

'REALLY DIVERSE EVENTS'

CAJUN HELL UNDERTAKES A FUNDRAISING BLITZ BY BRAD GOINS

THE DOCUMENTARY FILM *Cajun Hell* investigates the impact of punk music in Louisiana Cajun country by looking at the life of the area's premier punker, the late Criss "Drunk" Bennett of Ville Platte. Work on the documentary goes on. A recent public screening introduced film enthusiasts to a movie that's the length of a feature film. Filmmaker Eric Dunn says the documentary is "now a good, manageable length."

Even as something like a final version of the film is being assembled, new footage is being shot. In recent months "a lot of people" who knew Bennett have agreed to be interviewed for the film. Dunn recently interviewed two key figures in the story: Bennett's ex-wife Liz and son Christopher Doyle.

When things are going well, the primary expense of shooting new footage is the gas for the vehicles. "We operate pretty slim," says Dunn. "If a piece of equipment breaks down, we have to fix that. If a car breaks down, we have to fix it." The company owns all the equipment it uses for shooting. Eventually, the big expenses involved with getting the movie into film

festivals and arranging for a widespread release to the general public will have to be covered.

To generate revenue for this effort, Dunn and production manager Dana Cormier have been scheduling fundraising shows as fast as they can.

As part of this fundraising juggernaut, Dunn and Cormier put together no fewer than 10 shows in July. The shows generate revenue and (perhaps just as important) create a buzz about the movie. But the revenue won't be sufficient to meet the ultimate fundraising goals for the project. Dunn hopes to eventually find one or more investors who will give the project a large-scale bump in funding. "We're looking for any ideas that will step up our fundraising efforts."

Dunn and Cormier are presently try-

ing to organize a festival. "We're wanting to do a pretty big deal — not just music," but "really diverse events, diverse kinds of music, new local bands," says Dunn.

One way to be diverse is to introduce something that really does seem entirely new. I'm guessing one event that fell into that category was the work of chalk performance artist Ricki Kennedy, who, in Cormier's words, created "an art/music fusion by throwing up some sick art to live music" at My Place on August 11.

Dunn and Cormier are seeking bands, vendors, volunteers and sponsors for their fundraising efforts.

Fundraising shows in the near future include an event set to take place on Saturday, Aug. 20 at 9 pm at Nate's Place in Lake Charles. (Cover is \$8 for guests 18

and older; \$5 for guests 21 and older.) Also, on Monday, Aug. 22, Ryan Guidry, Andrew David, John Guidroz and Matt Fontenot will perform at 8 pm at Micci's Piano Bar in Lake Charles. (Cover is \$5; guest must be 21 or older.)

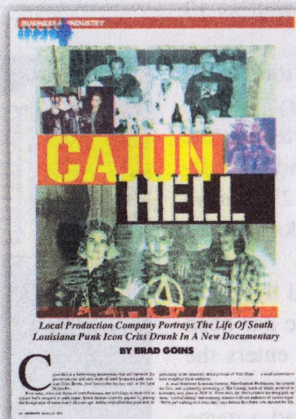
A CAJUN LOVE OF FAMILY

The film *Cajun Hell* will portray the life of Criss "Drunk" Bennett, a musician who created a tempest in a teapot when he introduced the sleepy town of Ville Platte to punk music.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Bennett's short career was his decision to remain in or near Ville Platte rather than move to a big city where he could obtain at least a fair degree of fame and wealth. One of Dunn's objectives in making the film has been to determine why Bennett stayed. His recent interviews with Liz and Christopher Doyle may have yielded some new answers.

Bennett "loved Louisiana and the people here," says Dunn. "He loved everything about [the area]. He wouldn't have been comfortable anywhere else."

"He treated band members as family,"



The author initially reported on *Cajun Hell* in the Jan. 20 edition of *Lagniappe*

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said Cormier. "He was part of the Cajun culture in which families stay close together; he lived a Cajun lifestyle of close-knit families and friends."

Christopher Doyle, who is now 12, found it "amazing" that Bennett stayed in Ville Platte, rather than strike out for large cities.

In the rough cut of the film, dozens of friends and musicians are interviewed about Bennett's career and the ways in which it influenced the area. Among the big names who share their memories of Bennett are musicians Dege Legg and Dax Riggs, and record producer Floyd Soileau. Former band members tell colorful tales of drunken performances and brawls, wanton destruction by band members and fans, and entire albums recorded in a single day. Bennett was a prolific songwriter. He had a gift for generating humorous song titles, such as "Drunk on Arrival" and "Surrounded by Idiots."

The cover art he created had the same off-kilter humor as the song titles.

There's some discussion of the meaning of the term Cajun in the film. One interview subject advances the opinion that the small towns where Bennett spent most his time — Ville Platte, Mamou, Eunice, Opelousas — are the heart of the Cajun world.

Bennett did find himself seriously restricted by the lack of big venues in Ville Platte. From 1997 to 2005, his primary band, Mystic Fix, was headquartered in Lafayette. There he was 40 miles from his home in Ville Platte and 50 miles from Mamou, where close relatives lived.

Bennett and Mystic Fix also made their way to the Lake Area, performing at such venues as Nate's Place, the Attic and the Kilowatt Club. The band was even headquartered in Sulphur for a brief time.

It appears that Bennett never met a show or venue he didn't like. One ex-band member said that Bennett would gladly have played four shows a day if he could have arranged it.

While Bennett never lived in a big city, he did play shows in New Orleans,

Houston, Miami and other large southern metropolitan area. One of his bands, LA phantom, played at the SXSW Festival in Austin and was named best band in Louisiana by the Hard Rock Café in New Orleans.

The move to Lafayette brought a greater selection of venues, but it certainly didn't bring financial security. "Money was always an issue," says Dunn. "He never had a car or a license. He learned to deal with it." In early years, band members requisitioned rides from friends whenever they needed to move instruments and equipment to a venue.

In 2007, one day after he signed a recording contract, Bennett failed to awaken when he went to sleep after a celebratory party. It was one of those mysterious deaths that have come to be associated with larger than life rock figures.

Some of Bennett's friends and fellow musicians sound as if they're still mourning the loss. Several are emphatic that if Bennett hadn't demonstrated that punk music could be performed successfully in the area they would never have become performers themselves.

LOOKING FOR BIGGER THINGS

Eric Dunn has worn most of the hats for this production. He's been director, photographer, film editor and producer.

"We're excited," he says. "There's a really big buzz (about the film) around town."

Completing a film is like finishing a novel or a symphony. It's one of the really big tasks an individual can undertake in the course of a life. Dunn is decidedly on the downhill side of the task. "We're feeling good," he says. "We're working hard. We're looking for bigger things."

For information about the project, including trailers, a web video series, a link to the film's Facebook page and specifics about fundraising shows, visit CajunHell.com. You can also get more information by calling Dana Cormier at (337) 540-2902.



ABOVE:
Bennett's son Christopher Doyle on the drums.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Director Eric Dunn; a recent fundraising show and booth for the Cajun Hell film.

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