

Emmy-winning filmmaker discusses his upcoming PBS documentary

Written by Kam Williams



Born in Grand Rapids, MI, Emmy Award-winner Dante James is an independent filmmaker who has produced and directed numerous award-winning documentaries as well as a critically-acclaimed dramatic short film. In June 2006 James, accepted an appointment as Artist-in-Residence instructor/filmmaker at Duke University, and the following year he conceptualized, produced, and directed *The Doll*, based on a short story by Charles W. Chesnutt. The Doll subsequently screened at film festivals around the world, including the Pan African International Film Festival in Cannes.

In 2006, Dante received three Emmy nominations for his work on the PBS series *Slavery and the Making of America*, for which he was awarded an Emmy for his work as series producer. He has also been recognized as a distinguished alumnus by Grand Valley State University in 1994, and in December 2007 when he delivered the commencement address the university awarded him a Doctorate of Humane Letters. In addition, he has earned a Masters Degree from Duke University.

In 2010, James plans to turn his creative efforts to the production of an independent feature film, which will be shot in Detroit and in his hometown of Grand Rapids, MI. Here, Dante discusses his latest offering, *Harlem in Montmartre*, a Paris Jazz Story for PBS's Great Performances. The documentary tells the story of the jazz age in Paris between 1920 and 1945. It explores an abandoned but crucial aspect of the African-American cultural experience and its effect on the international stage. The documentary will air on PBS at 8 PM (ET/PT) on August 26, 2009. (Check local listings) .

KW: Hi Dante, thanks for another interview.

DJ: Hi Kam, it's always great to talk with you and I want you to know that I appreciate your interest in my films.

KW: What interested you in making Harlem in Montmartre?

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DJ: When we were working on the Slavery and the Making of America series in 2004, my friend Charles Hopson brought the project to WNET. Charles had acquired the rights to the book and Tammy Robinson, a brilliant Black woman who at the time was WNET's V.P. of national production, had the vision to see the potential and the importance of the project. Tammy took the project on and she and Charles asked me to direct the film.

KW: It is based on a book by the late Anthony Shack, a professor of anthropology at Berkeley. What challenges were involved in adapting it into a documentary?

DJ: That is a very interesting question. Actually, it took some time to figure out how to make the book come alive. My Duke University class was involved in analyzing the script, suggesting storylines and visual approaches. They were very creative and several of their ideas did end up in the film. But the biggest challenge was figuring out a way to tell the story by using the music as the spine of the film. We wanted to have the music take us through the history as opposed to having the history take us to the music. The other huge challenge was determining what would make it into the film because there were so many great stories.

KW: In the screen version, you focus on a handful of key figures, including Josephine Baker, bandleader James Reese Europe, clarinetist Sidney Bechet, nightclub owners Bricktop and Eugene Bullard and gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt. What made you settle on their stories?

DJ: As you know the best films are character-driven. The idea was to cast the film with interesting characters who could take us through the history with music as an essential part of the storytelling. For instance, Sidney Bechet was an incredible musician but he also represented many other things. He represented the strength and independence of Black people during that time period. As a matter of fact, all of the characters were representative of our struggle for social, political, economic and artistic freedom in France and in this country. Django Reinhardt was the person who pioneered French jazz. Early French jazz musicians attempted to imitate American jazz. Django was essential to the development of a French style of jazz. One of the ways he did this was with drastically different instrumentation.

KW: Why did you decide to mix in live performances of jazz classics with archival footage? And by the same token, why did you employ the technique of having actors impersonate some of the leading icons from the era?

DJ: There were specific musical story points that were essential to telling the story and to interpreting the history. The live performances gave us the flexibility of featuring those points and they were also essential to the pacing of the film. We did not want to rely solely on the archival footage, as that would have been very limiting. In terms of musicians representing musicians of the time period we wanted to have our band directed by the brilliant Victor Goines simply capture the feel and the spirit of the musicians in Montmartre during that time period. I did not want them to attempt to become actors.

KW: What I found fascinating was learning that African Americans first discovered Paris during World War I. How many Black expatriates lived in Montmartre?

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DJ: First of all, I want to say that we had the opportunity to work with an incredible group of scholars. They kept us on track and helped us understand the complexity of this history. But to answer your question, in spite of all of the activity and all of the accomplishments of the Black expatriates in Montmartre the total Black expatriate population never reached more than several hundred.

