

Episode 4: Harry Shearer on BIG CHARITY

RM: Hello and welcome to Essential NOLA Cinema, a conversation between myself, Randy Mack, a New Orleans filmmaker, and a cinephile about a film they chose. I'm here with a man who needs no introduction, Mr. Harry Shearer, who delighted and surprised me with "Big Charity," the 2014 documentary by Alex Glustrom about the fate of one of the oldest hospitals in the world, and New Orleans' oldest hospital. It's a tragedy that unfolds in the post-Katrina aftermath. It's one of my favorite documentaries and I am curious how and when you saw the film, and what your first impression of it was.

HS: There was a very powerful setting for seeing that film. I have a friend who is very active in the movement to prevent the destruction and it was the deliberate destruction of Charity Hospital that the film documents. She told me there's going to be a screening. It was, at this point, a film in progress. The making of it was not completed and it was a screening at the Joy Theater on Canal Street, and not only that, almost everybody else besides my friend and I, maybe a couple other people at that screening, were people who had worked at Charity Hospital, and this was the first time they saw their story onscreen. So it was very, very powerful. I mean, you describe that and people might imagine - people with a highly dramatic bent might imagine that there are shrieks and cries, and people talking back to the screen and all that which there was none of. It was a very polite audience, but as an entertainer - maybe everybody has it, but I'm certainly aware of it that I have a sensitivity to the feeling in the room of an audience. You get that feeling when you're onstage and whether you're looking for laughs or not, you're just feeling what the audience is vibing. It was pretty overwhelming to sit in a room with people, seeing their traumatic experience documented on the screen for the first time.

I had a couple of notes about what could be done to maybe make the film a little better and I shared those with the director afterward, but my main first impression was I was just knocked out by the work, by the... A lot of stuff that is presented to the audience as "documentaries" these days leaves something to be desired. I'll pick on one that I recently saw that was hyped to me very enthusiastically by a couple of people I know called "The Great Hack," made I think in Britain. It was about a British person. She had worked for Cambridge Analytica and quit to become a whistleblower. It was one of those documentaries where, "Oh, my God. The camera just happens to be in the right place at the right time when all these dramatic events happen and it's a little bit suspicious," but I suspended my suspicions until there's this scene - she has to leave London suddenly to get out of town, and so we happened to be there as she's throwing clothes into a suitcase and then the camera follows her into a cab heading for

Heathrow Airport in London, except they're driving on the wrong side of the road and there's a street sign coming by and I freeze-framed it, and it said, "New Jersey This Way." [Laughter] I say that only to point out that the word gets misapplied a lot or the description does not get honored.

By contrast, I was just overwhelmed by how rigorous the work was in Big Charity. It's a situation where everything is being told in retrospect, except that the filmmakers managed to get some absolutely remarkable footage. The story is basically, this was the legendary Charity Hospital. There has been a Charity Hospital in New Orleans for over 200 years. This was the latest iteration. It was built in the 1930s when Huey Long built a bunch of Charity Hospitals throughout Louisiana to give quality healthcare to the poor and working poor, and many people who later came to prominence in New Orleans would proudly claim that heritage, "I'm a Charity baby." At the time of the 2005 flood, the basement of Charity Hospital flooded and the basement contained, as the basements of many buildings of that era, all of the utility infrastructure, so electric and water, and gas, and stuff were in the basement. So when that floods, the whole building just goes "I'm not working anymore."

The story tells us of the people who worked at that hospital, along with the National Guard people coming in within days to clean it up, not only to clean it up, but to sterilize it and get it ready to go back into operation as a working hospital at a time when the city was in a major public health emergency. The State of Louisiana which had come to be the supervisor of the hospital when the Sisters of Mercy turned it over to LSU to operate, Gov. Blanco decided or announced the hospital will not reopen, no explanation. Then the remarkable piece of footage that I'm referring to is footage of people going through the hospital, it's closed, and turning on faucets in bathrooms up and down the hospital to re-flood it. It's stunning and it's a stunning story and the story goes on to detail why LSU had reason not to want to reopen Charity and reason to instead want what it ultimately got, a suburban-style medical campus just a few blocks away, leaving the city without a working hospital for the poor for the 10 years it took for all of that to happen.

The interviewing style is so careful and so unaggressive that they got the head of the LSU Hospital System at that point sitting at his desk, big office, great window view, Rolex on his wrist, and he says, "You know, the word 'charity' has kind of gotten a stigma," and I'm thinking of all of those people who were proud Charity babies. It was anything but a stigma and I told my friend, "We should start a movement to rename

the new hospital “Stigma Hospital.” [Laughter] Had I come to this a little bit sooner, I really wanted, when they opened the new facility, to get a group of people down there and surround it and put up yellow crime scene tape because it was a crime. It was criminal activity. Anyway, it’s such a powerful story. It’s such an understated... the filmmaker has the confidence in his story to let it tell itself without having to hype it or push it, or shove it in your face in any way. It shoves itself in your face just fine and to know that it was done by a guy who is in his early 20s and had that intelligence, confidence, and self-discipline, it really amazed me. It’s a piece of work.

