

AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE



NEW ORLEANS



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On August 29th, 2005, a catastrophic hurricane named Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast of the United States. When the skies finally cleared, the survival of a major American city hung in the balance. For more than two hundred years, that city had been an iconic feature on the national landscape – a vital port; a cosmopolitan mecca; a sensual, mysterious refuge. Now, the storm had laid it waste, raising a stark and previously unthinkable question: What exactly would America be without New Orleans?

From director Stephen Ives and writer Michelle Ferrari comes *New Orleans*, a fascinating portrait of one of America's most distinctive and beloved cities: a small French settlement surrounded by water that ultimately would become the home of America's biggest party, Mardi Gras, and its most original art form, jazz; the site of explosive struggles with both integration and segregation, and a proving ground for national ideas about race, class and equality; a mirror that reflects both the best and the worst in America. An Insignia Films production for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, *New Orleans* premieres February 12, 2007 on PBS. Jeffrey Wright narrates.

Over the course of two compelling hours, the film tells the story of this remarkable city through revealing first-hand interviews with New Orleans natives and scholars, as well as through rich archival photographic material and footage that was miraculously spared from the devastation wrought by Katrina. Bringing the film vividly up to the current moment are verité-style portraits of people now living in or returning to New Orleans, including restaurateur Leah Chase, "The Queen of Creole Cuisine," stonemason Teddy Pierre, and the members of the irreverent Krewe D'Veux, which was the first Mardi Gras organization to parade after Katrina. Also featured, both on camera and on the film's soundtrack, is New Orleans' cultural ambassador, renowned jazz musician Irvin Mayfield.

"New Orleans has always been a laboratory for the American experiment," says Ives, "and the astonishing mingling of peoples there has created the most original urban culture in this country." From the very beginning, New Orleans has been, as an observer once called it, "a world in miniature." French-speaking Catholics and English-speaking Protestants, slaves and free people of color, Africans and people of mixed race, Albanians, Swedes, Germans, Irish and Italians – by the middle of the nineteenth century, all of them called New Orleans home. Some one hundred thousand people were crowded together on the narrow ribbon of high ground that shadows the Mississippi. "Rich, poor, white, non-white, people all live on top of each other. It's not a matter of choice, it's necessity," says historian Ari Kelman in the film. "That leads to a really unusual cultural

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AN INSIGNIA FILMS PRODUCTION FOR AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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mixing in New Orleans.” Out of that mixing, Ives notes, “came not only a distinctive style of architecture and a vibrant cuisine, but also the eclectic musical foundations that gave rise to jazz – one of America’s greatest cultural contributions to the world.”

New Orleans’ stunning cultural complexity would also spawn some of the most contentious and explosive struggles in the nation’s history. In the aftermath of the Civil War, New Orleans was at once the most integrated city in the country and the site of some of the most vicious white supremacist violence. Later, the city fostered the struggle against segregation that eventually culminated in the infamous 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which declared “separate but equal” constitutional and ushered in six decades of racial segregation in the United States. The overturning of that decision in 1954, and the court-ordered integration of public schools across the country a year later, likewise signaled national trends, fueling a mass exodus of New Orleans’ white population into the newly completed suburbs and sparking the downward spiral into urban blight that was tragically revealed by Katrina.

But even in the midst of conflict, the city has embraced creativity, the marriage of cultures, and a diversity of opinions – and has served as home and inspiration for some of America’s most famous creative forces, from Tennessee Williams to Louis Armstrong. “Without New Orleans, our American culture would look and feel much different,” says AMERICAN EXPERIENCE executive producer Mark Samels. “What would our music sound like? Would we have a different understanding of race? With New Orleans at a crossroads, this is the perfect time to train our lens on this city and explore those questions.”

CREDITS

An Insignia Films production for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Directed by Stephen Ives

Written by Michelle Ferrari

Produced by Amanda Pollak, Stephen Ives & Jenny Carchman

Edited by Deborah Peretz & Sari Gilman

Narrated by Jeffrey Wright

Music arranged and produced by Teese Gohl

Featured artist Irvin Mayfield

Associate producer Ben Ostrower

Cinematography Daniel B. Gold, Stephen Kazmierski, Peter Nelson, Buddy Squires & Andrew Young

Sound recording John Zecca

Researcher Lindsey Megrue

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AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is a production of WGBH Boston.

