

POSTED ON AUGUST 23, 2010:

Spike Lee's: If God Is Willing And Da Creek Don't Rise

Spike Lee's new HBO documentary picks up where his Emmy-winning When the Levees Broke left off.

By Matt Davis

If God Is Willing And Da Creek Don't Rise

8 p.m. Mon.-Tue., Aug. 23-24

HBO



In producing eight hours worth of documentary projects, Spike Lee has become a familiar face in New Orleans.

Photo by Cheryl Gerber

Academy Award nominated director Spike Lee was in New Orleans for the premiere of his new documentary, *If God Is Willing And Da Creek Don't Rise*, at the Mahalia Jackson Theater. *Gambit* caught up with Lee at the W Hotel on Chartres Street before the screening.

***Gambit:* How did it feel, asking Ray Nagin how he thinks he'll be judged by history?**

Lee: For me that wasn't the hardest question. The hardest question to ask him

was to ask what he thinks about the most. And I think it was his best, when he talked about the eight-hour window to call the mandatory evacuation, and he waited until the eighth hour, and I know ... well, he didn't talk about it, I didn't ask him, I think that's something that's going to haunt him the rest of his life. It would haunt anybody. Because he knows, we all know that by waiting till the eighth hour, people are no longer here. That decision meant the difference between living and dying, and I give him, you know, respect, because he didn't have to answer that, but he did.

When he got elected, he didn't know the city was going to be 80 percent under water. There was no playbook, but I feel people's problem with Nagin was really what he did in his second term, or what he didn't do in the second term versus something that happens that he had nothing to do with.

This is the economic development plan that ignored some of the city's poorest people?

Yeah, that was one of them. A whole bunch of stuff.

What did you think of Nagin's response to your questions? You said you gave him credit for answering.

Oh, I mean, I think that was a great answer, I mean, he really told something that's deep and personal, that he thinks about often, and that's a big what if. How many more people would have been alive today if I'd have called that mandatory evacuation right away? Instead of consulting with lawyers and stuff like that, just call it. And he didn't do it, he waited until the eighth hour.

Someone you've been critical of in the past was Larry Bird. Now Mitch is the first white mayor of New Orleans since his father Moon Landrieu left office in 1978. Is Mitch Landrieu the Larry Bird of New Orleans mayors?

He can't shoot like Larry. Or I've never seen him. I don't know if he even plays basketball. But look, I like Mitch, I like his sister, but as he says in the film, he's got a hard job. Right now New Orleans is on pace to have 203 murders this year, which by use of the population makes it the murder capital of the United States of America. Think about this: Greater New Orleans has 700,000, New York has 8 million people — 8 million. They're going to have more murders than New York City here, and New York City has 8 million people! That's, you're talking about like, Iraq odds, I mean, crazy.

I know you interviewed [Tulane University homicide expert] Peter Scharf for the film.

Yes. He was very, very informative. He's the go-to guy for homicide. His figures he has are chilling, and it's young black men killing young black men, and it's not something that's just owned by New Orleans. It happens everywhere.

I understand that, but New Orleans is richer and whiter since Katrina. Is that somebody's fault? Is someone to blame for that?

Well that's another thing that Peter said ... only about two out of 50 murders get solved, so people are literally getting away with murder. There's no fear of getting caught. You shoot in New York, [New York Police Department chief] Ray Kelly's going to get your ass. They're gonna track your ass down. And also these people doing the killing, it's not like they probably just killed one guy and stopped, they've probably got multiple bodies on them, too. They're like, "I don't care, no one's caught me yet, and no one's going to catch me."

What made you angriest, filming, this time around?

BP. Your people. (*Reporter Matt Davis is British.*)

Sorry about that.

You related to Tony Hayward?

Er, no. I am not related to Tony Hawyard.

You're not claiming him?

He's British, what can I say?

He was lying from the beginning, he was lying from the get go, there'll be negligible damage to the gulf, it's only 1,000 barrels come out, it's only 5,000 barrels, then the court orders him to make that camera public, and a 2-year-old can see that was more than 5,000 barrels coming out. And then the "I want my life back" comment, the other BP guy talking about little people, and now they're spinning this great lie, this is the biggest lie of all: 75 percent of the oil, they collected. Now I want to know, 75 percent of what? Of the oil on the surface, or all the oil in the gulf? Also, I'd like someone to ask BP, because no one's really done this I don't think, how much of the dispersant Corexit was put into the gulf, because I think that was millions of gallons. Their goal was to make that stuff

sink to the bottom so it's out of sight, out of mind. And who knows, some day in the future, we might look at it and say that the dispersant Corexit did more damage to the ecosystem than the oil.

Yes. There are significant concerns raised around Corexit because it's illegal in the U.K.

Yeah. In the U.K.

Was it difficult for you to know how to respond to the BP catastrophe, because you'd been in town since February?

Our first day of shooting was the Super Bowl. But we were making trips back and forth. What was hard was we had stopped shooting; we were done. April 20 happened and we had to change everything. The problem with the BP thing was that the story was changing every day, it's a very fluid story, still is, and it's going to be for many years to come, so we had to keep pace, and we were shooting as late as two weeks ago.

