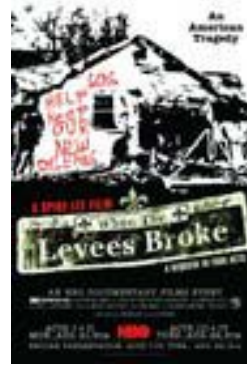


When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Parts Film Review by Kam Williams

Headline: Spike Lee Documentary Revisits
New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina



Conspiracy theorists disappointed with formerly iconoclastic filmmaker Oliver Stone for failing to explore any of the controversies surrounding 9/11 in World Trade Center might have a new hero in director Spike Lee. For Spike, in his HBO documentary, *When the Levees Broke*, gives vent to a panoply of paranoid notions about who's to blame for the flooding of New Orleans and the subsequent abandoning of its citizens for days on end. Early on in part one of this incendiary, four-hour documentary, interviewees from the lower Ninth Ward repeatedly refer to hearing a loud explosion during the storm, the implication being that a levee was deliberately detonated. Unfortunately, the film fails to supplement this anecdotal evidence with any tangible proof of tampering, leaving the discerning viewer believing that the breach was likely caused by the category-five hurricane after all. Despite capturing many heartbreaking aspects of the disaster, *When the Levees Broke* is essentially an overambitious mess which ultimately fails to convey effectively the scale or scope of the ongoing tragedy. There's a sense of déjà vu to the sad stories being recounted here, whether about wading through sewage-filled water to the Convention Center, being stranded on a rooftop, being left to die in the sweltering heat in an underpass or inside the Superdome, separated from family members, and bussed out of town, or being denied insurance payments. This feeling that we've seen all this before is compounded by the program's oft-confusing chronology. During part four, for instance, we hear homeless folks still complaining about FEMA's tardiness in providing trailers, although these remarks were ostensibly taped earlier than some contained in the third segment of the show. According to this production, all fault lies with the federal government, from the Army Corps of Engineers to FEMA director Mike Brown to President Bush to Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. Most disappointing, however, is how Spike decided to get in bed with Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and his ex-Police Chief Eddie Compass by giving these and several other pivotal political figures a platform to spew self-serving spin about their handling of Katrina, when their failures have been well documented. In my opinion, no honest investigation of this shameful chapter of American history could allow the uncritical participation of these partially-responsible culprits. Furthermore, appearances by well-meaning celebs like Sean Penn, Harry Belafonte and Reverend Al Sharpton simply serve as a distraction from the fundamental story Spike's trying to narrate here. In sum, *When the Levees Broke* only intermittently engages one emotionally, a no-no when the reason for even undertaking the endeavor in the first place was presumably to shed light on the ongoing plight of the voiceless Katrina victims whose displacement and continued suffering is no longer the concern of the greedy corporate interests entrusted with the rebuilding of the region.

Fair (1 star)

Unrated

Running time: 240 minutes

Studio: HBO

Arts & Entertainment with Kam Williams. www.awarenessmagazine.net/kamae.html

