

## Glen Pitre on KING CREOLE • Essential NOLA Cinema • episode 3

Randy Mack: [Music] Welcome to Essential NOLA Cinema, a conversation between cinephiles about the past and future of New Orleans movies. My name is Randy Mack, and I'm pleased to have the great Mr. Glen with me today to talk about 1958's King Creole, a film directed by Michael Curtiz and produced by Hal Wallis. Glen, how are you?

Glen Pitre: I'm doing wonderful. I'm doing wonderful, all things considered.

Randy: Yes, indeed. It's been nice seeing you and Michelle wandering through the neighborhood. I've been doing a lot of work-from-home lately, and this podcast has been a pet project of mine. I've been considering starting one a little while, but somehow, this winter, three separate people really encouraged me to do it, and I thought, "Now's the time, everyone's got free time, and [Laughter] I certainly do." It's great to be able to have the wonderful cinephile conversations that I used to have in bars and restaurants; we now get to do it over Skype. You grew up in Cut Off, Louisiana, if I'm not mistaken. How long have you been living in New Orleans?

Glen: That's a tricky question. We bought the house here in '99, but we were living at a place in Los Angeles, and we still had the big house on the Bayou. So, it was sort of between the three, and then it was after Katrina that this became the main residence. Then I guess 2010 or 2011 as we're renovating the firehouse, which is where I am now, it's our studio, we sold off the other places and said we're living in one spot, New Orleans. Full-time, since, yes, for 10 years now; 20 plus if you count part-time. I had lived here before for stretches. I mean, when I was a kid, this is where you would come, it was an hour and a half away, a little longer hitchhiking, this is where you'd come to hear music at The Warehouse, or see movies, or buy books, or all those things.

Randy: Sure, sure. So, do you remember when you first saw King Creole?

Glen: Much later than you think. It was not a movie I knew, and then I was doing - I got hired to do a book. The University Press of Mississippi did this series of books on folk foods of the South. The watermelon book, the sweet potato book, the catfish book, and they hired me [Laughter] to do the crawfish book. "Okay, okay, that would be fun." And someone - I think it was Nick Spitzer - I don't know if you know Nick, he has a radio show. Nick said, "Well, you know, you got to put the song 'Crawfish' in there by Elvis Presley," and I thought he was kidding at first. He says, "No, [Laughter] no, it's a real

song, it's in a movie." So, I looked up King Creole and just fell in love from the first screening. If you used to think in Elvis movies like - [Laughter] I mean, name one, there are like 30 of them.

Randy: "Roustabout." [Laughter]

Glen: Roustabout. There's one in Hawaii, there's one in - Viva Las Vegas, and there's one on a houseboat in Paducah, Kentucky. They move him around, but the plot's basically the same. It's just an excuse to have Elvis sing songs, and there's always a romance. In this, Elvis sings songs, and there is not one romance but two, it's a love triangle or intersecting triangles, but it's a damn good movie. With a stellar cast, Elvis is at his best, and the rest of the - people, like Walter Matthau were in it, Vic Morrow's in it, Carolyn Anderson's in it. I don't know if people remember the old Addams Family TV show. She was the mother.

Randy: [Laughter] Yes.

Glen: Morticia.

Randy: Morticia. Yes, Carolyn Jones, she's great.

Glen: Carolyn Jones. Although in this movie, she plays the babe; she plays the femme fatale. Not at all campy the way it was in the TV show. So, it's a great movie. It's stellar behind the camera, Hal Wallis, Michael Curtiz, who gave us Casablanca, gave us one of my all-time favorite movies, the Adventures of Robin Hood, which has maybe my favorite line ever in cinema. When the Sheriff of Nottingham, played by Basil Rathbone, spits out, "You speak treason." and Robin Hood, who's being played by Errol Flynn, says, "Fluently." [Laughter] It's just so... [Laughter] So, you had him, who also gave us another great line - his movie gave us another great line in cinema, "Round up the usual suspects". Then King Creole, which is so - pays homage to the cliches but does not succumb to them. Cliches about the French Quarter, about New Orleans. It's also, and although Ron Shelton, who wrote it, is a friend, it's a better look at the heyday of Bourbon Street than Blaze, the Paul Newman movie, was.

Randy: Right.

Glen: The music is great, not just the Elvis songs, but the other stuff. Then, again, the opening of the film is Elvis on a balcony on Royal Street, and a vendor going by in her wagon with a mule or horse pulling the wagon.

Randy: She's an acclaimed jazz singer. I did some research into it.

Glen: Really?

Randy: Yes. Her name is Kitty White.

