

'Street Fight' Delivers Political Heat

Award winning documentary on PBS

There's a saying that democracy is a contact sport.

The award-winning documentary "Street Fight" gives you a ringside seat. This insider's chronicle of the 2002 race for mayor in Newark, N.J. is riveting, delivering a dramatic account of youthful energy and ideals running headlong into old-guard machine politics and

with corporate, downtown-centered development, including a new Performing Arts Center and minor-league baseball stadium.

But Booker questions the value of the mayor's policies to the city's poorer neighborhoods and residents. He cites Newark's sky-high murder rate, a poverty level over 30 percent, and an astounding high school dropout rate of 60 percent. Booker suggests that it's time for a new generation to bring Newark's downtown "renaissance" to all the city's residents.

A son of civil-rights activists who integrated a white neighborhood in northern New Jersey, Booker is a poster child for the move-



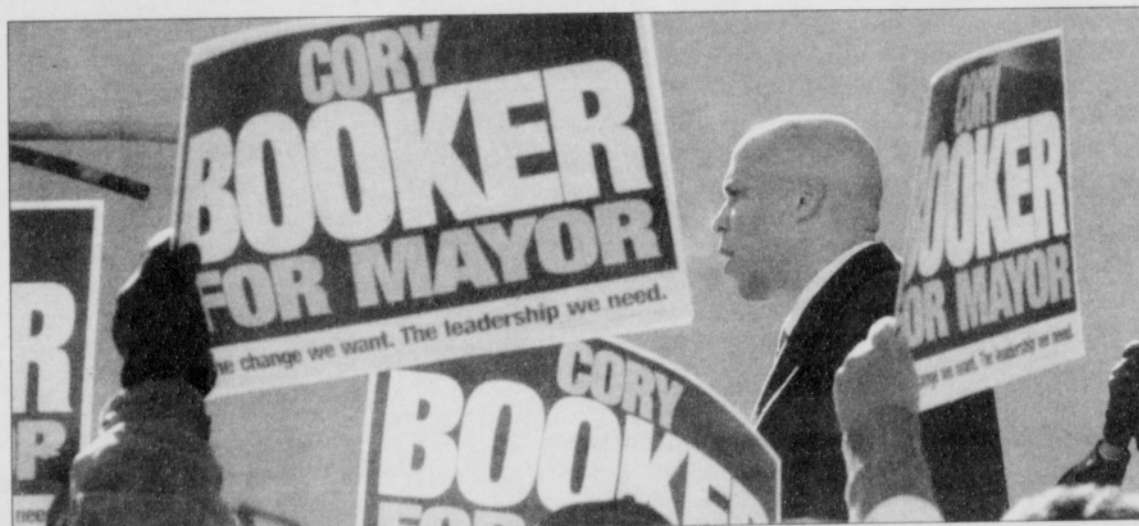
Mayor Sharpe James shakes hands with voters.

racial demagoguery. These opposing forces are, of course, nothing new in American elections. But, in Newark in 2002, a black mayor was using these tactics against a black challenger.

Director Marshall Curry's film, winner of the 2005 Audience Award at the Tribeca Film Festival and at Hot Docs, has its national broadcast premiere Tuesday, July 5 at 10 p.m., as part of the 18th season of public television's P.O.V. series.

At first, the 32-year old Booker, a recently elected councilman for the city's poor Central Ward, mounts a rather respectful challenge to the incumbent. Booker recognizes that the mayor, representing a first generation of black politicians who came up the hard way, is personally popular and has raised Newark's stature

ment. Excelling in high school where he was an all-American football player, he went on to Stanford, to Oxford where he was a Rhodes Scholar, and then graduated from Yale Law School. Upon graduating, Booker didn't seek high-paid law work, but instead embraced his parents' activist ideals, mov-



Councilman Cory Booker campaigns for mayor against incumbent Sharpe James.

ing to Newark, setting up house in the Brick Towers high-rise projects, and starting a nonprofit to fight slumlords. He also got himself elected to the city council when no one gave him much chance. He undertook unorthodox actions, such as living in an RV parked at notorious drug corners to drive away the dealers.

Sharpe James, Newark's mayor for 16 years, promptly labels Booker a carpetbagger engaged in public-

ity stunts. He turns Booker's "golden boy" image to his own favor, contrasting with great effect his own background as a native son who pulled himself up from the city's meanest streets. He has achievements to point to and support from state Democrats. More to the point, the mayor has solid support among poor blacks and Latinos – the very constituency Booker claims to be standing up for – who identify with James' rags-to-riches story or who

have benefited from the mayor's patronage.

The race turns uglier and more cut-throat over time, examining the ugly underbelly of politics.

"In the James-Booker mayoral race, we saw a story very different from the one found in other recent campaign films," Curry said. "This wasn't a story of mass-media politics; it wasn't about spin doctors and photo ops, but a story about politics in the city streets."

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