

Katrina “Scattered People Instead of Bombs” An Interview with Tab Benoit in Houma, LA Part One

“This Katrina thing was handled as if it would have been Iraq. It was handled in a military way for resources; resources were the main focus, and the only difference is that the hurricane scattered people instead of bombs. There were people getting shot, there were bodies everywhere, there was destruction everywhere, and there’s oil coming out of the ground like it never has before. Remind you of something else? The only difference is that we didn’t have the equipment and the ability to fight back.”

Tab Benoit, Houma, Louisiana November 2007

Tab Benoit is a Cajun man, first and foremost. He loves his country and is not afraid to say so. His pride in his heritage is only part of what drives this popular up-and-coming Louisiana blues musician to fight ferociously for a way of life and rich culture that are destined to be eradicated by big oil, big money, and big government. Billboard Magazine praises Benoit for a “thorough command of contemporary blues...splendid songwriting, gritty vocals and choice lead guitar work.”

The producers of the IMAX film, **Hurricane on the Bayou**, thought so too and cast Benoit as the star celebrity voice in the film, which has been viewed around the world since its premiere in 2006. The film was produced by the Audubon Nature Institute and partially financed by the State of Louisiana and Shell Oil.

More than simply *driven*—Tab Benoit seems possessed of a certainty that he is destined to be one voice of and for the Louisiana wetlands. He told us that many more voices were needed so that big government “cannot kill us all.” We heard more than once from residents of South Louisiana that government “is trying to kill us all.” We were also asked on several occasions whether Louisiana was still considered to be part of the United States, so Benoit’s statement did not surprise us.

Unhappy and unfulfilled as a pilot flying the pipelines for the oil companies, Benoit wanted to contribute more to his town, state, country and the world—and says so in no uncertain terms. Becoming a professional musician gave Benoit the opportunity to connect with a huge audience and tell them that, yes, the wetlands will disappear in our lifetime if we do not do something about it. Big oil and big government have a vested interest in this happening. He tried to get his warning across in, **Hurricane on the Bayou**, but feels his message was diminished and co-opted

when Shell Oil Company picked up the cost overruns after the film was extended to include Katrina.

Tab Benoit has a handle on the truth of what happened in southern Louisiana before Hurricane Katrina and after the flood of 2005 devastated New Orleans. He recently spent several hours on a bayou outside of Houma, Louisiana in the deepening November twilight and told his story. It was a story we had heard many times in the six weeks we spent in south Louisiana, but Benoit has an especially knowledgeable intellect and wants to use his celebrity voice to ensure that America hears and heeds the warning offered by Hurricane Katrina, the devastating floods, and the private and corporate take-overs, which followed.

He echoes Naomi Klein's assessment in her book, Shock Doctrine, that within days of Katrina and the floods that followed it was as if private contractors had recreated Baghdad's Green Zone on the bayous.¹ He talks about the importance of the earth's swamps, deltas and coastal wetlands, and without mentioning names he echoes the trauma and terror spread by big oil's unholy alliance with dictatorships throughout the vast mangrove wetlands of the Niger River Delta, the vast elephant swamps of Gambia, Gabon, and the once wild waterways of Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and Burma. But the story here is America, and we don't want to believe this can happen to us. Tab Benoit gives us a chance to look it straight in the eye and name it for what it is—disaster capitalism and war against America.

Tab Benoit is a strong man, and the passion in his voice belies the sorrows of a heavy heart. One can suppose he has shed tears over what has happened. Our investigative series to come will support the truth behind Benoit's observations, but first readers need to hear the voice of a local warrior. Tab Benoit is that voice, and he speaks for the environment, the people of Louisiana, and the truth.

We turned on the recorder and let Benoit roll with his story—uninterrupted—for almost three hours. Here is Tab Benoit's unedited testimony and witness to the wetlands, a hurricane, an IMAX movie, and what we all can look forward to if something is not done to change the chokehold alliance between industry, war, Homeland Security and private profit.

Here is some straight talk from a plainspoken Cajun man.

On the Attitude of Big Government Toward the Citizens of Coastal Louisiana

“We get the feeling that they just don't want us here.

“And my feeling is because of oil, because we've got a lot of it here. And we're the only state that doesn't get the off shore drilling money. We get our on shore money but not from off shore and we're the only state. So as we lose land and as that becomes off shore, then the federal government gets the royalties from that.

