

Tab Benoit Interview Part Two: “Government Needs to Tell People the Truth”

Series by Keith Harmon Snow and Georgianne Nienaber
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The soul of Louisiana is calling to us through her artists, musicians and writers. As this series on Louisiana unfolds, people have written to us asking what they can do to help. Perhaps a way to begin is to listen to the soul of Louisiana. Cyril Neville asked that Tab Benoit give us a copy of some music he and Benoit produced for a Voice of the Wetlands CD compilation. The music gives “voice to the water and land, to the swamps and marshes.”^[1] The songs are all about how to fight to keep what is about to be lost.

“Louisiana Sunrise,” a song by Cyril Neville and Rusty Kershaw, was recorded during the first week of January 2005. Katrina hit on August 29, 2005. The prescient soul of Louisiana was crying for help months before the wreck. [Listen](#)

What follows now is Part Two of our interview with Tab Benoit—one of the many important voices of the wetlands. Hear his voice as he mourns the loss of a 200 year-old Cajun culture where English was long a second language—a culture that unfolded with the first French settlers who were later joined by freedom-seeking Acadians from Nova Scotia. Listen as Tab Benoit explains that disaster preparedness meetings organized by the Federal Emergency Management Agency prior to Katrina were about saving defense and oil infrastructure and not about saving people. FEMA organized a mock hurricane response program called Hurricane PAM in 2004 in Baton Rouge that cost taxpayers millions of dollars but never had the people’s interests in mind to begin with. Listen as he wonders what happened to the civics lessons he learned as a child in the bayou schools.

Tab Benoit was a central star in the mammoth IMAX theatre film presentation [Hurricane on the Bayou](#), which has been running across the country in IMAX theatres. Listen to Tab Benoit’s palpable distress as he tries to distance himself from the IMAX theatre presentation he stars in, which has become a public relations tool for Shell Oil and the bigger oil companies behind it.

The Entergy IMAX Theater in New Orleans was sponsored by the utility company that declared bankruptcy, after years of record profits, and transferred Katrina “losses” to taxpayers, but continues to ignore utility problems in the Ninth Ward and Gentilly. A plaque on the Entergy New Orleans’ IMAX wall listing the sponsors of the Audubon 2000 “Wetlands” Campaign” is a Who’s Who of environmental and social devastation all over the world: Chevron-Texaco; Dow Chemical, Exxon-Mobil, Entergy, Freeport McMoRan, Pepsi, IBM, Shell Oil, Textron, Petroleum Helicopters, McDermott International, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The Audubon Nature Institute produced Hurricane on the Bayou in partnership with Chevron, Dow Chemical, Dominion Oil, the Weather Channel, and several “philanthropic” foundations. The film green washes the truth— there is not one word about big oil and defense and not a single image of the vast oil infrastructure that blankets the Gulf onshore, offshore, underground and underwater.

Listen to Tab Benoit and know that he is speaking his truth, and it is an apt truth that resonates with those who are suffering from the multinational corporate structure we call “government.” Tab Benoit loves the land he grew up on, and he speaks from his heart for the plants, the wildlife, the cypress forests and native bayou peoples decimated by our thoughtless consumption of the earth.

Part Two

“The only reason I got into music is because I knew it was the one talent that I had that I could help others with. It was a bigger, more universal way to help. I don’t just play music to try to sell records or to try to be cool or try to be famous; I would rather not to tell you the truth. I’d rather just be a regular old guy. It was killing me when I was flying for a living... I wasn’t doing the thing that I was supposed to be doing.”

—Tab Benoit, Houma, LA, November, 2007

Truth

“The first thing that needs to be done is the government needs to tell people the truth. I thought that the FEMA meetings would be that opportunity. These are public meetings, here’s a chance to tell everybody that lives in the lower ninth ward. It was a good opportunity to get everybody to evacuate and get everybody out of there. They didn’t talk about people. They didn’t mention that there would even be people there. It took me a while to understand it.

“You walk out of these meetings and you hear two hours of jargon, and you really don’t know what you heard, until you walk out and it starts going through in your head. I’d listen to everything they had to say, and reviewed it in my head, and I’m sitting in front of the building talking to people, and it just hit me. They didn’t even talk about *people*. You wouldn’t have noticed that they didn’t talk about people because they were so involved in all this other stuff that you had to go back and see what they didn’t say to figure out what they were gonna do.

