



DOCUMENTING NEW ORLEANS ON FILM

BY PAUL STEKLER

AND PUTTING **GETTING BACK TO ABNORMAL** IN CONTEXT

Election Day, March 1986, and we're filming on a cold, late afternoon in the bleak and mostly deserted Desire housing projects of New Orleans. Mayoral hopeful Bill Jefferson is looking for hands to shake, and I ask my cameraman to follow close behind him, make him look like Moses parting the waters of the few curious spectators. Around a corner, some teenagers are playing basketball on a pitted rectangle of blacktop. Jefferson takes a shot, an awkward air ball, then removes his sports jacket and swooshes the next one through a net that's torn and hanging by a couple of threads. "What a shot," someone yells. Then he walks off

into the distance, and we leave to film other places before the light fades and the polls close.

Driving out of the projects, we see an old man walking down the street, pulling up campaign signs and stakes, one by one. He wants the wood. We pull ahead of him, quickly get the camera on a tripod, just in time to frame him. Picking up one sign. Then another. Then a third. Then moving out of frame. Suddenly, off camera, he pulls a sign off its stake, one of Jefferson's, and tosses it into the air behind him so that it, and Jeff's image, falls softly back into the picture.

It was the kind of magic moment that you wish for in filming documentaries. It also reminds me of my own excitement back then as a transplant in New Orleans, a place whose history, music, culture—whose *everything*—seemed begging to be recorded, in my young filmmaker’s eyes.

Back then, our small documentary community revolved around the New Orleans Video Access Center (NOVAC), the Contemporary Arts Center’s screening program, and the work generated by feature film productions like *Pretty Baby*, *Down by Law*, and *Cat People*. Glen Pitre had just finished the early Sundance favorite *Belizaire the Cajun*, and photographer Michael P. Smith was introducing filmmakers to the local culture of second lines and Mardi Gras Indians that would later appear in his amazing book, *Spirit World*. And I was making the transition from teaching politics at Tulane University to working in film, having just met two young, established New Orleans filmmakers, Louis Alvarez and Andy Kolker, who had finished their first feature, *The Ends of the Earth* (1982), about Plaquemines Parish political boss Leander Perez.

Three decades later, long after we had left the city, Andy, Louis, and I (along with our fellow producer, Peter Odabashian) came back to the city we had started in and never forgotten, making a new film, *Getting Back to Abnormal*, about race and politics and New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. As its national PBS broadcast draws near (July 14 on the network’s *POV* series), I started to look back at the treasure trove of past New Orleans documentaries that includes our work among many others.

