



## An interview with

# LIZ GARBUS

By Jimmy Adams

### What inspired you to make a documentary on Bobby Fischer?

I was on a plane to the Sundance Film Festival in 2008 when I read Bobby's obituary on the front page of the *New York Times*. The next day I looked around to see whether any documentaries had been made on him and thought that everything was fairly inadequate or incomplete. So I realized there was an extraordinary opportunity to tell the story of Bobby's life and his famous match against Boris Spassky of 1972.

### Did you know much about his life before you read the obituary?

I knew about Bobby Fischer. He existed in a place in my mind and I found what a lot of audience members who did not play chess but watched the film experienced. I knew he was the greatest American chess champion and also a genius, but I knew little about the whole course of his life. So, the film takes you on a journey into filling the space between remembering and forgetting.

Directed by one of America's most celebrated documentary filmmakers, *Bobby Fischer against the World* is essentially the story of the checkmate of a champion, how Bobby Fischer defeated every opponent but could not save himself.

To give readers a taste of the content of *Bobby Fischer against the World* as well as an insight into the making of the film, we present a transcript of a chat between Jimmy Adams and the mastermind behind this dramatic movie.



“Only Bobby Fischer knows what Bobby Fischer is going to do”.  
*Anthony Saily*  
 (Medical doctor and long-term friend of Bobby)

### Did you find the story a challenge?

Yes, as a filmmaker, telling the whole amazing story of Bobby’s rise and fall was a great challenge. Bobby Fischer was a lone American who took on the entire Soviet machine in a sport they had dominated for decades. He did it all on his own, and the whole world watched. He was a Cold War warrior against the Russians — freedom versus communism was how it was couched in the media — and we used that as a backdrop. It was an incredible feat for Bobby to win that match, which almost didn’t come off many, many times, and it makes quite a thrilling story.

### Bobby had a difficult childhood...

Regina Fischer was a working single mother, and to a great extent Bobby grew up alone in his Brooklyn apartment, basically self-taught. And then came the pressure of celebrity on youth which had a lot to do with his ultimate unhinging. In the film we explore the people and circumstances surrounding him even as a very young child.

### And there was confusion over his real father...

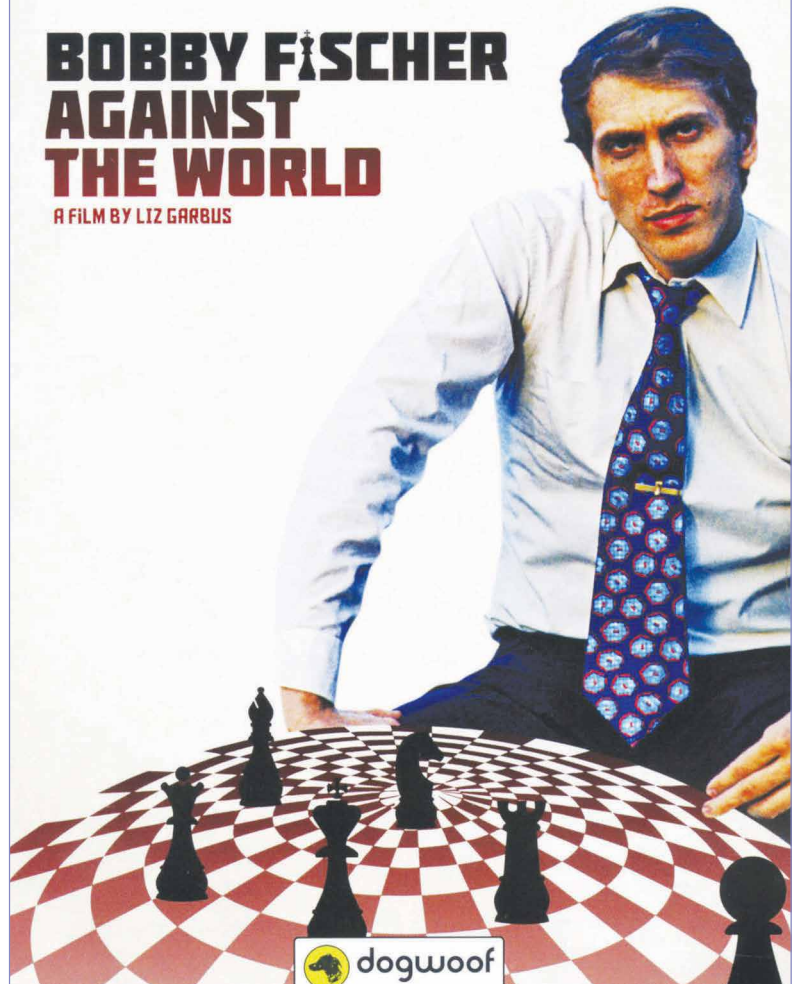
It was Clea Benson, interviewed in the film, who discovered from FBI files that Bobby’s father was not Gerhardt Fischer, but Paul Nemenyi. And this was also the consensus of opinion from all the people we talked to.