“And what they didn’t say was anything about people. And I was like, man, New Orleans is in deep trouble. The [Hurricane] **Pam** scenario was about a hurricane that would hit port directly and it would push the river over the banks of the levies there and the river would flood New Orleans. But to me they just seemed more concerned with the oil stuff and the oil port than about the city of New Orleans, which is why I really started focusing in on all of the musicians that I could get in New Orleans.”

Silencing the Voice of the Wetlands

“Our organization [Voice of the Wetlands] is wide open for anybody to jump in. We’re trying to hold back all of the powers so that we can gather more people to be a force against these powers. If you talk to Walter Williams^[2] [creator of Mr. Bill from Saturday Night Live fame], they thought this American wetlands thing would be great, until Shell Oil goes all over it. Then it’s like he

[Williams] can't talk about oil now, because Shell is funding it? When you see the IMAX thing, the first thing you see is Shell Oil. As long as it's like that, we're never going to fix it. As long as Shell Oil is funding the awareness tools, we're never going to fix this.

"I know that that film was a weird circumstance, because we had made this movie called Hurricane Warning, and it was about what could happen. And we started working on this project two years before Katrina. And then right at the end of filming, right on cue, the whole [Katrina] thing happened. So they had to get more money to come in to finish it with Katrina added in. [special effects and Katrina footage]

"There were new days of filming and a lot more editing and trying to get the storyline right. It must have been edited 10 or 20 times to make it all fit the story. So they needed more money, so I'm guessing that's where Shell came in.

"We didn't touch oil [in the IMAX film], so it was Shell-friendly. It's a good introduction, but it aggravates me when we see 'we can just do it, we know how.' And we aren't doing any of it, and we're not going to do any of it as long as these oil companies are making record profits and all, as long as the EPA restrictions are lifted off the oil companies as they are right now.[3]

"And all of the other things that happened after Katrina to help the oil companies out have hurt us worse. Those things have never been talked about and have never been addressed. They were only talked about when they happened, when the EPA restrictions were lifted, which means they put an oil rig anywhere anytime, they can dig new canals." [4]

Black Gold Rush

"Right after the hurricane, they were digging new canals. I saw, I was out there in my boat. Here the world just saw us flood because of this [Katrina], and we did get introduced to the fact that the wetlands are our real protection, and here oil companies are right in here instantly digging again. It's wide open. It's a gold rush down here. This town [Houma] is, probably after Katrina, another 30 or 40 thousand people. This town was 80,000 before Katrina, and now it's way beyond. All of that is oil. That's the only real industry out here.

"My dad owns a pipe company; he's the guy that puts threads on the pipes so that they can screw them together. That's all he does is mass production threading, but he's got patents on them. All these companies have to come to him for high-pressured gas well applications. He has to do the work. He's made millions, and I was always taught by my family—I don't think I'm any different than most American families—if it's legal, and you can make a living doing it, then it's good. And I didn't believe that. And I still don't believe that. Just because it's legal, doesn't mean it's good."

Killing the Delta

"But then again my family will gladly move out of here. They don't have any ties here, not like me. I love this place. I understand the importance of Louisiana, for the United States to survive, for the globe to survive. You hear all about this global warming, and you look at all the stuff that supposedly causes it, and the stuff that could be fixing it. Everybody knows that the delta of a river, that those lush forests of swamps and trees are like natural filters, and oxygen makers. And we just killed a huge amount of it. We killed the third largest river on the planet's delta. We killed one of

our big atmosphere scrubbers. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that maybe we should pay more attention to the delta of the Mississippi river."

Saving the Swamps

"If they were gonna tell us honestly, you're gonna have to move because we're going to open to the river back up into here, and we're gonna buy your place off—this is not anything new, they've done this before. These man-made lakes. They buy people's property off because they're gonna raise the water level. If they were gonna tell us that they were gonna flood this area, I would go for it. I can at least put a camp out here on stilts, and live farther north where it's not gonna flood, that's no problem for me. As long as I know that we can still have swamps and marshes.

"There's nothing more beautiful or alive than a swamp. It's the most living thing on the planet, and it's also the most delicate. If we're gonna show that we're gonna protect the planet like that, I'm all for it. Why not? This thing [the Louisiana Delta] should be a national wildlife preserve like the Florida Everglades. The Florida Everglades is still a wildlife preserve but the only reason it is, is because they're not drilling it—yet. They got 9 billion dollars and I hear they have more for something else. I've got the feeling that these things will be handled the same way. [5]

"The Florida Everglades are not connected to the Gulf like we are here. They're surrounded by beach hard coastline. They actually have rocks, but we don't, because everything here was built by the river. This is all black jack mud that was all sediment. It's a different scenario then they have. There are a lot more reasons to fix this than to fix that [the Everglades]. Look at the culture, the music, and the food [here]."

