

# Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

## New Orleans' Woes Explored



Phyllis Montana-Leblanc wears a New Orleans Saints football jersey in a scene from the Spike Lee documentary, 'If God is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise.'



Spike Lee

### Spike Lee returns to Gulf Coast for new documentary

(AP) -- Spike Lee's new HBO documentary starts on a high note: Super Bowl Sunday 2010, when the New Orleans Saints claim victory over the Indianapolis Colts.

Saints fans, many still reeling from Hurricane Katrina's aftershocks, are deliriously happy.

"It's a rebirth," says an overjoyed New Orleans native.

"It's divine intervention, man," says another local.

But cautionary words are voiced as well. The Saints are world champions, but in the real world there are bills to pay and neighborhoods to rebuild.

Then, only 17 minutes into "If God Is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise," the BP oil spill enters the narrative.

The party is over.

Lee, the gifted director and documentarian, had long planned a return to the Gulf Coast for a five-year follow-up to his acclaimed "When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts."

He began shooting Feb. 7, when the Super Bowl was played. The triumph by the Saints seemed a glorious conclusion for his new film.

"We thought we had our ending on the first day," Lee said in a recent interview. "Little did we know."

By the time the offshore oil rig Deepwater Horizon exploded on April 20, killing 11 workers and releasing a gusher of oil, Lee had wrapped production and was well into the editing process.

"But I knew we had to make that a part of the piece," he said.

He does, dwelling on the BP disaster for roughly 40 minutes of the

four-hour, two-part "If God Is Willing," which premiered Monday and Tuesday on HBO.

But there is much more on his mind and in his film.

The stage is set with painful, all-too-familiar images of Katrina's immediate wrath in 2005.

Then, as the film goes on, the government's failure to protect New Orleans from the storm surge is compounded by seemingly endless failures to aid the recovery. Former residents who want to come home remain displaced. Public education continues to struggle. Health care needs are still unmet. The police department is in shambles. And on and on.

The five years didn't pass without successes, and the film covers those as well. They include a legal victory against the Army Corps of Engineers for shoddy maintenance of a navigation channel that resulted in some of the worst flooding. And there are nonprofit reconstruction efforts such as Make It Right, led by actor Brad Pitt, that have built affordable, storm-resistant homes in the Lower 9th Ward.

But then, just months after the Super Bowl win, the BP disaster struck.

"The story was changing every day," Lee recalled. "We had to keep adapting, to stay on top of it as best as possible."

Scores of people share their stories on-camera, including ordinary, often overlooked local figures. There are also experts and advocates, plus familiar faces such as former Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, New Orleans

Mayor Mitch Landrieu, former New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, as well as Pitt and fellow celebrity activist Sean Penn.

To his credit, former FEMA Director Michael Brown is among those who participate.

Like other interview subjects who, when it counted, fell short, Brown points fingers. He says former Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff "didn't know what he was doing. Let's be frank."

The date was Sept. 2, 2005, in Mobile, Ala., and, prior to the live TV appearance, "I had been describing to the president how bad things were. Telling him what I needed. Why things weren't working. ... And then we walk out and he makes that [Brownie] comment, and I'm like, 'What the hell!'"

Hayward is well represented by the infamous clip where he states his regret for the oil spill, promises to make it right and adds his thanks "for the strong support of the government."

But it goes beyond "strong support," said Lee, who believes BP has been allowed to call the shots in its own interest, and often counter to the public good.

"What has been puzzling people, and I include myself, is how much BP has had control of the situation," he said, echoing a sentiment heard from many in his film.

Heartbreaking but defiant, "If God Is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise" picks up where "Levees" left off, as a catalog of plagues that largely could have been averted.

Why they weren't is not so puzzling, said Lee. "It's greed."

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