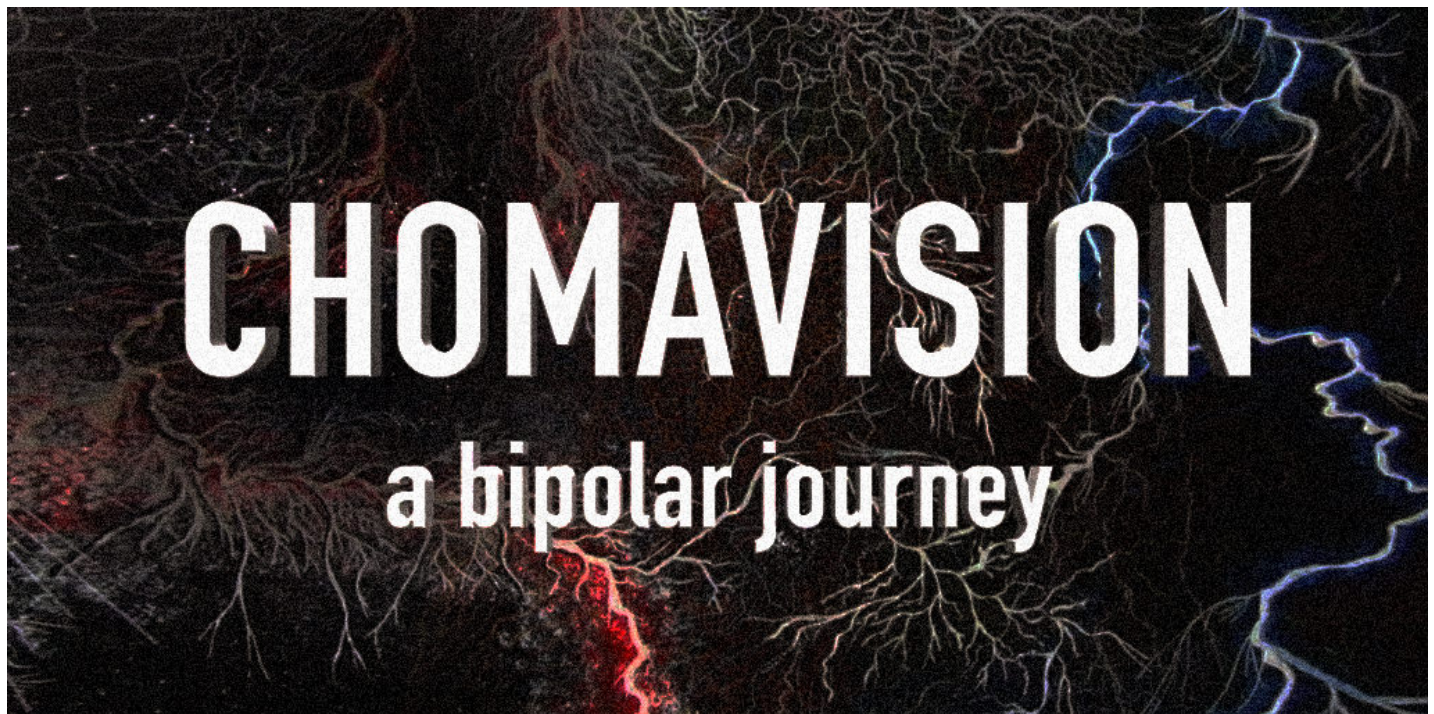


# Making Chomavision – A documentary about Bob Choma, artist with bipolar disorder

BRUCE SAUNDERS ON JUNE 3, 2020 ([HTTPS://WWW.CRESTBD.CA/2020/06/03/MAKING-CHOMAVISION/#RESPOND](https://www.crestbd.ca/2020/06/03/making-chomavision/#RESPOND))



Hi, Bruce Saunders here in Victoria, BC, Canada. I'm 69 and, though not diagnosed till 39, I now know now I've lived most of my life with Bipolar II.

This documentary project is an attempt to describe the condition as I and a few others have experienced it. It also tells the remarkable life story of a friend and artist, Bob Choma. This blog gives a glimpse into the film's making and adds a couple more details that didn't fit the 80 minute format.



## Chomavision Trailer

from **Bruce Saunders**

01:39 |



Chomavision Trailer (<https://vimeo.com/293986850>) from Bruce Saunders (<https://vimeo.com/user9917434>) on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com>).

**Watch the Full Movie (<https://vimeo.com/250067468>)**

## What's Chomavision about?

Chomavision is a feature documentary about an amazing Canadian artist, Bob Choma. His life has been a classic creative, chaotic story: an accomplished artist as a child, he became a graphic artist and businessman, a cartoonist, futurist, story teller – and generally sparky guy.

A graduate of Victoria's psychiatric hospital, Bob has been challenged by classic bipolar mood swings, prison time for counterfeiting, suicide attempts, and alcohol problems through a colourful life. In his later years though he was well and rediscovered his creative groove as an outsider artist.

His friend and fellow bipolar traveller, Bruce Saunders, was determined to tell his story. It has taken only 25 years. Hopefully, beyond revealing one man's life journey, this film provides insights into the connection between the bipolar condition and creativity, and

how vital that connection is for some of us.