RM: Same here. I’ve found out about the project during its Kickstarter phase. I backed it. I got my DVD and my postcard, and everything, and I’ve been living in New Orleans since 2006. I got here into the aftermath and one of the first things I was hearing about was the lack of mental healthcare. Actually, on the calendar, it was about four weeks after the murder-suicide of Zack and Addie who turned out were former tenants of the apartment I lived in down in the lower French Quarter. And it was one of those things where I’d moved from Los Angeles where everyone had assumed it’d normally just snap back like a rubber band. With all the resources the country flaunts on TV all the time, of course, they’re going to send everything they can to “Let’s rebuild the city” and it was out of the news cycle for so long that when I got down here, I guess it was about 15 months later, it was like the flood had happened yesterday, and especially psychologically and emotionally the rawness of it was palpable and just city-defining. I mean, it was edge-to-edge in terms of its traumatization of the citizenry.

So, when I went into the theater for the premiere of Big Charity, I was thinking I was going to learn a lot about the hospital system and the relationship with Baton Rouge which has always been a huge question mark in my head, about how New Orleans survives in the state the way it does, and I was completely blindsided by the Katrina footage and the sheer amount of visceral trauma flying off of the screen. I mean, the Katrina section was only - this was shocking to me to figure out on my rewatch, it was only the first 23 minutes of the film. I remembered it as being so much more, but that footage is so immersive and there’s so many escalating injustices that spill out over the course of that. The fact that Charity is right across the street from the Tulane Medical Center which was evacuated on Day One and they left everyone in Charity just to rot as they watched the evacuation happen out the window waving banners. They were just left behind.

How does that happen? Who allows that to happen? Who was flying those choppers? Like somebody must have said, "We should go over there," and somebody must have stopped them. It's the only thing I can imagine. And then who were those people... but then that injustice barely has time to fester because suddenly there's the fact that they had to get evacuated by the Forestry Department four, five days later. They're carrying all the people up the stairs and stuff. Then they finally get out. They finally rehabilitate the hospital. They bring in all of the new equipment. They pump all the floodwater out and now it's back, and then the real injustice comes in and it's just kind of overwhelming. LSU is - I don't understand how there weren't arrests made. It seems so obviously flagrantly criminal. Where was the justice?

HS: You have to, I think, see LSU in some context. I had made a documentary that came out four years before this one...

RM: The Big Uneasy.

HS: ...about the flood and why it happened. One of the main people who was interviewed for the film who is one of the leaders of the two different forensic investigations into the 2005 flood, he was the head of the LSU Hurricane Center at that time, and both he and the heads of the other investigation were housed at UC Berkeley came to remarkably similar conclusions even though they approached it very differently. The conclusions that stand out were that the Hurricane Protection System which was started construction in 1965 after another hurricane of roughly similar size 45 years later, 40 years later hadn't been completed as of yet, had major engineering problems and the agency that built it, the US Army Corps of Engineers, ignored warnings from both inside and outside of its own agency that it was making consequential mistakes in the way it was designing and supervising the construction of that Hurricane Protection System. LSU's reaction was to fire Ivor Van Heerden, the head of the Hurricane Center and closed down the LSU Hurricane Center.

He later won a lawsuit for unlawful dismissal, but the Hurricane Center remained shut and LSU's behavior indicated that its main objective was to remain on good relations with the United States Army Corps of Engineers, and with the federal government as a whole, because they get a lot of money out of the Feds. So, that was the background I had in my mind as I watched the actions of LSU in Big Charity. It seemed not at all out of character for that institution and it did seem to play out the dichotomy between the

way Baton Rouge looks at the world and the way New Orleans inhabits the world in a very stark and of course catastrophically harmful manner.

RM: Yes. I mean, it's an apathy toward human life and suffering that is - it's essentially like they're just above the law.

HS: Well, yes. Also, it's shocking to see a state institution founded as an educational institution behaving in the most crassly corporate manner.

RM: Right. Don't they have a responsibility? Aren't they a public institution that is accountable to the people?

HS: Yes.

RM: But they're clearly not accountable.

HS: Yes.

RM: I mean, that's the thing that's so amazing. The fact they're running that hospital at all was kind of - that was a little weird, but I mean, they're a public institution. They have a lot of resources. Okay, it makes a little bit of sense on paper since they already have a set of hospitals. They already have an administration in place, who know what they're doing, hypothetically, but the mission of the hospital is to serve the people. It was the only mental health facility in the city in a time where mental healthcare was of absolute imperative, and they removed it. Then the suicide rate goes through the roof and I mean, they have blood on their hands is what I'm saying.

HS: One thing I noted in that regard was 2006, since the summer of 2006, one of the first big conventions to come back to New Orleans was the American Psychological Association and they met at the convention center and they had their attendees during the two weeks that the convention was in and around town do some public service in the community. What was the public service that the American Psychological Association attendees did? They helped build houses at Habitat for Humanity. [Laughter] Now there's a mental health crisis going on. It doesn't take a lot of expertise to help out at Habitat, but mental health counseling does take some expertise. They have the expertise and they don't give a fuck.