Sharon Grimberg, series producer

Mark Samels, executive producer

ACCESSIBILITY

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is closed captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, and described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at WGBH. The descriptive narration is available on the SAP channel of stereo TVs and VCRs.

ABOUT AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Television’s most-watched history series, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has been hailed as “peerless” (*Wall Street Journal*), “the most consistently enriching program on television” (*Chicago Tribune*), and “a beacon of intelligence and purpose” (*Houston Chronicle*). On air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America’s past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award, including twenty-four Emmy Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and fourteen George Foster Peabody Awards, one most recently for *Two Days in October*.

ABOUT WGBH BOSTON

WGBH Boston is America’s preeminent public broadcasting producer. More than one-third of PBS’s prime-time lineup and companion Web content as well as many public radio favorites are produced by WGBH. The station also is a pioneer in educational multimedia and in access technologies for people with disabilities. For more information visit wgbh.org.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

**Stephen Ives** • Producer/Director, *New Orleans*

In nearly two decades of producing documentaries for public television, Ives has won a Primetime Emmy Award for his AMERICAN EXPERIENCE film *Seabiscuit* and a CINE Golden Eagle for *Reporting America at War*, which was nominated for Best Documentary at the 2004 News and Documentary Emmy Awards. His previous work for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE includes *Las Vegas: An Unconventional History* and *Lindbergh*. Ives produced PBS's landmark series *The West* and served as consulting producer on Ken Burns' *The Civil War* and *Baseball*. His work on *Amato: a love affair with opera* earned him a nomination from the Directors Guild of America for Outstanding Directorial Achievement. A graduate of Harvard College, Ives lives in Garrison, NY, with his family.

**Amanda Pollack** • Producer, *New Orleans*

Amanda Pollak has been producing, researching, and writing documentaries for public television since 1992. Her films for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE include *TR: The Story of Theodore Roosevelt*, for which she earned an individual Emmy Award; the Emmy Award-winning *Truman, Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided*, and *Las Vegas: An Unconventional History*. Pollak's other credits include *Money and Power: The History of Business*, and producing one hour of David Grubin's five-hour scientific series for PBS entitled *The Secret Life of the Brain*, for which she also won an Emmy. Most recently, Pollak worked on *Reporting America at War*, which earned a CINE Golden Eagle and was nominated for Best Documentary at the 2004 News and Documentary Emmy Awards.

**Michelle Ferrari** • Writer, *New Orleans*

Michelle Ferrari's documentaries for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE include *Las Vegas: An Unconventional History*, *Seabiscuit*, for which she earned a Primetime Emmy Award, and *Miss America*, an official selection of the 2002 Sundance Film Festival. Her other credits include *Out of the Past*, which won the 1998 Sundance Film Festival Audience Award, the PBS special *Margaret Sanger*, nominated for a Writers Guild of America Award, and *Calling the Ghosts*, which received the 1998 Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award and an Emmy Award for Outstanding Investigative Special. Her work on *Reporting America at War* earned a CINE Golden Eagle; the film was nominated for Best Documentary at the 2004 News and Documentary Emmy Awards. A graduate of the University of California at Berkeley, Ferrari holds an MA in American History from Columbia University, where she was a President's Fellow.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES *continued***Sharon Grimberg** • Series producer, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Grimberg plays a key role in the origination, development, acquisition, and editorial oversight of films for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE. Since she joined the staff in 2000, programs from the acclaimed series have been recognized within the documentary community by the Writers Guild and International Documentary Association, and have received multiple broadcasting awards. Grimberg served as supervising producer of *They Made America* and produced *Miss India Georgia*, which aired on PBS. A former writer for CNN Headline News, she did her undergraduate work at the London School of Economics and received an MA from the University of Michigan.

**Mark Samels** • Executive producer, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Samels has been instrumental in bringing AMERICAN EXPERIENCE recognition as a leading presenter of world-class films to a wide audience through broadcast on PBS. Under his leadership, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with nearly every industry award, including Peabody Awards, Primetime Emmys, the duPont-Columbia Journalism Award, Writers Guild Awards, Oscar nominations, Audience and Grand Jury Awards at the Sundance Film Festival, and the Eric Barnouw Award from the Organization of American Historians. A founding member of the International Documentary Association, Samels serves on the advisory council of the World Congress of History Producers. He is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin.

Download press materials and images for *New Orleans*
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at **pbs.org/pressroom** and **pressroom.wgbh.org**.