*“A compelling story of a sublime chess genius and 20th century icon”*

Grandmaster Nigel Short, MBE

## BOBBY FISCHER AGAINST THE WORLD

A FILM BY LIZ GARBUS



### What was your overall structure for the film?

We use his match against Boris Spassky as the narrative spine of the film and during that spine we circle back into various episodes of Bobby’s life, so that by the time you get to the conclusion of the match, you understand Bobby’s psychology and of course his subsequent decline.

### How long did it take you to make the film?

From the day it entered my head up to the day it was shown at the film festival it took about three years and, for a documentary of this nature, it was not

overly long. It took a certain amount of time to get a handle on the subject and to raise money. Also we had to really push in terms of the archival footage, what had been out there and seen so many times over and over about Bobby and what was a little more rare and special, and get into those areas which folks even from the chess world hadn’t seen. And that takes time.

### On reflection are you completely satisfied with the movie or is there anything you would have liked to add, change or improve?

There are so many things...some of which are hard to let go of. Fortunately,



for the DVD, we were able to include a bunch of ‘extras’ so we can bring in a few of those little nuggets that were interesting but didn’t make it into the 90-minute film. There is of course much more to the story. We had spent a lot of time on some of Bobby’s earlier matches and also had a whole section on the history of chess that was narrated by Garry Kasparov. There was also Bobby’s final resting place and gravestone. Items like these are featured on the DVD version.

**What other real-life character, if any, do you think comes close to Bobby Fischer?**

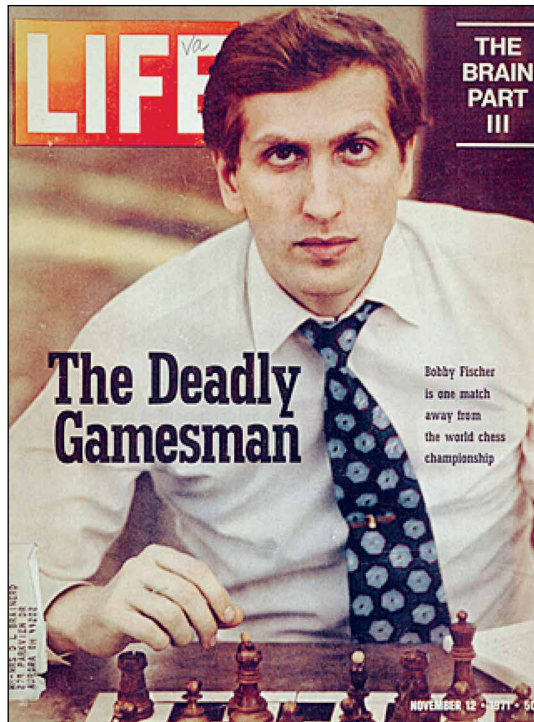
There’s nobody exactly like him. But there are stories of the great artists and composers who gave so much to their respective fields, who inside were tortured and met sad ends. I’m thinking of Vincent Van Gogh and others but I can’t think of any direct parallel, no.