RM: Yes. No, that's amazing. That reminds me of Ben Affleck's commentary track of the movie Armageddon where he asked Michael Bay, "Wouldn't it be just easier to train astronauts to drill instead of trained drillers to be astronauts," [laughter] and he just told him to shut the fuck up. Actually, it was funny because I was going to ask about the comedy. There's so much to be outraged about and it's so hard to channel it productively and you are so good at the political... Spinning the political stuff in a way that's very palpable - not palpable, digestible. I mean, the Nixon tapes, Le Show, et cetera, and it seems like there's a sharpness, but I was wondering if you had advice as to like, do you think there's a solution to something, a case like this LSU on murdering charity like this is it's a single-contained action that could be hypothetically dramatized or satirized or something in a way that could bring broader awareness. I know that the moment has passed and everything, but as a hypothetical, it seems like...

HS: Well, it's a good learning experience because those guys did such a fine job in making the documentary and I know this experience well because I had much of the same experience with mine getting other media to pay attention to the story. I don't recall even a lot of attention - I think maybe Gambit wrote a nice piece about "Big Charity," but I don't recall the TV stations in town or the then two newspapers paying any attention to it or at least my experience with the "Big Uneasy," I had that very same experience. I timed the making of it and the release of it to coincide with the fifth anniversary because I knew that all the major media would be swarming back into town and it would be like, "Oh, look what's been discovered in the meantime. There's a whole new layer to the story," and instead it was, "Look how good our coverage was five years ago," congratulating themselves and Anderson Cooper shaking his finger in the face of Mayor Landrieu. I'd been in and around journalism enough to recognize this phenomenon which is... I call it a template, The New York Times internally calls it a narrative. Producers and editors get a first glimpse of a story and that forms their view, their frame for the story, and after that the only reporting that they're interested in is people giving quotes about that view of the story. If somebody, especially if somebody outside the media framework, comes in with whole new reportage like Big Charity did, they not only don't welcome it, they seem to collude in shunning it.

RM: They decide about their take and then basically just report to support the take.

HS: Yes, "take" could be the modern word for it. There's a great story by a really good journalist. Peter Moss used to write for the New Yorker. Now I think he writes for the Intercept, and this was - I think this was a New Yorker story about the toppling of the

Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad in 2004. He was in Baghdad and he says there were maybe 40 or 50 Iraqis in that square, Firdos Square. Basically, this was an American operation and the photographers and the journalists in the square - the photographers particularly were saying, "Let's us turn around and show you how few people are here and how many of them are Americans," and the producers and the editors were saying, "What I'm seeing on CNN is the toppling of the statue and some Iraqis there. That's the story I want," and Moss was too good a reporter to fake that. I had a very similar experience when I was a kid working at Newsweek.

So, the fact that it remains a practice or a habit in American journalism is not surprising, but disappointing. So, when you do a piece like "Big Charity" - I mean, what I did was basically put the film [The Big Uneasy] under my arm and got it booked personally at theaters around the country and then show up for the premiere of the showing so that I could get local newspaper coverage of the story, because I couldn't get national. New Orleans suffered at least doubly, if not triply, because the idea that that event was "Oh, well, natural disaster, living in the wrong place." No, victims of borderline sinister criminality, at least dramatic malfeasance and misfeasance by an agency of the federal government would cast that story in an entirely different light and national coverage of it would change people's understanding of it. There's a quote from one of the co-authors of the Berkeley study that if the Hurricane Protection System had been built properly, the worst Katrina would've inflicted on New Orleans is "wet ankles." That would dramatically have changed what the federal government was either prepared to or would be constrained by public opinion to do, to deal with the aftermath. [00:20:00]

So, the media shunning that part of the story had really serious consequences for the city and for the people of the city. So I would recommend anybody who sets out to do a piece of investigative or explanatory work on the level of Big Charity have it in mind that the completion of the movie is halfway to job done [laughter] and the other half is getting people to know about the story, ideally see the movie, but even if they just read about the movie, read the point of the movie, the story that the movie is telling and are thereby either ideally motivated to go see the movie, but at least it changes their view of the event. That's the other half and as hard as it is to make a documentary and it's ridiculously hard if you do it right and don't put a "New Jersey" street sign on the road to Heathrow in London, as hard as it is to make a documentary, it's harder still to get it the attention it deserves if it's telling the other half of a story which people thought they knew.

RM: Yes, before I was a filmmaker, I was a journalist. I cut my teeth in New England, on “The Phoenix.” I have a shelf of investigative journalism awards and it’s a... I mean, it was the mid ‘90s and it was deregulation and the Clinton era where the big boys were starting to go in, but there were still free weeklies in almost every minor city in the tri-state area and so forth, and getting the media’s attention is... For as long as there has been mass media, there’s always been sort of a trick to it. It’s sort of knowing somebody, knowing how to speak the language and knowing how to present the story in a way, but in the modern era, with the consolidation and New Orleans’ media in particular is so idiosyncratic and... Every time I see the local TV stations, I just feel like they’re on a different plane of reality than anything else I see going on in the city. Printed media here is a little bit better, but with only one semi-newspaper, it’s... I wonder if the move for a documentarian would be to go to a national outlet, like The New Yorker, or find a personal angle or try to...

