

An Interview with Dante James

Dante James is an award-winning, independent filmmaker. He was writer and director for the PBS series *Slavery and the Making of America*. He also produced *The Doll*, a short film whose screenplay he based on a story by Charles W. Chesnutt.

More recently, James wrote and directed *Harlem in Montmartre* for the PBS Great Performances series. Based on a book of the same title written by the late professor of anthropology William A. Shack, the movie traces the phenomenal development of jazz in France from the end of WWI to the end of WWII. It also recounts the history of a number of African-American musicians and writers who either remained in France after they were discharged from the Army at the end of WWI, or who came to France because of the opportunities that were emerging there.



Dante James

Photograph courtesy of WNET

Perhaps the main reason that France attracted many African-Americans to its shores after WWI was the absence of racism that they, the African-Americans, perceived in French society. How racism in France manifested itself can be the subject of long discussions, but the fact is that the *perception* that there was an absence of racism attracted African-Americans who were longing to escape the harsh reality that they were experiencing in America.

We met Dante James recently at a reception that was given by the American Ambassador to France, Charles Rivkin, to kick off the France Noire/Black France Film Festival in Paris that the American embassy partially funded. The festival was organized by four professors, two of whom are American: Trica Danielle Keaton, Associate Professor at Vanderbilt University, and Tracy Sharpley-Whiting, Director of African American and Diaspora Studies at Vanderbilt. On the evening following the reception, James' film was featured at the Forum des Images, where the festival took place. *Harlem in Montmartre* was well received, and for our part, we found that it superbly recounted the fascinating story of jazz and the African-American experience in Paris between the wars. As the film will be aired on the European cultural television channel ARTE in September, we contacted him to learn about his experiences in making this documentary so that we could tell others about the process that led up to its realization.

What were some of the influences in your life that inspired you to go into filmmaking?

-That is a very interesting question. In grade school, I was always the one to help my teacher with the movie projector. I was always interested in cameras and I have always been an avid reader, but I think the largest influence was the fact that my father was a vivid storyteller. Now

many of his stories were solely for our entertainment, but I think they planted seeds in terms of the potential of one's imagination.



**James Reese Europe in Paris
with Army Band, 1919
Photograph by Frank Driggs**

How did the book *Harlem in Montmartre* come to your attention?

-As we were completing the *Slavery and the Making of America* series, a very good friend brought the project to WNET. The head of national production at the time, a brilliant African American woman named Tammy Robinson, saw the potential in the project and she asked me if I would direct the film. Previously I had made films on Mr. A. Philip Randolph and Ms. Marian Anderson for Tammy and we were happy with the results.

Before you read the book, did you have any idea about the influence that American jazz had on French culture?

-I was aware to the fact that African-American culture in general had a big impact on French culture. However I was not aware of the specific impact black jazz musicians had on French culture.

Did you have any idea about how great an influence the idea of France as a colorblind society had on black Americans?

- I was aware that French society was much less restrictive than American society. However I was also aware of the fact that France was a major colonial power and while they were welcoming black artists, musicians, and entertainers they were oppressing black people in French West Africa, the Caribbean and brown people in Vietnam. The complexity of the history is one of the reasons I was attracted to the project.

After you read the book, how did these perceptions change?

-My approach to any project is interdisciplinary as filmmaking is an interdisciplinary process, so there were many other interpretations of France during that time period that informed the film and our interpretation of French society between the world wars.

In the movie, you give attention to French musicians who not only adapted American jazz, but transformed it. I am thinking particularly of Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli. Why did you think it important to tell this part of the story?

- I'm not certain that they transformed American jazz, as jazz is an evolutionary art form. My interpretation is that French musicians created their own version of jazz. They clearly came up with different instrumentation, and influences of different cultures are easily recognized. For instance, Django Reinhardt's gypsy culture had an impact on his music and the make-up of his bands. So my analysis is that the French musicians imitated black American jazz at first, but eventually they created their own style.

Who were some of the people who helped you find old film clips and photographs for the film?

-That is another good question but I have to admit that I am a spoiled director and the staff at WNET and Arte our production partners did all of the archival research. I just told them what I needed and they went out and found it. They did an excellent job.

What were some of the steps that you needed to take in order to get the film from an idea to a reality?

- The most difficult task was deciding who would be our main characters. There were so many incredible people there but in the context of a film there were limits in terms of how many stories you can tell and how many characters you can follow. We knew we wanted the story to be driven by music, so it was a matter of identifying characters that could take us through the history musically and also be a gateway to the social history



Jam Session
Photograph courtesy of
Vincent Lignier

You told me that you traveled to Paris twice during the production of the film. What were some of the things that you needed to accomplish there?

-The first trip over, we met our production partners and spent quite a bit of time discussing the project and French jazz with French jazz experts. We also scouted locations. The final trip was to actually film the music performance scenes.

Did you walk around the neighborhood (in lower Montmartre) where many of the jazz clubs were established during years between WWI and WWII? What were some of your impressions of this neighborhood?

- We actually spent quite a bit of time in the area. One of our consultants lives in the area. I was struck by the energy and it was intriguing to imagine what it was like for black Americans decades ago. It had to be incredibly liberating to be in a place where your humanity and dignity were not constantly under siege.

How much of the film was shot in Paris?

-We shot over half of the film there. The only things filmed in New York were the American interviews. We shot the atmospheric shots, the French interviews, and all of the music performance segments in Paris.

Were you pleased that the American ambassador in Paris got involved in the sponsorship and celebration of the France Noire/Black France Film Festival?

-Recognition for your work is always gratifying no matter where it comes from. The festival was really well organized and we were a very grateful for the invitation to screen our film.

Would you comment on the reception of your film at the France Noire/Black France Film Festival?

- The reception was incredible. I was asked numerous times about purchasing the film but there are rights issues that have to be resolved before it is made available for purchase.

When do you think that the film will become available on a DVD?

- I'm not sure if or when it will become available. However I do know that there are plans to air the program on Arte in the fall.

You have expressed interest in making a film about African-American expatriate Beauford Delaney, one of many artists who came to Paris during the post-WWII era. Would you come to Paris to shoot the part of the film that would treat Delaney's later life?

-Clearly, Mr. Delaney was an incredible artist and some of the film would have to be shot there. However, the treatment of all aspects of his life is something that will emerge from gaining an understanding and appreciation for the history, the context of the time and of course, his own personal journey. I like to immerse myself in the material and let it speak to me.

Do you have any other film projects in mind that would involve Paris?

- As a matter of fact I do. I am currently collaborating with a writer and producer in Los Angeles who has written a television miniseries on the life of American expatriate and Renaissance man Eugene Jacques Bullard. Mr. Bullard was an individual who, after making his way to France as a teenager, valiantly served with the Foreign Legion during World War One. He also had the distinction of flying with the Lafayette Escadrille as a pilot.

Mr. Bullard was a highly decorated soldier and war hero. After the war he stayed on in Paris from 1918 - 1939 and established himself as a very successful night club owner, an impresario, and eventual citizen, playing a key role in ushering jazz music into Paris during the exciting Roaring Twenties.

The story of this man's life in Paris is very exciting to me. I am thrilled with the advanced development of this project, and look forward to filming it in the near future.

Thank you for your interest in my work.