**Coincidentally, during a big match in Yugoslavia, USSR vs. Rest of the World, Bobby went to the cinema with a friend and saw the Hollywood movie on Van Gogh. Afterwards he said: “If I don’t beat Petrosian tomorrow, I’ll cut off my ear too!”. Thankfully he did win his game... You raise the subject of mental illness among chess players in the film. Do you think playing chess can drive people crazy?**

*(laughs)* No, I don’t think it makes you crazy but there is a risk of monomania if, as a young player, you see everything through the spectrum of the chess board. Chess is war and that’s an intense way to grow up. It can also make you feel isolated. And that certainly happened to Bobby.

**If you were at a press conference talking to Bobby in 1972, what question would you ask him?**

I would like to know what happened in Game One. I would want to know whether it was a mistake or was it calculation that he played ♗xh2, after which he lost his bishop.



**And after he went into exile in Iceland, what would you have asked him then?**

*(laughs)* Bobby, can I interview you for my documentary?

**The film tackles Bobby’s anti-Semitic behaviour. But throughout his life Bobby had a lot of friends or associates who were Jewish.**

Absolutely, yes. On an individual basis he was not anti-Semitic, it was much more of a free-ranging ideology and it had to do with a rejection of everything he came from. You know he came from a Jewish world, he came from America, it had to do with the rejection rather than a well-organized ideology of hatred.

So, although I’m Jewish myself and he said terrible, anti-Semitic things, at the end of the day, I viewed him as someone suffering from a mental illness, so I empathized with him.

**What do you consider to be the most important ingredients of Bobby’s chess success?**

Well, from what I understand after talking to great chess players, it was his relentless desire to win and kill his opponent as well as his extraordinary creativity on the board.

**And what do you think of his decline?**

The beginning of the end was when he made too many demands and refused to defend his title against Karpov in 1975. It was like he was saying “I’ve had enough. I’m out of here.”

I believe that in any art form, exclusive attention to one thing, to the exclusion of all else, coupled with a lonely childhood and a tendency towards monomania is a terrible cocktail. Bobby had spent his whole life focused on winning the title, even to the exclusion of family and social relationships, and when he had achieved the pinnacle of his dreams, what else was there?

“I took them both by the scruff of the neck, pressed them down and said ‘Now you play!’”

*Lothar Schmid  
(Match arbiter)*

“Bobby is probably the most interesting person I’ve ever photographed”.

*Harry Benson  
(Photographer):*



**Did you consider including more over the board examples of his play in the film?**

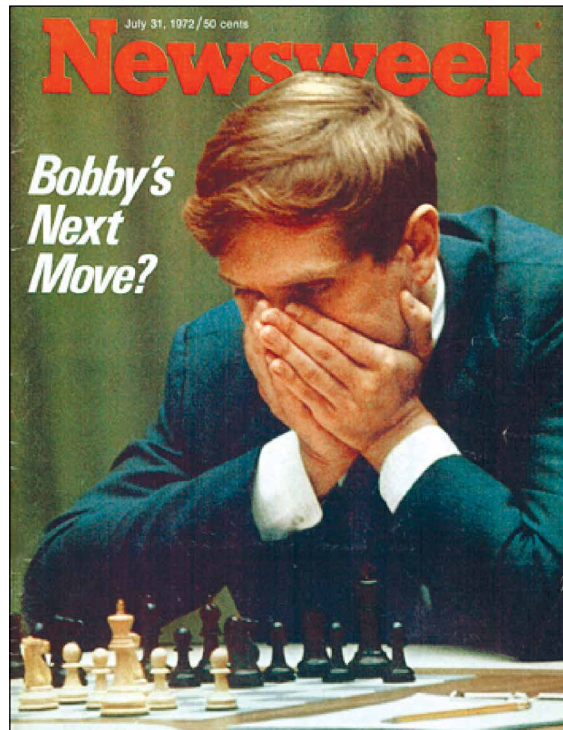
Yes, I hear you — but also other people who told me they weren't interested in his chess games, but did want to know more about his life. It's a tough balance how to include a sufficient amount of chess information to satisfy both chess aficionados and the uninitiated and that was certainly one of the biggest challenges.