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## The Process



This 80 minute version started with the intention to just tidy up a rough 40 minute version of the story. The shorter one didn't look that deeply into some of the issues like Bob's (and others) suicidal impulses and "what exactly is the bipolar condition?", as my new editor was wondering. So he got me clarifying those points as best I could in the short screen time one can take to do that.

Part way through the six(!) years we spent working on this version I was swimming one morning and my mind locked on Kay Redfield Jamison's work; how much her work influenced my thinking on this whole topic. I had copies of all her books in my library, and my own journey has been greatly influenced by her writing. Some elements are very parallel. I never could reach Jamison to get her permission and hopefully her blessings (I tried numerous avenues) but, in any case, I was determined to add her insights (it's a bipolar thing, I guess).

That made the whole project grow in length and complexity, an extra element to weave into the piece. Then there grew a number of revelations like the "stolen plane", more original artwork and documents. And finding Bob's account on tape, that matched his wife's previously recorded telling, of his bottoming out and then becoming an AA member.

And also we could add the screening of that early version when Bob was in attendance.

## The Project Evolves

In 2011 I didn't think I'd be going further than that 40min version although technically it was pretty rough. Jay, the editor who I worked with to put that together, is also bipolar and had a serious brain injury as well. Some moments, when neither of us could remember what we had just done, were absolutely laughable. Or we'd get a little squirrely when

things were coming together well. At one point we thought of calling it a 'Tripolar' production. We both were fascinated with fellow bipolar Bob and his wife Phyllis' story – enough to plow ahead with it. We were experiencing the highs of the creative process – and the frustrations of being 'outsider artists' too.



Editor Monique had an initial attempt with me, capturing the early videos and putting a few passages together but we got bogged down and our lives got busy so the momentum was lost.



Jay was working in the Premiere editing system (as we sat on his bed) so everything had to be imported again into that format from the previous Final Cut project. The 'finished product' came out of his system in 4X4 format (the night before we showed it!). The file had to

be stretched for its first screening for CREST in Vancouver. That further downgraded the quality. But eventually the photos and story of that screening, and then the screening in my Movie Monday venue, made a good finish for the longer piece.

## Receiving a deadline and finding an editor

I found out about that BC Arts Council's grant program, just as the deadline was passing. They allowed me to submit a slightly late application. I included the early version on a DVD. Amazingly the \$10K was awarded! But I had a hard time finding a more skilled editor who would work with my rather disorganized work.

One editor whose past work I'd admired had just discovered all the cool transition wipes in his new editing program and was now using them everywhere. Everything but sheep raining down was in his arsenal and he was determined that they were needed to hold a young hip audience. Then he made it clear he would need complete control of the project. That wasn't going to happen!

Luckily, about a year later I got talking with Stew, who works for the Health Authority as a filmmaker on health and safety topics. Nice guy, generous with his time and patience. He is very skilled and constantly upgrading to the latest technology.



We both thought it would be just a cleanup of the original effort, but as mentioned, it became much more complex. First I had to go back and re-import all the old (1994) 8mm and Hi8 tapes and log everything. And over the years, tons of rewriting, restructuring, rerecording my narration – over and over again. I found I was horrible at reading the narration lines, so many challenging recording sessions! So many doubts

about the whole project....

## Chomavision comes together

I'd pack my desktop Mac up to Stew's place some weekday evenings and often Sunday morning sessions; sometimes discouraging, often far beyond me. Usually I'd leave with a list of images to find or B roll to shoot, paragraphs to rewrite for next time. Sometimes months would go by before we found time to get together. But when the magic was happening, it was a terrific feeling.

Once I heard it, I'd always envisioned the "plane stealing story" as an animated piece but didn't get going on it till I met an animation teacher at the local art school. That began another longish and more complicated process but Georges did a nice job. And then musicians Eric and Jacqueline did lovely work to give many passages some needed depth and flow. But oh, what a job to make these elements knit smoothly together to serve the story.



As with Monique and Jay, Stew and I were tenacious and loved the story. But we had to make it fit with our day jobs; me, landscape maintenance gardening and Movie Monday and Stew, up to his ears with shooting and editing full time. The piece definitely got better with time and might have improved even more, but at some point one has to stop.

## Putting it out there

Now I'm putting it out on the www as no fests I tried went for it. I just want to see it out there working. That's why I made it. So far the responses have been heartening.

I hope our story helps a little to entertain and inform. It feels like my doctoral thesis on Bipolar. It certainly was a challenging exercise for me! I more than ever appreciate how much work goes into putting a film together.



Any comments, questions? I'm pleased to answer as best I can.

Bruce

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## Chomavision Outtakes

A few extra snippets and photos that didn't quite make it into the documentary, but that capture more bits of Bob's colourful life and friendship with Bruce, can be found in this short Word Doc. Click here to download it! (<https://www.crestbd.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CHOMAVISION-Outtakes-1.docx>)

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## More blog posts by Bruce

Movie Review: Touched with Fire (<https://www.crestbd.ca/2016/09/21/movie-review-touched-fire/>)

## Movie Review: The Dark Horse (<https://www.crestbd.ca/2016/10/12/movie-review-dark-horse/>)

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