

MOVIE NEWS &amp; REVIEWS MARCH 2, 2017 8:02 AM

## Miami Film Festival shines a spotlight on Haiti



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When filmmaker Owsley Brown set out to explore Haitian identity through music, he assumed it would take a couple of years. Never, however, did he imagine it would be 10.

But Brown's 70-minute documentary, "Serenade for Haiti," which opens three years before the country's catastrophic Jan. 12, 2010 earthquake that left more than 300,000 dead, an equal number injured and 1.5 million homeless, took a decade to complete.

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**THE HAITIAN POPULATION IS IMPORTANT IN OUR COMMUNITY, AND I AM VERY GRATEFUL TO BE ABLE TO FIND THEM FILMS THAT SPEAK TO THEIR EXPERIENCES RIGHT NOW.**

Jaie Laplante, Miami Film Festival executive director

The documentary follows teachers and students from Sainte Trinité Music School in Port-au-Prince. Through their eyes, Brown shows music's saving grace and the resiliency of the Haitian spirit before and after the renowned Episcopalian school crumbled in the disaster.

"By modern U.S. standards, this is a really difficult life the people connected to the school are leading," Brown said. "But because of music, they are some of the healthiest human beings. By healthy, I mean, happy, well, resilient and strong."

"Serenade for Haiti" is among seven Haiti-themed films that will screen at the 34th edition of Miami Dade College's Miami Film Festival, which runs Friday to March 12.

"We are very focused on what people want to see. ... things that entertain people at the end of the day, move them, touch them," said Jaie Laplante, the festival's executive director and director of programming. "The art of entertainment is what we're celebrating."

Laplante said he was happy to see so many films with a focus on Haiti this year.

“We can only program what people make,” he said. “The Haitian population is important in our community, and I am very grateful to be able to find them films that speak to their experiences right now and to be able to include them in this festival.”

Among the filmmakers represented are Brown, who had already made two music-focused films before “Serenade for Haiti,” Hollywood actor and producer Jimmy Jean-Louis and Miami-based filmmaker Dudley Alexis. Alexis, who moved to the United States from Haiti as a teen, is making his directorial debut at the festival with his film, “Liberty in a Soup.” The film explores the history of pumpkin soup or *soup joumou*, Haiti’s traditional Jan. 1 Independence Day meal.

“Haiti has a lot of talented people, and people should be aware of it,” said Jean-Louis, echoing a point raised in “Serenade.” That theme has been repeated at a number of recent film festivals, including Toronto, where for the first time in recent memory, three films (including “I Am Not Your Negro” by Oscar-nominated Raoul Peck) directed by Haitian filmmakers were screened.

Best known for his role as “the Haitian” on the NBC television series “Heroes” and as Toussaint in “Joy,” which earned Jennifer Lawrence a 2016 Best Actress Oscar nomination, Jean-Louis has three films in the Miami festival. There is “Empty Box” by Mexican-Haitian filmmaker Claudia Sainte-Luce, in which Jean-Louis plays an undocumented Haitian migrant suffering from dementia embroiled in a conflicted relationship with his adult daughter who knows nothing about her Haitian culture or identity. The second is “Cargo,” which also features Haiti-born actress Gessica Génés and addresses the trauma Haitians undergo when embarking on dangerous sea voyages in rickety boats in search of a new life. This is the first time that “Cargo,” which was partly shot in the Bahamas, is being screened at a film festival.

“With this movie, I really want people to sympathize, and I want to humanize Haitians. We have to be able to look at Haitians as normal human beings,” Jean-Louis said.

The third film “Everything But a Man,” which not only stars Jean-Louis but was also co-produced by him along with Nnegest Likké. The film, which also stars Monica Calhoun (“The Best Man” franchise), is about a self-made African-American career woman who has everything — except a man. It was partly shot in Haiti and has screened at several festivals in the United States and Europe. It has won numerous awards including “Best Audience” at last month’s 25th annual Pan African Film and Arts Festival in Los Angeles.

“We always have heated debates after the movie,” Jean-Louis said about the film. “I open a window that has been closed and invite [the audience] to see another side of Haiti, that’s what ‘Everything But a Man’ does. I want them to be surprised, amazed and to be willing to go to Haiti and explore it for themselves, by themselves. I think that is what most of these films do.”

When Brown first visited Haiti in 2006, he knew nothing about the country other than what he had seen in the news. And little of it was inviting, he concedes. Then he visited Sainte Trinité, where Father David César oversaw the music program.

Music’s importance in the lives of the children at Sainte Trinité is evident in the film. Still, the movie doesn’t focus on students’ poverty or the problems they face. It allows viewers to draw their own conclusions while still rooting for students’ success, as the camera follows them through the dusty streets of Haiti’s crowded capital and their bare-bones neighborhoods.

“We don’t have to be great musicians,” Bernadette Stella Williams, a cellist and a teacher, says at the beginning, setting the documentary’s tone. “But one thing is for sure. When we arrive at Saint Trinité and discover this atmosphere and grow up in it, we become someone serious and important in our own lives.”

With footage of Haiti’s magnificent National Palace before it was destroyed in the quake and subsequently razed, “Serenade” is a bittersweet reminder of Haiti’s pride and promise before the disaster. The cameras capture the struggle to rebuild: Four years after the disaster, the rubble is gone, but the dust seems to encase the capital as the film’s tone shifts from hope to doubt, mirroring the feelings of the teachers.

“You might see pretty landscapes,” César said toward the end of the film after the camera pans over Jalousie, a mountaintop slum where the cinder-block shanties are painted in pastel colors. “But look closely. The colors, the sun, the sea, the pretty environment. There is a shadowy place. There is a shadow, and that shadow is this anger, this sadness, that the Haitian soul is ready to express, to tell the world we have borne too much.”

## IF YOU GO

**What:** The 34th Miami Film Festival

**When:** March 3-12

**Where:** Various venues around Miami.

**Full schedule and ticket information:** [www.miamifilmfestival.com](http://www.miamifilmfestival.com)

### The other Haiti-theme films in the festival are:

- “Death by a Thousand Cuts,” a co-production with Dominican Republic that explores the tension and environmental degradation along the Dominican Republic-Haiti border through the murder of Dominican park ranger Eligio Eloy Varga, whose wife was Haitian.

▪ "Bending the Arc," a documentary that tells the story of Partners in Health, which opened in Haiti in the 1980s, the peak of the Haitian AIDS crisis. The medical charity was founded by Dr. Paul Farmer, then a Harvard medical student; Dr. Jim Yong Kim, an idealistic young physician, and budding activist Ophelia Dahl.



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