

# ERIC OVERMYER

03/01/2010 by [Sue Strachan \(https://www.myneworleans.com/author/sue-strachan/\)](https://www.myneworleans.com/author/sue-strachan/)



SKIP BOLEN PHOTOGRAPH

Ah, the glamour of Hollywood, or in this case, “Hollywood South,” the nickname given to New Orleans as the film industry booms in the city and the state. On this day of filming for the new HBO series “Tremé,” the Uptown restaurant Upperline is the setting for a scene with Melissa Leo (who plays attorney Toni Bernette) and John Goodman (as Creighton Bernette). Restaurant owner JoAnn Clevenger plays herself, as does a well-known author, whose name I won’t disclose, as to not spoil the scene; let’s just say, he’s quite well cast as ... himself.

Swirling around them in the tiny front dining area and in the adjacent rooms of this art-adorned restaurant are extras and about 150 crewmembers. Casting an almost Zen-like eye on it all – and occasionally to an omnipresent BlackBerry – is one of the show’s executive producers and writers, Eric Overmyer. It is his turn this late afternoon to oversee this scene in an episode written by Lolis Eric Elie, author and former columnist for The Times-Picayune. Meanwhile, someone from HBO is demanding Overmyer’s attention to be interviewed for an “EPK” (“What’s that?” he asks. “An electronic press kit,” someone answers. Overmyer looks dubious.) What it also means, is that it’s a break in the waiting – as anyone in TV or movies will tell you, filming is often more about waiting than actual filming.

To New Orleanians, it has seemed like we’ve waited endlessly for a TV show like “Tremé:” The one, from what we’ve read about in newspapers and magazines, that will finally get it right about New Orleans. Overmyer is joined by David Simon – the creator of the acclaimed series “The Wire” – and David Mills – who has also worked with Simon and Overmyer on “The Wire” – as the show’s three main writers, with contributions from local authors Tom Piazza and Elie.

Overmyer has had extensive experience writing and producing television series: “St. Elsewhere,” “Homicide: Life on the Street,” “Law & Order,” “The Wire” and “New Amsterdam.” TV movies have included a remake of Rear Window, starring Christopher Reeves, and the miniseries Jackie Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. He is also a playwright, having written more than 11 plays with his On the Verge having been performed at the Contemporary Arts Center.

But what many don’t know is that Overmyer has had a long love affair with New Orleans, buying a second home here in 1989. While based in New York City, he’s familiar with New Orleans’ traditions and singular quirks.

(“Where else would you have a police car leading a parade of men wearing dresses with beers in hand?” he asks, in reference to the parade on Jan. 31 in honor of the late Buddy Diliberto’s bet about the New Orleans Saints going to the Super Bowl.) Overmyer has also written about the city before – as a writer on the short-lived TV series, “The Big Easy,” based on the locally maligned movie. “I had forgotten about that,” he says bemusedly.

Overmyer was also the writer of the “Homicide: Life on the Street” episode, “Saigon Rose,” which aired in 1999 and was nominated for a Writers Guild of America award. It is based on the Antoinette Franks case – Franks, then a member of the New Orleans Police Department, was joined by Rogers LaCaze in murdering her partner, Ronald A. Williams II, and two members of the Vu family, who owned the Kim Anh restaurant in eastern New Orleans, where

the murders took place. The episode is still horrifying and powerful, not exploitive, 11 years later; a reminder of a time when New Orleans was a more dangerous place and that tragedy is still only a moment away.

With “Tremé,” Overmyer and his co-workers are tackling another tragedy, Hurricane Katrina, creating a distinctly American tableau that’s a reflection of a unique time and place. Tremé, the New Orleans neighborhood, has been the center of African-American and Creole culture since the 19th century, and with that history, as that with the city as a whole, comes a wealth of stories. Quoting the HBO Web site, in describing the show: “... ‘Tremé’ explores the lives of several struggling musicians and other New Orleans locals in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.” There will be many stories, tragic or otherwise, to tell.

Overmyer will be appearing at the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival in two events: “On Stage, On Screen: Eric Overmyer and a Double Art” (a Master Class), on March 25 at 9 a.m., and “All That Jazz ... And Beyond: The Making of ‘Tremé,’” featuring Overmyer with “Tremé” compatriots David Simon, Lolis Eric Elie, David Mills and Tom Piazza on March 28 at 11:30 a.m.

Profession: An executive producer of and writer for “Tremé;” playwright Age: 58 Resides: New York City and New Orleans (Marigny) Born: Boulder, Colo.; Grew up in Seattle, Wash. College: Reed College (Portland, Ore.), B.A. in Theater Family: Actress Ellen McElduff and two daughters, ages 15 and 8. Favorite book: One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez Favorite movie: Chinatown Favorite TV show (That you haven’t worked on): “The Sopranos” Favorite restaurant: It was Uglesich’s, when it was open. I like Galatoire’s and Clancy’s. Favorite musician: Dr. John Favorite vacation: New Orleans

**What was your first job in TV?** I was a writer on “St. Elsewhere.”

**When did production of “Tremé” start?** Prep work in October 2009, started shooting in November ’09 and will shoot through April ’10. We are filming 10 episodes for this year; 12 for next.

**Why New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina?** It starts at Thanksgiving 2005. We had to start sometime, and that seemed a good point.

**Why “Tremé” (the neighborhood)?** We liked the word, and it’s one of those neighborhoods where a lot of New Orleans culture sprang from.

**Though the title is “Tremé,” is the series focused only on that part of town?** No. We are shooting all over New Orleans.

**Who are some of the main characters in “Tremé?”** A trombone player, a Mardi Gras Indian chief, a chef, bar owner, a DJ/wannabe musician, a Tulane University professor and a lawyer. It [the cast] has expanded as we do more shows.

There’s a lot of pressure about “Tremé” getting New Orleans right. I no doubt think we will offend some people.

**Is most of the show shot on location or in a studio?** Almost all of it is shot on location. We rent some areas and have a “WWOZ” set.

**Any difficulty with locations?** The Archdiocese is still mad about Easy Rider – the cemetery scene. So we can’t shoot [at any of their properties], but we’re trying to get them to understand. The Criminal Sheriff [Gusman] is worried about our portraying the situation at the jail during the storm.

**How many locations can you shoot in a day?** Three; four is pushing it.

**Do the cast and crew sometimes correct you when you’re not getting something right about New Orleans?** Absolutely.

**What’s the difference between working for a network TV show and HBO?** HBO understands that if you hire people, you let them do their job. Network executives are driven by fear, about losing their jobs.

**You spoke about using a Subdudes song in the “Homicide” episode, “Saigon Rose.” It seems like you think of music while you are writing. Will you do that in “Tremé?”** We sometimes structure a scene around a song.

**How long is the average day on set?** Twelve hours or longer.

**Any plays percolating?** I’m working on a play right now.

**Who are some of your favorite Southern writers?** William Faulkner, Ellen Gilchrist, Sheila Bosworth and Tim Gautreaux, to name a few.

**What has surprised you the most about New Orleans?** It took me a while to get, but I like it when people call you “darling” or “baby.” You don’t get that in Seattle or New York City.

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