

The Revolution is Being Televised

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Filmmakers Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno.

by Steve Desroches

The recent 50th anniversary celebrations of the 1963 March on Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream Speech" focused both on the accomplishments of the Civil Rights movement and how far we still have to go to achieve racial and social justice in America. As time passes and we get further away from the turbulent 1960s, the lessons of that era and what gets remembered can leave much out of our collective memories. Whereas Dr. King's words and actions focused on non-violence, there were also riots, or as many remember them rebellions, that ignited in some of the most oppressed and disenfranchised urban areas in America, with perhaps the 1965 Watts riots being the most famous.

The 2007 documentary film *Revolution '67*, about the six days of rioting that embroiled Newark, New Jersey, in mid-July 1967, illustrates how the city got to that point and where it is now, still stricken by poverty in this majority African-American and Hispanic city. Filmmakers Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno will be at the Provincetown Public Library for a screening and discussion of the film this week.

"We live here in Newark and it has big problems and we wanted to know why," says Bongiorno.

“This screening has a nice tie into the 50th anniversary of the March,” says Tibaldo-Bongiorno, who produced and directed the film. “One of the most prominent aspects of the March was about jobs. Still 50 years later we’re talking about this problem that hasn’t been addressed.”

The 1967 riots in Newark were an immediate reaction to an incident when a black taxi driver, John Smith, was arrested for a traffic violation and allegedly beaten and killed by white police officers. By the end of the six days of rioting 26 people were dead, 725 injured, 1,500 arrested, and there was about \$10 million in damage. But the riots weren’t just a reaction to the death of Smith. At the end of World War II industry began to leave Newark, and the largely white, middle-class population moved out, too. While the city became a black majority municipality, whites held almost all of the power positions. In addition to an eroding economy and lack of opportunity overall in Newark, the African-American populations faced police brutality.

“Instead of focusing on the babies drowning in the river the focus should be on who is throwing them in,” says Bongiorno about how for years people have ignored the root causes of social and racial injustice.

The poverty rate in Newark is about 28 percent according to a variety of statistical sources, which works out to an income of \$22,314 for a family of four. The unemployment rate is about 15 percent and the high school graduation rate is about 22 percent. (Some dispute this, but even the most optimistic rates are only about 50 percent.) Roughly one-third of the city is impoverished. The problems of 1967 Newark are largely the same as modern Newark.

“Poverty is never a popular subject,” says Tibaldo-Bongiorno, a lifelong resident of Newark.

“Once we reduce the poverty rate schools get better and crime goes down,” says Bongiorno, who was the cinematographer and editor for the film. “People are desperate in Newark. The politicians are not interested in that. Their priorities are elsewhere.”

Revolution '67 aired on PBS in 2007 as part of the POV series receiving rave reviews for its examination of black rebellion in the 1960s. Its two filmmakers are both accomplished. Their documentary *Mother-Tongue: Italian American Sons and Mothers*, featuring Martin Scorsese, earned an Emmy nomination and screened at the 2006 Venice Film Festival. Their global warming-themed screenplay, *Watermark*, was featured at Sundance’s Investing in Media That Matters and the Tribeca Film Festival/Sloan Summit and was the centerpiece of a Johnson Foundation Wingspread Conference on Global Warming and Film in 2005. The Bongiornos are currently in preproduction for the fictional version of *Revolution '67*, executive-produced by Spike Lee, and they are currently completing a series of short films on post-Katrina New Orleans and flood-plagued Venice, Italy, screening on PBS’ *Natural Heroes* series and at film festivals. The Bongiornos are the recipients of a Film Fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, and *Revolution '67* is now part of the curriculum at the Teacher’s College at Columbia University. In addition to the Provincetown screening of *Revolution '67*, the husband and wife team will be in Chatham at the Eldredge Public Library on Thursday, September 5 at 5 p.m. for a screening of their documentary *The Rule*, about the Benedictine monks of Newark Abbey and St. Benedict’s Prep, a school that has a near 100 percent graduation and college acceptance rate.

“There needs to be a WPA-like program right now in America,” says Bongiorno, about the Depression-era Works Progress Administration jobs program.

“People are caught in intergenerational poverty,” says Tibaldo-Bongiorno. “You have to get to the root causes.”

“That’s what we’re fighting for,” says Bongiorno. “Working to get people out of poverty. You have to help them holistically. Jobs, education, opportunity—that is the key.”

Revolution '67 will be screened on Friday, September 6 at 2 p.m. in the Marc Jacobs Reading Room at the Provincetown Public Library, 356 Commercial St., followed by a discussion with the filmmakers. For more information call 508.487.7094 or visit provincetownlibrary.org.

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