“Three miles off the coast is considered off shore. I mean just right here, right now, if I could take you up in an airplane and show you this; you’d see that the Gulf [of Mexico] used to be 25 miles from the Houma airport, now it’s three miles.”

Vanishing Wetlands

“There are thousands of [oil] canals dug.

“I used to fly pipelines. I flew pipeline patrols where you would go out in an airplane and fly pipelines to the marshes. You come to these [oil] hubs and your line may come off of that hub and come in another direction and.... it’s just like spider webs out there. All of these canals were dug to bring these pipelines in and to do drilling. And all of that costs money. The oil companies would rather not have to do all of that digging and dredging to put a rig in there. It costs them money. They would rather not go out and directional drill under the city to get the oil that’s under [the city].

“I mean, come on, and let’s face it. Wherever there is a swamp—or was a swamp—there’s oil. It’s like that across the planet. It’s not just us. We just happen to live on third largest delta system on the planet, which is the Mississippi River Delta, which has been a swamp for eons and has been producing oil for a long time. The fact is, we have a lot of oil here, and it’s a lot cheaper to get it if you can just drill straight down into it, you know, part of the reason they’re saying that New Orleans has sunk so much is because of taking oil from underneath. And every time you take oil out of a hole, something’s gotta give.

“We [Louisiana] have got 4,000 rigs in the Gulf, compared to 100 rigs in the rest of the Gulf. There are 4,100 rigs approximately in the entire Gulf of Mexico; Louisiana has 4,000. We’re not getting the money from the off shore drilling. We’re getting the money from on shore. We get the state’s given royalty rate from the on shore drilling but not from off shore. So it doesn’t take a genius to figure out why there’d be 4,000 rigs in Louisiana waters, and only 100 rigs outside of Louisiana waters that belong to the United States. The federal government gets our [Louisiana’s] share. It goes straight into the federal fund. That’s been our big issue; [and] we’ve fought for it.”

Big Oil Money

“After Katrina it was like pulling teeth to get something through Congress to give us some offshore royalty back, but they didn’t give us a percentage. They gave us \$20 million per year. It’s \$20 million per year for the first 10 years and then something else after that. And it’s not even a percentage. The amount of money coming out of here you’d never know. Nobody knows. I don’t think [we are] allowed to know. Because it’s *that* much.

“Here’s where the oil port is. Just 20 miles southeast of here is Port Fourchon, where all the imported oil and the Gulf oil comes in that runs through a pipeline up to the refineries. I’ve been saying that we produce 60% of our own oil but I’ve seen recently on the news that we import 60% of our oil now. So, we only produce 40% of what we use. So if we’re importing 60% that

means Louisiana is that much more important because this is where the oil port is. Because we have coastal oil refineries.

“MR. GO stands for Mississippi River Gulf Outlet. It was a canal that was dug just south of New Orleans, coming out of the 9th ward and St. Bernard parish—this canal was dug to go straight out to the Gulf. But it runs to two major refiners. What’s behind the 9th ward? Two major refineries. Those things are running. The refineries are running. Nothing else is [running] in the ninth ward. [The lower Ninth Ward, mostly black and poor, has been depopulated since Katrina.] What else do you need to know? There it is. There are the answers.”

FEMA and Homeland Security Rescues Oil But Abandons People

“Those refineries were running before they even started rescuing people. The lights were on over there before the lights were on anywhere else. Because that was the concern. But if anyone would have gone to these meetings where they were talking about this before the hurricanes... believe me FEMA had plans for what was going to happen when New Orleans flooded. And even four years before the storm they had Hurricane Pam. Which they made up—it was a drill [practice run].

“The drill had nothing to do with people. All of those meetings that I attended, that I listened to, I didn’t hear them talk about people once. That’s why I started Voice of the Wetlands (www.voiceofthewetlands.com) because we had no voice. Nobody was acknowledging that there would be people here. It was all about oil, and infrastructure. You know the first things were refineries and oil ports. Those are the first things on the lists of things to do. And that’s exactly what happened.

“I get very aggravated with people thinking that FEMA messed up [after Katrina]. Or that it was a mistake. It was no mistake. This was a plan, they followed it to perfection, they ended up coming out and blaming this Michael Brown cat, who wasn’t even in New Orleans. [Michael Brown was the Director of FEMA] He wasn’t allowed in New Orleans until Homeland Security let him in. He was kept in Baton Rouge, and he said that when he was testifying before a congressional committee. The big problem was Homeland Security—and what their agenda was.