Glen: Kitty White. Well, Kitty could belt out a tune. They do this great duet called Crawfish. I don't know who wrote the song, but it's wonderful, and that's - yes. I put the lyrics in the book I did. [Laughter]

Randy: [Laughter] Yes, I love this movie. I stumbled on it a few years after I moved to New Orleans. I moved here in '06, and I had never seen an Elvis movie of any kind. Somehow, I missed Clambake and Roustabout, and so on. [Laughter] I did not know how stellar the creative team was behind it. So, I remember putting in the DVD, and then suddenly I see a Hal Wallis Production, a Michael Curtiz film, and I'm thinking, "These are the people who put together Casablanca. I mean, this is incredible." Then when the lady selling the crawfish starts singing, and then he starts singing with her, I thought, "This is amazing. The photography is gorgeous." My understanding from research, the history is that New Orleans had a very city-wide street cart culture back in the early 20th century. So, that's historical, not Hollywood contrivance that she'd be walking through the street, singing, and selling.

Glen: My grandfather and my uncle who'd go with him as a boy had a truck down in Cut Off. In the colder months, he'd bring up oysters, and in the warmer months, he'd bring up potatoes or whatever, and they would come to the French Market, stay there, sleep on the potatoes, sleep on the oysters, stay there until they sold out. I was asking my Uncle Elvis - different Elvis, Elvis Chabert, "Who'd buy from you?" and he said, "Oh, it's vendors." And he said, oftentimes, they would load up their cart from the back of their truck, and they would be crying out, "I've got potatoes. I've got..." - before they were out of earshot. So, as you point out, it's very much accurate.

Randy: Yes. It's truly something I miss. I've always lived in basically a very small piece of New Orleans. I've been here almost 15 years now, but all my residences have been from the

edge of the lower Quarter on the Marigny line to the Marigny Triangle to the Central Marigny, and now to the upper Ninth Ward. I've always lived in about a quarter mile stretch of the river curve here and my first apartment was on Bourbon Street between Barracks and Esplanade. I remember walking down St. Philip Street past McDonogh School, where they shot some of King Creole, and I heard a mule carriage tour guide telling his people that Elvis had personally helped construct the school, well, I guess, when he was working as a bricklayer or something and he helped [Laughter] build the school or something.

Glen: A stretch. [Laughter]

Randy: That was part of the reason I eventually went and rented the movie because I wanted to know [Laughter] what had been going on, and of course, it's all - much of it is shot on location. They did some set work on the Paramount lot, but you can tell that a lot of those interior apartments are actually real because of how they were - the windows and the architecture and things. It was unusual to do that, but Curtiz had already won his two Academy Awards at that point, and he had the clout to demand location shooting, and of course, Hal Wallis as well.

Glen: I don't know for a fact, but I suspect most of those interiors were not shot in New Orleans. They were shot back in LA, but he had the clout, instead of just repainting a set from something else, to have them build because they certainly had the skills, it's just they usually didn't want to waste the [Laughter] money.

Randy: Ahhh. If that's true, they did a tremendous job recreating those. There's a scene at the beginning of the movie, in fact, really the inciting incident of the whole film is when Elvis saves Carolyn Jones from those men who are abusing her, and they back out of the club onto the streets, and you can see the street behind them. I spent a lot of the time rewatching this movie trying to figure out the exact locations and things. It was fun to play New Orleans Geography, Spot the Balcony, et cetera, et cetera. The address Elvis gives for his home is 29 Royal Street, which I looked it up on the map, and it's basically right next to Unique Grocery, one of the sketchiest places on Earth I think.

Glen: [Laughter] We did this immersive film, this four-wall film opened, actually, a year ago this week, and it runs at 520 Royal Street, and there's - it's like... "the French Quarter by Night" is the title, but it loops 300 years of the city. There's a section on films about the French Quarter and there must be 30 of them, you see clips going around you, and

it starts with one, but it starts with King Creole because we got one of the - we were shooting in one of the carriages and got the carriage driver, "What do you know about this movie?" "Oh, yes," and he went drove us past, and he's talking, pointing out the balcony, which [Laughter] I don't know why he was pointing out the balcony, but he's pointing out the balcony and said, "Elvis was here," and this and that, and everything else. So that's what leads into Elvis singing, and of course, that leads into all the other million movies as you well know that were either shot here, or things like Saratoga Trunk that weren't shot here, but were set here.

Randy: It's a funny thing about the origin. The film is so very New Orleans-y in so many ways. They get so many details right, and just the types of personalities, the feeling that the film gives you palpably, but very subtly that it's a lawless environment. There's no police enforcement whatsoever, there are no cops, there's no...

Glen: [Laughter] Right, right.

Randy: Right? It's just a morality...

Glen: It's not cops and robbers, it's Elvis and robbers. [Laughter]

Randy: [Laughter] Yes. But the film was actually based on a novel called A Stone for...

Glen: Harold Robbins, who made these huge pot-boiler, very melodramatic, but large scale, and sold zillion and zillions of copies.

Randy: It's about a Jewish family in Brooklyn.

Glen: That I didn't know.

Randy: Yes. Apparently, it was Hal Wallis' idea to set it in New Orleans. The original casting, he wanted James Dean and Ben Gazzara were his two first pics. Then Dean died tragically and Gazzara, I guess was unavailable, and then they had the idea of Elvis, and Wallis...

Glen: He was almost unavailable.

