



A TRIBUTE TO THE WAREHOUSE

by Mark St. James

Filmmaker Jessy Williamson had always been fascinated by the legend of “The Warehouse.” After hearing about it from his parents, he wanted to know more but found very little information readily available. Motivated by the possibility that a significant chapter in the history of New Orleans music might fade away entirely, Williamson made it the subject of his first major film project, the documentary *A Warehouse On Tchoupitoulas*.

The story of The Warehouse is the story of when New Orleans first became a regular destination for big name rock bands, during the final years before rock music became big business. This was before the UNO Lakefront Arena, the Centroplex in Baton Rouge or the Mississippi Coast Coliseum. This was when some of the greatest bands of all time were still content to perform on a simple wooden stage, in a venue with no air conditioning, for fewer than 4,000 people. It was a time when you could pay five dollars to see Elton John.

In late 1969, Bill Johnston, Don Fox, Brian Glynn and John Simmons formed Beaver Productions. They purchased an old cotton warehouse on banks of the Mississippi at 1820 Tchoupitoulas Street. Their plan was simply to bring top level touring bands to New Orleans. “We had no idea what we were doing,” Johnston readily admits. The venue itself was never even given an official name.

Beaver Productions succeeded. The list of bands who graced the meager stage of The Warehouse is a phenomenal who’s who of classic rock acts, including David Bowie, The

Who, Bob Dylan, Kiss, ZZ Top, Bob Marley, Rush, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Jeff Beck, Aerosmith and more. Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin were both scheduled to perform before their deaths.

During its 12 years in operation, rock history was made at The Warehouse, starting with the opening night show on January 30, 1970, after which the Grateful Dead were famously “busted down on Bourbon Street.” It was the site of the very last live performance by The Doors. The Allman Brothers liked the place so much they played at least three times per month throughout the early 1970s. The last band to perform at The Warehouse was Talking Heads on September 10, 1982.

In December 2008, Williamson began pulling together a crew of friends from the local film industry, including Autumn Boh, Aeron McKeough, Jessica Dale, Bridgette Raimer and T.J. Reetz. They formed Glass Pictures and began researching and interviewing to piece things together.

The task was daunting, made harder by the loss of archival documents in the waters of Katrina. But once the group connected with Bill Johnston, the project built momentum. Over 75 interviews and counting have taken the crew through New Orleans, across

Above: Having recently formed in Jacksonville, Florida, The Allman Brothers Band quickly settled in as house band at The Warehouse. They not only performed regularly throughout the venue’s 12-year run, but often jumped on stage for unannounced, late night jam sessions. Photo by Sydney Smith



A young Rod Stewart performs with his group Faces at The Warehouse



Kiss at The Warehouse, just before reaching the peak of their popularity, in early 1976.



British rock superstars, The Who, in November 1971. Photo by Sydney Smith



An extremely rare snapshot of Jim Morrison on December 12, 1970 at The Warehouse in New Orleans. It was to be the final live performance by The Doors. Morrison was in a bad mood that night. About halfway through, he beat a hole through the floor of the stage with his microphone stand, then sat down and refused to perform for the remainder of the show.

During the course of research for the documentary, filmmaker Jessy Williamson met the man who owns an audio recording of this historic performance, though he’s holding out in hopes of selling it to The Doors’ management.



(L to R) Sydney Smith, Jan Bruder, Raymond Compton, II, Brandy Bell, Jesse Williamson, Kendy Chamberlain, Barnaby, Brian Glynn, Bill Johnston

Louisiana, to Georgia, north to Chicago and to the West Coast. Williamson hopes to complete over 100 interviews before the project is complete.

Meeting the elders of New Orleans rock music while creating the oral history of The Warehouse has been the experience of a lifetime, says Williamson, replete with an abundance of colorful characters and stories. He describes his role in reuniting former friends and business partners, many who hadn't seen each other in decades, as the most rewarding aspect of the project.

Now near completion, the film's production costs have been funded entirely by fans. However, the biggest hurdle still remains: to raise the minimum \$40,000 needed to secure the rights to audio recordings for the film's soundtrack. Williamson is now gearing up for a final round of interviews and fundraising events with the goal of completing the film by this summer.

Last month, an all-star, two night tribute event organized by Bill Johnston was held at Harrah's Casino to help draw support for completion of the project and to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the venue's opening. The concert sold out both nights. The elegant setting made for an interesting contrast, as hundreds of fans came from around the country came to reunite and pay tribute to the simple, stripped down rock venue that hosted the greatest bands of the era. 



The Warehouse Tribute Band: Larry Sieberth on keyboards, Cranston Clements and Jimmy Robinson on guitar, Matt Perrine on bass, Doug Belote on drums, and vocalists, Quinn Rainwater, Skeet Hanks, and Chuck Lofton. They performed classic hits by Warehouse bands such as The Doors, ZZ Top, The Allman Brothers, The Grateful Dead, and Chicago. Photos above by Mark St. James

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