“As soon as Homeland Security took over FEMA, people down here started paying attention. I can’t say people in New Orleans were because they never had to deal with FEMA. Down here we flood every three or four years from a storm event. But New Orleans doesn’t flood as often, you know, when we hear Homeland Security took over FEMA, it’s like “Oh my god—now what?”

“So I really started paying attention to things and how things were run. When Homeland Security is running it, that’s a whole different agenda. It has nothing to do with rescuing people. Homeland Security is not a rescue operation.

“I did an interview with more than one person from another country. One in particular was a guy from Canada... we [FEMA] had ordered 20,000 more body bags after Katrina, from Canada. Somebody was investigating. And because they were saying 1300 people died, and we had

20,000 body bags in New Orleans and they ran out, and had to reorder another 20,000 body bags.”²

Blackwater, Terrorism and Casualty Counts

“They found out that Blackwater was killing people. Blackwater was just in there eradicating. If you didn’t make it past the checkpoint and got to the dome or the convention center, or the bridge, or whatever, you were fair game.

“They were claiming that they would deputize to confiscate guns. But they were told to shoot whenever they felt like it.”³

“Everybody here knows that there are more than 1300 people dead. Everybody that actually got into the city and was trying to help, saw bodies floating, saw bullet wounds. The coroner knows what’s going on, and he ain’t talking. But he knows. Because I know for a fact from some other sources that he was saying to somebody, probably on a private level, that those bullet wounds were military or highly powerful wounds. [Our investigation noted the same reports from multiple, unrelated sources.]

Those were not 22 caliber pistols. Or 9-millimeter pistols. Let’s face it; criminals want to save their lives too, in a situation like that. It’s not some free-for-all. People are trying to get the hell out of there.”

Mass[ive] Media Cover-Up

“The way it was portrayed [by media] was totally wrong. And from what I hear from outside of this country, which really is embarrassing to me, is that our media doesn’t touch the stuff. I did an interview with a guy and he was blown away every time he opens a new door, it’s a whole other big story that nobody is covering. He said that this thing is like the ten-headed snake. You grab one head and the other one is ready to bite you.

“There is a story trying to go out on the Associated Press right now about oil and how that is why we’re in the situation we’re in right now, and the guy has submitted it, ready to go, and it’s really a huge step, but it hasn’t been out yet. This has been over a month that it’s been submitted and it hasn’t been out on the wire, so, is he gonna print it? That’s a whole different thing. At least someone is willing to listen.

“This Katrina thing was handled as if it would have been Iraq. It was handled in a military way for resources, resources were the main focus, and the only difference is that the hurricane scattered people instead of bombs. There were people getting shot, there were bodies everywhere, there was destruction everywhere, and there’s oil coming out of the ground like it never has before. Remind you of something else? The only difference is that we didn’t have the equipment and the ability to fight back. We didn’t have suicide bombers and the things that other people have.

“You get knocked out, and then you get killed. Look how easy this was to do. All the peoples’ records were wiped out. Their city hall, their courthouses, their medical records, and their hospitals—all of that is gone. How easy is it to start taking people out at that point? That’s the easiest thing in the world to be able to do.

“You hide it from the media, you keep the media focused on the [super] dome and the convention center, and you keep giving opinionated stories about what this picture is, and then you pull the wool over everybody’s eyes. I don’t know what we’re doing outside of this country, but I know what I saw right here. This is a major, major step into a civil war. Starting right here. With these resources right here. We have the biggest port in the country, the most important port, the mouth of the river, it will always be that way, and we have the oil port which is the most important port in the country. We have 40% of the oil refining capabilities in the country, almost half of the refining is sitting right on top of us right here [Louisiana]”

CNN Non-Interview

“I was on CNN to promote the IMAX film Hurricane on the Bayou. The interviewer asked me this five-part question, and I didn’t even finish answering the first part. Her question was longer than my answer. I didn’t even get to start getting into it, and they cut me off. I didn’t even talk about oil or anything. As soon as the cameras go out, I’m talking to someone at the local affiliate here, and they ask me “Is there anything down there we need to be knowing about?” and I was like yeah, we’ve got a [oil] rig in a neighborhood that was just blatantly in the wrong place.

