

WHITMER THOMAS

the golden one

ABOUT





Whitmer in costume in front of a portrait of his mom Jenny.

Whitmer Thomas on 'The Golden One' as a Musical and the Best Advice He's Ever Gotten

With The Golden One, Whitmer Thomas does more than turn music, comedy and documentary into his first HBO special: He also takes a trip back in time.

BY KATLA MCGLYNN

By going back to where he grew up in Alabama, reconnecting with his dad and aunt, and performing at the Flora-Bama Lounge — the famed, longstanding Gulf Shores venue where his late mother and her twin sister used to perform with their band, SynTwister — Whitmer Thomas takes viewers on a journey of his roots while living out one of his (and his mom's) dreams.

Co-directed by Whitmer and his childhood friend Clay Tatum, with comedian Bo Burnham as

an executive producer, the special combines Whitmer's jokes about growing up in Alabama and life as an "aging emo kid" in Los Angeles with original songs like "[Dumb in Love](#)." Read on to know more about Whitmer Thomas and watch *The Golden One*, now streaming.



Whitmer and Say Your Last band members Cris and Matt.

HBO: You've been performing some version of this show for quite a while now in L.A.

When you first started out, did you know you wanted to make it into a special one day?

Whitmer Thomas: No, not at all. I didn't really have any intention of making a comedy special or I didn't think I was going to be the type of comedian who could have that kind of opportunity. But I always had that bit about my mom calling me "The Golden One," and so when I would go on tour, I would call the show that — but only because I liked to put it on the poster. It was funny to have my dumb face on there with "The Golden One" underneath it. It really wasn't until I started adding music to the show that I started thinking this could be fun as a special.

HBO: True, there's a song about every 10 minutes in the special. Do you see it as a musical of sorts?

Whitmer Thomas: Yeah, that's how I look at it. I really love how Bo Burnham does his, where he doesn't have to say "Hit that track!" or anything. The song just starts to play and it's the same thing with musicals. To me, there's nothing better than when somebody is speaking and a little track starts to play and, "Oh, they're about to sing a song. Here we go." I also tried to write the show to have a bit of an arc in the way that a musical might.





Whitmer, his mom Jenny and his brother Johnny.

HBO: The story arc of the special is super personal, so I can see why you would want to work with a director who's your childhood friend.

Whitmer Thomas: Yeah, Clay and I grew up together. When I was 10, after my dad left, we had to move from Birmingham to Gulf Shores, Alabama, which is where we filmed this thing, on Pleasure Island. I met Clay on the first day of school and we just became best pals. There aren't a lot of us skater/punk kids down there, so we kind of latched onto each other and went through every phase together, then started making little short films in high school.

HBO: How did you decide to co-direct the special?

Whitmer Thomas: When me, Bo and Chris [Storer] first started talking about how to achieve this idea, I knew I didn't feel confident directing it by myself — that felt kind of strange. And when the idea of shooting it at the Flora-Bama came up, I was like, if we're doing it there, I definitely don't want a stranger or some person from L.A. to direct it. It was Bo who suggested, "Why don't you and Clay direct it?" Which was great because we have the same kind of aesthetic. Although, that all went out the window because the Flora-Bama has its own aesthetic that was established in 1974.



Whitmer, his father Whit and his brother Johnny.

HBO: So you step into this funky, old beach bar where your mom used to perform decades ago with her band. I'm guessing the room wasn't set up for shooting a comedy special. Did you change anything?

Whitmer Thomas: No, we didn't change a thing. I asked if we could take down the ropes around the stage so it wouldn't look like I'm on a ship and they said no [laughs].

HBO: Were you nervous to ask your father, brother and aunt to participate in the documentary portions of the special?

Whitmer Thomas: Well, yeah, it was extremely nerve wracking. I felt terrible being like, "Hey dad, take me golfing and let's talk about all of the trauma and we're going to film it." It's completely embarrassing, but it was so good for us. My brother and I talk all the time. He's one of my best friends. So, that wasn't so weird. And then, with my aunt, that was uncomfortable because I hadn't seen her in 11 years. We both look different now and our lives are so different than they were then. But I think she was excited to work through some stuff. There's a whole documentary just in the conversations I had with her.



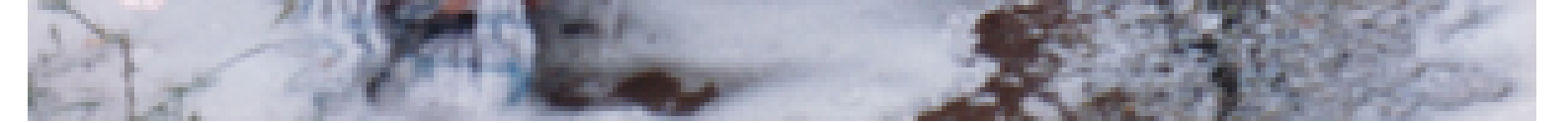
Whitmer's mother Jenny and her sister Jude, AKA SynTwister.

HBO: Obviously a big part of the special is telling your mom's story. Do you feel like you've closed a chapter or will you continue to talk about her in your act?

Whitmer Thomas: I kind of hope that this is the end of me being tangled up in my mom and her death and her career and her successes and failures. And I think that my therapist would really appreciate it being over. I've been telling these jokes and stories about her forever, and now it's sort of cathartic for me because now it's permanent and people can be aware of her in a way that I feel like she always deserved. Moving on, I think I'll definitely tell jokes involving my mom, but they'll be fun stories or ridiculous stories, instead of me comparing myself to her.



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Whitmer and his brother Johnny

HBO: What's the best advice you've ever received about comedy?

Whitmer Thomas: The best advice I ever got was from comedian Todd Glass. He said, "Try to be the comedian who's having the most fun on stage and the audience will feel it. Even if it's a bad show, the audience is dead and everybody's having a tough time, just go out on stage and try to have the most fun of the night." So, I try to do that. Sometimes I bomb and I realize I wasn't even trying to have fun — I was on autopilot. Then I'll go out for the second show and actually try to have fun. That's when I realize, "Oh, that was what was missing."

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