

**The most influential man you've never heard of.**

**"The time is surely right for a Goodman revival..."**

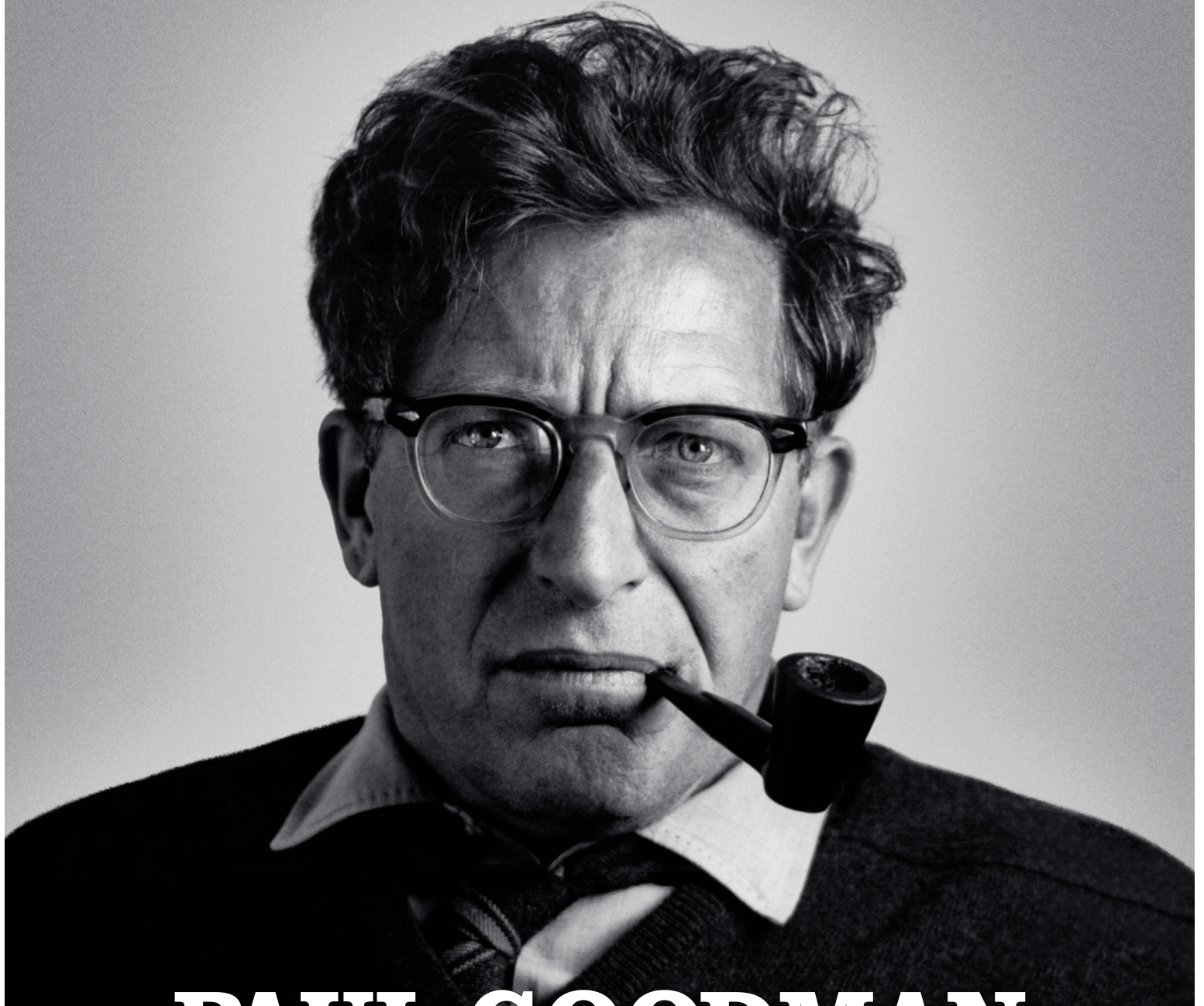
**A passionate, almost prophetic sense of the impact that a writer and thinker can have on his times and the future"**

