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Documentary director concentrates on the lives of New Orleans-influenced musicians

By [Sam Tabachnik](#)



Director Jon Brewer's documentary films concentrate on the lives of New Orleans-influenced musicians.

The walls in New Orleans are more than mere slabs of concrete or wood to filmmaker Jon Brewer. For him, they sing.

The Englishman first came to the Big Easy during stints as a music manager for the likes of The Rolling Stones and David Bowie and quickly became drawn to the wild lifestyle and festive atmosphere that has been known to ensnare those in search of fun times.

"As Mick Jagger would tell you, the walls here breathe music," Brewer says. "The walls breathe, 'Let's party!'"

Brewer returned to his favorite city last week to premiere two documentaries in the New Orleans Film Festival. His pieces, *B.B. King: The Life of Riley* and *Nat King Cole: Afraid of the Dark*, explore the lives and careers of two of America's most legendary jazz musicians.

The veteran producer and director will tackle a third – the iconic Louis Armstrong – in a new documentary to be filmed here beginning in March.

B.B. King: Life of Riley chronicles the story of an orphaned young man from humble beginnings who would go on to greatly influence the music industry, earning the blues singer the respect and admiration of countless artists who followed in his path.

Morgan Freeman narrates the film, which features music greats Bono, Eric Clapton, and New Orleans' own Dr. John.

Nat King Cole: Afraid of the Dark is a candid account of Cole's life of fame and fortune as told by those closest to him. His widow, Maria Cole, Tony Bennett, Buddy Greco, and Harry Belafonte each share memories and accounts that personalize the man behind the legend.

While many associate Nat King Cole with the big-band sound of Hollywood's Golden Era, his musical style, Brewer notes, is actually more rooted in New Orleans.

"New Orleans was very special to Nat and I think Nat was very special to the people of New Orleans," the filmmaker says. "To be honest, this should be his home."

Brewer has no interest in making cookie-cutter documentaries. The sights, the smells, the setting are key tools in telling the story, he explains. Thus he wants viewers of *Life of Riley*, for example, to wade right alongside B.B. King into the humid Mississippi delta .

"I look at establishing you where I want you to feel and place you," he says. "So if you're watching this in Baltimore or New York or Los Angeles, you'll see you're actually in the swamp and you're actually walking through the swamp. And then you come out the other side of the swamp and you feel the heat and you feel the locusts. Then you look at that cabin and suddenly Morgan Freeman — the voice of God — tells you the period, the time, where King was born and how he grew up."

Brewer officially revealed his plans for the Armstrong biopic from the home of renowned New Orleans jazz musician Irvin Mayfield.

"I think he's probably the biggest icon out of this town," Brewer said quietly and contemplatively of Armstrong. "It's a big thing to say, but I think he stands

among the biggest and best and I was drawn to him because of my study of the blues.”

After tackling jazz icons in King and Cole, Brewer says he now needs to go back and investigate the blues — which Mayfield calls “the blood of jazz.”

Brewer and his team will be back in New Orleans to begin shooting the Louis Armstrong documentary in March, with the goal to release the finished product by the start of 2016. The biopic, he says, will come out in about three years.

“New Orleans has to be carefully presented,” Brewer says about the timeframe for his next project. “If you’ve got Louis Armstrong, he has to be there and you have to feel him there as a kid.”

“I’m not going to give it away,” he adds with a smirk and a wink, “but it’s a great, great story.”

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