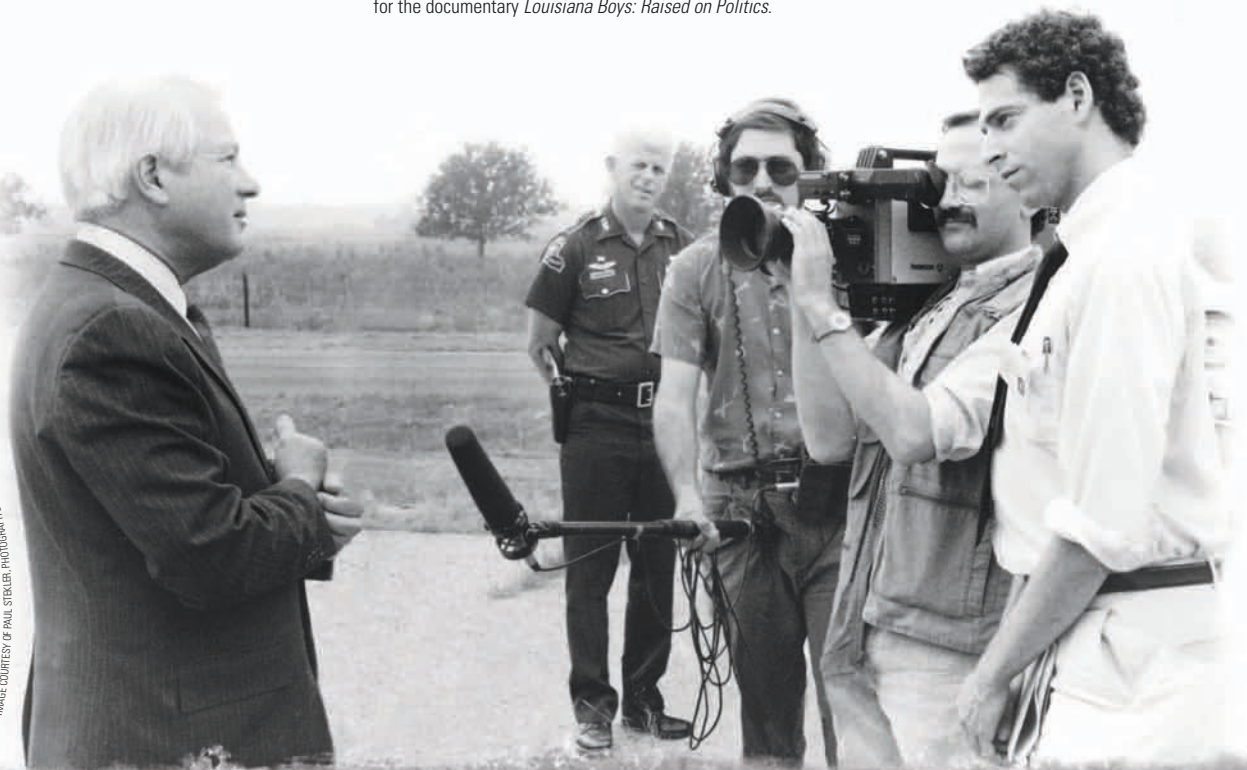
THE EARLY DOCUMENTARIES, 1978 - 1986

New Orleans is no stranger to being depicted on film. Images of Mardi Gras, jazz musicians, and parades are familiar to most Americans. The city has also functioned as a palette for many a screenwriter’s fantasy. And while Marlon Brando may have bellowed for Stella on a Hollywood set for the movie version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, some films used actual locations in New Orleans. That’s really Elvis on a French Quarter balcony in *King Creole*, singing to a passing street vendor. From *Panic in the Streets* to the Mardi Gras acid-trip scene in *Easy Rider* to *Cat People*, *Down by Law*, and David Simon’s HBO series *Treme*, New Orleans frequently appears on screen.

While some New Orleans documentary work predates the 1970s—most prominently *The Children Were Watching* (1961), about school desegregation, made by American documentary pioneer Robert Drew—the start of an indigenous documentary community stems from the 1971 founding of NOVAC, an activist video organization that started out making videos like *How to Get a Grievance Hearing*, *Must You Pay the Rent*, and *Police Brutality—Part 1* (they never did make Part 2). In the mid-1970s, NOVAC’s young videomakers, Alvarez and Kolker, along with Stevenson Palfi, Burwell Ware, and Eddie Kurtz, began making work about broader cultural subjects. *This Cat Can Play Anything* (1977), a gem made by Kolker, Kurtz, and Palfi, starred Preservation Hall banjo jazzman Manny Sayles. Ware’s short *Cheap and Greasy* (1977) featured the now-closed Hummingbird Grill on St. Charles Avenue. And then there’s Alvarez and Kolker’s *Being Poor in New Orleans* local TV series,

Paul Stekler, Andy Kolker (on camera), and Louis Alvarez (on sound) film an interview with Governor Edwin Edwards in 1987 for the documentary *Louisiana Boys: Raised on Politics*.

IMAGE COURTESY OF PAUL STEKLER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY STAN IRVINE



particularly "The Clarks" (1979), a portrait of a family living in the since-demolished St. Thomas housing project.

The first feature-length documentaries in New Orleans focused on iconic elements of the city: music, festivals, and the distinctive cultures of Uptown elites as well as the working class, both black and white. The best of these films remain among the more memorable three decades later.