Randy: Yes, that's right, the army. He had to get a deferment to finish King Creole. Kind of cool, the last movie before Elvis shaved his head. Michael Curtiz was very reluctant to

hire Elvis, but he eventually agreed after meeting him. He thought he would be a snotty pop star, but he turned out to be not only humble and eager to please, but also quite a good actor.

Glen: Well, he had to realize this was an opportunity for him.

Randy: True, definitely.

Glen: He could sing, but he was no fool. He was singing, he had his demons, but he was no fool, and he had to realize what a chance this was to show what he could do because the expectations were going to be high. A lot was going to be demanded of him, but it was going to be demanded by people who knew what they were doing, and had the clout, and had the resources, and could pull in very good actors. My suspicion is they weren't - Walter Matthau wasn't doing it because it was an Elvis movie; he was doing it because it was a Michael Curtiz movie.

Randy: Yes, multiple Oscar winners. Those guys are legendary even in their time. I think it's funny that the one stipulation Michael Curtiz had for Elvis is he demanded he shave his sideburns. [Laughter]

Glen: [Laughter] I wish there was footage of that. [Laughter] That barbershop visit. [Laughter]

Randy: Yes. I wonder if he had it done at Checkpoint Charlie's, [Laughter] which wasn't around back then if I'm sure, [Laughter] it's a funny thought though. Yes. John Wirt wrote a great article for 64 Parishes about the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of King Creole where there's a lot of information. I recommend anybody listening look that article up for a very cool detailed look at the history of the film and Elvis Mania coming to New Orleans for, I guess they only shot here for about 11 days of the production, but... On this rewatch, I was really struck by how well-written and well-plotted the film is. It doesn't have the writers of Casablanca, but the people who adapted it did a great job, and some of that dialogue really, really sings. The way that Danny Fisher keeps getting over his head and the escalating problems he encounters flow so naturally even though it's really only got like seven or eight characters, the way these worlds intersect is so organic and the rationale, the logic of the plot is just so airtight.

I remember thinking like - I mean, the writing - they did just a fantastic job with the writing of it. There's a lot of emotional turns that the main character has to do, and a lot of long dialogue scenes especially with his father and his sister where he's working through something that had just happened to him and changing his trajectory slightly and so on, and Elvis does a great job with all of that material and that supporting cast is killer. I've always been fascinated by the club owner mentality, and, especially Bourbon Street, which has traditionally been, I think mafia might be too strong a word, but there's certainly people who work outside the law in a lot of ways and have traditionally - they traditionally have had these skirmishes...

Glen: Jack Ruby used to hang out there. [Laughter]

Randy: [Laughter] Okay, interesting. Yes, so that says something.

Glen: Might not be too strong a word.

Randy: I did not know that about Jack Ruby. That's interesting, yes. There's a great article about the history of the Marchello family, a long three-piece deep dive...

Glen: I think it's "Marcello."

Randy: "MarSELLo."

Glen: They don't do it Italian style. Marcello.

Randy: Got it. Okay, interesting. See, I'm an immigrant myself, and seeing how the history of New Orleans is affected by waves of people coming in and shifting the culture slightly, but how there's a certain - no matter what part of New Orleans history you choose to dive into, there's a certain fascinating sameness to the culture. It seems to have resisted American and Colonial influence, and kept its culture truly unique even while absorbing so many different kinds of cultural and ethnic identities. It's really a wonderful aspect of the city. I'm actually wearing my Dirty Coast History of New Orleans tree rings shirt.

Glen: The movies King Creole, and if you look - you go back to the Louisiana Purchase, it was basically a French and Spanish city and African city, and then the Americans bought it because they wanted to control the Mississippi River. Between the 1803 when the

Purchase happened for - within seven years, half of the city was English speaking, but then the Haitian revolution happened, and you had all the Creoles who came, which doubled the population of New Orleans and none of them spoke English. So, they were the English-speaking American - became a small minority again, and it took decades to get back. The French Quarter, too, kept changing. It hadn't been French in a while; the architecture is Spanish. In the 50s, you were more likely to hear Italian or Sicilian than you were to hear French in the French Quarter. French was still spoken, but it was - they called it Little Palermo.

Randy: Really? That's amazing.

Glen: Yes, yes. It was the ghetto. It was through - from the 1890s, for decades after, yes.

Randy: I've observed that when I talk to my friends who moved here in the 80s or 90s or even the people who grew up here, they talk about how there used to be a street in the Quarter you wouldn't cross. They would say, "Nobody went below St. Philip," or, "Nobody went below Ursuline." That line seems to have been moving down river over the generations.

Glen: Correct, and also, the far side of the Industrial Canal, yes.

Randy: [Laughter] Yes. Yes, it's true. I was worried about when, like I said, I moved here in '06, the first iPhone came out in '07, social media, Twitter, and stuff really got going around that time, and I remember speculating to a friend about how social media was going to change tourist's habits, how secret neighborhood spots and so forth would suddenly be exposed on sites like Yelp and Travel Advisor and so forth. Airbnb wasn't even a thing, but now Airbnb is really thrown the whole culture into a tailspin, it seems like.

