



A film by Louis Alvarez, Andrew Kolker, Peter Odabashian, and Paul Stekler

Genre: Documentary

Total running time: 90 minutes (directors' cut) | 81 minutes (broadcast version)

Year of Production: 2013

World Premiere: South by Southwest Film Festival, March 2013

Film website: www.gettingbacktoabnormal.com

Film trailer viewable at: <http://vimeo.com/cnam/gbtatrailer>

Production company website: www.cnam.com

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A production of the Center for New American Media, Midnight Films, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). Additional funding support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.

Logline: Election time in New Orleans: Corruption. Racism. Dancing in the streets. And one in-your-face pol trying to get re-elected. Let the good times roll.

Short Synopsis: New Orleans' long history of political dysfunction and complicated racial dynamics gets a new lease on life when Stacy Head, a polarizing white woman, wins a seat on the city council after Katrina. Four years later, she needs to get black votes to be re-elected. But will her record of blunt talk doom her chances? GETTING BACK TO ABNORMAL follows the unlikely odd couple of Head and her irrepressible black political advisor Barbara Lacen-Keller as they try to navigate New Orleans' treacherous political scene. With its cast of only-in-New-Orleans characters, GETTING BACK TO ABNORMAL is a provocative and amusing look at race in America, set against the backdrop of New Orleans' rich culture.



Film Description

Getting Back To Abnormal is an intimate look at race, politics and culture in post-Katrina New Orleans. Since the storm, New Orleans has changed. It is less black and less poor, and one polarizing white politician has become a lightning rod for all things racial. Councilperson Stacy Head, a self-styled corruption fighter, takes her sometimes jaw-droppingly politically-incorrect style into the tribal world of New Orleans politics as she fights to maintain her seat in a black majority district.

Getting Back To Abnormal follows the improbable team of Head and her larger-than-life confidante Barbara Lacen-Keller, an outspoken African-American community activist, as they navigate the campaign through murky and unpredictable waters. Head's opponent, Corey Watson, the scion of a family of local ministers, misses no opportunity to point out her peccadilloes while simultaneously preaching peace and love on the campaign trail. Along the way, the film weaves in the story of Stephanie Mingo, a longtime public housing resident, as she fights a sometimes quixotic battle to maintain a sense of community in her rapidly changing neighborhood as well as parsing the pros and cons of Brad Pitt's architect-designed eco-friendly housing development in the still largely empty Lower Ninth Ward. The film also profiles the emotional 50-year reunion of the (then) three young girls who integrated the New Orleans Public Schools with the federal marshals who protected them.

Getting Back To Abnormal is populated by an only-in-New-Orleans Greek chorus of feisty urban philosophers, including noted Ninth Ward survivor Henry Irvin ("In New Orleans, we have some of the blackest white people and some of the whitest black people you're ever going to meet"), black radio shock jock (and former English teacher) Paul Beaulieu ("there's a train is coming through the black community that's going to bust it wide open—and it has white political leaders like Stacy Head on it") and legendary local attorney Buddy Lemann, who opines that "reality is cruel and we in New Orleans prefer to have a few drinks and go get naked in the streets." *Getting Back To Abnormal* reminds us how little has changed since Lafcadio Hearn wrote in 1880: "The city is buried under fraud and maladministration, but it is better to live here in sackcloth and ashes than to own the whole state of Ohio."

Getting Back To Abnormal is a collaboration between the Center for New American Media, (Louis Alvarez, Andrew Kolker and Peter Odabashian) and Midnight Films (Paul Stekler), whose fruitful partnership brought audiences the DuPont-Columbia award-winning *Louisiana Boys, Raised on Politics* and the Peabody, Emmy and DuPont-Columbia award-winning *Vote For Me: Politics in America*. The film is a co-production with the Independent Television Service (ITVS).

Directors' Statement

For three of its four producers, *Getting Back to Abnormal* is a coming home of sorts. Louis, Andy and Paul began their filmmaking careers in New Orleans, and for us the city will always exert its power and mystery over our hearts and minds. For Peter, the culture of the Crescent City has been more of an acquired taste which materialized over the several years that we were immersed in the project.

We knew at the outset that we wanted to make a film that captured at least a healthy morsel of the essence of the place -- what we knew as intimate participants when we lived there, and later as educated observers after we left. We felt that too many post-Katrina documentaries settled for presenting overly simplistic narratives that didn't recognize the complexity that has always been part of the city's DNA. In New Orleans, the tribal instincts of its insular racial groups have often trumped the self-mythologizing "we're all like a gumbo" attitude touted for tourists and anthropologists. And the familiar narrative of the city's victimhood is undercut by the reality that the city and its inhabitants -- both powerful and not -- have often been complicit in their own misfortune: the culture of Mardi Gras and street parades is also a culture of corruption and inefficiency, of bad schools and high crime. We thought that a film which attempted to weave a variety of stories together into a compelling tapestry would best be suited to presenting this contradictory world -- to give the viewer a real sense of what it's like to live in the city and think like a New Orleanian.

