Woody Allen has used a number of different techniques to frame the stories in his films, from the first-person, homodiegetic disclosure in such films as *Annie Hall* (1977), *Anything Else* (2003), and *Whatever Works* (2009); to the heterodiegetic narration found in *Don’t Drink the Water* (1994), *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008), and *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger* (2010); to the collective and participatory technique evident in *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984) and *Melinda Melinda* (2005); to the omniscient presentation, or authorial narrative situation, found in *Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), and *Cassandra’s Dream* (2007).

Each of these storytelling styles allows the filmmaker to manipulate the information in such a way so as not only to control the flow of the narrative, but also in ways that underscore the thematic significance of the particular film in question. One technique that Allen has used in several of his films is that of the mockumentary, a documentary-like presentation of a non-existent historical person or event, employing all of the techniques of a documentary—including the use of talking heads and B-rolls in the manner of cinéma vérité—for parodic, satiric, and analytical purposes. In his films *Take the Money and Run* (1969), *Zelig* (1983), *Husbands and Wives* (1992), and *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999), Allen has used the mockumentary, or mock-documentary, technique to explore the lives of public “artist” figures who struggle for self-expression—the frustrated cello player who becomes an inept criminal “crafting” modes of escape, the human chameleon who can “create” himself anew, a writer of highly personal novels whose subject matter tends to reflect his own troubled relationships, and a jazz guitarist whose genius fails to compensate for his inability to reach out emotionally to others. In many ways, this cinematic mode allows Allen to utilize the techniques he employs in other films by combining the objectivity of the omniscient narrator with the collective uses of storytelling, relying on narrators who are nonparticipants as well as those who are first-person witnesses, and placing these narrative styles within the hands of a controlling single-figure artist/filmmaker.

Nowhere has Allen more thoroughly explored the narratological nuances of this cinematic form than in the two mockumentaries he created after the 1990s. Not only does this approach afford the filmmaker a unique kind of narrative control—combining as it does the documentary and the dramatic modes, and then complicating distinctions between the two—but the very nature of that control complements the the-
matic concerns of the film. Both *Husbands and Wives* and *Sweet and Lowdown* reveal the lives of broken and decentered subjects, and the documentary-like presentation of its subject matter highlights the fragmentation of these lives. Put more directly, if the documentary genre is one made up of cinematic fragments, separate bits of interviews and historical footage that edited together create a larger coherent story, then Allen’s more recent mockumentaries challenge the notion of narrative unity. In both *Husbands and Wives* and *Sweet and Lowdown*, he “falsifies” the documentary project by problematizing, or mocking, its reliability as a genre of revelation. Instead of emphasizing a more coherent historical narrative, as we get in the traditional documentary, Allen actually calls into question the legitimacy of the documentary form as a “valid” narrative system. Yet at the same time, the mockumentary mode in these two works allows for the “reconstructive” role of the filmmaking artist, emphasizing one of Allen’s most persistent themes, one found throughout his career, from his early stand-up days to his most recent films: that art is an attempt to bring order to the chaotic and fragmentary state of existence. It is a preoccupation perhaps most memorably articulated in *Annie Hall*, when Alvy Singer addresses the audience after watching the rehearsal of his first play, and says, “[Y]ou’re always tryin’ t’ get things to come out perfect in art because, uh, it’s real difficult in life” (*Four Films* 102). By self-reflexively pointing out the limits of historical reportage—using a mock-documentary form to highlight the weaknesses of documentaries—and doing so through the guise of an orchestrating artist figure, Allen is, in essence, foregrounding the constructedness of narrative. In other words, and ironically, the artist/filmmaker attempts to make sense of the fragments of reality by pulling the pieces together while at the same time pointing out the medium’s problems with “getting it right.”

One could argue that the mockumentary technique is something that has periodically defined Allen’s films across the trajectory of his career. His 1969 directorial debut, *Take the Money and Run*, “documented” the life of Virgil Starkwell, a schlemiel criminal of profound ineptitude, tracing his life from the petty crimes of childhood (trying to steal from a gumball machine and getting his hand caught in the process) to the bungled attempts at prison escape (with some of the most memorable scenes being those where Virgil carves a gun out of a bar of soap, only to have his scheme foiled by a rainstorm, and when he, as part of a chain gang, escapes by disguising the group as one large charm bracelet). What is most notable about this film, at least within the scope this essay, is that Allen constructed this early film through what could be called the classic modes of the documentary. There is an omniscient narrator—performed by voice actor and radio announcer Jackson Beck—who recounts the life of Virgil Starkwell and whose presence in the film is never revealed, except through his voiceovers. The narratively loose and episodic nature of the film, reminiscent of the linked sight gags found in the films of Jerry Lewis, is given coherent structure through this detached authoritative voice and the interspersed on-camera interviews with figures from Starkwell’s past (e.g., his parents, his music teacher, his psychiatrist, and his neighbors). Furthermore, the still footage and “staged” reenactments—dramatic episodes from Starkwell’s life that the viewer, watching the film within certain generic assumptions, assumes to be part of documented history—give credence to the film as montage of actual recorded events.

