

GUARDIANS OF THE FLAME

Directed by Daniel Wolff

PRODUCTION NOTES

Running Time: 70 minutes

Aspect Ratio: 4:3 and 16:9

Not rated

Sound: Stereo

Country of Origin: USA

Language: English

guardiansoftheflamemovie.com

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A Clinica Estetico Production

GUARDIANS OF THE FLAME

Directed by
DANIEL WOLFF

Production begun by
JONATHAN DEMME

Produced by
NKEM BIG CHIEF BRIAN NELSON
BONNIE ELDER YASSKY
BROOKLYN DEMME

Cinematographer
JONATHAN DEMME

Editor
MARTA RENZI

GUARDIANS OF THE FLAME

Synopsis

Undeterred by decades of prejudice, post-Katrina neglect, and ongoing appropriation of their traditions, three generations of the extraordinary, multi-talented Harrison family guard their legacy and define what Black masking culture means in New Orleans today.

Initiated and filmed by the celebrated Oscar-winning filmmaker Jonathan Demme, the film was shot over the course of 17 years documenting the artistry and activism of three generations of the Harrison family of New Orleans. In the course of this African American family's fight to recover not just from Hurricane Katrina but from a history of cultural suppression, we meet the matriarch Herreast Harrison, whose dream is to found a museum dedicated to her husband's legacy. Along the way we are also introduced to her four talented children: a renowned saxophonist, a master beader in the closely-guarded Mardi Gras tradition, a performance artist and educator, and a singer and manager of Herreast's grandson's musical career. In the decades-long struggle towards survival and healing, we're given an intimate view of the family's determination to educate and preserve culture - from a social and pleasure club parade to a brass band commemoration, culminating in the spectacular Mardi Gras unveiling of the Guardians of the Flame.

Cinematographer Jonathan Demme and writer Daniel Wolff began visiting the Harrison family a few months after Katrina. Their visits continued, 4-times-a-year, for the next six years. After Demme's death, in 2017, Wolff, Demme's son Brooklyn, and a film crew returned to New Orleans in 2019 to bring the project up to date. The desire to finish this project and the persistence to do so comes from the Harrison family's inspirational work in what Cherice Harrison-Nelson calls "self-emancipation." Long before Katrina and in the years since, the Harrisons have forged cultural weapons to resist racism and oppression both locally and on a national scale. As this film documents, their tools include music, beading, masking, literacy, and community building. The filmmakers are honored to have Big Chief Brian Harrison Nelson as one of the film's producers and culture bearers. Whether handing out books to pre-schoolers, being nominated for Grammys, making films, or sewing elaborate ceremonial clothing, the Harrisons have kept their eyes on the prize. *Guardians of the Flame* offers a decade-and-a-half overview of one family's trials and eventual triumph.

GUARDIANS OF THE FLAME

Reflections from Director Daniel Wolff

One thing I've learned - in part from Jonathan - is that you can't know how a documentary ends. In fact, when the two of us went down to New Orleans in 2006, we didn't even know we were making a documentary. We thought we'd film a little and just bear witness to how America dealt with its first real test of democracy in the 21st century. But we became friends with New Orleanians, returning regularly, and ended up making (Jonathan directing, me helping to produce) two full-length films on different New Orleans subjects. I also wrote a book, *The Fight for Home: How (Parts of) New Orleans Returned* (2012).

Those projects were about people trying to get back to New Orleans. As we went through hundreds of hours of footage from six years of following the Harrison family, we realized *Guardians of the Flame* was a different story. It isn't particularly about Katrina or peoples' fight for home, though those are certainly factors. I think of it more as an answer to the ancient question: "How do you sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

Before Jonathan died in 2017, we were talking about returning and finishing this film. We couldn't quite see the ending. In 2019, Jonathan's son, a film crew, and I went back and documented how – a dozen years after we met her - the family matriarch, Herreast Harrison, had succeeded in making her dream come true. She'd spearheaded an effort to turn the lot next to her home into a neighborhood museum. The Donald Harrison, Sr. Museum honored what the family no longer thought of as the Mardi Gras Indian tradition but a maroon society: that combination of dance, music, and visual art which had “escaped” the white over-culture, as maroons had. If this was our ending, then it was a story less about real estate than a still vital alternative tradition: the “song” that the Harrisons sung and are still singing.