English as a Second Language

"Here we [Cajuns] were forced to speak English. If you go to Lafayette and everything, Lafayette and that area west still speaks French and they keep French important. Here, my grandparents didn't learn English in school. Everything was totally French here. They learned English from Texaco. Texaco bought 70% of [Terrebonne] Parish; they were kind of forced into learning English and changing their ways of living. As far as I'm concerned, that's when the culture started dying, right there. It was stripped away for industry purposes. [6]

"Which is kind of aggravating with me [and] a lot of people is that you see Spanish going up everywhere and people are allowed to speak Spanish and actually have TV and billboards and they're trying to get us to learn Spanish, instead of trying to make those people conform to English like they made us conform.

"We were real Americans down here. This is where the French people came and mixed with the Indian people, before the thirteen colonies, this was already going on down here. This was the real melting pot. This town was not founded by Acadians from Canada; this town was founded by French people from France, who came here and mixed and lived with Indian people. That's my heritage: French and Indian. I mean, that's as American as you're going to get. Here's Europeans coming in and mixing with the natives, not taking it over, not killing them, not forcing them out of their place, but living with them. [7]

"To force Americans to speak English but allow the Mexicans or Spanish to come in and try to get

us conform to their language doesn't seem right at all. Sometimes I think this country does things totally backwards. And I would love to see that change because we all want to believe that we're the best country on the planet, but right now it's very hard to believe that. I think we do have the ability to do that, I think that the founding fathers had a good idea, but it wasn't carried through."

Warning from the Founding Fathers

"All of the things that they talked about when they were forming this form of government that we live under, they warned us about these times, about giving up freedom for security. They warned us about being afraid and letting fear run your decision-making in your country. They warned us about allowing corporations and industry to get bigger and more powerful than government itself. It's happening right now. Oil is more powerful than government, and we're afraid of terrorism, so we'll give up all of the freedoms that we can to try to make it seem like we're safe, when we're definitely not safer than we were before. If anything, we're more vulnerable than we were before 9/11.

"Showing the pictures that they showed during Katrina, where it took five days for the military to get to New Orleans, did not do us any justice according to the rest of this world and how they view our security forces.

"The people that we're fighting [in Iraq] have hardened bunkers with permanently mounted guns in all of their cities. We don't have any of that. Everything that we have is mobile. And most of it is [in] another country right now. The security thing and this terrorism thing is killing us. This was huge, what just happened with this veto override [of the Water Act]. [8]

"That's the first time in history that that's happened. How can anybody not see what just happened? Here is a water bill, which we're included in. It's all about managing rivers better because all of the rivers in this country need to be managed, and as a result Atlanta is about to run out of water. There's already a town in Tennessee that only gets water for three hours per day, because they got no river water coming through there. They got rivers in the vicinity, but they're not able to use them.

"This Water Act is supposed to help all of this. This is pertinent, going on right now and the president is saying I'm vetoing it. Give me 200 billion for Iraq, and I'm vetoing everything else. Everything in this country, the bridge in Minneapolis, that's a federal government owned bridge, that's not Minneapolis' bridge. They didn't even have a plan to fix that, for months. Because all of the money and concern is in Iraq. That's about the biggest case of mismanagement I've ever seen in my life, and I'm not an expert on management, but I don't have to be. If the president is going to sit there and tell you, I'm going to veto everything that runs across my desk, even if it helps this country, I'm vetoing it, because I need 200 billion dollars for Iraq. And I have to give it up for the people in Congress to actually step up and override the thing [veto of Water Act]. It at least shows that some things in our constitution are still in place.

"How can we say we're the greatest country in the world when you see the Governor of Georgia saying Atlanta has 80 days of water left, and we've got no solution? With all of the scientists that we have in this country, and all of this technology and all of the advances that we make, we can't get water to a city that has a river flowing not too far from the city? There is water there.

"If you're the president, or the leader of a country, that's what you'd be doing. If you were really

the leader of a country, that's what you would do. You would find a way to speed up the process. The president is the only one that has the ability to speed up the process. That's his job. That's his description in the constitution. The president is the people's voice in Congress. So Congress has all of these rules they have to follow, and all of these procedural things they have to follow, but the president can break the procedure when it's necessary to help his people. He has that power. He has not used it [to help people].