Palfi's *Piano Players Rarely Ever Play Together* (1982) brought three generations of New Orleans pianists—Isidore "Tuts" Washington, Henry "Professor Longhair" Byrd, and Allen Toussaint—together to play. It's a remarkable preservation piece, the virtuosos on three pianos practicing for a public performance. But Professor Longhair died of a heart attack before the performance could take place, and Palfi instead captured his funeral, brass bands playing in the street and Toussaint singing inside, over the casket. The film concludes back at the practice, the three pianists playing a joyful blues, each taking solos and looking delighted.

Yes Ma'am (1982) was made by Gary Goldman, who had moved back to his hometown to work on Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby*. He proceeded to burn every bridge he could, peeling back the covers of the lives of black domestics and their white employers, especially the unconsciously honest children of privilege. One particularly memorable story was of a little girl, told she couldn't sleep downstairs with her maid, covering herself in mud and running into her house screaming, "I'm black, I'm black." The film is like *Driving Miss Daisy* and *The Help* meeting the Uptown New Orleans society stories of Ellen Gilchrist. Pulling no punches, it aired on PBS nationally but never screened in New Orleans until 2011.

The late Les Blank's seminal *Always for Pleasure* (1978) remains the touchstone for filming music and people dancing in the streets of New Orleans. Blank, already a well-known documentarian of American roots music, was on his way to make a film in Colombia, when he stopped in New Orleans for a folklore conference. He met Michael

Smith, who invited him to a second-line parade. Blank was transfixed and decided to stay. What he produced is a feast of festivals and second lines, a hall-of-fame lineup of musicians and the distinctive voices of New Orleanians. I've never forgotten a smiling black woman, enjoying Carnival day but knowing the difference between partying and reality in her city: "If you want to be white today, you can be white today. Superman. Batman. Robin Hood. You can be whatever you want to be today. But, now, tomorrow? You got to be a nigger tomorrow." So one makes do with the joy one can find.

As the text on screen tells us: "When you're dead, you're gone. Long live the living!"

While Alvarez and Kolker's first feature, *The Ends of the Earth*, isn't a "New Orleans" film, the action was just down the highway in the alluvial lands of Plaquemines Parish. It's a visit to a vanished world of Orange Queen contests, nutria hunters, French-speaking Creoles, and the marshes before they began to rapidly vanish from coastal erosion. What starts as a portrait of the parish leads to the story of archsegregationist Judge Leander Perez and the doomed efforts of his feuding sons, Chalin and Leander Jr., to stay in power in the parish's first unrigged parish election in half a century. Three years later, Alvarez and Kolker finished *Yeah You Rite!* (1985), a half-hour

documentary on New Orleans dialects in which Yat meets Uptown meets urban black accents. And even if typecast by accent, as one man put it: "I don't want to go through the process of making my

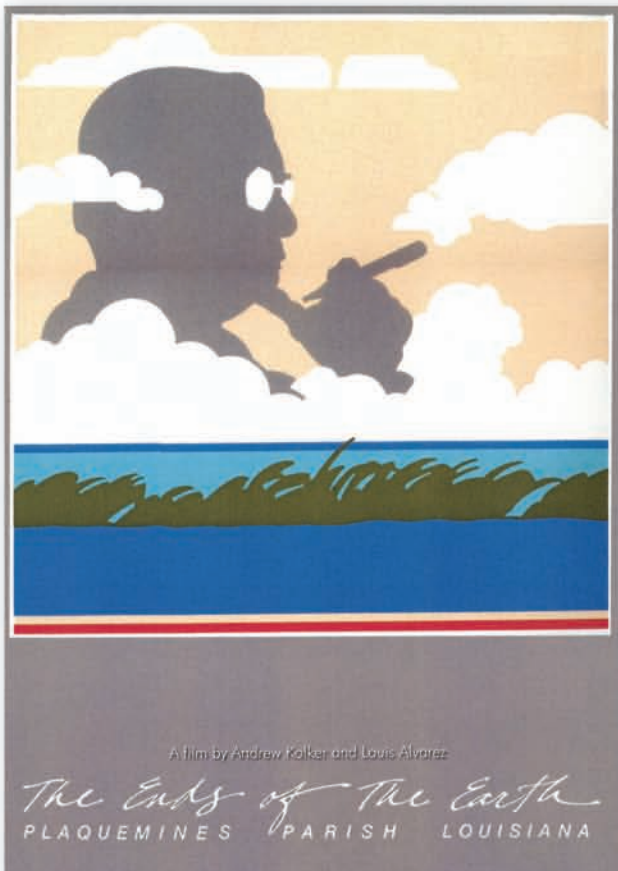
tongue do the stuff you have to do to talk right. Why put forth the effort? Everybody knows me—ain't that right?"