Allen revisits this straightforward style of mockumentary filmmaking fourteen years later in *Zelig*, the story of the depression-era phenomenon and now long forgotten celebrity, Leonard the Lizard, a man who both physically and psychologically transforms in order to blend into his social surroundings. As in *Take in Money and Run*, in this film Allen incorporates the off-screen voice of an omniscient narrator—this time played by actor Patrick Horgan—one who, we assume, is not an artist filmmaker but who merely functions, along with the on-screen...
interviews, as a structuring device guiding us through the unlikely life of Leonard Zelig. Elaborating on his earlier attempt with *Take the Money and Run*, Allen enhances the documentary feel of his 1983 film with actual and faux newsreel footage (albeit doctored to look old and blend in with the real historical segments) and by providing interview subjects who assume their actual identities—e.g., Saul Bellow, Susan Sontag, Bruno Bettelheim, Bricktop—and are not played by actors, thereby giving an added and ironic twist to the film’s self-reflexive dynamic between fact and fiction. In *Zelig*, Allen creates a more “authentic” mock-documentary than he did in *Take the Money and Run*, in that the episodes that illustrate the life of Leonard Zelig are presented not as straight dramatic narrative—where we just assume that what we are seeing is a re-presentation of historical events—but are more overtly contextualized as old film footage or as unambiguous reenactments (as in the case of the film within the film, *The Changing Man*).

What is important to note about these earlier examples of mockumentaries is that the artist filmmaker, the authoring presence behind the films we are viewing, is absent from his creations, with no on-screen appearances, commentary, or narrative voice-overs marking them in any way. The guiding voices that we hear throughout both films, those of Jackson Beck and Patrick Horgan, are merely components of documentary convention and not instances of direct artist presence and intervention. Put another way, a self-conscious filmmaking persona—whether played by Allen or by a stand-in—is nonexistent and as such, does not function as a narratively binding force. Because of this, neither of Allen’s two earlier mockumentaries foreground the role of the filmmaker, drawing attention to the act of filmmaking and thereby making it one of the themes. What is more, the stories that are told are presented in such a way that, outside of the fact that we are knowingly watching a mock-documentary, we assume them to be straightforward and uncomplicated. In other words, if we momentarily accept the fact that what we are watching is an *actual documentary*, there is really nothing in either film to indicate that the narrated lives we are watching are anything other than true. This being the case, there is nothing problematic about the lives of Virgil Starkwell or Leonard Zelig (outside of their own chaotic existences, which are comedic givens). This sense of verisimilitude is created largely through the classical documentary form, with the detached and god-like voiceover that narrates the film, the stills and the reenactments, and the various on-camera interviews that authenticate the documented lives.

Such is not the case with Allen’s more recent examples of the mockumenary technique. In both *Husbands and Wives* and *Sweet and Lowdown* the filmmaker complicates his narrative subject by metafictionally, or metacinetically, drawing our attention to the kind of film we are watching. He does this in three ways. First, he inserts the presence of the author filmmaker, an overt creative force behind the scenes of the narrative we are watching and who takes part in the events that unfold. In this way, the artist figure becomes a homodiegetic narrator, a participant in the events that he frames. (In *Husbands and Wives*, the narrating presence appears on film in voiceover, and in *Sweet and Lowdown* the filmmaker/interrogator is both absent—we never see or hear him asking questions—and present, in the onscreen appearance of Woody Allen himself.) Along with this, in both films Allen highlights the fact that what we are watching may not in fact be a realistic depiction of the lives revealed. Unlike both *Take the Money and Run* and *Zelig*, we are never lured, however mockingly, into believing that the lives on screen actually existed in history. Third, both *Husbands and Wives* and *Sweet and Lowdown* combine elements of the documentary—voiceovers, off-screen narrators, interview subjects—with straight dramatic narrative. These narrative segments are significantly more “realistic”—and thereby of a less mocking nature—than the assumed reenactments of *Take the Money and Run* in that they
are more serious and less comedic, and they tend to take up the majority of the film’s running time, punctuated less frequently by documentary voiceovers and interviews. If one edited out the disembodied commentaries and interview segments in each of these films, what remained could conceivably stand alone as a coherent fictional narrative, the kind of film we have with *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) and *Midnight in Paris* (2011). In other words, Allen gives a further twist to this hybrid genre by mingling the *mockumentary* and straight dramatic forms—similar to the ways that mockumentary combines the documentary and dramatic forms—thereby complicating not just the documentary as a genre, but also our understanding of his earlier attempts at the mockumentary.