Cherice Harrison-Nelson, Queen of the Guardians of the Flame Maroon Society, talks about it in terms of “self-emancipation.” The emancipation dates back to the struggle of African and Native ancestors trying to survive in this “strange land.” In an act of generosity and trust, the Harrisons let us into not only their family but the little-known world of masking and beading, of world-class musicians and street dancing, of traditions that had to be kept secret to survive.

We persisted in making *Guardians* partly because of the Harrison's persistence: an African American family that not only survived Hurricane Katrina but is determined that the culture that sustains them will continue and grow. I think of it as a film about hope: three generations of hope. Through the film, you get to meet an extraordinary family and feel how tradition gets passed on and re-made, what it means to stand for something.

GUARDIANS OF THE FLAME

About the Filmmakers

DANIEL WOLFF (Director)

Daniel Wolff was the associate producer on Jonathan Demme's documentary film, *The Agronomist*, and a producer on Mr. Demme's five-part series on New Orleans featured on Tavis Smiley's national television show in 2007, as well as Mr. Smiley's hour-length PBS special, “Been in the Storm Too Long” (2010). *I'm Carolyn Parker*, a

previous Demme/Wolff collaboration, aired on PBS in 2012. He has appeared in *Philadelphia*, *Rachel Getting Married*, and *Subway Stories*. This is the first film he's directed.

Wolff's writing includes essays, profiles, critical pieces, scientific articles, poetry and fiction. His articles have appeared in many publications including *Connoisseur*, the *Nation*, the *Village Voice*, and *Vogue*. Nominated for a Grammy award in 2003, Wolff's other honors include the Ralph Gleason Music Book Award in 1995, two nominations for the General Electric Younger Writer's Award, and being recognized as a Michigan Notable Book author in 2018. His work has been anthologized in various publications and featured on National Public Radio, Sirius Radio, and in numerous publications from the *New York Times* to the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

His 2012 book *The Fight For Home: How (Parts of) New Orleans Came Back*, was hailed by *The Christian Science Monitor* as "a historic document ... powerful and revelatory", and his 2005 book *Fourth of July, Asbury Park* was a *New York Times* *Editor's Choice*.

Wolff was a contributing editor for the music newsletter, *Rock & Rap Confidential* and has received grants as Writer in Residence from the New York State Council on the Arts, from the Public Arts Fund of New York City, and from the Connecticut Commission on the Arts.

JONATHAN DEMME (Cinematographer)

Oscar-winning director Jonathan Demme initiated what would become *Guardians of the Flame* in 2006, continuing to film the Harrison family for the next 6 years. Over his lifetime, Demme created an extraordinary body of work: documentaries, shorts and features, from *Silence of the Lambs* and *Philadelphia* to *The Agronomist* and *I'm Carolyn Parker* (both with producer Daniel Wolff). Demme also directed numerous concert films such as *Stop Making Sense*; *Neil Young*, *Heart of Gold* and *Justin Timberlake + the Tennessee Kids*, and worked on several television series as both a producer and director.

MARTA RENZI (Editor)

Originally trained as a choreographer, Renzi's first half-hour video dance for PBS was *You Little Wild Heart* (1981) to music by Bruce Springsteen. In 1989, she was commissioned by KCTV's "Alive from Off-Center" to create *Mountainview*, made in 1989 in collaboration with indie filmmaker John Sayles, and featuring Jane Alexander. Since 2005 Marta has directed and edited more than three dozen self-produced short video dances, which have been presented at over 300 festivals nationally and internationally. Her debut feature film *Her Magnum Opus* - "presented by Jonathan Demme" - was released in 2017. Retrospectives of her film work have been screened at BAAD! in the Bronx, at Rivertown Films in Nyack; at Compartimiento Cinematografico in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico; at University College Cork, Ireland and at the Rockland Center for the Arts.

Cast

HERREAST HARRISON

Among her many honors – including The New Orleans Legends Award and the Louisiana Endowment of the Humanities Light Up for Literacy Award - in 2021 Herreat Harrison was named Grand Griot in a "racial healing commemoration of the ancestors, known and unknown, from the Transatlantic Slave trade."

