

## THE NEIGHBORHOOD FILES

### Film Sheds New Light on 1967 Newark Riots

Revolution '67, a documentary is screening at the Cranford Community Center at 7:30 p.m. on Oct. 27.

By **Dw. Dunphy** October 26, 2010

In the documentary *Revolution '67*, filmmakers debunk widely circulated myths about the Newark race riots.

The film will screen at Cranford Community Center tomorrow at 7:30 pm. – Filmmakers MaryLou and Jerome Bongiorno will host the event, as will Dr. Mark Krasovic of the American Studies Department at Rutgers, Newark.

The film, which was a part of the PBS documentary television series P.O.V., looks into the turbulent events of Newark in 1967, and the subject of race all throughout America at the time. Filmmakers say the documentary asks thought-provoking questions concerning the tensions that boiled over then – and now, years later, how things have and have not changed.

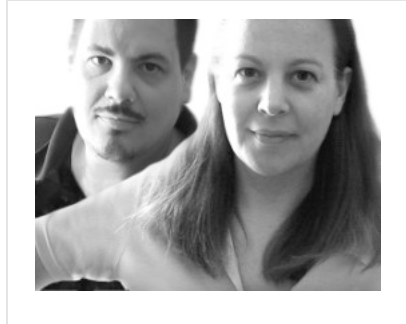
Cranford Patch spoke with the filmmakers, MaryLou and Jerome Bongiorno, about the movie, the subject matter, and what it takes to make a documentary film in the twenty-first century.

**The subject matter of *Revolution '67* is a bleak time in the nation's history, and in New Jersey in specific. What was it about the subject matter that made you want to do this documentary?**

MTB: We live in Newark, New Jersey. And it's a city – like so many other American cities – that's suffering.

Most people associate Newark with its airport or its violent history. They especially remember the Newark riots of 1967, during which 26 people died, hundreds were injured and the city endured millions of dollars in property damage. People assume that it was this one event that left the city in a state from which it has never fully recovered.

We started researching Newark's past for our short thesis film at NYU's Graduate Film School. The film, *1967*, was fictional, an interracial love story set during that hot, turbulent summer in Newark. With Spike Lee as a teacher/mentor and later as an executive producer, we sought to write a longer, more substantial screenplay and needed to ask lots of questions. We also wanted to record the answers. This work became *Revolution '67*, the documentary film.



Our first interviews with eyewitnesses Amiri Baraka (who in '67 was known as LeRoi Jones), former Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) president Tom Hayden (who had lived in Newark from 1964 to 1968) and historians Ken Jackson and Clement Price brought many surprises. The most startling was the myth of the black sniper. According to newspaper articles of the time, and even today, most of the riot's casualties were said to have been caused by black snipers from the Newark community. This was information that we dramatized in our NYU thesis film. But our interviewees presented evidence that black snipers didn't exist and that most of the killings were committed by law enforcement: Newark police, New Jersey State Police and the National Guard.

JB: Another revelation was that the riots were a rebellion against deplorable conditions stemming not from a single day, or from months or years, but from decades of corruption and neglect. This led us to a reexamination of how slavery, the economic motives of the Civil War, Jim Crow laws, unscrupulous real estate and banking practices, the civil rights era, the Vietnam War and the veracity (or lack thereof) of media coverage factored into Newark's revolution of '67. As Newark's history unfolded, so did America's.

Tom Hayden states in our film: "To recover, you have to know what happened." Forty years later, after numerous Newark officials have been indicted and/or imprisoned, and the vital signs of the city are still poor, we recognize that Newark has not learned from its past. The greatest lesson of the 1960s is that the people must empower themselves in order for that change to occur.

