

# Don Bluth Talks 'Somewhere Out There' Documentary and Future Production Dreams

The famed director, filmmakers Dave LaMattina and Chad Walker, and Lavalle Lee discuss the new film, which recently premiered at SAVFF 2025, that takes an unvarnished look at the career highlights and lowlights of the man who bravely left Disney to make films like 'The Secret of NIMH.'

By [Victoria Davis](#) | Thursday, November 13, 2025 at 12:53pm

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'Don Bluth: Somewhere Out There.' Film images courtesy of Copper Pot Films.

Just a few days before the [SCAD Savannah Film Festival \(SAVFF\)](#) began, filmmakers Dave LaMattina and Chad Walker wrapped the final cut of their highly anticipated documentary project *Don Bluth: Somewhere Out There*, spotlighting the animator behind *The Land Before Time*, *An American Tail*, *Anastasia*, *Thumbelina*, *All Dogs Go To Heaven*, *The Secret of NIMH*, and many other classic, hand-drawn animated masterpieces.

The film, which paints a compelling portrait of **Don Bluth**, a passionate artist who spent his life battling both Disney and his own ego, had its first ever premiere at the festival, which took place last month. For attendees – film students, animators, and general fans of Bluth's work – it was a moment to reminisce about their childhoods. For LaMattina and Walker, who met while working at Blue Sky Studios and were lifelong fans of Bluth, it was a decades-long dream realized. For Bluth, who also attended the festival, it was a true "journey to the past."

# Anya

Conceptual Art



ANYA

THIS SKETCH EXPLORES  
LARGE EXPRESSIVE EYES  
ALSO BROWS. ALSO THE  
COLOR OF HER HAIR MAY  
BE TOO RED, THE STYLING IS  
APPEALING AND ANIMATABLE.  
THIS DRAWING WAS DONE  
BEFORE BILL'S DEC 15 '74  
NOTES.

Don

The Music Box

Conceptual Art

BOX 140F

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"The Music Box"

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'Anastasia' concept art. All film art images provided by the Don Bluth Studios Animation Archive, Jen Library Archives and Special Collections, Savannah College of Art and Design. Copyright is retained by the authors or artists of items in this collection, or their descendants, as stipulated by United States copyright law.

"I had forgotten many of those things, like some of the interviews that I did when we had our studio in Ireland," said Bluth in an interview after the premiere with AWN. "But suddenly, there they were again [in the documentary]. Conversations and faces I thought I'd forgotten. And it brought back memories. But what I also saw in the documentary is the importance of trying. If you fail, keep trying. If you fail again, keep trying."

The documentary is produced by Copper Pot Pictures with music from Fergal Lawler. Currently on the festival circuit with new screening updates shared on Don Bluth Studios' social media accounts, the film kicks off with a big fork-in-the-road moment for Bluth. In 1979, he and 17 other animators at Walt Disney Studios made history by all turning in their resignations to leave house Walt built behind and start their own studio.

"We left because we knew that they were starting to eliminate things, beautiful things, in the art styles that should have been in the pictures, and they were doing it for economic reasons," shares Bluth. "So, we said, 'Look, we can't have the kind of movies we grew up with, which look so beautiful, unless we leave here and try and renew it,' because they wouldn't let us experiment. Disney wouldn't let us do anything that wasn't in their command. So, the only thing we could do was leave and try to create a renaissance of what was really Walt's original vision."

And that's what Bluth and his team accomplished. Don Bluth Productions, headed by Gary Goldman and John Pomeroy with nine fellow Disney animators, set to work creating some of the most stunning, hand-drawn animated films that have ever been created. But Disney wouldn't go down without a fight, and while most young audiences remember being captivated by the sparkles, vibrant colors and emotional turmoil found in Bluth's works of art, few knew about the emotional and financial turmoil going on behind the scenes. Bluth's studio went bankrupt multiple times, closed, relocated, reopened, closed again; it was revived many times over by, as Bluth says, "God's grace" and the sheer will of many self-sacrificing animators who believed so strongly in Bluth's dream.