BIG CHIEF DONALD HARRISON

A former Big Chief of the Creole Wild West, Cherokee Braves and White Eagles tribes before he organized the Guardians of the Flame in 1988. Mr. Harrison's interest in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition began in 1937, when he was 3, and he started beading suits at 12

CHERICA HARRISON-NELSON

A Fulbright Scholar and the recipient of the USA Artist Fellowship, Maroon Queen Cherice Harrison-Nelson continues to learn and work with children through her intergenerational community service, performances, art works, audio recordings, theatrical productions and published books.

DONALD HARRISON, JR.

Grammy nominee Big Chief Donald Harrison of the Congo Square Nation Afro-New Orleans Cultural Group received an honorary doctorate from the Berklee College of Music in 2021 and was named a 2022 National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master.

MICHELE HARRISON

Artist and Master bead worker Michele Harrison continues to use her innovative and distinct sewing techniques to create art that addresses societal ills and gives voice to marginalized and underrepresented groups.

CARA HARRISON DANIELS

Historian and entrepreneur Cara Harrison Daniels is president of both Stretch Music LLC and OmniAmerican Pictures, Inc. Her current research as a historian excavates and complicates histories of indigenous New Orleanian masking traditions.

BRIAN NELSON

With an MFA in screenwriting/directing from University of Southern California, Big Chief Brian Nelson is now an award-winning filmmaker and New Orleans Bounce hiphop artist.

CHIEF XIAN ATUNDE ADJUAH

Formerly known as Christian Scott, multi-instrumentalist, composer and producer Chief Adjua is a two-time Edison award winner and six-time Grammy nominee.

KIEL ADRIAN SCOTT

Kiel's directing projects have won him an NAACP Image Award and the Peabody Award for Entertainment.

Crew

Additional Editing & Production

SEAN GALLAGHER
ABDUL FRANKLIN

Additional Camera
ANTHONY CALYPSO
KATHLEEN CORGAN
BROOKLYN DEMME
JUSTIN DROBINSKI
SAMANTHA FELTUS
ABDUL FRANKLIN
SEAN GALLAGHER
CAROLINE GOODMAN-THOMASES
IDO HAAR
LINDSAY JAEGER
ANDRE LAMBERTSON
KERVIN MARSEILLE
ROYCE OSBORN
DECLA QUINN

Clinica Production Assistance

NEDA ARMIAN
SHANE BISSETT
HARPER DILL
ELIZABETH HAYES
JENNY MCCORMACK
BEVIN MCNAMARA
INNBO SHINN
SUSA SPANGLER
KAT SPEISS
MAUD STREEP
MIKE WALLACE
EMILY WOODBURNE

Color
JORDAN CAMPBELL

Post Supervisor
DAVE STECK

Re-recording Mixer
TOM RYAN

ADDITIONAL FOOTAGE FROM

Flags, Feathers and Lies

Pablo Palacios, Director; Julie Belafonte, Executive Producer

The Harrison Family Archives
including excerpts from *Guardians of the Flame: A View from Within*
Brian Nelson, Michele J. Harrison & Herreast J. Harrison

Tavis Smiley Media
The Black State of the Union

MUSIC

Candlelight

featuring Ron Carter & Billy Cobham
courtesy of Nagel Heyer Records

Salt Peanuts

composed by John Gillespie & Kenny Clarke
courtesy of Universal Music

"Salt Peanuts Live at Massey Hall"
performed by Dizzy Gillespie & Charlie Parker
courtesy of Concord Music Group

Guardians, Here They Come

Brian Nelson with Donald Harrison, Jr. and Chief Xian aTunde Adjuah

Indian Red from *Indian Blues*, Donald Harrison, Jr.

Indian Red from *Young Guardians of the Flame* (lead vocal: Cara Harrison)

Shallow Waters from *Indian Blues*, Donald Harrison, Jr.

Chong Chong from *Young Guardians of the Flame*, Donald Harrison, Sr.

Paradise Found from *Paradise Found*, Donald Harrison, Jr. introducing Christian
Scott

Two Way Pockey Way from *Young Guardians of the Flame*

Flames Are Leaving from *Young Guardians of the Flame*

Shallow Waters from *Young Guardians of the Flame*

Intro Statement from *Young Guardians of the Flame*

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