**The film was shown on the PBS series P.O.V. - was it made in conjunction with PBS or was it an independent production that P.O.V. picked up for broadcast?**

MTB: Although it began as an independent production, it became a co-production with the Independent Television Service (ITVS), and P.O.V./American Documentary Inc., in association with WSKG, with funding provided by The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

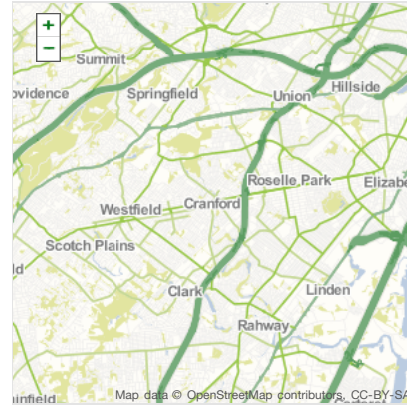
**In doing a film like this, a documentary maker is likely to be speaking with participants that may not want to speak on the subject matter. What is the process in preparing to speak with them in such a situation?**

JB: The interviewees we contacted were very eager to talk about the Newark riots, particularly Governor Brendan Byrne, who was instrumental in helping us get the real story. Preparing for these interviews required researching the interviewees' expertise, figuring out the info we needed from them, and carefully crafting questions that would elicit the material used to create a logical narrative. Then, if we needed further clarification, we filmed another interview either with the same person or another. By the end of production, since the interviewees provided all the info we needed, we edited the film without an omniscient voice-over.

**Likewise, because of the subject matter, there are possible participants that could still harbor philosophies that might make it difficult for the filmmaker to include their footage. What do you do when a participant is too willing to talk, if such a thing is possible?**

MTB: We carefully selected our interviewees and then let them talk. Most of the filming extended for many hours. Our interviews were really conversations (although the interviewees are the ones sitting under bright lights, like an interrogation of sorts!)

JB: They would mention points and we would engage in dialogue in order to clarify what they were saying. For instance, it wasn't enough for someone to mention corruption, we had to get a clear understanding of what the corruption was, why it occurred, how it was allowed to happen and why high levels of corruption always seem to exist in poorer areas. The more in-depth the dialogue, the more succinct the sound bites. After transcribing the interviews, we pored over the texts and extracted excerpts that logically explained why people in Newark were so "ready to riot." We were most interested in understanding the vested interests that government and media keep from the public. Finally, this material outlined why cities are suffering today.



**Because the events are mostly on the public record, is it the documentary maker's job to put the events into context, step back, present the footage and let the viewer decide the context, or is there a middle ground?**

MTB: What we discovered is that many aspects of the Newark Riots were - and still are! - misrepresented in the media and books (if they're mentioned at all). This was certainly the case with the "snipers" who are repeatedly cited - although there's no proof of their existence and, in one case involving the killing of Billy Furr, some sources cite snipers as the cause of his death even though photos in *Life* magazine document his killing by police. We've even seen major media cite the cause of the Newark Riots as the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. (which happened a year later).

What this erroneous info does is it contributes to an ignorance of the root causes of the "riots" and ignores the terminology used by many residents, i.e. "rebellion" or "revolution."

The incredible power of a documentary lies in being able to immerse an audience for 90 minutes in a balanced presentation of information that strives to be factual (relying sometimes on eyewitness testimony).

While we include opposing viewpoints in the film, *Revolution '67* really shows a clear progression in Newark's eruption of civil disobedience and the factors that keep it depressed today.

**Were there ever stories from the riots that, to this day, stunned you? How do you prepare for the possibility of hearing, and then working with, such testimonies?**

MTB: Yes. The killing of Billy Furr - a segment in the film - previously mentioned, is one example. We began researching this murder because it's depicted pictorially - as a full spread in *Life* magazine. When we interviewed the photographer, he told us that when he arrived in Newark, nothing was happening, i.e. it was quiet. So, basically he and the reporter "staged" some photos with two men carrying a case of beer out of a liquor store. What happened next is the police arrived on the scene and one of the men, Billy Furr, ran, was shot down, and died - and it was all captured by the photographer.

Another example is the testimony from a National Guardsman that he was fired upon by a sniper because it was automatic weapon fire and the police didn't have automatic weapons. It was only, afterwards, while we were sorting through ABC's archives that we found riot footage of Newark police using automatic rifles, which we included in the film.

JB: We were also struck by how City Hall allowed such neglect to occur in Newark; how frightening it was to be part of law enforcement during the riots, where the local police, state police, and national guard were on different radio frequencies, i.e. unable to communicate with one another, yet had the task of controlling complete chaos; the effect of that chaos on residents who were subjected to barbed wire, tanks rolling down their streets, and random firing into their homes because of "alleged" snipers (all captured in archival footage that we edited into the film).

