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MUSIC PREVIEWS

NOLA in exile

TV Preview

[Steve Hammer](#)

New Orleans Music in Exile
May 19, 8 p.m. Starz in Black
May 20, 1 p.m. Starz

The massive crisis created by Hurricane Katrina not only demolished much of New Orleans, it also destroyed much of the city's great musical heritage, scattering the musicians to far-flung cities and bruising their spirit. A new feature-length documentary premiering this weekend on Starz, *New Orleans Music in Exile*, explains the tragedy of Katrina through the eyes of the greatest musicians of the city as they struggle to cope with financial and emotional devastation.

Lovingly shot and directed by Robert Mugge, the film shows New Orleans legends such as Dr. John, Cyril Neville and Theresa Anderson revisiting their hometown, assessing the storm damage and trying to rebuild their personal and creative lives despite the mass destruction of the storm.

In one touching scene, Irma Thomas returns to her business, the Lions' Den Lounge, only to find it badly damaged by flood waters. As she surveys the damage, Mugge cuts to a performance of "Smoke Filled Room" by Thomas at the bar from 1993, providing a stunning juxtaposition. The performance is stunning, but the pictures of the destroyed business overwhelm the senses.

Filming of the documentary began two months after Katrina, when spirits were low and the musicians were still in shock. In the face of the tragedy, many club owners in other towns raced to provide gigs, housing and other assistance to the musicians. If the film is based in tragedy, it's also rooted in compassion and the people who rushed to aid hurricane victims. They are the heroes of the story.

The destruction of the Lower Ninth Ward, St. Bernard Parish and other mostly-black neighborhoods meant that many of the musicians in New Orleans were also left homeless. The pictures of these areas, already familiar to audiences through news footage, look even more stark and devastated than before. The sense of despair is palpable and many of the musicians appear dazed and sleepy, as if they've given up on ever returning to their former lives.

While the film deliberately steers clear of political issues and assigns no responsibility for the humanitarian crisis that followed the storm, notables such as Dr. John and Cyril Neville bemoan the destruction of the city and its loss of the people who made New Orleans great.

The complete avoidance of the political issues keeps the documentary pure and above the fray of the many controversies of the time. Instead, the focus is kept purely on the musicians, their struggles and their triumphs in their new lives. During one stunning sequence, Theresa Anderson sings Neil Young's "Like a Hurricane" over footage of media coverage of Katrina. The familiar news images are recontextualized into evidence of a biblical catastrophe. The images still pack an emotional punch and reminds the audience of the massive suffering caused by the storm.



The Rebirth Brass Band

Mugge followed musicians to their new homes in Austin, Houston and Memphis, dazed by the transition but grateful for the gigs and supportive audiences in their new hometowns.

Besides Thomas, Neville and Dr. John, many other New Orleans greats appear in the film, including the Rebirth Brass Band, Cowboy Mouth and many, many others. The music is as warm and human as the people who create it. Contrasted with the destruction of New Orleans, the strength of the musicians is even more amazing.

On Saturday, May 13, Starz will host a benefit concert in New Orleans for the musicians shown in this film. To contribute, visit starz.com.

Starz in Black will premiere the film on May 19 with encore performances scheduled on the main Starz channel throughout the month.

This film is a tragic yet triumphant story of the human spirit and the ability of artists to transcend their problems. It serves as an inspiration to us all.