The subtle -- and not so subtle -- issue of race, which should be front and center in any portrait of New Orleans, also directed our search for stories, and came to the forefront in the local spectator sport, municipal politics. When we began shooting, the political winds seemed to be shifting: as the black population appeared to be declining, white politicians were making a comeback after decades of African American control. We found that a white City Councilperson named Stacy Head had been grabbing headlines with her sharp tongue and take-no-prisoners attitude towards government accountability, and in the process had become a racial piñata for many blacks who thought her at the very least insensitive to their concerns. We soon discovered Head's unlikely companion-in-arms, Barbara Lacen-Keller, a black veteran of the civil-rights era who gives new meaning to the word "outspoken." Stacy's re-election campaign against African American preacher and novice politician Corey Watson, himself a son of a politically active preacher, became the backbone our film as we got up close and personal, warts and all, with both campaigns.

There were other stories we discovered. A huge number of (mostly) black residents have been displaced since the storm, their houses destroyed by floods or controversial urban renewal. Housing has become a huge issue, and we followed both community activists and high-flying starchitects as they tried to tackle the problem, each in their own way. Finally, we went to the streets to bask in the rich local culture that makes everyone fall in love with the place: the second-line parades, po-boy festivals, and Saints celebrations that seem to await around every corner. In *Getting Back to Abnormal*, we've tried to give the viewer a different, more intimate perspective on what it's like to be in one of the few truly unique places left in America. We hope that we have succeeded.

Some simple Q & A about *GETTING BACK TO ABNORMAL*

How should audiences approach the film?

New Orleans is a place that's always messing with your head, in both good and bad ways. Add in the volatile topic of race and you've got a movie that continually plays with your expectations. As filmmakers we've always avoided preaching to the choir, and prefer to let the audience draw its own conclusions about the people in our movies. *GETTING BACK TO ABNORMAL* is about a New Orleans election, which means that everyone watches their own backs and the idea of "good" and "bad" behavior is never very clear. Leave your pre-conceived notions at the door and you'll have a great time!

What was your biggest challenge in developing the project?

After Katrina there were a lot of docs shot in New Orleans, some good, some not-so-good, and audiences got a little tired of storm and recovery stories. We're calling *GETTING BACK TO ABNORMAL* "the first post-post-Katrina doc" because the storm and its aftermath isn't central to the action, just a fact of life everyone has already dealt with. So even if people think they've seen this story...trust us, they haven't. It helped that the documentary gods smiled on us and led us to discover two great characters who make the city seem fresh and mysterious all over again: loose-lipped politician Stacy Head and her feisty advisor Barbara Lacen-Keller, a classic Odd Couple.

What inspired you to want to make *GETTING BACK TO ABNORMAL*?

Our real inspiration was the city itself, which continues to defy expectations. Three of us lived and worked in New Orleans for ten years, and we really wanted to make a film which communicated the love and frustration we have for the place. We also knew we wanted the culture and richness of the place to come across as a backdrop to our political story, and so we sought out appealing local characters who could provide context. A lot of post-Katrina docs were made by outsiders who never quite captured the city's weird DNA. We'd be happy if people came away feeling like they'd spent a weekend in New Orleans hanging out with the locals and getting the inside story.



The making of *Getting Back to Abnormal* featured no less than four creative producer/directors: LOUIS ALVAREZ, ANDREW KOLKER, PETER ODABASHIAN, and PAUL STEKLER. Luckily, they've worked successfully together on and off for almost three decades, creating thought-provoking, award-winning, and often very funny documentaries about American life, culture, and politics.

For three of the producers (Odabashian is a lifelong New Yorker), making *Getting Back to Abnormal* was a return to their Louisiana roots. In the 1970s and 80s, Kolker and Alvarez were part of a new wave of young, activist video makers exploring the culture of New Orleans and Louisiana, making films on New Orleans accents (*Yeah You Rite!*), race and poverty (*Being Poor in New Orleans*) and the complicated racial history of nearby Plaquemines Parish (*The Ends of the Earth*). Stekler was teaching Southern politics at Tulane and running political campaigns in the city. He turned to filmmaking after his "reform" candidate for mayor lost in 1986 (former Congressman William Jefferson, now serving a thirteen year prison sentence for bribery). Stekler's film about the campaign was called *Among Brothers*.

Alvarez, Kolker, and Stekler first collaborated on 1992's *Louisiana Boys, Raised on Politics*, a no-holds-barred look at the Bayou State's freewheeling political culture, highlighting such stars as Earl and Huey Long and then-governor Edwin Edwards. The film was screened on public TV's *POV* series and won the team their first DuPont-Columbia Journalism Award.

