



Mill Street Studios to transform Jackson

BY ORA REED

We often have casual encounters that can impact our lives in surprising ways years later. Such is the case in meeting Film Producer/Director Robert Schnitzer when he traveled to Mississippi to accept an award from the Jackson International Film Festival, which was founded by Edward St Pe, a long time resident of Jackson who now lives on the Coast. Recently shared information regarding Mill Street Studios made us aware of Schnitzer's personal involvement. When approached as to his specific role in this venture, he responded with an informative article, which we are sharing in its entirety, for it tells the Mill Street Studios story from its beginning.

"GHETTO TO GOLD" by Robert Schnitzer

Like his role model Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. before him, Chokwe Lumumba had a dream. The mayor had big plans for Jackson. It was January 2014. As our meeting wrapped up in City Hall that day, the legendary civil rights activist and attorney shared his plans for the city's most underserved, impoverished neighborhoods.

He leaned forward behind his desk and looked me in the eyes. "We're going to transform the ghetto into gold," he said.

Less than a month later, Chokwe was dead. He had passed away unexpectedly from undetermined causes.

Today, I remember those parting words as I walk among the twelve solid steel structures of industrial-riveted construction on Jackson's Mill Street that had been abandoned for decades. Weeds grow in the cracks of the crumbling sidewalks, most of the machinery still remaining are rusted hulks.

Hard to believe this massive cotton seed oil mill once employed hundreds of workers less than a mile from Mississippi's State Capitol. Like Memphis, TN and Tulsa, OK, downtown Jackson was once a thriving, upwardly mobile epicenter of Black entrepreneurship and industry at the turn of the 20th century.

But all that is long gone. Or is it?
Not by a long shot.



Schnitzer



Today, Mill Street Studios is the future home of a new, state-of-the-art motion picture and media production facility. The 5.5-acre campus has been repurposed by Dallas-based architect Arnold Hernandez, converting the massive silos and grain storage shelters into two 17,000 sf sound stages and two 6,000 sf studios. In addition, over forty office suites, a commissary and café, expendable and equipment rental stores, screening rooms and set fabrication mills are slated for construction. An on-site boutique hotel is also being discussed with several hospitality chains.

Less than two miles down the road from the MSS campus is the Mill Street Movie Ranch on 20 acres of raw land in a federally designated Opportunity Zone. "When the stars and studio executives fly into town on their private jets, they'll be landing at Hawkins Field, a city-owned cargo and private jet airport less than 3 miles away," according to Monte Reeves, co-chair of Mill Street Studios LLC.

His wife Charlotte Reeves, co-chair of MSS, said, "The response from real estate developers and Wall Street to our RFPs has been gratifying. They seem to recognize this venture as the vanguard for a dramatic urban renaissance."

MSS is being developed as an environmentally friendly campus. Its 216 average annual days of sunshine guarantee solar power as a viable energy source, supplemented, of course, by the electric grid. It's located on an elevated plain which provides a natural barrier to flooding. And it is located above an underground aquifer well to provide pure, sweet water that will be recycled for the many fountains and waterfalls planned for the property.

The studio expects to hire a full-time staff of over 250, providing job growth and an economic boost for the state capital and surrounding region.

The Mill Street Studios online waiting list was launched Oct. 1. First to sign up was Oscar-winning producer Gerald Molen (Schindler's List, Jurassic Park and dozens more hit features). Molen is currently preparing the southern romantic thriller Sweet By and By for my Los Angeles-based Movicorp Media. "Movicorp CEO Robert Schnitzer brought this new studio to my attention, and it may well be perfect timing for our mini-series."

Indeed, I'm on the board of Mill Street Studios LLC

Mill Street

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and no stranger to Mississippi. I directed The Premonition, my second feature, entirely in Jackson and immediately fell in love with the place. The film is currently available on Amazon Prime, Tubi and other streaming platforms, and showcases many of the Magnolia State's unique locations.

Those producers signing up on the waiting list will be the first to receive the MSS Rate Card when published next year. "We don't know the exact fees at this point, but they will be far less than those in Los Angeles and New York. In fact, Mississippi's cost of living is the lowest in the nation, its hospitality is legendary. And there's virtually no traffic jams on our highways," added Ms. Reeves.

In addition to producer Molen, the waiting list includes sign-ups by former CBS marketing exec Paul Friedman, currently planning the miniseries The Unexpected Danny Green, and CPA William Crim, former board member of Ridgeland, MS-based accounting firm Grantham-Poole. Mr. Crim will provide on-site production accounting services and help producers qualify for Mississippi's rebate incentive programs.

According to Nina Parikh, director of the Mississippi Film Office, "The addition of a production facility with multiple stages in central Mississippi would increase our ability to draw larger productions which have often located in surrounding states with established studios. Our cash rebate has been an exceptional recruitment tool, but infrastructure to support the industry is essential for continued growth. Mill Street Studios has the potential to meet this critical demand."

The Reeves expect to open the studio gates for business in Q4 of 2023. And perhaps somewhere in the heavens, a man

named Chokwe will be smiling.

For additional information, email Robert Schnitzer directly at Robert@millstreetstudios.com.

The Potential for Mill Street Studios is real, and what an outstanding economic impact this will have for the city of Jackson. I predict the presence of this facility will help unleash Mississippi's unique cre-

ative talents in the movie, TV and streaming industries in much the same way as it has proven so powerfully in the music industry. Throughout our nation, inner city improvement is essential. In this case, it is the redevelopment of a once thriving African American business district. The Old Mill has long been silenced but today gently awaits its birth. This is an idea whose time has come.



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