

INTRODUCTION

Most first time visitors to New Orleans have fixed ideas about the city based upon what they saw in movie theaters. Many big screen images of New Orleans can be traced to numerous films shot or set in the French Quarter and other sections of the city. This book proposes to show why Hollywood chose the city for so many productions. To journey through the French Quarter and other historic places, read about them, or see a film shot on location is a pleasurable experience. Films lure visitors and locals to an ambience rooted in the city's distinctive mixture of cultures, languages, music, art and religions. Directors have been inspired by writers and painters to capture scenes in historically preserved places. Many moviemakers consider settings that are visually powerful for audiences. We are given a glimpse into the past even though films tend to romanticize stories about the city. How did people in New Orleans in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries live? The answer might lead us to discover why New Orleans is considered "America's Most Interesting City."

Twenty films representing various genres and historic eras were selected to give the reader access to a wide range of movies and personal preferences.

At the back of the book there are tours and maps

of selected film sites in the French Quarter and beyond. This allows individuals to compare locations with images formed by them as filmgoers. Set designers, camera crews, directors, and everyone else working on a motion picture make decisions about how to use a cinema site. Cinema directors decide as to how much of a picture will be shot on location or at a Hollywood studio. The chapters are organized into film genres and historical eras. Whenever possible the reader will be told about how many sequences in a movie were filmed on location or on a set.

A complete list of movies included is as follows: *Interview With the Vampire* (1994), *The Feast of All Saints* (2003), *The Buccaneer* (1958), *Jezebel* (1938), *Saratoga Trunk* (1945), *New Orleans* (1947), *Pretty Baby* (1978), *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965), *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962), *Blaze* (1989), *Panic in the Streets* (1950), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *Easy Rider* (1969), *Cat People* (1982), *JFK* (1991), *Double Jeopardy* (1999), *King Creole* (1959), *The Big Easy* (1987), *The Pelican Brief* (1993), and *Runaway Jury* (2003). Some are based upon a book or a play. Others follow a screenplay script. All use New Orleans as settings in portions of the pictures.

The French Quarter, also called the Vieux Carré (Old Square), attracts millions of visitors a year. It is from this living museum with a large inventory of historic architecture in both its public and private

buildings that many images of New Orleans arise. It is a six by thirteen rectangular square block section dating back to colonial times when the French (1718-1762) and Spanish (1762-1803) ruled the Louisiana Territory. It was returned to the French, and in 1803, Napoleon sold it to the United States. The colonial period gave it a European look which continued to exist under American rule. Its lifestyle and unique buildings remained when descendants of the French, Spanish and Africans of the colonial times continued to inhabit this enclave. Others from the Caribbean and Europe settled here. They were joined by immigrants from Europe. It was a melting pot even when it witnessed a decline into a slum and remained “foreign.” A powerful preservation movement in the twentieth century helped protect the area from several modern encroachments.

In guide books it is described as exotic, decadent, like no other place in America, magnificent, European, African, Caribbean, hedonistic, a bohemia, colorful, sensory, historic, and Roman Catholic. It comes as no surprise that Hollywood continues to use the place as a site for cinematic productions on studio lots and on location.

In a time frame the films discussed in this book range from *Jezebel* in 1938 to *The Feast of All Saints* in 2003. Both movies used very expensive sets aimed at re-creating New Orleans in the mid and early 1800s.

The first is praised for a representation of the Old South. The second is based on Anne Rice's novel of the same name. *Jezebel* contains many themes from Old South mythology. Mint juleps, plantation life and a code of honor based on dueling appear frequently. But the 1853 yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans fills the narrative as the love story between the principal characters Julie Marsden (Bette Davis) and Preston Dillard (Henry Fonda) plays out. *The Feast of All Saints* covers the free people of color as a people in peril in nineteenth century New Orleans. The two movies will be discussed later.

For now, it is important to define the boundaries of the area of the city where the twenty films were shot on location or on a set. The six by thirteen grid of the Quarter and several blocks adjacent to it along the curve of the Mississippi River and along Basin Street (see the map at the back) will be included in the discussion of sites. The river front and St. Louis #1 Cemetery appear in some of the pictures and should be mentioned as places favored by filmmakers. A long, fascinating history, lush greenery and flowers, beautiful architecture, scenic streets, promenade on the river, and other aesthetic aspects in the area offer the camera special visual effects. The St. Charles Avenue and Garden District section of the city has also been used by Hollywood to portray New Orleans in movies and will be part of our description of movie

sites.

Hollywood should be thanked for building replicas on studio sets of two French Quarter landmarks. The French Opera House and the old St. Louis Hotel appear in films covered on the tour. In *Jezebel* and *Saratoga Trunk* the interiors of the French Opera House and the St. Louis Hotel are shown even though these structures no longer exist. One burned beyond repair (the Opera House) and the other was demolished (the St. Louis Hotel). Both symbolized the “joy of life” culture in the old Quarter. Later an attempt will be made to describe these two venerable buildings, which disappeared early in the twentieth century, and in the chapters covering *Jezebel* and *Saratoga Trunk* the two historic buildings will be discussed.

Two tours and two maps at the back of the book will help us find film sites in New Orleans. One tour covers the French Quarter. The second uses the St. Charles Avenue streetcar to view movie sites and other points of interest along the way. The sketches throughout the book help us recognize historic structures on the tours. Some illustrations help us visualize how New Orleans may have appeared in earlier times. Sets used by filmmakers try to replicate New Orleans during early times. The illustrations and text attempt to give filmgoers other means to judge Hollywood’s visions of this magical city.