**-A.O. Scott, THE NEW YORK TIMES**

**"FASCINATING!" "REVELATORY!"**

**-THE WALL ST JOURNAL**

**-THE A.V. CLUB**



# **PAUL GOODMAN CHANGED MY LIFE**

**a film by JONATHAN LEE**

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# The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2011

## Gadfly of the '60s, Getting His Due

"Paul Goodman Changed My Life" pays tribute to a man — poet, teacher, social critic, guru without portfolio —

A.O.  
SCOTT

### FILM REVIEW

whose name was once a household word and whose books were talismans of intellectual seriousness and social concern. His current obscurity is something this documentary, directed by Jonathan Lee and including eloquent testimony from friends, family and admirers, is determined to overcome.

"I want it to come back," says Jerl Surratt, who attended Goodman's memorial service in 1972, despite never having met him. He is referring to the style and substance of Goodman's remarkably eclectic body of work, and underscoring a point implicit in the rest of Mr. Lee's film. The time is surely right for a Goodman revival. There are aspects of contemporary life that he anticipated and influenced — the gay rights movement, most notably — and others that are sorely in need of his wisdom. At a time when the discussion of education is locked into sterile, strident and instrumental debates about "reform," his radical humanism, at once romantic and commonsensical, would be more than welcome.

His most famous book, "Growing Up Absurd," originally commissioned as a study of juvenile delinquency and later a bible of the 1960s student rebellion, remains essential and troubling reading for anyone who cares about the problems of the young, which were hardly solved by the baby boomers. Libertarians and anarchists of the left and the right could learn a lot from this Jeffersonian pacifist's ideas about freedom. And those drawn to the recent renewal of interest in artisanal and agrarian practices as a sustainable alternative to consumerism will find instruction and inspiration in "Communitas," a 1947 blueprint for utopia that Mr. Goodman wrote with his brother, Percival.

It is true that Paul Goodman's brand of romantic, polymathic thinking is not much in fashion these days, but perhaps that should change too. In any case Mr. Lee's film, in addition to making a persuasive (if partial) case for its subject's importance, also has a great story to tell, of a 20th-century life that was at once exemplary and idiosyncratic.



The poet and social critic Paul Goodman, center, in "Paul Goodman Changed My Life," a film directed by Jonathan Lee.

Goodman, born in 1911, belonged to a generation of Jewish intellectuals who made their way from the margins to the center of American cultural life. Educated in the argumentative pressure cooker of City College in the '30s, he avoided the lures of ideological sectarianism. A writer of varied interests and talents — his poetry stands up particularly well — he followed a zigzagging career path. He was a founder of Gestalt therapy and a member of the faculty of Black Mountain College in North Carolina, a midcentury hotbed of the homegrown avant-garde.

Married twice and the father of three children, he was open and unapologetic about his sexual attraction to men. Nobody interviewed in "Paul Goodman Changed My Life" suggests that he was an easy person to understand or to get along with, but a composite portrait emerges of a man who never stopped thinking and who was incapable of anything but honesty in thought and deed. As a result, he sometimes alienated allies and exasperated friends.

By now, though, any hurt feelings he left behind seem to have healed, and while a more pointed and skeptical treatment of his life and work might have been possible, Mr. Lee allows himself to

be guided by an affectionate, generous spirit consistent with Goodman's best qualities. At times, especially early on, as it makes its introductions, his film has the reverent air of a funeral service, with sentiment threatening to overshadow ideas. In the end, though, the ideas receive a full hearing in 90 minutes, a span Goodman himself might have found intolerably brief.

But I suspect that he would have approved of Mr. Lee's film, and not only because it approves so unreservedly of him. "Paul Goodman Changed My Life" may not have that effect on every viewer, but it has a passionate, almost prophetic sense of the impact that a writer and thinker can have on his times and the future.

### Paul Goodman Changed My Life

*Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.*

Directed by Jonathan Lee; director of photography, Benjamin Shapiro; edited by Kimberly Reed; music by Miriam Cutler; produced by Mr. Lee and Ms. Reed; released by Zeitgeist Films. At Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, west of Avenue of the Americas, South Village. Running time: 1 hour 29 minutes. This film is not rated.