“They taught us, the president is your voice, he's the peoples guy. I remember in elementary school, they taught us how to write letters to the president, and we wrote letters to the White House. Because they wanted us to understand that that door was open and here is how easy it is to use it. Well where is it? Why aren't we doing it? Why isn't it working? I've been very hard on people, encouraging them to get involved. You live in the system. As far as the constitution goes, you are the system. You are the voice. You are the power. You have to exercise and see if it works. If what we're doing in Iraq... I'm just telling you from what we're told... we're in Iraq trying to turn them into a democracy, trying to make them be more like the good old U.S.

don't want them to be like us.”

Witness for the Gulf

“This ain't working. This isn't right. This is not a democracy. I don't even think it's a Republic. I think it's an oil dictatorship, you know, run in a way that... well, I think we learned some things from Russia, the old iron curtain. If we only show through the media what we want them to see, then that's all they're going to believe. And we proved it right here, right under our nose, with the whole Katrina thing. We saw the difference between reality and the news. And they're very different. If that's what the country believes, everything that they're seeing on the TV, and only certain things are allowed to go through that media, well then the iron curtain is officially up.

“Twice a year I'm traveling the whole country. I talk to more people, real people, than I think anybody in government. I'm not just a musician who plays my show and then takes off after the show. I use it to open the door so that we can talk. There are always discussions after my shows with 10-20 people about what's going on. The reason is the real people out there are the ones that don't vote. Look at the numbers of the people who are eligible to vote, and look at the number of people who actually do vote. That's a huge chunk of people that aren't voting: the majority of people aren't voting. Because I think the majority of people know better, they know that the vote doesn't matter. They're looking for a way to change that. They're looking for a way to get involved. They're like, what do we do? They're waiting for somebody to tell them what to do. They know that something's not right.

“I'm trying to tell them that we've had too many people assassinated over shit like this. Don't wait for that leader. Go and find something to do. Dig, go dig. The Internet is a great tool for you to be able to get information right now. It's the revolution tool. Find a way to help. Find a way to change it. Believe me, they can't take millions of us out. They can take one out, but they can't take millions. More or less, I'm trying to encourage people to be a leader themselves and to try to spread

the idea that... get some truth behind you about something going on this country, which right here in New Orleans, we have tons of it.”

The Voices of the Artists

“All the artists are going to be the voices. Artists are the communicators. We see everybody, we go everywhere, we talk to people everywhere we go, we find out information, we found out stories, we tell stories ourselves, and I mean that’s where you’re going to get the news from. It’s come to the point right now where the news doesn’t matter; the news doesn’t count. So how are you going to get pertinent information from each other? The artists have a way to spread it. We have a way to spread it nationally, worldwide for that matter, which nobody really has here.

“There’s a difference between wanting to make a lot of money and wanting to make good art. The only reason I got into music is because I knew it was the one talent that I had that I could help others with. It was a bigger more universal way to help. We have a limited amount of time to leave a positive stripe on the planet with whatever talents God gave us and you know it just seems like music kept coming up as a way to help. It keeps showing its ability to do that because it’s not just about music. I don’t just play music to try to sell records or to try to be cool or try to be famous, I would rather not; to tell you the truth, I’d rather just be a regular old guy. It was killing me when I was flying for a living... I wasn’t doing the thing that I was supposed to be doing. I didn’t feel fulfilled, you know, that I was really doing the best for everybody in every situation. For my town, my state, my country, and the world... I just felt like there was something I wasn’t contributing.

“As soon as I started being a professional musician I felt this is the right place. Just keep going. It’s led me to everything that I’ve done. Like talking to you right now. Little did I know that my area would need the most help out of any area in this entire country. But there you go. There’s gotta be a reason why I’m here, why I know what I know, why I’ve seen what I’ve seen, and everything that I did before was a huge part of getting me involved in wetlands restoration. I saw it from the air, day to day, I would come in and talk about it and people would think that’s never going to happen in my lifetime. Every day I’m watching stuff wash away. Yes, this is going to happen in our lifetime. Learning it from the air, watching it from a bird’s eye view, it’s so much easier to see. All your questions are answered in a matter of minutes.”

[1] Liner notes. Voice of the Wetlands. www.voiceofthewetlands.com used with permission.