There is another significance to be drawn from these later instances of the mockumentary, and that lies in each film’s authoring subject. The self-referential presence of the filmmaker figure, whether on-screen—as in the case with *Sweet and Lowdown*—or through off-screen voiceovers—as we have in *Husbands and Wives*—not only draws our attention to a specific creator behind the film we are viewing, but gives us a sense that the documentary/mockumentary project is incomplete and perhaps not the final word on its subject matter. Again, these more recent examples of the mockumentary technique are a significant twist on the form. Whereas in the earlier mockumentaries Woody Allen is using this style of filmmaking to humorously highlight the absurdities of his subjects—and doing so against the contrastive backdrop of “serious” documentary-style commentary—in both *Husbands and Wives* and *Sweet and Lowdown* he is holding up for examination the actual act of filmmaking itself. As such, both films become commentaries on the fragmented, equivocal, and imperfect nature of storytelling. Just as the lives of each film’s subject are disjointed and unfinished—Emmet Ray lives a nomadic life and fails to attain the fame he seeks, and Gabe Roth divorces Judy and never completes his latest and more personal novel—so, too, are the narratives that unfold before our eyes. Presented as they are, with temporal jump cuts, episodic segments, and narrating insertions sprinkled throughout, both films leave the viewer with a sense of incompleteness. In this way, the emphasis is placed not so much on the product that results—especially as a coherent and self-contained instance of cinema—as it is on the process of narrative-making itself.

Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in *Husbands and Wives*, especially in its authorial voiceovers. Throughout the film, Allen incorporates twenty-two on-screen interviews with a total of seven subjects, most with microphones conspicuously placed and visible, and all of which are commenting on the lives of Gabe (Woody Allen), Judy (Mia Farrow), Jack (Sydney Pollack), and Sally (Judy Davis), two married couples who go through a series of infidelities, break ups, existential crises, and relational readjustments. Along with these interviews Allen inserts the voice of the documentary investigator (played by Jeffrey Kurland, who was also the film’s costume designer) whose on-screen questions prompt the responses of the interview subjects, and as such, determine the narrative trajectory of the film. These investigative questions, a typical convention of documentaries, complement the hand-held camera work that constitutes *Husbands and Wives*. The jumpy, fast-sweeping, and erratic shooting of the subject matter, most evident in the opening scenes of the film, give it a cinéma vérité quality, as if the documentarian/investigator is right there on the scene and trying desperately to keep up with the actions as they unfold. What is more, Allen presents these twenty-two interview segments as if they were both spatially and temporally dispersed. We as viewers, reading the film within documentary conventions, assume that most of the interviews have taken place after the narrated events—the temporary breakup of Jack and Sally, the eventual split between Gabe and Judy, and the final pairing of Judy and Michael (Liam Neeson)—but not all at the same time. Allen presents the
interview subjects in different dress and in different locations, suggesting that the documenting presence in the film (represented in Kurland’s voice) conducted his various interviews over time. In all, the presentation of the various interview segments adds legitimacy and authenticity to the film as a vehicle for documentary.

At the same time, Kurland’s narrative voiceovers also serve as linking sound bridges between no less than eight different scene changes. As such, they occasionally provide a context to the dramatic components of the film, functioning in ways similar to the heterodiegetic narrators in *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* and *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*. In this way, the voiceovers in *Husbands and Wives* work in at least two different ways: paired with the interview subjects, they contribute to the (mock-) documentary feel of the film, and in contextualizing the various scenes, they suggest a dramatic work of fiction recounted by a detached narrator. These two functions may work at cross-purposes—Is the film a kind of documentary/mockumentary, or is it a fictional work of drama?—but this narrative tension is what distinguishes *Husbands and Wives* from Allen’s earlier, and more straightforward, mockumentaries. The blurring of generic boundaries helps to foreground the film’s constructedness and self-consciously draws our attention to mockumentary project that is underway.

An example of this boundary blurring occurs toward the end of the film when Gabe and Judy Roth decide to separate, and the documentary filmmaker interviews each of them about their decision. These scenes are particularly telling in that before the on-screen interviews, the documentarian’s voice is used as a narrating device, setting up the segments that follows: “Several days later, Gabe moved out of his apartment and into a hotel.” In her confession, Judy admits to being in love with Michael, and then Gabe is interviewed about his growing infatuation with his young creative writing student, Rain (Juliette Lewis). Also significant is the fact that during this interview with Gabe, we hear the questions and prompts posed by the interviewer, asking him about his relationship with Rain: “Why didn’t you stop yourself [from pursuing Rain]?,” “Rain had a boyfriend,” and “So what is it, you have a self-destructive streak?” In these instances, Kurland’s voice is reminiscent of the more traditional kind of documentary, or mockumentary, technique found in both *Take the Money and Run* and *Zelig*, a detached narrator linking scenes and setting up on-camera interviews that lend a coherence to the documented story. But what stands out in these scenes, and what occurs throughout the film, is the aural presence of the documentary filmmaker as he questions his interview subjects. Allen could have easily cut out the questions posed by this faux filmmaker, giving this example of mockumentary the feel of a more conventional or “real” documentary. However, his choice to leave in the documenting voice gives *Husbands and Wives* a feel of raw incompleteness, a tone that is further enhanced by Di Palma’s hand-held camera technique found throughout most of the film. This documenting style “jolts” viewers into an awareness of the kind of film they are watching, similar to the ways in which the unstable framings and abrupt jump cuts jar the viewer’s smooth and more passive

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Judy (Mia Farrow) in one of her six on-screen interviews in *Husbands and Wives*. 
escape into the film’s dramatic narrative. By doing so, Allen is drawing attention to the form of his art, not so much targeting the subject of his film, as he does in his earlier mockumentaries, but self-consciously parodying the very process of documentary filmmaking itself.