From the studio's first feature-length film *The Secret of NIMH* (1982) to *Titan A.E.* (2000), Bluth and his team created roughly a dozen feature length films during their on-screen battle with Disney Animation. And though Bluth may have lost the war with Disney, he believes he was still successful in what he set out to do: make beautiful movies that inspire generations of people, and challenge Disney to the point where they would make better films. And they did.



# TRAILER

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"What we were fighting for, really, was the art of animation," says Bluth. "We were inspired to do that by the early Disney pictures. We knew it was deteriorating since Walt's death and we said to ourselves, 'Can we make it flourish again, before it goes out?' I think we accomplished that because Disney got worried and that's when they made *The Little Mermaid*. We gave them a bump on the head to work harder."

Bluth also changed the standard for what kinds of stories could be presented to young audiences.

"When I showed Steven Spielberg a completed version of *The Land Before Time*, he told me, 'The T-Rex is too scary. I don't want to see mothers in the lobby with crying children,'" remembers Bluth. "So, we cut some of it out. But I think it weakened it. A story is only as strong as your villain and I still believe in telling children that life is going to be a struggle and it will be hard, but something good will always come to rescue you."

He continues, "We had a staff of about 350 people, and we made 12 movies that then affected millions of lives all over the world. So, was it worth it? Yes. It was worth it. Because those films would not have been there if we had not left Disney."



*Somewhere Out There*, named after Bluth's memoir, "Somewhere Out There: My Animated Life," is not a film of triumph, nor one of failure. It's a love story about a man and his craft.

"A lot of the people we knew at Blue Sky had spent time with Don and so he was this guy we were fascinated by because we knew he had left Disney and done all these amazing things," begins LaMattina. "But then you start to look into it and that story gets to be more compelling. We had done the documentary *I Am Big Bird*, about the *Sesame Street* puppeteer Carroll Spinney, that started out as this story about a man in his 80s, still working, who had touched so many people. But, as we talked with him more, the story became about his love story with his wife. It was similar for Don. It started out as a story about the man who left Disney, and it became a story about a man's love for animation and for the characters he created."

Bluth adds, "I never got married or had children of my own, so my characters became my children and, in some ways, the children of the world who the films are seen by, they somehow become my children, too."

Not to mention the hundreds of animators who were not only willing to uproot their lives to follow Bluth to Ireland to reopen a new studio, but for whom Bluth also bought green cards to get the animators back to the United States to work on *Anastasia*.