[2] For people in the NOLA area, Walter Williams will be on WWL, the CBS affiliate, Sunday morning, December 16, at 10:30 talking about why the oil industry is going to pay to restore the wetlands. They’re showing clips from his film about a class action lawsuit against big oil, and Williams will debate Chris John, representing the oil industry. Williams says, “Get ready for a wave of press about this subject in the coming weeks.” You can also watch the film at www.HealthyGulf.org

[3] On September 16, 2005, Senator James Inhofe, the Chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, and Senator David Vitter of Louisiana introduced [S. 1711](#), to allow the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to waive or modify the application of any requirement that is contained in any law under EPA's administrative jurisdiction, if it is necessary to respond in a timely and effective manner "to a situation or damage relating to Hurricane Katrina." On September

22, Senator Vitter and Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana introduced [S. 1765](#) and [S. 1766](#), identical bills to provide disaster relief and recovery incentives for Louisiana. These bills would allow the President to issue emergency permits under which any project carried out in response to the disaster would be considered to be in compliance with any applicable Federal law. Shadegg's [H.R. 3836](#), would require expedited issuance of permits for Katrina-related refinery reconstruction. Verbatim Source: RL33107 Emergency Waiver of EPA Regulations: Authorities and Legislative Proposals in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina September 29, 2005, www.opencrs.cdt.org/document/RL33107/2005-09-29%2000:00:00

[4] It is noteworthy that Inhofe introduced the bill on Sept. 15, just one day after Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff announced that he was exercising the power granted by the REAL ID Act to waive all laws in order to expedite construction of border fencing near San Diego. See: www.ombwatch.org/article/articleview/3091/1/315?TopicID=1

[5] Oil exploration has been ongoing in the Everglades area for 60 years. The Collier family retained the mineral rights to their land in the Everglades when they sold it to the federal government for the preserve in the 1970s. The government allows oil drilling as long as it doesn't harm the Everglades. The Collier Resources company currently draws crude oil from two well fields at opposite ends of the preserve. More than 110 mm barrels have been extracted to date. The oil is shipped in a 17-mile buried pipeline to tanker trucks that take the crude to Port Everglades, where it is shipped to Gulf Coast refineries. Oil drilling could increase to 10,000 bpd if all the requests are approved and oil is found below the surface. Seismic testing has been challenged by environmentalists over the years. See: www.gasandoil.com/goc/news/ntn20665.htm

Collier Resources is the primary holder of the oil and gas rights beneath the Everglades, which are estimated to hold about 40 million barrels of oil - enough to power the U.S. at current rates of consumption for two days. In 2002 Collier filed plans to explore and drill in beneath Big Cypress National Preserve, and the National Park Service gave its initial approval to the plan. In 2002, President Bush announced plans to spend \$120 million to buy oil and gas rights on 390,396 acres of federally protected land in the Everglades to safeguard them from drilling. The decision came as the president's brother, then-Gov. Jeb Bush was seeking re-election and amid plans for a major expansion of drilling operations on the western edge of the Everglades. Members of the Collier family contributed more than \$121,000 to Republican candidates in the last election cycle, including at least \$5,000 to Jeb Bush, according to the Washington-based Center for Responsive Politics. The buyout failed, and in 2006 Collier Resources began a search for new oil reserves beneath the Big Cypress National Preserve. The exploration plans call for dropping 5-pound explosives into 5,600 holes across 72 square miles. See: www.naplesnews.com/news/2006/apr/29/namesake_family_back_hunt_new_oil_reserves/?local_news

[6] The Cajun language is a mixture of French, Indian, African, and English.

[7] The French/Indian War was the result of most native tribes siding with the French settlers, with the exception of the Iroquois Indians who sided with the British. The first refugees from the French and Indian War were Acadian French deported by British authorities from Nova Scotia. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow used this exile as the background for his poem Evangeline.

[8] In November Congress gave Bush the first veto defeat of his presidency, and the Senate

approved the \$23 billion Water Resources Development Act, WRDA, by a wide majority. The House of Representatives also voted overwhelmingly to override Bush's veto. Bush had termed the Water Act a "pork barrel" with no merit. This statement is also noteworthy when one examines the no-bid contracts that were given to Bush cronies in the aftermath of Katrina. The 79 senators voting to override Bush's veto, included 34 Republicans who broke ranks with their party.

Note: The other members of the Voice of the Wetlands All Stars are: Big Chief Monk Boudreaux, Dr. John, Anders Osborne, George Porter Jr., Waylon Thibodeaux, Jumpin' Johnny Sansone, and Johnny Vidacovich.