Indeed, there are moments in the film where boundaries between interviewer and interviewee, documentarian and documented subject, becomes blurred. Take, for example, the instances where characters in the dramatic segments of the film respond to the camera as if they were being interviewed. On her first date with Michael, Sally discusses her marriage to Jack and recalls a time where she catches him in a lie. Jack had told her that he was going out of town on business, but she sees him in the city buying lingerie for, she supposes, another lover. As Sally reveals this episode to Michael, she does so in great detail and while looking slightly off to the side of the camera’s direct gaze, similar to the ways in which she responds to the interviewer elsewhere in the film (as if the documentarian were sitting right across from her with the camera by his side). A similar incident occurs later in the film, when Gabe and Rain are sitting in the back of a cab on their way to pick up Gabe’s lost manuscript. While they discuss the merits of his writing, and whether or not she might have unconsciously misplaced the manuscript on purpose—“It’s so Freudian,” she utters as she begins her self-critique—Rain is presented in close-up and centered on the screen. During this exchange Gabe is outside of the frame, to Rain’s right, and his questions—and her responses to them—are reminiscent of the various interview segments of the film. Much like Sally does in the previously cited episode, Rain replies to her questioner while looking to the side of the camera, again recalling the gestures and composition of the film’s “authentic” interview scenes. Only occasionally does she turn to her right and directly look at Gabe during this conversation, choosing instead to look straight ahead. By staging such scenes in this manner, replicating the atmosphere of the interview segments in what is supposedly the straightforward dramatic portions of the film, Allen is questioning the conventional distinctions among (mock-) documentary, fictional cinematic narrative, and even docudramatic recreations.

In addition to foregrounding Allen’s blurring of generic differences, the taxi ride scene with Rain is significant for yet another reason: it is the one moment in the film where the artist figure, as artist, and his artistic product are critiqued for any sustained period. During this exchange, Rain criticizes Gabe’s novel in terms of its attitudes toward women—calling his representations “so retrograde, so shallow”—its cavalier treatment of affairs, its trivializing of conventional marriage, and its problematic lead character. Indeed, it is on this last point that Rain levels her most biting analysis of the manuscript, citing a weakness that sounds suspiciously similar to the character of Gabe in *Husbands and Wives*. She asks, “Isn’t it beneath you as a mature thinker to allow your lead character to waste so much of this emotional energy obsessing over this psychotic relationship with a woman that you fantasize as powerfully sexual and inspired, when in fact she was pitifully sick?” This observation is not without significance. “Maybe it meant something,” Rain says, in way of prefacing...
her loss of Gabe’s manuscript. And we as viewers are similarly invited to find meaning in this scene. While Rain’s words are obviously a criticism of Gabe’s writing, at the same time they can also be read as Allen’s meta-cinematic commentary on the film we are currently watching. Allen’s films, *Husbands and Wives* being one of these, have been similarly criticized for their attitudes toward relationships, their representation of women, and their protagonists’ romantic obsessions. In other words, Allen in this scene is drawing attention to himself as an artist, and his film as art, momentarily collapsing distinctions between Allen as actor and Allen as filmmaker, and even having a laugh at his own expense. And Rain appears to be on the mark. “I must have hit a nerve with you,” she says, after Gabe responds angrily to her critique. All of this is significant because if we approach *Husbands and Wives* as not only a mock-documentary, but as a self-reflexive mockumentary drawing attention to itself as a ill-defined cinematic object, then Rain’s critique of Gabe becomes a microcosmic commentary on the larger film. Her questioning the believability of Gabe’s manuscript becomes synonymous with Allen’s problematizing his own film.