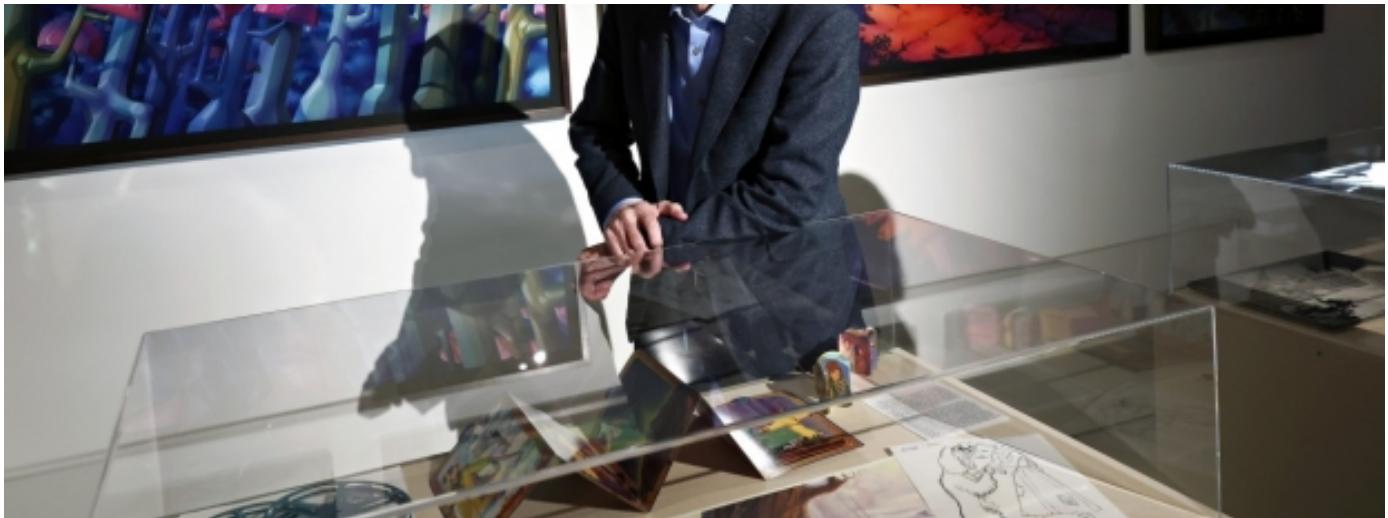


Lavalle Lee, animator, editor, vice president of the new **Don Bluth Studios** and owner of Traditional Animation website, learned hand-drawn animation from Bluth's animation classes, which Bluth still teaches, and has grown so close to the animator that Lee's daughter Anastasia is not only named after Bluth's film, but is also Bluth's goddaughter.

"Our family loves Don so much. So the most important thing for me was that the documentary respected Don's life and amazing career," shares Lee, who also attended the SAVFF screening. "Sometimes documentaries push negativity. Knowing that Dave and Chad were directing, I didn't have to worry at all. We'd been saying no to other people for years about a documentary. But then these two guys came along and I thought, if they could do that for Big Bird, then they could do that for Don. And we had lots of archive footage to give them."

LaMattina adds, "I think they probably have thousands more hours than what we used. We just couldn't get to it all. I do wish we'd had two more months."





Don Bluth at the Don Bluth Studios Animation Archive, Jen Library Archives and Special Collections, Savannah College of Art and Design

Ironically, the archive materials used as the foundation of the film came from a discarded box in the corner of Bluth's house.

"It wasn't even his box," notes Walker. "It was Gary Goldman's box. He had left it at Don's and Don didn't even know what was in it before we took a look. I mean, think about how the universe works. We find this amazing box, out of the corner of our eye, as we're leaving, which had just been coincidentally left there. It had this great interview with Don from 1980, right after he'd just finished *Banjo the Woodpile Cat*, which he made in his garage. The interview also had the raw footage, so you see Don before, during, and after the interview is going on. This footage really gave you a sense of who he was as a person. We got so lucky finding that box."

But for Bluth, who has always been a person of faith, credit for these happy accidents goes to a higher power. "I think what happens is God moves things around the way he wants to," he says.

Interestingly enough, the documentary's premiere at SAVFF coincided with the 20th anniversary of Bluth's donation of a massive trove of animation archive materials to SCAD Savannah in 2005. The donation – which includes background gouache paintings, cells, film reels, concept art, props, merch and more – totals roughly 1,500 square feet and is one of the largest animation archives collections SCAD owns. It is the largest donation received by SCAD from an animator of Bluth's caliber.





'All Dogs Go to Heaven' color model.

While the majority of the collection is kept safe in the upstairs archives of the school's Jen Library for professors to use as teaching materials, some of the materials are displayed in glass cases in the library. But, for the documentary premiere, the school created a larger, celebratory exhibition which Bluth visited during the festival.

"When Bluth visited the exhibition, the first thing he did was take time to talk to the students," says Virginia Seymour, SCAD Savannah's Head Librarian of Research and Instruction. "We had some teary students and that happens even when Bluth isn't visiting and they are just up here for classes and study purposes. And many of them who know the films don't know Don's backstory, so they get to hear about that up here as well."

One of the biggest challenges Walker and LaMattina faced during production on *Somewhere Out There* was deciding how much of Bluth's backstory to show. There are some high highs, such as when Bluth joins forces with Steven Spielberg to produce box office hits like *The Land Before Time* and *An American Tail*, which, at the time of its release, became the highest-grossing non-Disney produced animated feature. But Bluth also experienced some very low points.