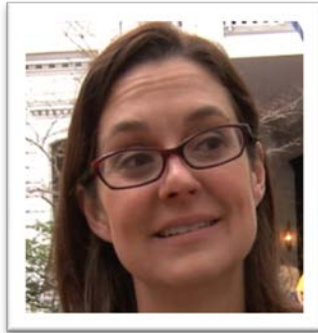
Four years later, joined by Odabashian, the team made the four-hour *Vote for Me: Politics in America*, a wide-ranging, eye-opening look at the American way of elections, from Texas to Chicago to the New South. The series, a two night national PBS special, was awarded the George Foster Peabody Award as well as a second DuPont-Columbia baton.

Alvarez, Kolker and Odabashian are known for *People Like Us: Social Class in America* (2001), a classic examination of American society; *MOMS* and *Sex:Female*, candid looks at the lives of American women; and *The Anti-Americans*, a 2007 film about the way Europeans look at American culture. They are also the creators of the 3D history game *Past/Present*. Alvarez and Kolker's 1987 *American Tongues* was the first film broadcast on public TV's long-running documentary series *POV*.

Paul Stekler's work includes the Sundance Special Jury Prize winner *George Wallace: Settin' the Woods on Fire*, *Last Man Standing: Politics Texas Style*, and two of the *Eyes on the Prize* civil rights series films. In 2008 he co-produced and wrote Frontline's *The Choice*, about the Obama-McCain election. He has a doctorate in American politics and is the chair of the Radio-Television-Film Dept. at the University of Texas in Austin.

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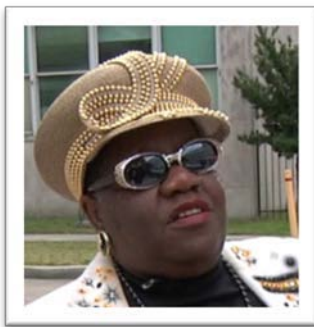
about
the
characters



Stacy Head has served on the New Orleans city council since 2006, when she defeated the Council B district incumbent Renée Gill Pratt, who was subsequently indicted for racketeering. Running against what she termed the political machine of then Congressman Bill Jefferson (who was subsequently indicted and convicted of racketeering), Head, who became the first white politician to lead this majority black, Central City district in decades, immediately became a lightning rod on the council with what the New Orleans Times Picayune described as her "intense, caffeinated and personal" approach.

Head's tenure on the council has been marked by a series of controversies, many related to her efforts to reform city government. In 2008, she began investigating the relationship between fees collected and services rendered by the Sanitation Department. This escalated into arguments about city contracts with minority businesses. When Sanitation Director Veronica White leaked thousands of e-mails from white members of the city council to activist lawyer Tracie Washington, the conflict expanded, eventually leading to a failed recall drive.

Councilwoman Head was also known for constituent service and in 2012, she won a council at-large election by 281 votes out of turnout of over 57,000 voters. She is now one of two Councilpersons At Large on the seven-person City Council. She was reelected in 2014.



Barbara Lacen-Keller is the Director of Constituent Services for New Orleans City Councilwoman Stacy Head. A longtime activist, former Mayor Marc Morial called her the "Mayor of Central City." She worked in the Orleans Parish School System for sixteen years and then became the Clinic Administrator at the Central City health clinic for another eight years. Since 2006, she's served as a staff member for Councilwoman Head.

Ms. Lacen-Keller was the original organizer of the Second Line Cultural Tradition Task Force, which promotes, preserves, perpetuates and celebrates the ingenious music and culture of the city. She was also the founder of the Lady Buckjumpers Social Aid and Pleasure Club.

She is the former wife of the legendary late musician Anthony "Tuba Fats" Lacen.



Stephanie Mingo is a housing activist in New Orleans, who was one of the many displaced during Katrina from the old St. Bernard public housing development, the second largest housing project in the city. She was the third generation of her family to live in St. Bernard.

The project was subsequently demolished after a unanimous vote of the city council. Stephanie was offered but refused an apartment in the new mixed income Columbia Parc development which is being built on the same site. She (and other former residents) object to the small number of residences set aside for the low income former residents of St Bernard and the new strict set of rules for residents.

Ms. Mingo is the mother of four and a longtime employee of the Orleans Parish School Board.

The Make It Right Foundation. In December 2006, the actor Brad Pitt founded Make It Right to rebuild 150 safe, energy-efficient and affordable homes for families from New Orleans Lower 9th Ward who lost everything to Hurricane Katrina. As of November 2011, Make It Right has completed 75 homes and is beginning work on the second half of the project. The project attracted a great deal of national attention and the efforts of a number of internationally known architects including Bill McDonough, Frank Gehry, and such firms as Morphosis, Adjaye Associates, and Concordia. The development is designed to be innovative in design and totally green, but many have questioned the bang for buck, in this case an initial cost of over \$400,000 a home by 2010 (with costs decreasing to around \$200,000 per home subsequently). Other discussion has centered on the utility of rebuilding on the site, because of its problems with flooding, and its design, as it conforms to New Orleans style.