**Were there anecdotes that surprised you in a positive way, in that you came away with something totally opposite of the dire nature of the events?**

JB: Rioting is bad: it's dangerous and never ends well. But in the case of Newark, if there was any beneficial outcome to the deaths and destruction of the riots, some say it was to help bring about a "color change" in the leadership. But in reality, as we've seen for the past 40-plus years, having black leadership in Newark has not helped the city. The black population in Newark, currently at 53 percent, owns around 23 percent of the businesses. Also, the rental rate is very high, at 70 percent. This all means that the people that live here don't have ownership in their city. It's the people that control a city, but in order to control your city, you have to own it.

We also learned that the reason why towns like Newark remain bad is because there's a lot of money in poverty; there's a lot of federal money available for development, education, and crime prevention. Campaign financiers want that money, so they groom politicians who, once in office, work in their interest, not in the best interest of the people. Instead of using that money to create thousands of pick-and-shovel-WPA-type jobs to quickly rehabilitate and stabilize a city like Newark, the developers and city get together and propose entertainment-type arenas-venues like stadiums, which together with the media are touted as economic generators. In all cases, these are great economic generators for those involved in the deal but never the city. If they were economic generators, Newark's poverty rate would have decreased over the last five years, not have increased from 25 percent to almost 27 percent.

We also learned that the media, due to their own vested interests is mostly complicit in helping to forward the best interests of campaign financiers, by not doing enough investigative journalism to expose the true motives of politicians versus the true needs of the people. Therefore, the voting public never gets a sense of reality.

The positive side to all this is that, if politicians and the media are capable of cleverly working hard and succeeding in attaining their interests, then if we exceed their cleverness we can turn their industry around to benefit the people. As the last line of our 3D film, *New Work: Newark in 3D* (at the Newark Museum) states: "The possibilities are the people."

**What were the mechanical difficulties in making the film (cost, subject matter, availability of materials, assembly)? Has new technology made it easier for a filmmaker or has it just presented a new series of challenges?**

MTB: Archival materials are costly, so we needed to work long and hard to find funders. Some archival materials were "orphan works" so we worked with the IP Clinic law students at American University Washington College of Law to support our orphan work and Fair Use claims.

JB: Some events in the film had no archival material to illustrate them. This problem became an opportunity for creativity through animation.

New technologies, like digital video and the internet, are a blessing, i.e. really democratizes the filmmaking process by making it cost-efficient to shoot and edit video. A friend shot his doc on his cell phone!

**What are your hopes for what an audience will come away with after viewing *Revolution '67*?**

JB: The first thing an audience will learn is that Newark did not explode into riots in 1967 due to a few isolated incidents but from decades of neglect.

The second thing is that Newark is not in its current crisis due to the riots of 1967 but because the same neglect persists today. The number one revitalization recommendation from the 1968 Kerner commission - "jobs" - still goes unheeded.

Finally, whenever we speak, people always ask, "How is Newark doing today?" One needs only to access Newark's poverty rate to understand its condition. Newark has a very high poverty rate that has grown recently to nearly 27 percent. If they don't understand what 27 percent means, we ask them to compare that with Nutley, a safe and comfortable town only 3 miles away, with a poverty rate of only 4.8 percent, or even Seattle - a city with over double the population of Newark - at 11.6 percent.

Poverty creates a community that is unable to take control of its city (the way wealthier areas do) and is unable to resist corruption - therefore, as long as the poverty persists, crime and poor education will persist. As we always say to the audience during our screenings: In the case of Newark's problems, poverty is at the bottom of it all. The answer to Newark's problems is poverty reduction.

**For more information about the documentary, and filmmakers MaryLou and Jerome Bongiorno, visit [www.Revolution67.com](http://www.Revolution67.com) (<http://www.Revolution67.com>) Information about this screening is available by e-mail, [library@cranfordnj.org](mailto:library@cranfordnj.org) (<mailto:library@cranfordnj.org>), or by phone, 908-709-7272.**



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