HS: Well, I hired a New York PR guy to handle the “Big Uneasy.” I had exactly that thought. I hired a guy who also represented Katie Couric who at that time was anchoring the CBS Evening News so I thought... And he ended up apologizing to me, didn’t return any of the huge fee I paid him, New York level fee, couldn’t move the needle. I got nothing, except one little shot on Morning Joe. I was down right by what is now Mardi Gras World and that was it, nothing on the network news, nothing on the morning shows aside from that, nothing in The New Yorker and nothing in The New York Times, nothing in the New York anything.

RM: Wow.

HS: Yes. Arguably - all right, let’s keep it in perspective, but I’m a little bit of a celebrity. I’m a known person. [Laughter] There’s a little hook there, “Guy from The Simpsons makes a documentary. What’s that about?” None of it, so I found it inexpressively hard and that’s why I was so full of admiration for this team that knowing exactly the nature of the morass that they had walked into I admired them tremendously for carrying this through, for working really hard, for making - I saw the work they were doing towards the latter half of framing the movie and massaging the parts and making every part speak as clearly as possible. I thought they did an amazing job.

RM: I agree. There’s not an ounce of fat in that film. It’s got 66 minutes running time and every moment of it is vital and surprising. It’s really a stunning piece of work. As I dug

through it, the old Kickstarter, Alex and his team did a great job of bringing the Charity employees, the doctors, nurses, tech crew, and assistants and stuff who were instrumental in keeping the film alive after its premiere at the film festival. The Joy Theater seems to have been helping him from jump it sounds like because the Joy programmed Big Charity nights routinely for at least four, five years after the festival premiere...

HS: That's great.

RM: ...and they were generally just sold out every time, which is really reassuring. I mean, it's a huge success story in a sense.

HS: They faced the same thing though that I did, except that I faced it on a national level. They faced it on a local level. I bet if you stop a New Orleanian on the street today and ask them what happened to Charity Hospital, "Oh, it got flooded."

RM: I've had people tell me that. They say, "Oh, no. Everything was damaged" or "The building needs to be torn down" or whatever. Information in this town, it's just - when you were telling me about the apathy of the national outlets - I mean, especially Anderson Cooper really made a reputation out of "the empathetic anchor," the guy who stayed the longest in the city and all of that, it's really amazing. Here's a question. You've been such a close follower of media for so long, do you think it's gotten worse since the deregulation and consolidation of media ownership?

HS: Yes. I'm old enough to be able to say I think it got worse starting in the mid-1970s when the broadcasting organizations stopped being freestanding organizations and started being subsidiaries of larger corporations. When CBS was just CBS and what they did was add TV stations and radio stations, and they put stuff on the air, their behavior was very different from when they became part of a larger conglomerate like Viacom. NBC, I think it happened to them even sooner, although they were always part of a bigger company and ABC was pretty much ABC until the '90s when Capital Cities swallowed it. The way I would describe it is, The New York Times is an exception and I think there's been a little heavying up in the last year or two but basically, they're like Potemkin news organizations. The anchor desk looks as impressive as usual. My favorite anecdote about how this has worked is a few years ago, I was watching "Meet the Press" one Sunday morning and David Gregory was anchoring it at that time, and he said, "We

have a breaking news story this morning in Pakistan and for the latest, we go to NBC's Chief Foreign Correspondent Richard Engel reporting today from London."

RM: Okay... [Laughter]

HS: Because you can see Pakistan from there. Now the only untruth in that sentence was the word "chief" because he really meant "only." Now when I was a kid, I had in my memory the names - because I was a news junkie - the names of the CBS Bureau chiefs in Rome, in Paris, in Moscow, in London, in Tokyo. Those things don't exist anymore. There's one person that flies around. In the '90s and the 2000s, even the purpose of having a correspondent in other cities became antiquated because if there was a big enough story, they didn't cover it. The anchor flew in and asked a couple of cab drivers what was the mood and then did a report from the big story.

RM: From outside the airport.

HS: Yes, so you're a correspondent who got big-footed whenever there was a chance to get on the air and I think that was really the end of that system. Now, of course, they don't fly the anchor in anymore, but they'll fly one or two people who were out there, like Richard Engel who was wherever he was. But what that meant was his contribution was he could do what I could do: read the internet about what was happening in Pakistan and say it out loud. That's a Potemkin news organization. I mean, NBC is I think particularly bad. They had an anchor who was a proven public liar, "Oh, those shots, they came at our helicopter as we were landing in Iraq. It was frightening." They were never shot at. Brian Williams was never shot at. His punishment was six months off the air which he later described as torture.