Fievel model sheet from 'An American Tail.'

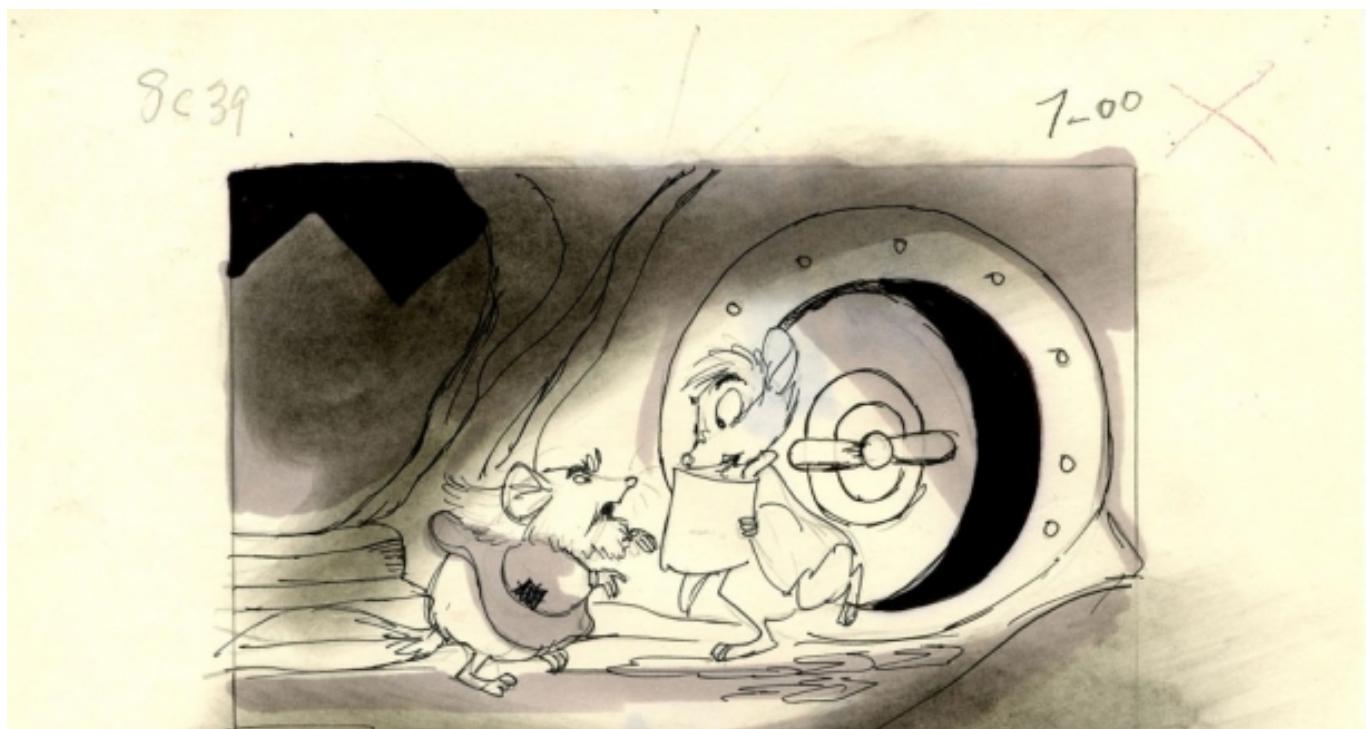
"We also discovered this sales reel that Don put together where he's basically trying to sell some of his movies to investors and toy production companies," shares LaMattina. "It really is this low point of him sacrificing the art in place of commerce. It's in the documentary and we take it pretty low at times, to the point where Chad was like, 'I put this together, but I think maybe we take him too low?' And I was like, 'No, this is good because it's real.' You see him when he's recording the sales pitch and after when he's getting ready to record and you can see it in his face that he wants to be anywhere but there. He would rather be drawing six hours a day than doing this."

