

Are STL Blacks Keeping Each Other Down? New Documentary, "City of Haterz," Says Yes

By Nicholas Phillips Tue., Jul. 12 2011 at 9:06 AM



Graphic by Virgil Boyd Jr.

Do area blacks suffer from the "slave mentality"?

In his recent documentary, *City of Haterz*, local filmmaker **Horace Williams** explores a combustible hypothesis, best summed up by **DJ Cub** of *Derrytys* in the first few minutes of the film:

"[St. Louis is] a 'crabs in the barrel' city. One person tries to make it out, and the other person pulls 'em right back down in the barrel."

This kind of self-criticism isn't exactly a sure-fire way for a black citizen to make friends in his or her own demographic -- just ask comedian **Bill Cosby** or academic **John McWhorter**, who've voiced similar sentiments on a national level, only to be reviled for airing the community's dirty laundry or for minimizing racism.

And yet, what's remarkable about *City of Haterz* is how, one after the other, Williams interviews ordinary black St. Louisans -- not celebrities who might make a buck from controversy -- and they, too, openly voice the same concerns as Cosby and McWhorter.

And their concerns center not on all of black America, but rather, on St. Louis in particular, which Williams submits has become known as a "City of Haterz"

due to what seems to be a complacent, jealous, and contentious attitude amongst blacks which seems to thrive here and is well recognized by outsiders and by migrants from other major cities and regions of the United States.

What kind of hatin' are we talking about? Take **Derrick**, for example, who's asked by his white bosses to discipline other black workers who've slacked off under his supervision. The latter accuse him of taking the side of "the white man" -- a situation in which, he says, "they're hating on me when I'm trying to do the right thing."

Or take **Honorace**, another interviewee. She admits to being "aggressive" with her son's black teachers because she insists he get a good education. When a white parent comes in with a concern, the teachers treat it as legitimate, but when she does, it's "not because I want the best for him....[they think] I'm just upset....because I'm a single mother raising a child."

These are just two of more than 25 interviewees, many of whom share their own stories of "hatin'."



Image via

Filmmaker Horace L. Williams

For his part, Williams -- formerly a videographer for the [Marine Corps](#), now operator of [Low Blow Video and Photography](#) -- suggests in his film that this mentality might be a legacy of slavery.

To the extent a "slave mentality" infests St. Louis, Williams says, it's "an attitude when people basically don't strive for anything better in their lives and accept the fate that life hands them instead of taking control of their futures; a mentality where people may feel trapped because they may not see a way out of that condition of life, so no one wants to

see others move ahead or make advances out of that environment, and prefer[s] them to stay within the same negative conditions. The slave label ultimately alludes to possibility that many slaves had a similar attitude, which allowed their slave masters to retain control for so many years."

Indeed, Williams spends a large chunk of his film discussing St. Louis' history of slavery. But his two main sources on the subject don't dwell on the horror of that past; rather, they mine it for stories of dignity.

Lynne Jackson, the great-great-granddaughter of **Dred Scott**, talks at length about her famous ancestor -- yet not about the famous court decision that denied his personhood so much as his own perseverance. (After all, it was Scott himself, along with his wife, who walked up the Old Courthouse steps and filed their own petition for freedom -- a freedom the Scotts won in the [final chapter of their lives](#).)

Williams also gives a lot of air time to **Dr. John Wright**, a local historian who touts black St. Louisans of historical significance: **Elizabeth Keckly** (who wrote invaluable memoirs on the Lincoln White House), **William Wells Brown** (one of the first American black writers) and **John Berry Meachum** (an early black educator).

These bright spots aside, Williams seems to believe that slavery (in addition to poverty and the drug trade) may be indirectly to blame for the current level of violence among black St. Louisans.

"The abundance of black-on-black violence," Williams intones at one point, "and the high murder rate....could in fact be a trickle-down effect of the 'slave mentality.'"

One woman, sitting in a barber shop, observes this mindset in everyday interactions. "We're so full of self-hate," she says, "we don't even know how to speak to somebody, just to say, 'Hi.'"

No one in the film denies that racism from whites still plays a role in St. Louis; in fact, local activists **Norman R. Seay**, **Percy Green** and **John Bordeaux** all weigh in and point out that it lingers to this day. So do many other area residents who complain of racial profiling, of neighborhoods unwelcoming to blacks, and of dirty looks they get while shopping (or going on a date with someone from another color).

However, Williams states up front that his film concerns itself equally with both problems *and* solutions. His big goal, he says, is to "find some positive directives for the advancement of our city," and those ideas are sprinkled throughout the interviews, especially toward the end.

For writer **Anthony McDonald**, a big change needs to occur regarding marriage. "We

need to teach our daughters that they need to depend on their husbands," he says, "and we need to teach our sons that they need to love and honor their wives."

Poet **Reginald Stringfellow** says it's not just about marriage, but about parenting: "Black men knowing how to manage their money and their children. That's the key. If you lose that, you've lost everything."



DJ Cub of Derrty DJs

The aforementioned Dr. Wright thinks it's about education -- that African-Americans in St. Louis will "feel better" once they learn about their predecessors in our national history.

But perhaps DJ Cub -- the one who, early on, makes the "crabs in the bucket" analogy -- concludes on the most memorable note:

I love St. Louis, for real. St. Louis goin' be back on top one day. It's just the damn hater-ation need to stop.