**In the film you presented the games with an element of theater, like repeated slow motion shots of Bobby fatefully taking that pawn on h2 with the bishop...**

Editor Karen Shmeer was having a great time working with the material and especially cutting the games. I think she found a wonderful way of allowing the match drama to unfold and hopefully satisfy chess lovers too. Tragically, Karen had edited about half of the film, when, in January 2010, while heading home after a long day at work she was hit by a car speeding from a drugstore robbery and killed. When the film was completed we dedicated it to Karen.

**What was the most unexpected thing you encountered when you were researching for the documentary?**

I think what was surprising to me and the whole team was how, even after his death, people were so divided, really so fierce in their opinions about him. It was like they were either standing on the white or black squares — either Bobby was a saint and you couldn't say anything bad about him, like questioning his mental stability, or else he was a ranting madman beyond rehabilitation. The people in his world were divided into two camps and of course in life we exist in grey. Bobby was one of the greatest chess players who ever lived and a phenomenal person who in his prime was very



“During the match I felt quite unusual. Not like before.”  
*Boris Spassky*  
 (Former world champion)

“We wanted to receive him as a king but he just rushed to the first car in the convoy.”  
*Fridrik Olafsson*  
 (Grandmaster and Icelandic parliamentarian)

charismatic. But, of course, he also had this tendency towards paranoid thinking. Both of these aspects of his character are true and it was shocking to me how people staunchly aligned themselves to one or other of these camps, even after he died.

**Bobby didn't like his friends talking about him...**

That's right. If you were not totally loyal to Bobby, or if there was any sort of confrontation with him, he disowned you and that's why it was sometimes hard to get people to open up about him.

**How would you define Bobby's charisma?**

That was another surprising thing, how charismatic he was on those TV chat shows like Dick Cavett. I think many people remember him only from later in life and they forget that in his prime he was very good looking, had a great laugh and a sense of humor. He would say things that were hugely arrogant and then kind of laugh at himself a little bit. And I think that made him very appealing.

**Frank Brady, author of a new biography of Fischer, is listed as your chess consultant...**

Frank Brady was one of our consultants, but Larry Evans and Anthony Saidy were actually much more involved with us during the course of production, helping in terms of the chess and our getting the facts right. They were also such terrific interviewees that I didn't need an overall narrator. They helped to carry the film through, they had a closeness with Bobby and also had a good perspective on him. We were terribly shocked when Larry Evans died.

**What locations did you use in the production of the film?**

We talked to the American personalities in New York but we were also on Iceland for a good period of time and also used London as a central location to conduct a few European interviews



— for example with Lothar Schmid, who was the referee of the match, and David Edmonds who wrote the book *Bobby Fischer goes to War*.

**That also included Eugene Torre, I think, and Bobby's Filipina girlfriend Marilyn Young and her daughter Jinky, who was earlier thought to be Bobby's love child.**

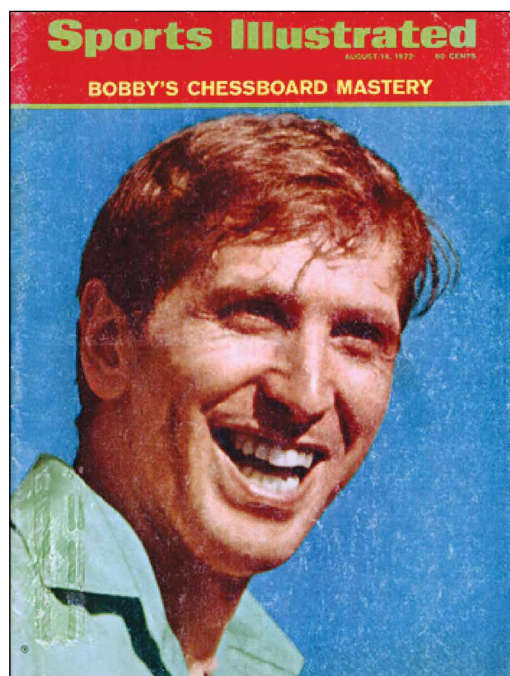
That's right. And when I talked about lost treasures, we've included a piece about Bobby's paternity in the DVD extra section. You know, it depends how you put a life like this into 90 minutes and, at the end of the day, I didn't think this had the same importance as some of the other happenings.

