

Films show passion, complexities of their maker

By Amy Hotz
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The passions, sounds and colors of New Orleans run through the veins of Maurice M. Martinez.

He grew up there and his family, he says, has lived there so long, you can find the names of his ancestors in the city's very first census.

But Martinez left The Big Easy with its segregation and unequal educational opportunities decades ago. In 1954, after earning a B.A. from Xavier University in New Orleans, he moved to Michigan for his M.A., spent two years in the army, returned to Michigan and finally ended up in New York where he taught courses in education.



Dr. Maurice Martinez, a professor at UNCW, has a film showing in the upcoming Cine Noir Film Festival. Staff Photo by PAUL STEPHEN

There one night, as Martinez slept soundly in his bed, he heard the voice of his dead grandmother.

"It's two or three days before Mardi Gras and she came to me in a dream. She says, 'Get on down there.' And I somehow got a flight down and I didn't know what I was doing, but I took my camera and I got in the car and I just drove around," he said. "And every time I saw an Indian, I took a picture."

Those first dozen or so photos of Mardi Gras Indians, and several return trips over four years, won the heart of the "Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas," Tootie Montana.

With Montana's permission, Martinez acquired a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and began filming his first documentary, "The Black Indians of New Orleans" (1975).

That was the beginning.

This year, the Cine Noir Black Film Festival, will feature Martinez's short, "Touché," one of the latest of about one dozen films Martinez has shot in his lifetime. "Touché" will be featured along with other short films and features by black filmmakers from this area and across the country at the festival, which runs March 12-15.

The words in "Touché" are spoken by Martinez in a jazzy, poetic tempo to the sound of him playing bass thumb piano and a cuíca, a type of Brazilian drum. The two-minute story ends with a surprise quip.

This is not his first work screened at Cine Noir. Martinez walked away with the Best Documentary award in 2005 and 2007. He's completed eight films in the past four years.

"He keeps churning them out. And they're very interesting subject matter," said Rhonda Bellamy, festival president.

Bellamy said she believes one of the things that makes Martinez special is that he understands how important a "slice of life" can be. The subjects he covers and the people he interviews would be lost to posterity without his filmmaking, she said. And it's important that these stories endure.

Between "Black Indians" and his most recent film, Martinez has seemed to stick with documentaries, short and long, about a variety of subjects. But they always seem to teach, which is another of his many passions. And that, too, runs through his blood. When asked about his race, Martinez says he always answers, "Hispanic Latino African AmerIndian French Seventh Ward New Orleans Creole."

Those who first meet him may walk away from a conversation uncertain if he's a teacher, musician or filmmaker.

The answer is he's all of those. But no single passion seems to define him. They're all rolled up in his good-natured personality, the wise proverbs that spontaneously roll out his mouth in any variety of languages and the kind eyes that squint when he's particularly pleased with something.

His mother, who everyone called "The Dutchess," founded The Martinez Nursery School in 1934, the first kindergarten for children of color in the state of Louisiana, Martinez said. It started with 15 children of friends and grew to more than 400 before Katrina destroyed it in 2005. It had been passed down to her younger son.

Martinez himself taught eight years in public high schools in New Orleans and 24 years at Hunter College, C.U.N.Y. in New York City before starting at the University of North Carolina Wilmington in 1994.

"I'd been absorbing for 24 years in New York and now I wanted to just relax and squeeze the sponge and let whatever comes out," he said.

Martinez is a professor in the Donald R. Watson School of Education.

In New York, he wore an army field jacket and a pair of Timberland boots just to blend in. Life was tough for the kids and that made instruction tough for the teachers.

Here, life isn't quite as challenging, but teaching is never easy.

Martinez lightly pounds his hand on the table for emphasis when he talks about how one-third of all new teachers leave the profession after three years. After five years, he says, about half leave.

Because teaching is a passion, he made a film about that, too. "No Teacher Left Behind" screened at UNCW just last week.

"You never know what imprints, how you have affected the lives of students," he said. "That's why I think teaching is the noblest of professions because you help people in many ways, giving them skills and knowledge and joy in their hearts to do and pursue whatever their life's work might be."

In all his films, whether it's "No Teacher Left Behind" or "Touché," you'll notice the music. The beats he chooses seem to say as much about the emotions expressed as the words do. Martinez counts music as one more of his passions. In some music circles he's known as "Marty Most Jazz Poet."

While working from 1966 through 1968 as a research associate professor at the Universidade Federal da Bahia Brazil, he put together a "free jazz" band of three Brazilians and two Americans and did a 14-concert tour across the country.

Martinez played a bass he named Matilda.

"Whenever we had a conflict, and there were a few along the road, I would say, 'Allow me, please to present my love, mi amor . . . She has a forma fina . . . And she sings in four voices, or four chords. But she's handicapped, she only has one foot, one leg, you know, the peg. And besides that, we have a ticket for her to sit next to me on the bus.' "

The film, "Drumscussion," which Martinez produced in Wilmington, put Brazilian and New Orleans drummers in the same room and just letting them go.

"And what came out of that is just fabulous," he said, squinting happily. "It's wonderful. Life has been good to me, and I'm thankful that I can continue doing these stories that seem to pop up all over the place."

After an hour and half-long interview on Mardi Gras day with Martinez, it was easy to see there were too many layers to peel. But one thing is clear: Martinez is a man who is passionate about life – and not afraid to show it.