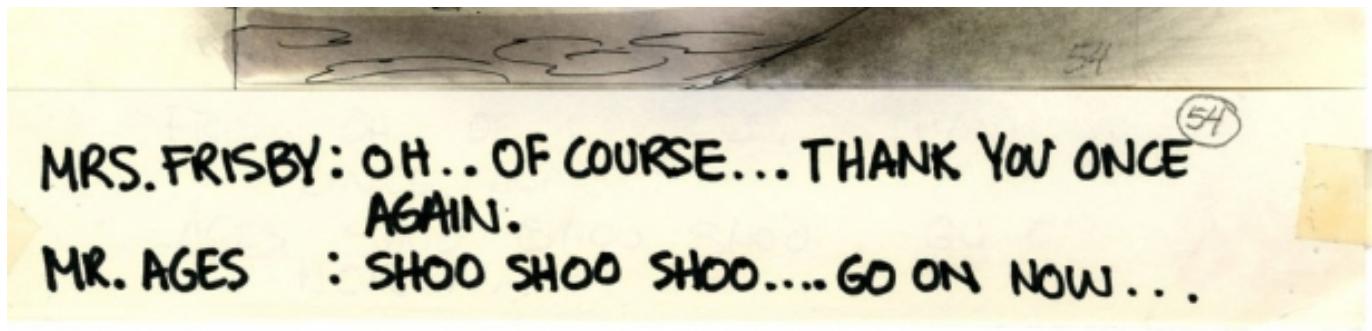
Bluth, in addition to the countless sleepless days and nights spent making films and fighting the biggest monster in animation at the time, always made time to draw for himself. Sometimes, it was as many as six hours a day.

"He's a poetic soul," says Walker of Bluth. "And as he would talk to us and look back on his life, he'd have these revelations that would teach him more about himself. And he was always so willing to share those thoughts with us. He was so honest. We were so nervous the first time we showed him a rough cut, but he patted us on the shoulders and said, 'You know, you should be proud.'"

For Don, animation has always been a reflective, introspective, even spiritual experience. Sometimes it's great, sometimes it's uncomfortable, but it's always a chance to learn and understand more than before.

"Students will come up to me and ask for a set of rules that will help make them an animator," says Bluth. "But it's not about that. Animation is about feeling. It's about getting in touch with the spiritual inside of you. Art is not corporate or digital. It's part of you. And you need to be willing to get to know who you are in order to create art and be an animator."





Storyboard from 'The Secret of NIMH.'