Glen: Yes. They're not real full right now [due to the pandemic].

Randy: [Laughter] That is true, that is true.

Glen: Do you know my first movie to hit the big screen was about a family during - in quarantine during an epidemic?

Randy: No. What film?



Glen: It's called Yellow Fever. I was 21 when I shot it, yes.

Randy: Wow. Were you a film school person or were you just a film lover your whole life and you put together - because independent films - you're talking about the 80s, right?

Glen: I'm talking about the 80s. No, no, I'm talking about 1977.

Randy: That's amazing.

Glen: Summer of '77.

Randy: I assume you shot it on film.

Glen: I shot it on black and white 16 millimeter.

Randy: [Laughter] That's tremendous. Is that a film you can still watch today somewhere?

Glen: Yes, yes. I don't push it too hard. [Laughter] I've come a long way since, but it got me started, it sold, it played theaters, it's safe.

Randy: That's fantastic, especially for a first film. That would have been the 1918 pandemic?

Glen: It was the 1905 - well, actually in the film, it's 1897, and I forget why that was important, but it was largely based on what happened during the 1905, which was the last yellow fever epidemic here.

Randy: That's a great segue into the lessons we can take from King Creole because it sounds like you said they're trapped in a house together, so it sounds like you're talking limited scope, single location.

Glen: Limited cast. Doing period on no budget, but King Creole was - they got out of the studio, I think. It's Hal Wallis producing. As you say, it's people with clout, so they weren't - a less prestigious director, they would have shot all that in the studio in Los Angeles. It would not have come to the French Quarter.

Randy: Yes, or if it had been completely independent, it might have been all location.

Glen: It might have been all location, but in the late 50s that was hard, that was hard. When was the Nagra recorder invented?

Randy: That's a great point.

Glen: When did cameras that were portable and quiet? Because usually you'd only get one or the other. [Laughter]

Randy: [Laughter] Yes. That's a great point. My understanding is that the French New Wave, the Nouvelle Vague, came about largely because cameras had gotten to the point where they were small enough to be portable, and that's what kicked off the Truffaut-Godard Revolution because it was possible for the first time.

Glen: It was possible, and they couldn't afford the studios anyway.

Randy: That's great. I loved how Curtiz makes the film feel - even though it's really only got like 10 characters maybe, maybe 12, if you include real small supporting ones like those extra gangsters, it really has a breath to it. It's unclear how much time the story takes place over, but the escalating sense of doom as Walter Matthau systematically starts taking over Elvis' life is just the stuff of great drama. You don't need a big budget to do that kind of thing. You just need a strong character with interesting familial connections and an ambition and you can then immediately start throwing opposition into his way.

Glen: And great performances, yes. [Laughter] Good dialogue, well-written dialogue, and great performances. But to that point, the doom when it finally - when you're making a movie you always want the climax to be a climax. It can't possibly go any further. It has to end. It has to come to a head here. Here's a situation where they get to the end of the road, they get to where they can go no further, and it's shot on a place where you could literally go no further. All those camps on the lakefront, which just a few years later, all got washed away by Hurricane Betsy, but they're all these shacks on the end of these long catwalk piers out over the water, and that's where the film comes to its climax. There's no further you can go; you're out over the water. You're not only at the end of the road, you're at the end of the walkway. [Laughter]

Randy: [Laughter] That's right. It's like walking a gangplank almost, yes. Again, wonderful screenwriting in how the person who saves him, in the end, is the one person he was nice to - he was nice to a lot of people, but I'm saying...

Glen: He's Elvis, he's nice to everybody. [Laughter]

Randy: [Laughter] Yes. Because he shows mercy and understanding to that kid, who they call the dummy because he's a deaf-mute, and then he ends up saving him at the end, I thought it was a wonderful very earned kind of moment because there's so much of his good deeds early in the film come back to haunt him. He lets The Shark, Vic Morrow's character, take his knife back after he tried to knife him for beating up his brother. So, he lets him get away. He's not one to like escalate conflict, so - although he did punch his brother in the face for simply mocking him. I thought that was...

Glen: It's interesting you say that because something just hit me, which I've seen that movie several times, and I've never thought of before, but think about when it was made, 1958.

Randy: I think March.

Glen: Yes, what's going on in '58? We're at the height of the Cold War. Okay, so you're talking about not wanting to escalate the conflict, and yet you can't avoid it, you're only putting off the inevitable, appeasement doesn't work.

Randy: Interesting.

Glen: Here, you got a director who's a refugee, first from the Nazis, but then World War II ended, then the Russians took over Hungary, and in '56 invaded Hungary with tanks, which is where Michael Curtiz was from, where he was born and where he still had family. So, there's got to be literature somewhere on - some grad student wrote a thesis on this because two years after the Hungarian uprising was squashed by tanks you have this Hungarian director making a movie about you have to stand up to him, sooner or later you have to stand up to him. It's a Cold War film.

Randy: Yes, that's a great parallel - I mean, a great parable, or, what's the word I want - allegory. Yes, it does totally work as an allegory in that sense.