Along with its meta-cinematic questioning of generic stability—how much is mockumentary and how much is drama?—the film also throws into question the reliability of the story itself. Indeed, questions of narrative consistency and believability occur throughout the film, and are of a kind with the film’s style: just as the camerawork is disjointed and erratic, so are the stories that unfold. One such episode occurs in the first half of the film, with the first interview segment with Judy’s ex-husband (Benno Schmidt). During his time on screen, he is explaining to the documentarian Judy’s devious nature, calling her passive-aggressive and accusing her of manipulating him, as well as Gabe, in order to get what she wants. What follows is an analepsis (or reenactment?) of Gabe’s first meeting Judy at a party in the Hamptons, and then that is followed by an interview segment with Judy (her second in the film) questioning her ex-husband’s believability and curiously linking it to his “impotence,” his wanting a woman like his mother, and his lack of romantic involvement with her. In other words, she attempts to rewrite the story of the Hamptons party by discrediting her former husband’s character. This episode, and by association the story behind Judy’s machinations, is given a further twist immediately after Judy’s refutation of her ex-husband’s accusations, and then the ex-husband’s final response to Judy. In the dramatic narrative segment that follows, Judy voices concern about a passage in Gabe’s novel-in-progress. She is worried that his highly autobiographical account of their meeting in the Hamptons paints her unsympathetically as a dull lover—strikingly similar to the charge she levels at her ex-husband—and this is accompanied with another visual analepsis of the Hampton gathering, similar to the first. What Allen presents, in essence, are at least three interpretations of the same event: the ex-husband’s account of Judy’s manipulating Gabe from the very beginning, Gabe’s novelist account of when he first met Judy, and Judy’s contentious reading of both of these descriptions. This moment in the film represents, in miniature, one of the larger issues raised in *Husbands and Wives*, namely, the ability of documentary style filmmaking to get at the truth of its subject matter. As with the foregrounding of the unedited interviewer voiceovers, Allen is holding up for examination the very form of his film and asking us to question the reliability of documentary—or, in this doubly ironized twist, mock-documentary—filmmaking as window onto the real.

Allen makes a similar move in *Sweet and Lowdown*, a mockumentary about the second greatest jazz guitarist of the twentieth century, Emmet Ray, played by Sean Penn (the first being the great Django Reinhart). Similar to what he does in films such as *Take the Money and Run* and *Zelig*, Allen here documents the life of a schlemiel artist figure and his fumbled attempts to create some kind of meaning in his life. But as he does
in *Husbands and Wives*, Allen problematizes the very project of documentary filmmaking by underscoring the role of the documentary filmmaker himself. Whereas the previous film accomplished this through an unknown and disembodied interviewer/narrator, with his voiceovers guiding his subjects’ responses and serving as narrative bridging devices, in *Sweet and Lowdown* the documenting subject is given onscreen presence: he is Woody Allen himself. There is nothing in the film that directly tells us that Allen is the one orchestrating this documentary, other than the fact that we know we are watching a Woody Allen film. Allen is just one of six interview subjects—including journalist Nat Hentoff, disc jockey Ben Duncan, and filmmaker Douglas McGrath—who recount the life of Emmet Ray. However, his on-screen presence stands out from the others in that he is the only one interviewed without any accompanying context. Each of the other five interview subjects is introduced, the first time they are on screen, with a brief biographical note revealing who they are and what they do. Allen appears on screen without these cues, thereby privileging his presence and making him stand out as a filmic subject (the assumption is that because he is Woody Allen, there is no need for biographical context). He also appears more frequently than any other interview subject. What is more, his is the first interview that sets up the story of Emmet Ray, and he has the last word in the film, telling what seems to be an off-camera interviewer that nobody really knows what happens to the jazz guitarist, that Ray “just, you know, seemed to fade away” (much as a cinematic scene would fade to black). These structural clues suggest that Allen himself is the primary interviewing presence—or, if you will, both the interviewer and the interviewee—and the one coordinating the documentary we are viewing. In this way, Allen draws attention to himself, meta-cinematically, as the documenting filmmaker.

Yet, while we are prone to view Allen as a reliable source of information—not only is Allen the filmmaker, but he is also a jazz aficionado—such is not necessarily the case with the other “authorities” in the film. Indeed, in *Sweet and Lowdown* Allen problematizes the very idea of critical authority by mixing otherwise believable sources with false experts. Actual, or at least conceivable, specialists on jazz history—Allen, Ben Duncan (a former disc jockey on WBGO out of Newark and WQCD in New York), and Nat Hentoff (music critic)—are intermixed with a real figure who is a non-expert (filmmaker Douglas McGrath) and two fictional experts played by actors: A. J. Pickman (Daniel Okrent), author of *Swing Guitars: American Perspective Series*, and Sally Jillian (Sally Placksin), author of *Guitar Kings*. And to confound our understanding of critical authority even further, Allen lists one of his real jazz historians, Ben Duncan, as a disc jockey at WFAD-FM, a radio station as fictional as the jazz histories of Pickman and Jillian. (WFAD is actually an AM sports radio station out of Middlebury, Vermont.) Through his interweaving of real and imaginary, actual and faux, Allen provides an added twist on the kind of critical commentary embed-
ded in Zelig, a film where genuine cultural figures provided testimony to a fictional historical subject. In Sweet and Lowdown, the subject of the film is also fictional, but the focus of this mockumentary is not just a satirizing of the genre’s format and conventions. Going one step further than he did in his earlier mock-documentaries, Allen is also calling into question biographical authority and how we construct history.