KW: To what extent did Jim Crow segregation in America contribute to the exodus?

DJ: There is a moment in the film when Brent Edwards talks about the idea of freedom and how after Black Americans experienced freedom and respect in France during World War I. They began to see possibilities and could no longer accept the segregation and degradation of American racism.

But it is also important to note that we do not frame France as a utopia for Black people. We spend quite a bit of time making the point that France was a colonial power and while they were welcoming Black American expatriates, they were exploiting and oppressing people of color in the Caribbean, West Africa, and Vietnam. This is an example of what I meant in terms of exploring the complexity of this history.

KW: The film also focuses on the fact that the bubble began to burst during The Depression when Paris started enforcing an ordinance limiting the number of foreign performers.

DJ: This is really interesting in that the 10% law, which limited the employment of foreign musicians to 10% of any band, had been on the books for many years. But with the onset of The Depression, the French began enforcing the law. So it was not a matter of race, it was more a matter of French capitalism and the tighter money supply. This is something we see happening in this country as resources become sparse, people take action to make sure that they are going to be financially stable. We often interpret their actions as racist and sometimes race is a factor. However, this is also one of the characteristics of capitalism.

KW: And then what had been an oasis of tolerance turned into a nightmare when the specter of Hitler invading France forced all the Blacks to run back to America where they not only had to readjust to segregation and second-class status, but where they received little respect as artists.

DJ: It is ironic and sad that in World War I, Black Americans were not allowed in U.S. combat units because the U.S. military did not want Black soldiers killing white enemies. It is also ironic and sad that while some segments of American society referred to jazz as jungle music, the French recognized it as an art form. But this is the dichotomy of the Black experience. Yet, through it all, we continue to define for ourselves and assert our humanity and our dignity.

KW: What do you want viewers to come away with after viewing Harlem in Montmartre?

DJ: The film is really about finding common ground as human beings and in Montmartre that common ground was Black American jazz. We must begin to think not in terms of race, color, language, religion, or political persuasion, but in terms of humanity. The common thread of humanity is more powerful than all of the things that divide us.

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KW: How was it working with PBS again? Do you ever feel constrained by the limits of public television? **DJ:** To be very frank with you it was difficult. Too often in television, film and publishing there are those in positions of power who have the final word on the interpretation of our history and our culture, but it is not their culture and they do not understand it. In general I'm happy with the film, however, there were changes made after I left WNET that I am not happy with. Here is an example. In the opening of the film Josephine Baker is described as scandalous. I think that description far too narrow. Her act might have been scandalous at first, but the French patrons who paid to see her were just as scandalous if not more so. Josephine Baker was complex and extremely talented so I have a problem with reducing her to scandalous at the top of the show. Clearly, this was copy that was written by and approved by people outside of our culture. Things like this happen far too often.

KW: What's your next film project going to be?

DJ: I really enjoyed making my dramatic short film THE DOLL and it has screened at film festivals nation wide and internationally so I decided to make an independent feature film in my home state of Michigan. The Michigan Film Commission is offering incredible incentives for filmmakers to shoot films in the state. I have identified a story and I'm working with Mike Wiley, an incredibly gifted actor and screenwriter, on the script. It's wonderful to have the opportunity to work with a brother in an atmosphere of mutual respect and support. My attorney, Lee Jenkins, and I are in the process of seeking investors, so Kam, if you have an extra two million dollars to invest in this project we'll even give you a cameo role! Lee is another brilliant Black man who has been supportive of me and my work for many years. With a team that includes Lee, Mike and of course my wife, Delores, I know we will be successful.

KW: Will you also be teaching at Duke this semester? What course?

DJ: As of today I'm scheduled to teach a course on planning the documentary film. However, like every other university in America, Duke is experiencing economic challenges and there could be changes. In the meantime, I'm also exploring other opportunities at Duke. Whatever happens, it is a great university and I'm very proud to have a masters' from Duke and I'm appreciative of the opportunities I've had there. They made the production of THE DOLL possible and by the way the film is still available at www.dmdfilms.com

To obtain a copy of the book from which Harlem in Montmartre was adapted, visit:
<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0520225376?ie=UTF8&tag=thslfofire-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0520225376>