Glen: What Elvis does.

Randy: [Laughter] I was really struck on this rewatch on how the songs fit the storyline. In fact, the first song he really sings in full with the band is when he was forced to go on stage by Walter Matthau, and the lyrics of that song are basically him explaining what happens with Carolyn Jones the day before or whatever. I thought, "Wow, that's really [Laughter] clever." That doesn't always happen, there are a couple of songs that stopped the movie dead, but for the most part I thought there was a - it was funny how he used the song to rub the guy's nose in it in a way that the guy probably wouldn't even catch in the moment.

Glen: I read once that one of the secrets to a successful Broadway musical is the songs always advance the plot. They got to be catchy, they got to be fun. Just like any scene, any good scene in a movie, the situation has to be somewhat different at the end of it than it was in the beginning, and the same is true for a song in a musical, which is exactly what you're saying King Creole was doing.

Randy: They must have really been... because James Dean and Ben Gazzara, obviously great actors, but they're not going to be breaking into song every few minutes, but they found really fascinatingly organic ways to work the singing into the stories, like opening with the crawfish, and making it kind of a call and response. You have them forcing him to sing his high school song in the club in that first scene before he goes to school, and then you have him forced on stage, that, and then, of course, they realize, "Oh, he's quite good," and then he gets a job singing, all of that flows very naturally. It's good writing.

Glen: [Laughter] Yes. Also, in the 50s, another Louisiana film, Cecil B. DeMille remade The Buccaneer. He had done it in '38 in black and white with Fredric March playing Jean Lafitte and then did it again in, I think '57, '58, somewhere right in there with Yul Brynner playing Jean Lafitte. The remake started out was going to be a musical because The King and I with Yul Brynner had won the Oscar the year before, and he's going to do it as a musical and somewhere along the line they canned the musical idea, but they still made the movie. [Laughter]

Randy: Singing pirates has been a Hollywood tradition going way back. [Laughter] I can understand the impulse. [Laughter] I have to see that. That's funny, you're giving me great titles to add to my list. I don't know, this podcast can hypothetically go

indefinitely because more movies are being made, but I was able to more or less off the top of my head after my consulting my old blog, Essential NOLA Cinema, come up with over a hundred titles, but those two did not make the list because I didn't even know about them. So, I'm really excited to have something more to watch during my quarantine.

Glen: There've been cheesy ones, there have been iconic ones, there have been Easy Rider, which ends here. One of my all-time favorites is Walk on the Wild Side.

Randy: Was that Brando?

Glen: No, it's Laurence Harvey, Capucine, Jane Fonda plays a prostitute, and the madam is Barbara Stanwyck.

Randy: Oh wow.

Glen: Saul Bass did the opening credits, and it's perhaps the best opening credits of any movie ever.

Randy: Amazing. I love Saul Bass.

Glen: You have things like Candyman.

Randy: [Laughter] Yes.

Glen: You have things - Port of Call New Orleans.

Randy: "Bad Lieutenant 2." [Laughter]

Glen: Yes, Bad Lieutenant 2, right.

Randy: Werner Herzog, yes.

Glen: Yes. You had Garrison. JFK did the - Oliver Stone did JFK.

Randy: There's a wonderful scene in JFK where Kevin Costner walks outside and he starts pointing with his pipe and he realizes he's standing in Lafayette Square and he's like,

“Gentlemen, we’re in Lafayette Street, and right here at the corner of Poydras,” and he just starts explaining [Laughter] the geography of where he’s standing, and, “This is the FBI building. This is the federal courthouse. This is the CIA building, this is where in the middle of the -” I think - what did he call it, the apparatus of American Intelligence gathering in North America or something, and I remember thinking, “Hey, that’s where the free concerts are.” [Laughter]

Glen: Richard Widmark, *Panic in the Streets*, another classic.

Randy: Yes, that one’s great too. That also captures the - it’s a piece of the French Quarter that is the French Market and wharf-related side of it. It’s a funny thing that both *Panic in the Streets* and *King Creole* have these somewhat abrupt endings, I think maybe by modern standards where they don’t really have denouements, there’s just a - they rush up to the climax, and then it’s just over. [Laughter]

Glen: Yes, there’s no coater, there’s no “And they lived happily ever after.” Yes.

Randy: Yes, there’s a few dangling questions that I had at the end of both of those films in terms of just what happened to the side character or - but in a way, *King Creole*, part of its great writing is it ties so much of all the side characters’ fates up to what happens to Elvis. For instance, the very nice club owner, Charlie, he’s going to marry his sister, and without Elvis, the club may not survive. So, part of the resolution has to be him returning to that club so that his sister can have a good life and so on.

Glen: Yes, yes, it’s raising the stakes, raising the stakes.