This mockumentary examination of “the real” is carried out in ways similar to that of Husbands and Wives: an intermixture of interviews and episodic narrative, the latter of which could conceivably stand on its own as straight drama without the dialogues. There are nineteen interview segments that structure the film—three successive interview events open the film, and two close the narrative—and provide its faux biographical and cultural contexts. What is more, the film augments its narrative “legitimacy” by providing a brief history that immediately precedes the opening credits (and which are accompanied by Django Reinhardt’s version of “When Day Is Done,” a comic pairing, given Ray’s legendary fear of meeting the great Reinhardt). “Emmet Ray,” according to the text, is a “little known jazz guitarist who flourished briefly in the 1930s,” and he “was considered second only to the great Django Reinhardt and is best known by jazz aficionados.” Accompanying this introduction is a list of six songs that Ray recorded for RCA Victor. Yet even here, in the historical setup of this (mock-)documentary, Allen is creating a fiction comprised of both real and false facets. Five of the six songs purportedly recorded for RCA Victor—e.g., “I’ll See You in My Dreams” and “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles”—are actual compositions written during or before Ray’s supposed career. The other tune, “Unfaithful Woman,” is, according to Allen in his sixth interview segment, Ray’s only recorded original composition. (“Unfaithful Woman” was, in fact, written by Dick Hyman, who arranged the music for the film.) This faux historical recording—a significant one, we can assume, since it was written after his discovery of Blanche’s (Uma Thurman) infidelities and thereby becomes an important emotional breakthrough—listed along with the genuine songs is just another example of Allen’s playful mixture of the real and the imaginary. Similar to his intermingling of fictional jazz historians, the biographical data that opens the film contributes to Allen’s larger project: creating a false documentary, comprised of both historical and fictional components, that challenges our understanding of narrative authenticity and what we accept as “real.”

Also like Husbands and Wives, Allen’s jazz film uses the narrative itself to undermine its own legitimacy. There are anecdotes of Emmet Ray that conflict with other historical accounts, and the interview subjects themselves are never entirely clear if what they have heard is actually what happened. Indeed, tentative language permeates the dialogue in most of the interview segments, and many refer to their information as something approximating hearsay. In his first time onscreen, Ben Duncan admits that “[t]he problem is, there’s just so little known about [Emmet Ray],” and then goes on to expound on “a story going around” about Ray fainting when he sees Django Reinhardt. Later Duncan admits that he “heard stories” that Ray was a kleptomaniac and that he had once stolen an alarm clock from Hoagy Carmichael, making Carmichael miss an important recording date. When we first see A. J. Pickman, he states that there “are few Emmet Ray stories before [he meets Hattie (Samantha Morton)], but I have no idea if they are true or not.” Elsewhere in the film, Pickman says of Ray’s infamous moon idea—a wooden prop in the shape of a crescent moon on which Ray would descent during his performance—that “the story is that it came to him, apparently, I guess, in a dream.” Douglas McGrath, in relating an incident where Ray is fooled into thinking that Django Reinhardt is in his audience, prefaces his story by saying, “I don’t know if this is true or not, or just one of those Emmet Ray stories.” And Allen himself, in his interview segments, uses similarly uncertain language. When setting up the story
of Hattie’s brief stint as an actress, he says, “Now, as the story goes...,” and in recounting the episode of Ray spying on Blanche warns, “I’ve heard stories about this from musicians. I’ve read about it. I don’t really know.” What all of these dialogical contexts suggest is the uncertainty of the story they are all telling. Emmet Ray is a legend, and as such, his history is filled with myth, rumor, and innuendo that may or may not have any anchor in reality.

Nowhere in Sweet and Lowdown is narrative uncertainty more evident than in the episode where Ray spies on Blanche, an event that stands as a keystone to the film. In this series of scenes, we are told how Ray’s marriage to Blanche falls apart when he discovers that she is having an affair with a known mobster, Al Torrio (Anthony LaPaglia). According to Allen, the narrator/interviewee who first sets up the story, Ray secretly hides in the backseat of the car that Blanche and her lover take on a drive first to the movie theater and then to the country. He then reveals how the adulterous lovers stop at a country store being held up by two robbers, how the thieves steal the car with Ray in the back, and of the police chase and gunfight that ensue. Immediately after this recounting, Ben Duncan interjects, “Well, that’s not what I heard. But let me tell you, like all Emmet Ray stories, you never know what’s made up, or what’s exaggerated, what’s true. You never know what to believe.” Duncan then says, “What I heard was this,” and tells a different version of the story where Ray confronts Blanche and threatens to shoot himself over her betrayal. Duncan’s account is then followed by another instance of Allen, who corrects Duncan’s story: “Believe me, he never tried to kill himself, because Emmet Ray had much too much ego for anything like that.” He then tells a third version of this story—one that curiously contradicts his earlier account—where Torrio holds up the store and fires shots. This frightens Ray, who then leaps into the front of the car and drives off, only to crash into an oncoming car that just happens to be driven by musicians, including the great Django Reinhardt. And Ray, in the presence of his idol, faints. Yet Allen’s final account is neither definitive nor certain. He prefaces this third version of the story by telling the camera that jazz guitarist Eddie Condon is its source, but that Condon is “definitely not a reliable source because he was a big embellisher himself.” So what we have here, in essence, is a legendary and defining moment in the life of Emmet Ray, but one that can never be agreed upon, and further, is substantiated by questionable sources. Again, Allen the filmmaker draws attention to himself as a (mock-)documentary filmmaker, not only by placing himself on screen as a “reliable” source of jazz history, but by problematizing any effort to get at the real story of Emmet Ray. Much as what happens in Husbands and Wives, narrative consistency is undermined, uncertainty is woven throughout, and the film self-consciously deconstructs itself.