**What is the Icelandic view of Bobby Fischer today?**

I think that to this day Bobby Fischer remains a hero in Iceland, which has a chess playing tradition. Bobby put their relatively small country on the map, so he was a huge part of their history.

**Which chess people didn't want to participate in the film?**

We reached out to Boris Spassky, Bill Lombardy and Zita Rajcsanyi, Bobby's



“This is the nightly news. First... Bobby Fischer.”  
NBC

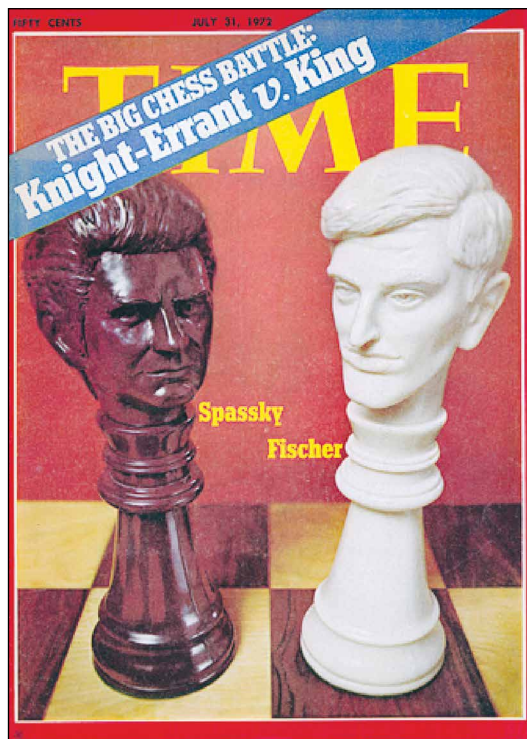
Hungarian girlfriend who helped to arrange the match against Spassky in 1992, but unfortunately they did not take part. We did try to get in touch with Bobby's wife Miyoko as well, but, you know, she has done practically no interviews.

**What led you to talk to Harry Benson? I don't think he had ever spoken publicly about Fischer before...**

Well, Harry had taken all those great photos. We knew him from *Life* magazine and so we contacted him and found out he had even more photos. After that we wanted to work with him, not just as an interviewee but someone who also contributed artistically to the process. We had numerous talks and lunches and Harry was wonderful, and his materials were wonderful. He spent so much time with Bobby, there were no other photographs of Bobby that were so intimate, so unguarded, where you really got a sense of the man. Harry's photos were a major part of the film and the way we bring the viewer close to Bobby.

**Did you visit any other locations, such as the tenement block where Bobby lived?**

Well, funnily enough, when I started the film my office was also on Lincoln Place where Bobby was raised in Brooklyn. So we were very close to that!



**Do you play chess yourself?**

*(laughs)* Let's just say, I play but don't play chess *well*.

**Has Bobby Fischer inspired you to make another biographical movie. You've directed many documentaries, mainly dealing with a variety of social issues, but no others on individual famous stars.**

Yes, you're on to something there. My next film will be on a single person. Stay tuned about that. *[It was on Marilyn Monroe!]*

**Is Bobby a hard act to follow?**

He *is* a tough act to follow. His life had so much drama, everything he did was just always filled with drama.

*This interview was conducted in 2011 when the documentary was released but it has never previously been published. For more information on the video see [dogwoof.com](http://dogwoof.com) or [www.bobbyfischermovie.co.uk](http://www.bobbyfischermovie.co.uk)*