Randy: Yes, and put it all on that poor kid’s back too. Even his dad too, which is great. I thought the family dynamics were really good. The first time I watched it, I was more caught up in the gangsterisms and the club owner mafia kind of situation, and I wish there’d been more about other clubs and what kind of prospects a singer would have on Bourbon Street at that time. But this time, I was really moved by the struggling father. In fact, I’ve just done a big James Dean deep dive - granted, he only made three movies, so it did not take long to catch up with them. [Laughter] The family dynamics were very similar to *Rebel Without a Cause* in the sense that you have, according to the masculine norms of the time, a weak father and a very volatile son as a result of this weak influence on him.

Glen: Again, that is so much of the period when juvenile delinquency, that was a term of art, juvenile delinquency was front burner. You also had movies like Blackboard Jungle that treated the same thing.

Randy: The Wild Ones.

Glen: The Wild Ones. Difference here from, say, Blackboard Jungle is that was from the teacher's point of view. This is very much from the kid's point of view.

Randy: Indeed. Yes. It's great having the family defined by this tragedy, the loss of the mom. It's a funny thing because I think in the - I think a modern version would have had the dad stay in grieving mode for a lot longer, but this film - King Creole really surprised me because you hear all about the dad for several scenes in the beginning, and then when he shows up, he's actually put himself together. He seems to have come out of the tunnel of depression and he says, "Oh, I'm getting a job," and, "It's not going to be like that, son. I'm going to work again. You don't have to do all this work yourself," and so on. So, it upends your expectations, and then when you see him getting browbeaten in the store later, you realize that he hasn't come as far as he's presenting, and that Elvis is right about his doubts.

Glen: Yes. Yes. Yes, no, it's good storytelling, good storytelling.

Randy: I think there's wonderful stories to be told about the dynamics of Bourbon Street in terms of the influence of money. How artists, singers, musicians are looking for work, and they're having to deal with certain maybe unscrupulous club owners or managers, and all of the things, especially if you're a woman. Like in the case of Carolyn Jones's character, she was a former singer who became the plaything, a kept woman by this mobster. I'm surprised there are not more movies about surviving on Bourbon Street and navigating all of the pressures and temptations and lowlifes and so forth. It seems like a really rich...

Glen: There's one of the... One of Peggy Laborde's documentaries is about Bourbon Street.

Randy: No kidding?

Glen: Yes. It's very much a celebration of the golden age. Strippers certainly took their clothes off, that's the whole point being that's why they call it a stripper, but they had

acts. There was the Oyster Girl and there was this one, there was that one, and there was - it was burlesque, it was...

Randy: Yes. Yes, burlesque and cabaret, right? There's even a line about having a cabaret license in King Creole, which is still a thing to this day.

Glen: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Certainly, going back to the days of Storyville red light district, cabarets were notorious. They were not places you admitted to going.

Randy: Yes, it's funny because for a film about Jews in New York, they really captured a fascinating virgin-horror perception of Catholics against the sex trade. Practically, the first line of the film is his sister saying, "Don't be associating with that." "That" referring to the dancer across the street who offers him a free dance. Elvis has a great retort, she says, "I'll let you dance with me for free, baby," and he says, "No, you have to pay me." [Laughter] Then his sister immediately says to stop associating with that. There's a very palpable sense of fallen woman versus virtuous woman.

Glen: Oh yes. Each well-personified, but each given, I don't want to say equal time, but both had their virtues.

Randy: Yes, definitely. They both have strong points of view. I was pleasantly surprised.

Glen: It's not the Garry Marshall Pretty Woman where the whore is really the good one, and it's not the Cinderella story where the meek one is the - held up as the true - they're both - they both earned their screen time.

Randy: Yes, indeed. I like those performances a lot. The scene, the first date where Elvis takes her to the hotel room under the pretense of there's a party, but then no one's there, reminded me so much of the Cybill Shepherd date in Taxi Driver where Travis Bickle takes her to a pornographic movie theater. [Laughter] Where it's just - you're just dying on the inside for that woman. She stands her ground, she refuses to go in, and he apologizes, even gives her a fake name, and then almost immediately says, "No, here's my real name. I'm sorry." It's interesting you feel like he's definitely been under some bad influences in terms of how to treat women and what to expect and so forth, but he's also got an older sister who's raising him as like a surrogate mom and an old-fashioned dad to balance the seedy influence. He plays that that dilemma really well. It's like having an angel and a devil on each shoulder kind of thing.



Glen: [Laughter] Yes, yes, yes.

Randy: Another thing I thought watching it was in terms of great lessons for filmmakers is how you take on a neighborhood. Nobody has to say, “We’re in the French Quarter, this is Bourbon Street,” et cetera, but you feel it very palpably. Then you start to understand the rules this main character is dealing with and negotiating and struggling with over the course of the story are actually not particular to one person, but are actually more like the cultural norms of the area. So, it can tell you a lot about a neighborhood or a subculture simply through the machinations of the plotting without having to do any kind of exposition.

Glen: Likewise, they managed to convey Walter Matthau’s menace without a whole lot of overt violence. It wasn’t completely free of that, but it wasn’t - imagine a modern movie, there would’ve been a body count.

Randy: Yes, no, you’re right. Great point.