What we can take away from Sweet and Lowdown is a theme that is also common to Allen’s other post-1990 mockumentary: that...
everyone is a storyteller, and that the line between interviewer/author and interviewee/subject is not as clearly defined as we have been led to believe. The narrative of Emmet Ray is not a singular chronicle, but a participatory event in which many historical “authorities” have their say, contributing bits and pieces that at times overlap and at others appear inconsistent. Jazz aficionados such as Ben Duncan and A. J. Pickman are not only interview subjects, responding to an assumed documentary filmmaker whose presence is never revealed, but also authors in their own right. Their stories are what compose the film. The same could be said of the interviewees in *Husbands and Wives.* Gabe, Judy, Sally, Jack, and Michael all respond to the film’s interviewing persona—the constructing presence in the film and who often serves as its direct narrator—but at the same time they themselves become the primary storytellers, at times eliminating the middle-man (the official interviewer) and addressing the viewer directly. Notice, for example, how easily Sally assumes narrative authority when she recounts the first time she suspects Jack of adultery (seeing him in the city while he is supposedly on a business trip), or how dominating a presence Rain becomes as she reveals to Gabe her allure to and history with middle-aged men. In both of these instances, their stories are accompanied by episodic analepses, fragments of story that supplement and illustrate their narrations in ways that are similar to the dramatic episodes that accompany the unseen interviewer’s commentary. By framing his mock-documentaries in this way, Allen is using documentary conventions not only to satirize and have fun with the genre, but also to raise larger issues concerning narrative authority and our assumptions of the real.

Documentaries are made up of fragments, separate bits of interviews and historical footage that, edited together, create a cohesiveness story, a tale whose authenticity is implied through the persuasiveness of its construction. Woody Allen, by contrast, uses mockumentary to question or falsify the legitimacy of these various fragments—the interview, narrative voiceovers, docudramatic reenactments, and expert testimony—and to show them to be similar to the conventions found in fictional storytelling. In doing so, he foregrounds the role of the documentarian as a narrating agent and, by association, his own responsibilities and limits as an artist/filmmaker. With his most recent mock-documentaries, Allen self-reflexively uses the films’ formal elements to interrogate the kind of truth-telling we assume to be embedded in traditionally legitimized systems of narrative—those that purportedly get at “the real”—and to challenge our understanding of what “narrative authority” actually means.

**Notes**

1A full understanding of the mockumentary genre is inextricably linked to the system of documentary, both its various conventions and its cultural functions. As Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight point out in their pioneering study, the mock-documentary form (their preferred term) is characterized by fictional texts “which make a partial or concerted effort to appropriate documentary codes and conventions in order to represent a fictional subject” (2). More specifically, this parodic or satiric genre displays “an (often latent) reflexive stance toward documentary—a ‘mocking’ of the genre’s cultural status” (5). In expressing the primary function of the genre, Cynthia J. Miller describes it this way:

One part humor, two parts transgression, the many forms and variations of the mockumentary genre hold a mirror up to our flaws, poke fun at our assumptions, and refuse to let us look away from our most cherished notions about reality, the “truth,” and the taken-for-granted of everyday life, laying bare the audacities, frailties, and well-guarded fantasies that bring them into being. (3)

Of particular significance in Miller’s description is her emphasis on “truth” and
mockumentary’s ability to interrogate and even undermine our assumptions of what is real. In this essay, I will focus on this aspect of the genre and apply it not only to how Allen’s films question the “real,” or what actually happened, but how film itself narratologically frames those questions and thereby draws attention to the form, self-reflexively, as a truth-producing medium.

Indeed, the very structure of Take the Money and Run reflects Lewis’s own episodic style of comedy filmmaking and in many ways explains why Allen turned to Lewis as a possible director of the film. See Lax (Biography 255-56) and Allen (Woody Allen 16, 18).