Other notable documentaries from the 1980s include the work of John Beyer at WYES, the New Orleans PBS affiliate: *The Men of LSU* (1982) about college football; *Pete!* (1980), a profile of jazz musician Pete Fountain; and *Hot Stuff: The Restaurants of New Orleans* (1980). All of these films are narrated with a wicked, sarcastic sense of humor and employ music as only a music lover would.



IMAGE COURTESY OF PAUL STEKLER, PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSEPHINE SACCO

Louis Alvarez and Andy Kolker with a sign promoting the 1985 documentary *Yeah You Rite!* that examined ethnic and class-based accents in New Orleans.



Eddie Kurtz was making his irreverent *Real New Orleans* series. Karen Snyder's *View from the Stoop* (1982) was about the New Orleans habit of sitting on the front steps, "looking for the breeze and finding a cool spot." Neil Alexander followed a high school band in *Get Down Street Sound* (1984).

Stretching the bounds of what constituted conflict of interest, I made that film that captured Jefferson on election day, *Among Brothers: Politics in New Orleans* (1986), about the race between two African American contenders to succeed the city's first black mayor, Dutch Morial, even though I was also Jefferson's pollster and was analyzing the election nightly on local news. Only in New Orleans.

THE HISTORIES AND THE STORM, 1986 - 2008

It's an unseasonably hot October day, and we've driven a ways out into the swamps downriver from New Orleans, looking for the dedication of a forlorn piece of newly paved

highway. It's our last chance in the 1987 election campaign to interview Gov. Edwin Edwards, who is running for re-election. Having survived two grand jury indictments, his hijinks have finally caught up to him in the form of reform candidate Buddy Roemer. With no news crews around to film the listless ribbon cutting, we have the governor all to ourselves. He's dispirited at the prospect of losing, but our final question suddenly lights the old Edwin magic. "Who's the greatest politician you've seen in your lifetime?" we ask. With a twinkle in his eye, he answers, "Every time I shave and look in the mirror, I see him."

It wasn't our intent to make a Louisiana political history film. *Louisiana Boys: Raised on Politics* (1992) came about because the 1987 gubernatorial election that Alvarez, Kolker, and I had tried to document had little drama. Edwards even dropped out after making the runoff. That potential storytelling failure, though, became an unplanned opportunity when we dug into our own collection of archival footage to focus on the state's unique political culture and history. Besides a cast of colorful rogues, we featured sequences about political advertising on the old Schwegmann's grocery store's shopping bags and unusual attack ads like one for district attorney that featured a supposedly soft-on-crime candidate's face superimposed onto a dripping Mr. Softee ice cream cone. There's also footage of a younger, more upbeat Edwin Edwards, saying the only way he could lose an election was to be "caught in bed with a dead girl or a live boy."