Glen: Just to make the point that this guy is dangerous.

Randy: The first time we meet him, he has this wonderful line. He says - yes, so it’s right after he forces Elvis to sing, and then Elvis gets off the stage, and that other club owner offers him a job, and then he comes up and says, “Hey, Charlie, what are you doing in my club?” He says, “Oh, I’m just offering this kid a job,” and he says, “I saw him first.” Matthau retorts to him in a thesis statement for this character, he says, “Yes, you usually do see him first, but I always get him in the end.” You get a sense that this is a person who is not only ready to use violence and intimidation, but also is very cunning and has a way of identifying weaknesses in people and a way of getting under their skin. So, that the threat he proposes is not purely physical, but it’s also a spiritual threat too.

Glen: Yesterday, I was watching a showtime series called Billions about a hedge fund...

Randy: I’ve heard good things.

Glen: Essentially, it’s the Walter Matthau character, but he’s the hero. His methods are just as bad, he’s just as tough, he’s just as ruthless, he’s just as heartless, but he’s the hero.

Randy: Is he fighting Wall Street? Is that what makes him a hero?

Glen: No, no. He's the hero because it's set up for us to want him to win, but the stuff he's doing is unconscionable. Several times per episode, just ruining people's lives and just - yes, just no holds barred and stuff. Whereas again, 1958, you would not have done - even in - getting back to Jean Lafitte in The Buccaneer, he was a pirate, but he was a good pirate. [Laughter] His heart was in the right place, the way he was portrayed. They certainly never mentioned him smuggling slaves, which was how he actually made most of his money. Yet, in those 50 years that have passed, 60 years that have passed since making King Creole, we can take that same character and hold - have him held up as a role model, essentially. It's quite a change in culture.

Randy: Yes, it's true. Yes, the late 50s, you really got me thinking about the Cold War and where this film falls. It's the end of the studio era in Hollywood. '57, I believe, was when Sputnik went up, and people really started to freak out. I think the Russians got the nuke in, what, '54, '55 something like that?

Glen: '54. They moved into Hungary in '56, I mean reconquered it, and then Czechoslovakia in '57, reconquered it.

Randy: Right. Khrushchev banging his shoe at the UN.

Glen: "We will bury you. We will bury you."

Randy: It's interesting. Yes, all of that feeds in.

Glen: Also, the classic Cold War film, Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

Randy: Right.

Glen: Right around then too, wasn't it? Wasn't it '57, '58?

Randy: That's a great question. I think so. I think it was maybe even earlier because - I want to say '54. When was Fail Safe, Sidney Lumet?

Glen: I think that was a little later. You see that marked a turn because it was starting to look at the dangers of going too far with The Cold War. I don't think you had that in the 50s.

Randy: Interesting. Invasion of the Body Snatchers was '56, yes.

Glen: '56, yes. McCarthy and all of that.

Randy: That's right, the McCarthy era. The film stands at this really interesting multiple generational cultural edges. It's only a couple of years after the dawn of Elvis. I think his first singles were in '54. He had made a couple of movies, but nothing really prestigious. They were kids' films until this point. Then we're also on the edge of the acting revolution with Brando and...

Glen: Right, right.

Randy: That whole Method generation.

Glen: A Streetcar Named Desire, that was a New Orleans French Quarter film.

Randy: Exactly, right. You have the studio system which is moving, but there is now, the French New Wave is kicking in, the Italian NeoRealist movement is kicking in, a lot of things were changing quickly at the end of that.

Glen: Television's kicking in.

Randy: Television too, that's right, of course. Yes, the big threat to the studios.

Glen: Yes, this is when they're starting to widescreen and cinemascope, and this and that.

Randy: There's something about King Creole that really feels independent to me, independently spirited, but it's also something about the scale of it and the use of locations and so forth that feels open, and it's dealing with lawlessness in this very straightforward way. It's not moralizing in the way that it would have had to during the Hayes Code era, and so forth. It has a refreshing honesty.

Glen: Grittiness for a studio picture.

Randy: Yes. Great. That's perfect. Yes, grittiness. It's got real texture to it. Yes, the morality just isn't cut and dry like the way studio films had been.

Glen: Yes. Right, right. Like the Good Girl or the Bad Girl, they were both - they were equal in this thing.

Randy: Both valid, yes. Well, cool, I'd like to wrap up. I want to thank you for coming on and thank you for all the work you do mentoring filmmakers at The Old Firehouse.

Glen: Yes, there's some exciting stuff going on here now. It's been a little quiet lately, but even during a pandemic, people are coming in, they're using the courtyard to film and stuff.

Randy: Rickie Lee Jones. [Laughter]

Glen: Yes, yes, she did a thing last week. There's something coming up next week, and I just finished my book, a little novel I've been working on for 14 years now.

Randy: Oh my God, congratulations.

Glen: Yes, it'll drop on Amazon on Friday.

Randy: What's the title?

Glen: "Advice from the Wicked."

Randy: Beautiful. Cool. Well, it'll be out by the time I post this episode. So, "Advice for the Wicked" by Mr. Glen...