This is at a time where there's real torture going on at the hands of the United States government, but being off the air was his equivalent, and now he's anchoring a nightly newscast for the same organization, although not on the network, on the cable system and they have, as did CNN, an analyst, former intelligence director who lied under oath to the senate. So, they've got a lying anchor and a lying analyst. [Laughter] I don't say this a lot in public anymore because you don't want to get conflated with Donald Trump's critique of the media. So, yes, it isn't what it used to be.

RM: How do you feel about AP and Reuters? [00:30:00]

HS: I'm impressed with AP. I think AP realized that their bread and butter, which had been a straight down the middle unadventurous writing down of what happened yesterday in as many locations as possible was being usurped and their main customer base was drying up. That is to say local newspapers which wanted international and national coverage and they've heaved up on investigations as an alternative course. I haven't seen that change at Reuters. Reuters seems to still be doing the old job of counting the bodies every day. I think it's a woman that runs AP now and I think she's the person who sort of is steering it at a slightly different direction. I mean, I'm amazed. I think I've seen this year between half a dozen and a dozen stories on AP that are the result of long-range investigations and deep dives and that was never a part of the AP recipe before.

RM: Oh good. I'm glad somebody's stepping into the gap. When the Brian Williams thing went down, people were shocked I guess for the five minutes they were paying attention. I say TV news is barely news at all. TV news is kind of entertainment and anchors are not journalists, so it's amazing this hasn't happened earlier and it's just a matter of time.

HS: I think it happened. The "Oh, my god. He was lying" reaction by the network was as fake as the rest of it because he was lying. He was going on Letterman and he was going on Jay Leno. He was going on those shows because the network wanted to young up the demographic of the evening news.

RM: Right, exactly.

HS: He wasn't doing that because he wanted to be more famous. Well, he may have been, but I think he was doing it with the network's blessings because if they could get a couple of younger viewers to watch the news...

RM: Yes, exactly. That's why they hired him in the first place. I mean it's...

HS: Yes, and it's so crazy because I remember growing up watching the Cronkite news during the Vietnam War and I was in my teens and early 20s and the main sponsors at that time were Geritol and Just for Men hair coloring. So it's always been older people that watch the news. This thing of "Why can't we get the kids to watch the news?" Because they're kids. [Laughter]

RM: Yes, exactly, exactly. I'm trying to digest all this in the context of Big Charity. We're recording this on the weekend of May 31st when there's been rioting in how many dozen major cities right now over the Floyd murder.

HS: I haven't seen any news of it in New Orleans. Have I missed something?

RM: No rioting here.

HS: Yes.

RM: Yes. It's been peaceful and most of what I've been seeing passed around is, "don't take the bait." A lot of ways to say it, coming from a lot of voices, but essentially the feeling is, we can be outraged. We need to stand together and everyone... New Orleans loves its conspiracies, of course, and so everyone seems to be protesting with a wary eye on young white outsiders, which is interesting because it sort of... There's an interesting parallel between the young white outsiders who've been gentrifying the city since Katrina and now these young white outsiders who are instigating the riots. It almost feels like there's some kind of great satire to be made about this moment with regard to that.

HS: About the Y.W.O's.

RM: [Laughter] Yes, but it's been peaceful here and the NOPD have been... they haven't been showing up in para-military gear or anything. The protests seem to be going about every four or five hours. There was like one at noon, one at 6:00, one at 9:00, kind of. I don't know if the attendance is remaining steady or different kind of sub-factions are choosing which ones to attend. They're all hosted by various non-profits but the "Take Them Down Foundation" who was a big voice in the removal of the Confederate statues has a lot of existing credibility and so I know their protests were particularly well-attended.

HS: I'm put in mind at this moment, I mean, this feels... the febrile nature of the country at the moment feels so much like 1968. It's frightening and saddening, but I'm put in mind of discussions that I would have with friends about anti-war demonstrations and this gets back to how do you get this message, whether it's from a documentary or from a demonstration or such, across. The problem that I thought demonstrations faced then, and I think we're seeing it again, is it has an impact. It has an impact when

people take to the streets and protest. It's undeniable, but as a long-running tactic, it has very rapidly diminishing returns because of the danger of being taken over either by police misbehavior, "Oh, my god. I'm shocked" by protester misbehavior, "protester, interloper behavior," whatever you want to call it because it's so easy for media to shift their gaze from the thing you're protesting against, whether it's a hideous war or a murder in plain view by a man in blue to "Oh those damn people in the streets" or "Those nutty people in the streets," and they love to do that. They love to change the focus. It's more visual. How many times can you rerun the George Floyd tapes, but protesters and cops, they're making new video for you every day.

RM: It reminds me of Los Angeles '92.

HS: Yes, exactly, exactly. I mean, you have to think like TV news producers think, "Do we have new video?" Well, being on the street demonstrating gives you new video every day. That's the gift you're giving to them. You, as an organizer think the deal is "Okay. I'm giving you new video every day. You give me coverage of my issue," but that quickly gets transmogrified into something else.

RM: Yes, it gets turned into why are these poor people burning their own businesses or whatever the upper-class's take on it is.

