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# Money, hurricane, death: Jason Berry's 'City of a Million Dreams' mulls history of second-lines, jazz funerals

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Actors and dancers film scenes of a drum dance for the documentary "City of a Million Dreams," a history of jazz funerals and second line parades, in Belle Chasse. The scene recreates 1815-1830s drum circles popular in Congo Square.

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Advocate staff photo by SHAWN FINK

It was the last day of filming “City of a Million Dreams: The Untold Story of Funerals in New Orleans,” and as the cast and crew milled about

in the early morning sun, Jason Berry stood watching with a mixture of pride and wistfulness.

It had been a 20-year journey, an odyssey of death, money and destruction.

“This has been an epic of my life,” said Berry, of the documentary and book.

That's saying something, because Berry, 69, is the author of explosive exposés of the Roman Catholic Church, including “Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II” (Free Press, 2004), which was made into a documentary, and “Render Unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church” (Crown, 2011).

For “City of a Million Dreams,” Berry visually attempts to answer the question: How did jazz funerals start and evolve in New Orleans?

The idea was sparked in the 1990s, when Berry spoke with jazz musicians such as Dr. Michael White, Gregg Stafford and the late Milton Batiste Jr., who were bothered by the changes in the style and tone of jazz funerals.

“When the crack epidemic hit, there were so many young homicide victims,” said Berry. “The second lines were becoming harder-edged and fiery, people shooting off guns, taking off clothes, throwing beer.

“They were concerned about the spiritual dimension, the religious trappings being stripped away from second lines,” said Berry.

Through vintage photos and films, historical recreations and filming of modern-day jazz funerals, the documentary traces the evolution of the tradition – and the city – from the late 18th century to today, from the African rhythms and ring dances of Congo Square, European marching bands, Sicilian brass bands and early 20th-century jazz musicians to the present-day’s rollicking processions.

“Funerals are caravans of memory,” wrote Berry in the accompanying book.

Jazz musician and educator White's personal memories of discovering his musical ancestors are woven in with the overall story. White attended the final day of the film shoot, quietly looking on.

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Deborah “Big Red” Cotton, a contributor to Gambit and a blogger who covered brass bands and second-line culture, is a poignant voice in the film. Cotton died in 2017 during filming, the result of lingering injuries from a gunshot wound at a Mother’s Day second line in 2013. Her death had an impact on everyone in the production, particularly Berry's daughter, Simonette, he said.

Simonette was 13 when her father started the project. She was 30 when she started working on it, joining full time in July to supervise the final filming. With extensive experience in the film industry, she is the co-producer, unit production manager and production designer, and was key in making sure the locations, props and costumes were authentic for Congo Square and séance sequences.

On the first day of filming, the crew re-created dancing in Congo Square in 1750, which was "Senegambian" — the enslaved people at that time were mainly from Senegal and Gambia. The second day, it re-created a séance circa 1863. And Oct. 14, the last day of the three-day

shoot, the crew re-created Congo Square later, from about 1815 to 1830 — the earliest days of jazz funeral history.

A traditional jazz funeral starts with a procession by the family and friends of the deceased with a brass band playing somber dirges and hymns. Once the deceased is entombed and the hearse leaves, a parade starts as the brass band blows celebratory music. The brass band and the people dancing and following the parade are called the second-line.

Congo Square in Treme is now part of Armstrong Park, surrounded by buildings and pavement. Seeking an authentic-looking backdrop for the late 18th-century dance, the crew headed across the river, having found a location to film in Plaquemines Parish, secured with help of parish officials.

The multicultural cast on that final day included drummers, dancers, dance extras, and onlookers from the United States, Ivory Coast and Congo.

The cast, who had not performed together as a group before, had only two weeks to rehearse under Creative Director Monique Moss. But

when the camera started rolling, it all came together.

“We should have a rough cut in early December,” said Berry.

Once the final edit is done, it's off to the film festival circuit.

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Berry submitted a grant proposal for a book to the Ford Foundation. While the foundation's Sheila Biddle turned down the grant for the book, she urged him to apply for a grant to do documentary research and a video oral history on jazz funerals.

With that seed money in hand in 1997, he started interviewing musicians on camera, providing transcripts and filming several funerals in collaboration with the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University. He also began writing the book, which has a slightly different title, “City of a Million Dreams: A History of New Orleans at Year 300.”

While the book gives a more detailed history of New Orleans through a cultural lens, both it and the movie have burial traditions as a key thread,

said Berry. (The book's publication date is Nov. 12.)

Throughout the process, funding was always an issue.

“At the time, it felt like I was a guy in a cave looking for light,” said Berry. “It takes time to raise money. Most of the foundations who got onboard were outside of New Orleans. It has not been nearly as easy to raise funds locally.”

A Kickstarter in 2018 helped with funding, but it was Berry's fellow Jesuit High School graduate, Bernard “Biff” Pettingill, a forensic economist who lives in South Florida, who provided a much-needed financial boost.

“I saw the movie, “Secrets of the Vatican,” on PBS,” said Pettingill, and he was impressed. Berry was a co-producer and interviewee of that documentary. Pettingill told Berry to call if he needed an investor for his next movie. He did, and Pettingill is an executive producer for the movie.

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Berry had several chapters of the book completed by 2002, when The Boston Globe series about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church broke. With the church scandals in the national spotlight, he put “City of A Million Dreams” aside to start working mainly on “Vows of Silence.”

Then Hurricane Katrina arrived in New Orleans on Aug. 29, 2005. “When Katrina hit, it really upended the whole project,” said Berry.

“Michael White lost his house and everything in it. I was in Plano, he in Houston. It was two to three weeks after the flood, and he was still unable to get back in.”

The men had a long discussion by cellphone. “He was going back in as soon as he could,” Berry recalled. “I asked if he minded me filming him.

“It was a little awkward to do so, but we had become friends while collaborating. I filmed him while he was going through his house,” said Berry.

In those scenes, a masked and gloved White walks through a cacophony of destruction, quietly musing about his ruined photos, vintage



clarinets, collection of 4,000 books, among other items.

“It’s like your whole life drowned and you get to look at it,” White says in the film. “A part of me is in here, and I think I died with it. Thirty years of life.”

Hurricane Katrina’s devastation and its aftereffects lingered. “It took several years to decide what the story line would be for the movie,” said Berry.

But Berry never lost interest and jumped back into the documentary in 2015.

“My heart was pulling me back to the story of the city and the funerals,” he said.

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