Glen: From the Wicked.

Randy: Even better. [Laughter] It reminds me a little bit of The Devil's Dictionary by Ambrose Bierce.

Glen: Yes.

Randy: [Laughter] That's fantastic, and of course, your movie, *Belizaire the Cajun* was the one that you considered your most famous film.

Glen: It depends on who you talk to. If South Louisiana, it's probably *Belizaire the Cajun*, then there's a whole Hurricane on the Bayou crowd from the IMAX movie about Katrina. Then the musician community liked *American Creole*, which was a music doc. Then there are people in LA, the Lionsgate release *The Man Who Came Back*, so that one's - so it depends on who you talk to. I'll claim them all.

Randy: [Laughter] Roger Ebert called you the Father of Regional Cinema, right, Cajun Cinema? It's a wonderful thing that article he wrote about *Belizaire*, he talks about the importance of regional cinema and how he thinks it's really important to the overall health of filmmaking so that people can tell stories about the unique cultures they come from without having to put everything into the big capitalist machine.

Glen: Which in the late 70s, early 80s was a big - indie film was just - there had always been an independent cinema, but independent cinema as we think of it today was really cranking up because those cameras that became portable for the new wave became much more portable, and people started coming out of college with enough skills to make a decent watchable - technically, watchable movie. Whereas previously, it had pretty been almost exclusively the apprentice system. You had to go to Hollywood and learn and basically have an uncle who was in the union, so you'd get in the union and you could learn that trade. Heaven help you if your uncle was a grip and you wanted to be a gaffer, you couldn't switch. All of a sudden, people learning skills and equipment's there, and it's out, and you can use it, and you can record sound. A subset of that was this regional thing.

The first thing I did, *Yellow Fever*, the reason I shot in black and white was because there was a film that came out the year before called *Northern Lights* set in North Dakota in the [teens], and it's in black and white. Half of it's in Norwegian, it's Swedish - oh, American movie. So, those things were creeping up. When I was getting started you had - I was working here, you had Victor Nuñez out of Tallahassee who did *Gal Young 'Un* and all these things, and you had Eagle Pennell out of Houston who did *Last Night at the Alamo* and things. So, you had different pockets of America. When Sundance started, I got into the Directors Lab on I think their second year, their third year. It was regional. Robert Redford said, "We want to push this. We want to push

this.” So, not all of the handful of projects they chose that year were, but a couple of us were representing the hinterlands.

Randy: [Laughter] That’s amazing.

Glen: Now it’s spread all over.

Randy: Yes, it’s interesting. I wonder, at a future date, I’d love to when maybe after the pandemic, sit down and talk about the - where filmmaking is going in this moment we’re having. Where the technology has created a proliferation of everyone can make a film, everyone’s got an HD camera on their phone, and yet there’s so little time in the day, there’s this accelerated homogenization of American culture.

Glen: I’ll leave you one last thought, which is what I always tell the young filmmakers. You are so lucky compared to me because when I was getting started, it was so hard to make a movie. You needed to buy film, and you were in thrall to the laboratory. You couldn’t negotiate with Kodak, and the equipment was so expensive, and you couldn’t find people who knew how to use it and all this stuff. You’re so lucky. But you are so unlucky compared to when I was starting because when I was getting started if you made something halfway decent, people notice it, they wrote about it, they flew you here and there. Now, you can make - you could be the next Stanley Kubrick, and you can’t get eyeballs to watch it because there’s just so much stuff out there, and a lot of it’s good. Even what’s not good at least looks good. Even with what’s missing a story, you can get it technically slick look for a dime.

Randy: That’s such a good point, yes. I’m always stressing screenwriting on these episodes because it’s such a... it’s free value in a way, and it’s often the thing missing with so much of the modern films. They have all the cameras, and all the toys, [Laughter] and great digital CGI post-production work, but they don’t tell the stories. Stories don’t cost you anything except imagination and time.

Glen: One last bit. I said that was the last, but this is the very last one. Michael Curtiz was Hungarian, and there were so many Hungarians fleeing the Nazis and coming to Hollywood that there was, I think it was Paramount, it was one of the studios, I think it was Paramount, where there was evidently a sign-up in the writers building that said, “It’s not enough to be Hungarian, you also need an ending.” So, script was important then too. [Laughter]

Randy: [Laughter] That's fantastic. Fantastic final note for this episode. Thank you so much again. I could talk to you all night, but I won't keep you any longer. Everyone, go watch Glen's movies. Louisiana Music Factory has them all there. Support local, shop local, boycott Amazon.

Glen: Except for my book.

Randy: No, yes, oops, buy his book on Amazon.

Glen: Buy the book.

Randy: Yes, buy the book on Amazon. [Laughter]

Glen; "Advice from the Wicked" only on Amazon. [Laughter]

Randy: Awesome, awesome. I'm going to go buy that right now. [Laughter] All right, thanks again.

Glen: Thanks. Bye.

Randy: [Music] Subscribe, rate, review, tell your friends, et cetera.

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