

# CHAPTER 1

## *WHY NEW ORLEANS HAS ATTRACTED FILMS*

William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams are among the great writers who strolled around the French Quarter streets seeking and receiving inspiration for their works. Movie fans can walk in the same place looking for film sites in this book. While traveling through older parts of the city bear in mind that both Faulkner and Williams worked as scriptwriters in Hollywood and surely learned a great deal about the appeal of films. Both writers needed money in the periods when they were employed by motion picture studios. While living in the French Quarter they had to struggle to lift themselves out of poverty. In the late 1920s and early 1930s many authors were attracted to the unconventional life in the Quarter which at that time was an immigrant slum. It was a refuge where rent and food were cheap and where alcoholic drinks were abundant, even during Prohibition. The old rundown neighborhood was carefree and fun-loving. It was often described as a Caribbean enclave in North America. Situated in a semitropical seaport city the sense of place was exotic and foreign. With its French origins and Spanish architecture the Quarter was

closely tied to its colonial past.

This bohemian atmosphere was fertile ground for creative people in the arts and literature. By 1910, the Quarter was eighty percent Sicilian. This wave of immigrants transformed this oldest city neighborhood into a Latin ghetto populated by a new cultural group which showed a great tolerance for eccentricity. The French Market built by the Spanish was now occupied by seafood, meat, fruit and vegetable vendors from Italy. By many accounts even goats and chickens lived in courtyards, apartments and houses along with their owners. Roman Catholicism was still the predominant religion and French Creoles both white and of color continued living along with the new immigrants, creating a potpourri in language and traditions more common to the West Indies than North America.

Sherwood Anderson, a well-known writer who lived in one of the Pontalba buildings on Jackson Square, encouraged promising writers to live in the South's new literary enclave. William Faulkner was to become his most famous recruit.

While living in a room overlooking St. Anthony's Garden behind St. Louis Cathedral Faulkner wrote his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*, published articles in local newspapers and contributed essays to the prestigious literary journal *The Double Dealer* which was published in New Orleans. Other famous figures

in literature of the era who visited the Quarter were Ernest Hemingway, Thornton Wilder, Gertrude Stein, Thomas Wolfe, and New Orleans-born Truman Capote.

One story involving William Faulkner told on a literary tour of the Quarter is about the author being described in an old guidebook as making a living leading tour groups. It can be traced to a time when some of his close friends who ran a travel company were asked by the Chamber of Commerce to hire guides to show conventioners the sights in part of the old section. The friends knew about Faulkner's firsthand knowledge of the history and architecture of the Quarter. They used him and several other guides. The visitors were divided into groups about one block apart. Faulkner's imaginative mind caused him to make up fantastic tales about places along the route. At one point most of the conventioners drifted from other groups as they heard the natural storyteller's accounts of what mysterious events took place in various buildings as he wandered through the narrow streets and alleys. In one of his essays written later, he expressed his love of New Orleans by describing the city as: "A courtesan, not old and yet no longer young, who shuns the sunlight that the illusion of her former glory be preserved."

Tennessee Williams was also charmed by a city which he called his "spiritual home." Williams

began to live in the Quarter in 1938. He hoped that some of his plays would be supported by the Federal Writers Project in New Orleans, sponsored by the Works Project Administration, with the goal of helping struggling writers with their creative pursuits. Ironically, Williams, the figure who put the city on the literary map, was not helped by the Writers Project. He made a living by waiting tables at restaurants and even hocked his typewriter in despair. Both Faulkner and Williams were inspired by the Quarter and New Orleans, and returned frequently to the place as they evolved into two of America's most highly respected writers.

At different junctures in their careers, they were employed as scriptwriters for studios in Hollywood. Those experiences surely had an impact on the evolution in writing styles for which they received international acclaim. Perhaps to know what moviegoers wanted to see in films gave each important insights into crafting some of their future works. The jobs did give each salaries to rescue them from monetary troubles and allowed them to concentrate on completing novels, plays, and other literary pieces. Faulkner worked on at least twenty-seven screenplays on and off from the 1930s until the 1950s at three Hollywood studios. Perhaps the most widely known of his screenplays is an adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's novel *To Have and Have Not* (1944). This picture was the first to

feature Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, a couple whose presence on the screen and their private lives became legendary. Faulkner was befriended by the filmmaker Howard Hawks who had read his first novel *Soldiers' Pay* and introduced him to key figures in the publishing business in New York.

Several movies are based upon Faulkner's novels and short stories. *The Long Hot Summer* (1958) from *The Hamlet* and starring Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, and Orson Wells is known best by movie fans. *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), *The Sound and the Fury* (1959), *Sanctuary* (1961), and *The Reivers* (1969) are other films based on his writings. When Faulkner was living in New Orleans his patron, Sherwood Anderson, took long walks with him around the French Quarter and riverfront. Anderson advised him to continue to concentrate on fiction and what he knew best, i.e. Mississippi and his hometown Oxford. The rest is history because this advice brought him great success.