HS: Yes.

RM: "If it bleeds, it leads" is still the defining mantra. That's the whole thing about deregulation and consolidation of media companies is that when you're supposed to be practicing journalism, which is an ethos, but if you're really practicing capitalism and just going for ratings and advertising dollars and so forth, then it's more than just a mis-service. It's a deception on the public just like LSU.

HS: Yes. I started my life, or my adult life, working in an advertising agency just as a lark during two summers between years in college. I mean, I had advertising jingles in my head from my childhood. I still do. I ran into Al Jardine in New Orleans a couple of months ago and we were like doing almost a competition with each other who remembered more stupid advertising jingles from childhood. Now I've gotten to the point I'm very influenced by reading Tim Wu's book, *The Attention Merchants*, which is really good and is about the 125-year history of advertisers just trying harder and harder, and harder, and harder, and harder to hijack our attention.

It did occur to me at one point. I spent a lot of time in England recently. The thing you hear in Britain a lot is “Why are Americans so stupid?” [Laughter] I don’t think there are any such thing. I think people are basically the same. I think they get acculturated differently, that’s why people in New Orleans are more sociable and all sorts of other things. They’re not different people. They’re just acculturated differently. So, I thought, Boy, I would love to do a big macro study where you somehow figure out how many minutes of advertising people in different countries are exposed to and compare that to a group of people from each of these countries, their performance on a general knowledge test. My hypothesis being that advertising colonizes parts of your brain that would otherwise be used for storing useful information.

RM: That’s absolutely true, I think. I call them catalog heads. There’s a certain kind of person who, all they know is like the price of everything and like the different colors of cars that come in or whatever. They know the make and models of every vehicle that drives down the street. They can’t tell you who their state senators are.

HS: Yes. Or they know all the minutia of baseball statistics going back. You reminded me of a great Dave Frishberg lyric. They know the price of everything and the value of nothing at all. [Laughter]

RM: Yes, I remember that from Doonesbury way back. That was John Kerry, I think, in fact. It was an old strip making fun of John Kerry when he had come out of the war to become a political activist. I mean, this was Doonesbury in probably ’69, ’70, ’71 era. Kerry, in one of the strips, is caught kind of passing off that quote as his own, basically.

HS: God bless him.

RM: Yes, the colonization of the mind. It’s a real problem. I guess the question is then is how do we save the media? Force them to run as non-profits, essentially? [00:40:00]

HS: Well, I’ll answer that in two ways. One, I’m on the board of The Lens and I support The Lens very strongly, and I think The Lens has done amazing work in New Orleans. They’ve broken at least two or three stories that have become national news, such as the astroturfing of local council meetings. The example being the Entergy astroturfing of the city council meeting when they were going to vote on whether to let Entergy build a new fossil-fuel-fired power plant in the east of the city. So, that’s one model.

The other one which I think gets more attention and admiration than I think it deserves is ProPublica. Now I may be stuck in a thing about this, but I will never forget that even 15 years ago, ProPublica had decent resources and what they covered in the New Orleans flood was the story of Dr. Anna Pou who was in some hospital with like seven or eight critical patients, no resources, everything fallen around her and she has to make life or death decisions about these patients. They excoriate her, and they got a Pulitzer and they got a book, and they got a movie out of it; meanwhile, the grand story of the failure of the federal government to live up to its promise to protect the city, that's nothing they're interested in. I am sorry. I find that a grave stain on their journalistic reputation.

RM: I remember that. I mean, I remember that story really vividly. When it came out it was all people wanted to talk about was, "Yes, the doctors are pulling the plugs on people," and I'm like, "There's got to be context to that."

HS: Yes, like no electricity in your building to keep the machines going. I mean, it was to me - and I have no connection with Dr. Anna Pou. I don't know her. I never knew her. I don't know anybody who knows her. So, this is not from a personal interest. That was a savaging.

RM: Yes, and it's a funny thing about people - you're talking about "The Attention Merchants" and we now live in the attention economy and all of that. What people pay attention to is not necessarily what they should be given, because people love drama and cheap theatrics, and one person making a scene in hysterics is going to get more eyeballs than a governor or somebody reading a statement at a podium just because of the sheer entertainment value. But the whole reason that we have the non-profit sector of the world economy and so forth is because there are things that are vitally important that you cannot rely on people to seek out on their own. They have to be protected... Which reminds me of one of the... -So the Army Corps of Engineers as your movie the "Big Uneasy" showed, is essentially legislation and liability proof, right? It's lawsuit proof. It seems to exist in a strange quasi extra governmental space.

HS: Yes, they were given immunity by a 1927 law by congress. They have learned the lesson from being under the Defense Department, which is get an operation going in each congressional district, so your local congressman always wants to keep that going because money goes to local construction companies and contractors. Michael Grunwald, who wrote a great five-part series for the Washington Post about the Army

Corps at the beginning of the century, like 2000, 2001, called it— it may not be his origination, but he used it in the piece— “the Iron Triangle” which is the Corps, the local congress people, and the contractors. The Corps hasn’t done its own work since it was cleaned out by the Raegan administration because they wanted to make government agencies lean and mean so they contract the work out to local or national construction companies, engineering companies, and so those companies contribute to the congress people to keep the Corps funded and keep it creating projects and so forth, and so on. Yes, it’s a... because if you need your harbor dredged, there’s only one place to go.