It's kind of dynamic, obviously quite stressful, when you have a film in the can, to reopen it, but then again?

We had to. That's our job, as filmmakers. As documentary filmmakers. This is the biggest oil spill in the history of the world, and it's not going to be in this?

Doug Brinkley was in the film, and he said New Orleans has this "knee-jerk boosterism." It's the result of schizophrenia in the city between this confidence elsewhere and slight insecurity. What do you think of that?

I think that schizophrenia he's talking about is the highs and lows that people go through, which is ... just the way we roll here, the highs and the lows, the good and the bad, the joy and the pain. And as I'm telling people, let's start from the beginning. From the get-go, New Orleans is below sea level, let's just start there. And then it's in hurricane alley. So forget about anything else that happens, you've got that. Then you add the eradication of the wetlands, the marshlands, shoddy work of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, which many people still question how safe it is. So, you live down here, it's not boring.

Do you feel like there's a lesson that New Orleans needed to learn, since Katrina, that it's failed to learn?

That was really the premise of this film, to see what's been done, what hasn't

been done, what lessons have been learned, what hasn't been learned, and then it's left up to the audience to decide based upon what they've seen in the four hours.

So you're not going to spoil the surprise by expressing your own opinion?

Well, we know what the issues are: Education, affordable housing, health care, crime, employment, but those issues I just named, what city doesn't have those issues? But the United States unemployment is 9.5 percent if I'm correct. I don't know what it is down here, it's bigger than the national average though. (*Editor's note: As of June 2010, the New Orleans unemployment rate was 8.2 percent — below the national average.*) And for me, this demonstrates, people are hurting all over, they've lost their jobs, lost their homes, and things like this oil spill make it that much harder.

Do you like Brad Pitt's houses?

Love 'em. And Brad's a great guy, and I really can't understand what are peoples' motives to criticize what he's doing. He's doing stuff that the local, state and federal governments should be doing, and he's not the government. Same thing with Sean Penn ... he's picked up and moved to Haiti, Port-au-Prince.

I think some of the criticism for Brad Pitt's houses is perhaps he should have built them like they were before. I mean, why build these Frank Gehry designed houses?

First of all, the houses that were built before did not last. The houses before didn't have escape hatches in the roof so that people could climb out and not drown. The houses before were not green, they didn't have the monthly utility bills for \$30. And I spend a lot of time there, and homeowners are happy. So who can dictate to them what their homes should look like? These people had homes, their homes were destroyed. Brad Pitt's Make It Right homes, the people who inhabit those homes are former homeowners in the Lower 9th . It's not like they moved from some place else. They lived there.

Landrieu is talking openly now about when is the right time to repossess Lower 9th Ward properties, and raising race as an issue. But he seems to have support of those in the Lower 9. On this issue, does he have yours?

I'm just hearing about this for the first time, so I can't answer that question.

Did the show *Treme* live up to its promise?

I enjoyed it. I'm a big David Simon fan, and it was great to see Wendell [Pierce], as one of the leads. It's was great to see some of the people in *When The Levees Broke* get a few speaking lines. And he was using all local musicians, too.

You wouldn't ever consider moving to New Orleans, would you?

No, I got enough homes. I like it here, though.

You're pretty well loved here. Is it difficult for you to speak truth to the city, to hold up a mirror to the city and reflect its shortcomings?

Is it difficult? No. I mean, to some degree, we're giving the microphone and letting people tell their own story. Of course there's editing, and we choose who speaks, but I think ... that's what made the first one so successful, because it was the people New Orleans saying what they felt. There's no narration. It's people just talking, expressing themselves, telling stories.

I noticed that the last film was a "Spike Lee Film" rather than a "Spike Lee Joint." I wanted to ask you about that.

Well, [HBO's president of documentary and family programming] Sheila Nevins doesn't like "joint." But we had a come-to-Jesus. No big thing. I said, "Look, all my films (are Spike Lee Joints)," and so she was more than gracious.

Okay, so this time?

Joint.

Great. What do you want your last film to be, in your old age?

Subject matter? I don't know. I just want it to be good. I want to go out on a winner.

Very few Louisiana politicians have brought up America's dependence on oil in the response to the BP disaster. Is that a lost opportunity?

See how much money has been contributed to their campaigns by the oil and gas lobbies. That'll answer your question.

You've been critical of efforts to build mixed-income projects in place of some of the demolished federal housing projects here in New Orleans.

What's happening to the residents of those former projects?

As it says in the film, 37 percent of the African-American community is still in exile, those are words in the film. Now some have found a better way of life in Atlanta, Houston, San Antonio. Others want to come back, but when they came back after the mandatory evacuation, their housing projects were surrounded by barbed wire and (the projects) were knocked down, and now the rents have quadrupled.

So, if America is to learn anything from New Orleans, what is it?

Well, that's the \$64 million question.

And it's the last one.

I don't have the answer for that, but there's a lot we can learn. You know, I think that we cannot turn our backs on our American brothers and sisters. No one has still explained to me, or I haven't read anywhere the explanation why it took five days for the United States government to show up here? ... Have you ever found out why it took five days?

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