Tennessee Williams also used the South as a locale for his works but stated that New Orleans was the source for the majority of his material. An emotional attachment to the city continued throughout his life. Williams' agent, Audrey Wood, got him a screen writing job at MGM in Hollywood. At least fifteen films were made from plays, novels, and other Williams' original sources. The movie *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951)

came from his Pulitzer Prize play. He completed this play while living in a third story apartment in the French Quarter where he could hear the rattling streetcar rolling along a nearby street.

After *A Streetcar Named Desire* appeared on the screen, Williams was accorded celebrity status. Vivien Leigh, Kim Hunter, and Karl Malden received Oscars for their performances and another Oscar went to the film for art direction. Marlon Brando was nominated, but the Oscar went to Humphrey Bogart for *The African Queen*. Brando, who at the time was a virtual unknown in Hollywood, would emerge at a “star” in future roles. Williams became the best known playwright in cinema and he continued to draw upon New Orleans for plays and films. In a later chapter, *A Streetcar Named Desire* will be discussed at length.

The special appeal of the French Quarter as a place can be seen in the stories set in old New Orleans in the 1880s and 1890s by Lafcadio Hearn, George Washington Cable and other writers in the post-Civil War period. What cultural historians call the “culture of defeat” contributed to a renaissance in literature about the South and New Orleans. Also, pioneers in Hollywood saw the box-office profits soar when films became a form of escape for moviegoers from the harsh realities of life to the idyllic times of the Old South. *Jezebel* (1938) captures the prosperous times of New Orleans in the 1850s as a city surrounded by

plantations. Julie Marsden (Bette Davis), the central character in the picture owns a mansion in the city and a plantation nearby. The conniving Southern belle defies social conventions by appearing at a party in a riding outfit and later at a ball in a red dress. Her social circle dictated that single women wear white dresses to Mardi Gras balls. In dark theaters around the country audiences admired her defiant spirit. What existed in the past or is imagined to have existed is a powerful theme on the big screen.

What draws viewers to this time period? One answer to this is seen in the fact that the South and New Orleans in antebellum times were isolated from the rest of America. The region created a culture tied to the mythology of a way of life tied to a thriving plantation system and port city.

The symbolism of the Old South flourished long after the Civil War. In Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* Blanche DuBois personifies how many people were still clinging to what existed in the past and was then not only in decline but in decay. Movie fans and Hollywood found a lasting infatuation with "southern agrarianism."

In contrast with Julie in *Jezebel*, Blanche comes to New Orleans to live with her sister in a slum apartment in the French Quarter. In *Jezebel*, Julie and other women in high society are treated as "chalice

to be cherished and protected.” Blanche, even in her tarnished state, struggles to maintain the manners and style of a fading belle from the Mississippi Delta when she encounters the animalistic Stanley.

In all the pictures covered in subsequent chapters New Orleans is a location favored by moviemakers. Its colonial architecture, houses with carriageways and patios, and historic aura give a sense of the past. Borrowing a phrase from the classic mystery film *The Maltese Falcon* New Orleans is a place filled with “the stuff that dreams are made of.”

Having said that New Orleans is filled with “the stuff that dreams are made of,” the person who embodies these dreams most is Anne Rice. She was born there and educated in Catholic schools in the city. Rice has written twenty-eight novels, many drawing upon the city’s mysteries and history. She is by far the most popular and prolific contemporary fiction-author from New Orleans.

When she and her husband Stan moved from California to New Orleans in 1989, they bought a Greek Revival home in the Garden District in the Uptown section of the city. The Italianate mansion is a character in some of her novels. While here, Anne Rice wrote screenplays for films based on her works. Two of these movies are examined in this book, *Interview With the Vampire* and *The Feast of All*

*Saints* are found in Chapters two and three.

*Interview With the Vampire* on the screen takes us through the supernatural world while visiting New Orleans from colonial times to the present. It spans the ages and allows us to experience history over two centuries. Anne Rice has a special ability to entice fans to think about the past. The picture will become a classic in the horror genre for Hollywood.

*The Feast of All Saints* is a fictional work taking us into the real lives of the free people of color in Louisiana. During the slave revolt in Haiti in the early 1800s, thousands of free people of color came to Louisiana. They brought with them the French language and a cultural heritage unique to North America. We see how these people adjusted to a new life through the characters in the story.

Anne Rice, with an eye on preservation, purchased and renovated several properties in the Garden District. This dedication to the past is crucial to making New Orleans a prime destination for visitors who value historical structures as connections to former days. Like the characters in Rice's novels and movies based upon her works in literature, we find ourselves as participants in her stories while journeying through the old sections of the city in a quest for bygone times. We can combine the images seen in films with the history that surrounds us on

the French Quarter and St. Charles Avenue tours found at the back of the book. Anne Rice utilizes New Orleans as a place for her tales about the supernatural world and real life. It is fortunate that she and other preservationists did so much to maintain a legacy for the future.