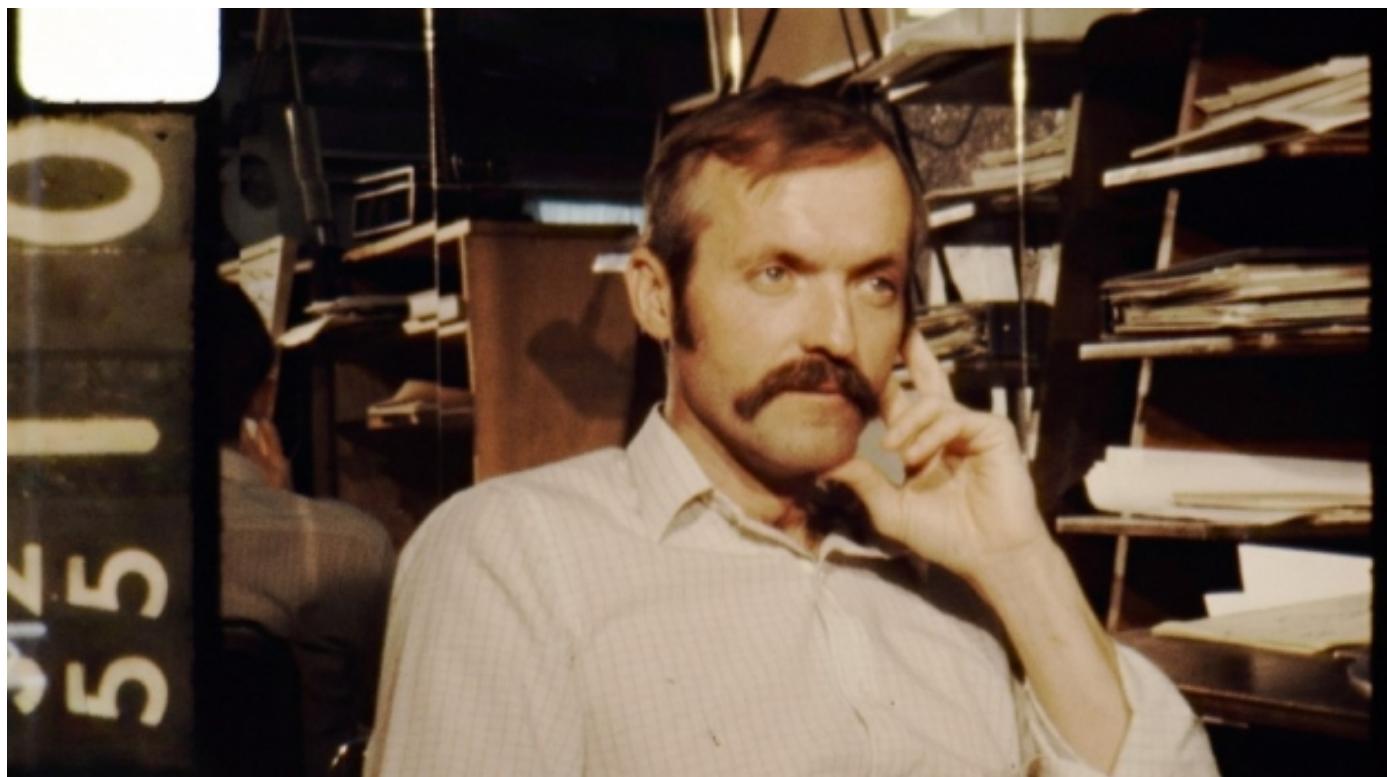


Storyboard from 'The Secret of NIMH.'

Few could argue that there's something divinely inspiring about Bluth's films. And, in turn, there seems to be something larger-than-life about this documentary project because, among the serendipitous moments associated with this production, the premiere not only fell on the 20th anniversary of Bluth's archive donation, but 2005 was also the year that Chad and Dave started working at Blue Sky, learning from Bluth's friends about Bluth's story.

"Here's another funny detail," shares Walker. "We use the same track coloring scheme that I used at Blue Sky when I was an assistant editor to color-code the layers of footage on this documentary."

LaMattina adds, "Also, similar to the 'Production Babies' list we put at the end of Blue Sky film credits naming all the babies born during the production, we added a 'Production Tweens and Teens' list at the end of our documentary credits. Both our sons are on there."



Documentary film image

It's a fitting sentiment for Bluth, who says he always viewed his production teams as family as well. As for what's next for the animator, he's currently at work on his next book, "The Blue Note," which explores the connection between creativity and spirituality. He is also very interested in pursuing a sequel to *The Secret Of NIMH*.

"Don and I have been talking with multiple producers we work with to see what they can do about getting us back the rights to *NIMH*," shares Lee. "I'm sure everyone feels, as much as I feel, that Don needs to make another film."

Bluth adds, "I have ideas. I think *The Secret of NIMH* was probably the best one of my films in my eyes. And if I said to the world, 'We're going to make a really good sequel to *NIMH*,' I think, the animation world and all those animation students who are studying would have an enormous piece of encouragement."

Stay up to date on the documentary screenings via @donbluthofficial on Instagram.



Victoria Davis is a full-time, freelance journalist and part-time Otaku with an affinity for all things anime. She's reported on numerous stories from activist news to entertainment. Find more about her work at [victoriadavisdepiction.com](http://victoriadavisdepiction.com).

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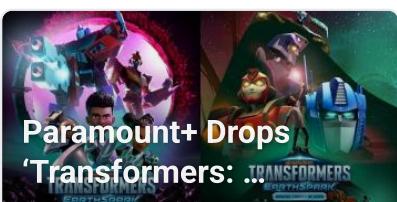


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