RM: Right. I mean, it seems like a recipe for just flagrant grift, right?

HS: It’s bigger than that. I mean, the Corps has a really great business model. Do something and if it turns out to be really egregiously wrong, then get paid a second time to fix it. The people who got called in to build a better system after the Corps’ hurricane protection system failed disastrously in 53 different locations in New Orleans, was the Army Corps of Engineers.

RM: It’s a monopoly model.

HS: Yes, the people who were called in after they had been party to the destruction of the Everglades in Florida over 35, 40 years was the Army Corps of Engineers. They were called in to save the Everglades. I mean, it’s crazy. You wear the black hat for a while, take it off, put on the white hat, keep getting paid.

RM: I’m thinking of Cleavon Little kidnapping himself in Blazing Saddles. [Laughter] LSU seems to exist in the same kind of quasi-governmental state that the Army Corps does. It’s supposed to have a public mission and yet it seems to operate as a capitalistic enterprise with no consideration for the humanity that suffers under it and at the same time, it operates with no accountability toward any higher office or public outrage. The public outrage is the only thing that could be levied against them and even then, it all feels so futile to. LSU is such a mammoth organization and all those people wearing all the Tigers’ hats and shirts, and stuff, it’s like they’ve got a sports franchise that distracts people from being able to hate it because like they say, “Oh, but I support the team” or “I went to college there so therefore, they can’t be doing these terrible things.” It’s a cognitive dissonance kind of set up.

HS: Yes, it's almost as if the athletic program acts as a marketing tool to protect them, to generate loyalty and protect them from criticism and/or accountability.

RM: Almost if, yes. [Laughter]

HS: Yes. I mean, it does point out that there's something that's become very popular in the political world since the Reagan administration and we just saw the latest example, the latest iteration of it with the space launch yesterday, the public-private partnership, which basically means letting private companies do what the government is supposed to do and it's a result of this anti-government thing that's gone on for 30 years. Private organizations could do anything that government can do and can do it better. I haven't seen the private organizations outdoing the government in getting PPE to people in the hospitals in this country during the pandemic.

RM: Yes, or the tests.

HS: When catastrophic brush fires break out in California every year, I'm not seeing the private companies rush to help put them out that have better-equipped trucks.

RM: I've never understood this whole anti-big government thing in the sense of, the way it's executed since the Reagan era seems to be expand the executive branch exponentially while reducing the actual service.

HS: Yes, doing less.

RM: So, the government is staying the same size, if not bigger and the military budget hasn't shrunk, but it's actually doing less. So, how do you... I have this tongue in cheek mayoral campaign that I pull out of the box every couple of years which is called "Blow the Bridges," which is essentially, dynamite all the water ways around New Orleans and become like a self-contained protectorate like Washington D.C. where you don't have to report to a state, but you can have maybe like one congressman, but that would take Baton Rouge off our metaphorical dick and at the same time, New Orleans can be a self-contained economy because we can let the Kenner airport go, reopen Lakefront as a commercial site and essentially, we'd have 99% of Hollywood South and the tourism industry, and so on. This is half tongue-in-cheek and half just utopian fantasy, but the idea would be that it's free to leave at any time for anybody, but if you want to

move here, it's like 1% of your income and a bottle of your favorite booze. There's a public liquor supply.

HS: Well, my fantasy was a little less grandiose. My fantasy was that if you moved into New Orleans, if you bought a house in New Orleans or bought or rented a place, it was going to be through a realtor so it was really about home buying that you got, along with your paperwork, a 10-minute little video that was basically your orientation video about New Orleans. "Here's how this city behaves. Here's how we do so that you don't start calling the cops when there's a brass band marching by your fucking house and going 'There's noise in the street.'" [laughter] Because we depend - the city so depends on people picking up the culture and wanting to assimilate into it with no mechanism. It just happens and fortunately, it often really does happen. We've been able to depend on that because it does happen, but it would be great to give people a little kick in the ass to start them off.

RM: Definitely. I live in the ninth ward piece of the Marigny, where we had all the live music and Mimi's shut down because of a couple of neighbors who were appalled that there were bars with entertainment in the area that they moved in, knowing nothing apparently. The whole idea of "Oh, I love the city. I just hate the culture of it" has become a... I don't know if this is an ongoing thing— like I said I'm a post-Katrina immigrant— but it feels like I hear stories like this all the time and sometimes the people eventually leave or we have a couple of snowbirds in the neighborhood who only live here a few months of the year, but when they do live here, they complain.

HS: [Laughter] It's bizarre. You wonder what they're here for.