The most interesting New Orleans films from the mid-1980s up through Hurricane Katrina were histories, with Ken Burns' *Huey Long* (1985) the first of national note. Before making multi-hour series about the Civil War and World War II that took longer to make than the conflicts they covered took to fight, Burns came down to Louisiana. His film is about power, ethics, and an unforgettable character in the larger-than-life "dictator" of Louisiana. Any film with Robert Penn Warren reading from his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *All the King's Men* is something very special. Plus there's the late Betty Carter, the wife of the crusading newspaper editor Hodding Carter, posed in front of the gorgeous patterned upholstery of a high-backed chair in her Uptown New Orleans home, matter-of-factly commenting, "I can't remember any Saturday night that I went anywhere, that we didn't talk about killing Huey Long."

There are plenty of other histories to choose from. Rick Smith's heartfelt biographical documentary of Huey's colorful—if not crazy—brother, Gov. Earl Long, featured wonderful archival footage in *Uncle Earl* (1986), especially around the time of Earl's being committed to a mental



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institution and his subsequent escape. *Treme* writer Lolis Eric Elie and Dawn Logsdon interwove a history of black New Orleans with the rebuilding of Elie's flood-damaged house in *Faubourg Treme: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans* (2008). Rebecca Snedeker took us on her very personal inside look at the history of Mardi Gras society in *By Invitation Only* (2006). A series of films were made at WYES about the various ethnic groups who populate New Orleans—Irish, Italians, Germans, and Jews—along with Peggy Scott Laborde's many

successfully registered as "white" in order to vote.

Jazz, after a montage of fabulous archival film and photos, goes back to where the music began, New Orleans, with its mix of peoples and cultures, where "there was a whole lot of integrating going on." African roots, Caribbean sounds, the religious songs of the slaves, the "mania" of Creoles of color for horns, minstrels, and ragtime make a "roux" mixed with dancing and Delta blues. And so they begat jazz. Plus, there's the ever-present Wynton Marsalis mimicking horn melodies vocally and demonstrating how one can even transform "The Stars and Stripes Forever" into jazz.

Then there's *Storyville: The Naked Dance* (1997), which covers much of the same ground while allowing viewers to feel the heat and the funk of the city. Maia Harris and Anne Craig's film is about America's most famous legal red-light district and includes a lot of photographic (and graphic) nudity, including the famous portraits of prostitutes by E.J. Bellocq. The narrator, a fictional older prostitute, looks back at the history and lives of the people who made up the district, making madam Lulu White, jazzmen Buddy Bolden and Jelly Roll Morton, and regular working girls come to life. Then there are the storytellers, Al Rose, whose *Storyville* history was the basis of Malle's *Pretty Baby*, and the musician-writer Danny Barker, both passed on now. When Barker does his voices of what he calls the "do-wrong people," such as vegetable peddler Meatball Charley—"I got bananas today, ladies. I got apples. I got oranges. I got sweet potatoes, and I've got onions. And I've got some other things, everything a lonesome woman needs"—you can close your eyes and think you really are in living history.

