



Alan Govenar's Latest Documentary Brings a New Perspective to Fame and Race

The Dallas filmmaker's new project, *Myth of a Colorblind France*, was completed last summer, but its roots can be traced back decades.



First Run Features

Alan Govenar's fascination with France began when he was a child, listening to his father's records.



As the Dallas documentary filmmaker and multimedia artist grew older, his appreciation for music and French culture deepened. So although his latest film, *Myth of a Colorblind France*, was completed last summer, its roots can be traced back decades.

“With the way my career has evolved, so many areas of interest converged together,” Govenar said.

“The projects I do grow over the years. They emerge over a long period of time.”

After premiering at Dallas VideoFest and opening virtually in dozens of markets last fall, the film is available on DVD and via digital platforms beginning Tuesday.

The feature-length documentary explores the legacy of African American artists and cultural figures who have emigrated to Paris to separate themselves from racism in their home country in favor of friendlier and supposedly colorblind acceptance.

From dancer Josephine Baker in the 1920s to more contemporary names such as authors James Baldwin and Richard Wright, the trend takes on distressing undertones when considered in context with a curiously hostile perception of people of color in France from Arabic or African ancestry.

“It’s always been interesting to me the way French artists and intellectuals connected with African American culture, even if they had difficulty grasping the social reality from which it springs,” Govenar said. “It’s a history that can be romanticized, but it’s a history that’s very complex. Paris has long been a mecca for artists of all cultures.”

One of Govenar’s favorite boyhood records was a jazz compilation on a Parisian label featuring Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and others.

Flash forward to the 1980s, when he was commissioned to do a project called Living Texas Blues, which led to a book and anthology of recordings, plus three films about blues music in the state.

Govenar learned about a specific interest in the Texas blues scene in Europe. He was invited to Paris to organize concerts with three performers who he profiled, including South Dallas singer Osceola Mays.



“The reception amazed me,” Govenar said. “It just propelled my work in France.”

Among those attending those “Texas in Paris” shows was Michel Fabre, the late author and professor at the Sorbonne who dedicated his career to writing about African Americans in Paris. They stayed in touch and became friends.

Govenar began making annual trips to France for various projects, but it wasn’t until recently that he decided he wanted to pull his work and research together.

“One person led me to another,” Govenar said. “The question for me was how to bring it to fruition.”

He recalled his conversations with Fabre and also with Houston native Monique Wells, a veterinary pathologist who conducts tours of African American sites in France. She coined the phrase that became the title of Govenar’s film.

“That really stuck with me,” he said. “Within French society, there is its own thread of racism that has existed since France was a colonial slaving nation, and it continues today — particularly as it’s directed toward people of African or Arabic descent.”

The film’s roster of interviewees includes psychoanalyst and jazz aficionado Francis Hofstein, poet James Emanuel, historian Tyler Stovall, filmmaker Thomas Allen Harris, graffiti artist Quik, hip-hop producer Ben the Glorious Bastard, and African drummer Karim Toure, among others.

“Everyone had a different story,” Govenar said. “I wanted the film to be told through their voices. They’re persuasive and have different points of view. I didn’t want to editorialize or make an authoritative history.”

Coincidentally, another of Govenar’s interdisciplinary projects, called [Truth in Photography](#), will launch on Friday.

The interactive online effort is an extension of Govenar’s longtime collaborations with the New York-based International Center of Photography.

The project aims to examine photography and social change through a global collection of diverse images integrating photojournalism, fine-arts photography, and other disciplines.



“The idea was to create a forum that would bring together different forms of photography that are not often seen together,” Govenar said. “It’s both timely and timeless to look at issues of self-representation, connected to so many of the important points of conflict and crisis that we’re experiencing in the United States and around the world.”

The site will be updated quarterly as it incorporates various curators to focus on three recurring themes: looking for truth in a digital age, the ethics of truth, and community and cultural identity.

“It’s very much an open-ended forum,” Govenar said. “It’s going to continue to evolve.”

—TODD JORGENSON