RM: What's your personal history with New Orleans? You mention you grew up in Los Angeles, but it seems like you've been coming here a very long time. [00:50:00]

HS: I've been coming to New Orleans since 1989. It was my first Jazz Fest. I fell in love with jazz fest and fell in love with New Orleans. After probably about eight years, my wife and I decided we're doing a great job of subsidizing the hotel business, but maybe we should get a place. We talked to some friends and they had the condo experience, turn-key condo and so we got one and immediately, just in the day-to-day of being a resident as opposed to being in a hotel, was such a startling change in what day-to-day felt like. If you haven't experienced it, it's very hard to describe it because hotel life is

insulated. I remember there was some in-flight magazine that I looked at in a desperate moment on an airplane and they had a guide...

RM: Speaking of journalism. [Laughter]

HS: Yes, a guide to enjoying New Orleans and “Well, if you’re looking for music, there’s this music venue in the Ritz Carlton and if you’re looking for a restaurant, there’s a very good restaurant in the Ritz...” No, it wasn’t the Ritz Carlton. It was the Windsor Court, I think. It was one of them. Anyway, the whole point of the article was you don’t have to leave the fuckin hotel to experience New Orleans. Then my wife is a singer and songwriter and we had friends in to hear one of her latest records, a little listening party, and they were all scrunched together on a couple of couches in the condo and hanging off the balcony up the stairs, and we thought, “We know too many people. We’ll never be able to reciprocate all the dinners we’ve had if we stay in this place. We need a proper house,” and so we got one.

RM: Cool.

HS: So I’ve never lived anywhere but the Quarter.

RM: So, I’m trying to think of a.. What I keep turning my mind to is how to be creative with this outrage. You’re a satirist. I mean, I consider myself fundamentally a comedy writer even though I make narrative features. We have a city full of artists and artisans of all kinds and a piece of art like “Big Charity” does not have any humor or satire in it really at all other than the sort of dire gallows humor of seeing the guy with the Rolex talking. [Laughter]

HS: Nor did my documentary. I was very careful not to step over that line. If you’re telling a story that contradicts an existing narrative, I think you have to be very, very careful to go “I’m not kidding around. I’m not fucking with you. This is the real shit. This is really what I’ve discovered or I didn’t discover. I discovered the people who discovered it or I know the people who discovered it.” So, I didn’t want to be in the position of “Hey, I couldn’t tell whether you’re joking or not when you had that thing about the flood.” So no, I think those are two rigorously separate things in my book, but I have the advantage that I really have learned over a long period of time to take anger and transform it into something. It’s not a good emotion if it just sits in you untransformed or unresolved. If you’re an accomplished organizer, the fact that you can take your

anger and turn it into an excellent protest demonstration, that's another way of doing it, but for me, it happens to be I can take the object of my anger or disdain, or horror, or revulsion and make fun of it. So, for example, my emotional state regarding the current occupant of the White House is very different from my wife's because she just has to live with it, the daily dose of "What?" Whereas I feed off of it.

RM: Yes, it's... She has music as an outlet.

HS: Yes.

RM: I'm trying to process my own kind of simmering rage. I mean, the monster in the White House right now is something I can barely even look at out of the corner of my eye. I was in junior high when he took out the full-page ad demanding the execution of the Central Park Five and I've basically never thought of him as anything but a monster and I remember in 2016, during the primaries, I was telling everyone who would listen, "I had two pieces of hope. I thought the Republican apparatus would never let him get that far. I thought they would just rig it so he couldn't win." Then on the Democratic side, I thought, "Well, as long as anybody but Hillary gets the nomination, they could defeat him soundly." Hillary is the only person who could possibly lose to Trump.

HS: Well, yes. They were the two most unpopular candidates in the history of the American presidential campaign if you look at the polls. They both were monstrously unpopular overall in their general numbers. Well, all I can say about that and this is not said in any diminution of any contempt or revulsion I have for this guy is that George W. Bush killed a lot more people, got a lot more people killed, made a lot more mess in a lot more of the world, and his successor ignored his legal compulsion to punish torture.

RM: No, it's a...

HS: That's a big red line for me.

RM: The silver lining on Trump is that he doesn't have the attention span for foreign policy.

HS: Yes, and you can say the math has changed now because he's arguably responsible for more people dying than otherwise might have during the pandemic, so his hands are no longer - they're still as small, but they're not as unbloodied as they were before.

RM: So, he's responsible for more Americans dying than foreigners.

HS: Yes, and on that note...

RM: Yes. Well, thank you so much for doing this and I hope this episode brings "Big Charity" to the attention of a lot more people.

HS: Me too.

RM: Both as a role model film and as a truly amazing experience and I consider it the best movie about Katrina ever made.

HS: Yes, and the worst ad for Rolex that was ever made.

RM: [Laughter] Or maybe the most honest.

HS: Oh, the demo is coming by my house right now.

RM: Oh right.

HS: I'm going to go cover it.

RM: Okay, fantastic.

HS: Anyway, thank you.

RM: Good luck out there.

HS: Thanks.

[Sounds of the George Floyd demonstration passing by]

-END-