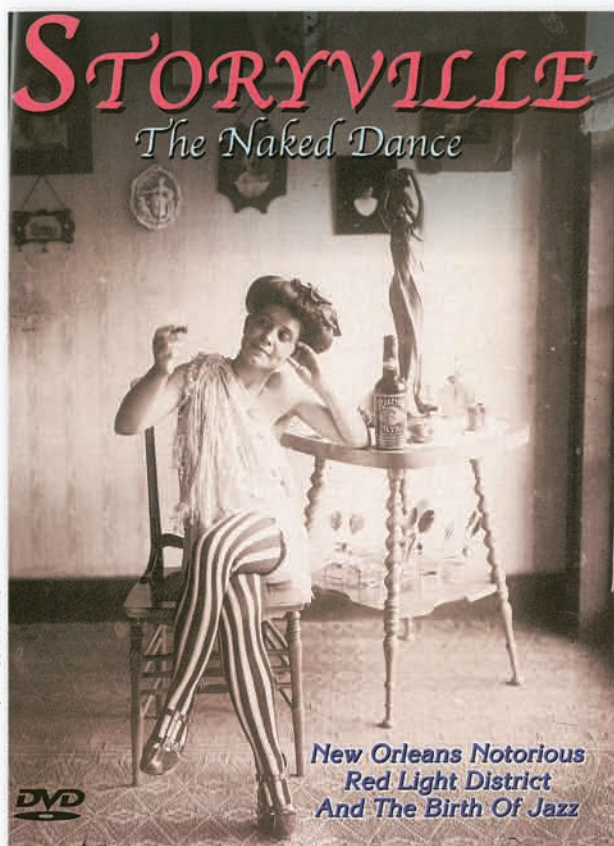


IMAGE COURTESY OF PAUL STEKLER, DIRECTED BY MAIA HARRIS

KATRINA, 2005 - 2011

In the wake of Katrina, it seemed like every documentary filmmaker in America headed towards New Orleans. Spike Lee made his big-budget HBO films, Jonathan Demme came to the Lower 9th Ward for *I'm Carolyn Parker: The Good, the Mad, and the Beautiful* (2011), and early cinema verite icon Ed Pincus made his last film, *The Axe in the Attic* (2007). PBS's *Frontline* weighed in (*The Old Man and the Storm*, 2009), and there were films about the Vietnamese community mobilizing against a post-storm dump (*A Village Called Versailles*, 2009), a lovely film about pets lost and sometimes found after Katrina (*Mine*, 2009), and the reunion put on by a Creole jazzman (Michelle Benoit and Glen Pitre's *American Creole: New Orleans Reunion*, 2006), among many others.

programs that take local viewers down memory lane.

Two national PBS productions, Burns' multipart *Jazz* series (2001) and the *American Experience* production of "New Orleans" (2007), also tackled the city's history. *New Orleans* (2007) is set in the context of Hurricane Katrina and addresses the question of what America would be without the city. Sequences that chart the city's history are interwoven with contemporary portraits of people making do after Katrina: Creole restaurateur Leah Chase cooking, workers repairing tombs in an above-ground cemetery, the first post-storm Carnival season, along with interviews with historians, writers, and artists. One memorable irony pointed out in this documentary is that years after being arrested on a streetcar and losing the historic *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision that made "separate but equal" the law of the land, the light-skinned Homer Plessy

The makers of the Oscar-nominated *Trouble the Water* (2008) literally walked into their star, evacuee Kimberly Roberts, outside a refugee center in Lafayette. She asked if they'd be interested in her home movies of the storm. She'd narrated them, even filming as the waters climbed up her stairs, forcing her to escape through the roof. The footage is amazing, and this tour de force only gets better as it follows her and her husband on their two-year journey after the storm.

It was in this context—since everyone else had

IMAGE COURTESY OF PAUL STELLER, PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDY KOLKER



seemingly made a film about New Orleans—that we thought, why not go back ourselves, to see how the city had recreated itself after the storm?

Political operative and advisor to Councilwoman Stacy Head, Barbara Lacen-Keller denounces some typical New Orleans electoral dirty tricks in *Getting Back to Abnormal*.

The city we knew. It's a place of contradictions, where the culture of Mardi Gras and street parades is also a culture of corruption and inefficiency, of bad schools and high crime, where the

NEW ORLEANS TODAY, 2009 - 2014

It's a few nights before Mardi Gras, February 2011, one of those winter evenings when a northern cold front meets warm air up from the Gulf, and the city gets really foggy and damp. We're waiting outside a small Mid-City shotgun with Barbara Lacen-Keller, community activist and aide to Councilwoman Stacy Head, who is holding VIP tickets to tonight's Zulu Ball. She wants us to meet her dates. Suddenly, two shapes begin to appear in the fog. Tall, in long gowns and high heels. They're also guys. Lacen-Keller introduces us to Miss Serenity and Miss Legacy, grinning at our expressions as we shoot. Then they're down the porch, stepping into a waiting limo, Lacen-Keller waving at us with a prediction of the ball to come: "Guess what. I don't have a man tonight, but I will have one when I leave."