One could even argue that in mockumentaries such as Take the Money and Run, Allen exploits our assumptions of dramatic reenactments—framing them in ways that call to mind the docudrama, a form that presents historical events through dramatic recreation—thereby giving still another twist to viewers’ understanding of the genre(s) in which he is working.

In his conversation with Stig Björkman, Allen admits that the hand-held, jump-cut technique was used in the Husbands and Wives “to make it more disturbing. … I wanted it to be more dissonant because the internal, emotional and mental states of the characters are dissonant. I wanted the audience to feel that there was a jagged, nervous feeling. An unsettled and neurotic feeling” (Woody Allen 252). As Peter J. Bailey, among others, have observed, Carlo Di Palma’s ragged cinematography contributes to the theme of broken lives and ruptured relationships brought about by each character’s narcissistic desires (184). For more on the technical choices Allen makes in the film, see his conversation with Björkman (244-46, 253-54).

The one exception to this is the interview with Judy’s ex-husband (Benno Schmidt). During his first brief segment in the film, he mentions Gabriel Roth as “her current husband,” suggesting that his interviews were conducted before Gabe and Judy broke up and Judy became involved with Michael. Lacking any clues to the contrary, we may assume that all of the other interviews in the film were conducted—or were meant to appear to be conducted—after the final narrated events in the film (i.e., Jack and Sally getting back together, Judy becoming involved with Michael, and Gabe left on his own).

Among the instances of interview subjects who appear more than once, Gabe is interviewed seven times and is wearing three different outfits but only presented in one location, in front of a bookcase; Judy is interviewed six times (twice with Michael) and is presented in five different outfits and four different locations; Sally, interviewed three times (once with Jack), is wearing three different outfits in two different locations; Jack is interviewed twice (once with Judy) in two different outfits but in the same location. Judy’s ex-husband is the only figure interviewed more than once, in the same location and dress.

These voiceovers function not only as audio bridges between scenes, but narrative contexts setting up Judy’s reaction to dinner with Jack and Sally following their breakup announcement; Sally’s dinner date with her co-worker, Paul; Judy’s lunch with Sally where she first mentions Michael (Liam Neeson); Judy presenting Michael with some of her poetry; Jack and Sally getting back together and celebrating over dinner with Judy and Gabe; Gabe breaking up with Judy and moving out into his own apartment; Judy helping Michael get over the loss of Sally; and the year-and-a-half narrative ellipsis between the previous events and the film’s final interview segments.

There are other moments in the film where a character’s art is discussed—e.g., Judy mentioning Gabe’s novel, Rain’s parents praising Gabe’s short stories, and Michael commenting on Judy’s poetry—but these instances are fleeting and function only as minor plot points.
I do not want to suggest here that Allen in *Husbands and Wives* is being intentionally autobiographical in the way he presents Gabe and his relationship with Judy, especially as it applies to his breakup with Mia Farrow. Allen has told Eric Lax that the script was written two years before the couple split (*Conversations* 54). However, I do hold that this is one of those scenes where Allen is highlighting the role of the artist, as he does in most of his other films; and since Gabe is the obvious artist figure in *Husbands and Wives*, and Allen by choice plays that role, then Woody Allen by association becomes the subject of his own critique.

As Allen discusses with Eric Lax, *Sweet and Lowdown* is a modified version of *The Jazz Baby*, a manuscript he wrote in the early 1970s (*Conversations* 128). John Baxter notes in his biography that the original script, centered around the early days of jazz, was intended as a follow-up to *Take the Money and Run*, but that those at United Artists balked at its serious dramatic content (177). It is telling how Allen transformed the drama, almost thirty years later, into a light comedy as well as retooled the narrative into documentary form.

Given the topic of Pickman’s expertise, jazz guitar, Allen’s choice for a fictional last name adds to the comedy of his project.

Of the nineteen segments, Allen appears in seven of those, one with only a voiceover; Ben Duncan in four; the fictional A. J. Pickman in three; Nat Hentoff in two; Douglas McGrath in two, one with only a voiceover; and the fictional Sally Jillian in one.

Several times throughout the film Ray’s friends and lovers accuse him of bottling up his emotions, a condition which prevents him from reaching his full artistic potential and actually rivaling Django Reinhardt. But his last recordings, the ones he made after Blanche and including “Unfaithful Woman,” are “great...absolutely beautiful,” according to Allen in his final interview segment. A. J. Pickman puts it this way in his last onscreen appearance: “He did make, though, in those last couple of years... his best recordings. He never played more beautifully, more movingly. Something just seemed to kind of open up in him. It was amazing, because he was, finally, he was every bit as good as Django Reinhardt.” The irony here is that one of Ray’s most significant recordings, something that made him as great as Django Reinhardt, is, in fact, a complete fabrication.

When asked by Stig Björkman, “who in your mind is this investigator [in *Husbands and Wives*], the interviewer in the film?,” Allen responds, “I never thought of it. Just the audience. It’s a convenient way of letting the characters explain themselves” (*Woody Allen* 246).

**Works Cited**


