

"The Last Movie Stars" Is a Festive Canonization of Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward

Ethan Hawke's documentary is hagiographic, but it's also canny, inventive, and revelatory.

By [Richard Brody](#) July 21, 2022

The six-part, six-hour HBO Max series "The Last Movie Stars," a documentary about Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, directed by [Ethan Hawke](#), is a work of unmitigated hagiography, even canonization. Its tone of veneration goes beyond the two protagonists (who were married for fifty years, until Newman's death in 2008) to embrace the actors with whom they worked and the directors and writers who fostered their art. Yet Hawke, who is himself among the most creative and curious actors of the time, turns his film (dropping Thursday) into a festivity, and one that makes the best of the troubled circumstances of its production—namely, the *COVID* pandemic.

The documentary comprises three main elements: clips from the actors' films, other archival footage (including the family's own), and Zoom appearances by Hawke and his

actor friends, which figure far more in the movie's soundtrack than in its onscreen images. [Newman](#) had planned to write a memoir, and commissioned a friend to record interviews with his friends, colleagues, and family members; later, Newman had second thoughts and destroyed (literally burned) the audio recordings. But his family had thousands of pages of interview transcripts, which they turned over to Hawke. (A [book based on these transcripts](#), "Paul Newman: The Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Man," will be published in October, realizing something of the autobiography that Newman had planned.) With the transcripts in hand, Hawke recruits his own friends to "make these audios come alive," and describes the resulting film as "a play with voices." The other actors are introduced on lo-fi, Zoom-like screens, and the encounters are conspicuously social and warmhearted; the actors are casually dressed in domestic settings, and some are joined by pets. George Clooney plays Newman, and Laura Linney plays Woodward.