After the tidal wave of Katrina coverage, we came back to make *Getting Back to Abnormal*, in part because it seemed to us that many of those "Katrina" films, made by filmmakers who had never lived in New Orleans, had settled for simplistic narratives that didn't reflect a city that defied easy definition.

city and its inhabitants—both powerful and not—have often been complicit in their own misfortune. Underlying everything, of course, was race. The challenge was to find a tapestry of stories that also didn't ignore the humor that's part of the city's DNA, giving the viewer a real sense of what it is like to live in New Orleans. We found a main narrative with the 2010 re-election campaign of Councilwoman Head, a take-no-prisoners white reformer, and her irrepressible and unlikely companion-in-arms, Lacen-Keller, a respected black community organizer who gave new meaning to the word "outspoken."

We also discovered something else during our three years filming. There's a vibrant community of young filmmakers, some of them natives who'd survived Katrina, others who'd come to the city, not just to document the aftermath of the storm, but to stay. And just like us, 30 years before, they're curious about everything in New Orleans.

Two film examples are Luisa Dantas' *Land of Opportunity* (2010) and Lily Keber's *Bayou Maharajah* (2013). Dantas, a Brazilian-American and a graduate of Columbia's film school, came right after the disaster to document recovery



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IMAGE COURTESY OF PAUL STEKLER. PHOTOGRAPH BY GLEN PITRE

The directors of *Getting Back to Abnormal* take a break from filming to enjoy the 2011 Carnival season: (left to right) Louis Alvarez, Andy Kolker, Paul Stekler, and Peter Odabashian.

efforts led by ACORN. She commuted from Los Angeles for a while and then moved permanently in 2006. Keber had previously visited the city, and after graduating from the University of Georgia, she decided to move New Orleans, where she worked on community media projects and bartended at Vaughan's Lounge in Bywater. Both Dantas and Keber met Tim Watson, an editor on *Storyville* and *By Invitation Only*, and eventually moved into edit rooms in his converted Bywater warehouse.

Bayou Maharajah is a glorious biographic homage to pianist James Booker, a truly crazy genius, dead now 30 years and mostly unknown, except to a select few. The music is sublime, the stories are funny, and Booker is an unforgettable character. Near its end, when the film features Booker playing one long song in its entirety, it's like hearing a supreme being on the keyboards. Maybe better.

Land of Opportunity charts the lives of New Orleanians, displaced and otherwise, as the city tries to rebuild itself. The film is there when the first street lights are turned back on in the 9th Ward and stays with its characters as they figure out what's next. Perhaps its most important long-term achievement, though, is the project's evolution into an award-winning, interactive, web-based platform, where people can park their footage, and others can come and use what's there.

These days there's a rush of new documentaries tackling the reality of a city that has been changed by the tragedy of Katrina but retains much of what made it

unique. There are new films about youth and gun violence (*Shell Shocked*, 2013), Mardi Gras Indians after the storm (*Bury the Hatchet*, 2011), the transformation

of New Orleans' schools (*Rebirth*, 2013), a history of gay New Orleans (*The Sons of Tennessee Williams*, 2010), even a new effort to resurrect the late Stevenson Palfi's Alan Toussaint tapes, with more projects on the way. And there's a buzz of activity at Pitre and Benoit's converted Bywater fire station, where the makers of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and others work, among other spots.

For us old New Orleans documentary vets, just thinking about the youngsters roaming the same streets where we started filming so long ago reminds us what we saw when the city was new to us. They are the latest in a long line of filmmakers to ponder how they can document a Mardi Gras parade, or a second line, or the Quarter, and make it somehow look different. Or, maybe more importantly, they will discover what's changing in New Orleans, film it, and make the familiar new. Not all those filmmakers will succeed. But some of them will make films where you feel the pain and the joy of the city that frustrates us and that we love. And that's just wonderful. **LCV**

Paul Stekler lives in Austin, where he teaches documentary filmmaking at the University of Texas. And since he couldn't cover every worthy film, a complete listing of New Orleans documentary films appears on the new website for *Louisiana Cultural Vistas*: www.louisianaculturalvistas.org.