“It’s a brand new neighborhood that’s going up, and there’s a brand new house being built, and then there’s a [oil] rig right next to it. Right there in the middle of a neighborhood. This is an expansion of a neighborhood that already existed. It didn’t look right. We couldn’t fight it; they had police protection around it... we didn’t know who these people were. There were unmarked cars sitting around this rig. We’ve never seen that before. You can usually walk right up to a rig and nobody is gonna stop you.

“There was no signage on the rig or anything like that, and from what I was told it was a Chinese rig.⁵

“I don’t know if that meant China is drilling here or if it’s a Chinese [oil] drill drilling with another company, but there were no signs.⁶ That’s kind of unusual too. Usually when you see an oil company that has a rig up, they’re gonna have signs all over the thing.

They’re proud of their logos. The people around here were kind of blown away but couldn’t do anything about it.”

“Local government... there’s no government in Louisiana. There is no such thing. As long as we have this much oil coming out of the ground, there is no such thing as *government* here. And it’s been like that since we’ve had oil coming out of the ground. Since the Texas oil companies bought this whole coast. All of the swamps and marshes are owned by a Texas oil company. None of it belongs to anybody but them. That’s why they can cut it up and do anything they

want. It's their property. So when we're trying to fight to save this stuff, we're fighting to save their land. But their land is our coast and our protection. People don't understand all of this. People here are so focused on working in the oil field business, and making a living this way, that they're missing what's going on.

"Oil companies don't need protection. They need to fork money over to us and fix the areas that they've destroyed."

Hurricane on the Bayou

"The IMAX film wouldn't let me say anything. They wouldn't let me touch oil.

"The first levies built around the Mississippi river were to protect farms. Channeling the river all the way to the Gulf was not to protect farms from flooding. That was about choking the river down to make it deeper, blowing the sediment out, blowing it off the continental shelf, so that they could get big ships into there. (See <http://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2006/1195/htmldocs/intro.htm> for an explanation of sedimentary deposits on the continental shelf.)

"We need to bring the levies down, we need to raise everybody's houses like we used to be, we have to expect flooding and kind of wish for it. There was a time here when we used to pray for floods when it was dry, when they needed the ground to be replenished with that new topsoil and things like that, when we were over-farming it. Before technology, flooding was a major part of this area and a necessary part. This is what built this area, flooding. So let's go back to where we used to be. Let's expect a flood every now and then. It's Mother Nature. If you're going to live in the swamp, you have to live *with* the swamp. When you build levies you give everybody this false sense of security that they can build on the ground, and they're gonna be able to live there forever, and nothing's ever gonna happen.

"Well, why do people in New Orleans even think that? It should be common knowledge by now that most of New Orleans is below sea level. It wasn't always, but it is now. They're reliant on levies right now, every day, to survive there. You break a levy down right now; the city fills up again like it did after Katrina. Then take a hurricane and do it. All it takes is a broken levy. High tide and the south wind blowing could do it. A boat running into one of those walls....

"For about two years I was flying over New Orleans every day. I'd look down, and you'd see the levies that are big massive levies, and those are the river levies. All of the other levies are not. Look at the river levies. They have held. There has not been a breach in one of those river levies. Look how substantial they are. If you're going to build a levy out of dirt, you have to go wider as you go higher. And then you have to have some kind of lining in the inside. Especially around the city, the river is bulkheaded there. When you take the Highway 310 Bridge, you'll see that there is concrete around the inside of that levy. That's how you build levies, if you're going to build levies, and those are the levies that work. The problem is that those are the ones that need to come down. We need to let that river come down here, some kind of way, if we're going to stay here. That's the only thing that's going to fix this.

“The Gulf is not far. It’s right there. It’s twenty miles closer to the airport than when I was a kid. That’s unbelievable amounts of land going. Swamps where I used to go camping and think, “look how beautiful this is, the natural bayou with the live oaks and on the other side of the banks there’s lush green Cyprus swamp,” I just thought it was the most beautiful place in the world. You have to stay pretty far north now to see Cyprus swamps. There’s miles and miles and miles of it that are dead. I can guarantee we’ve lost, in my lifetime, I’d say 70%.

“The lake [Pontchartrain] is now open to the Gulf. The lake *is* the Gulf.

“You have to be realistic right now here. Optimism is thrown out the window. Now we’re in survival mode. We actually have been for a long time, but Katrina just exaggerated it and accelerated it. So there is no more optimism here. And understand where you stand and understand what it takes to fix it, and go out and try to fix it if you want to stay here. The biggest thing we have right now is just educating people on what needs to be done and why it needs to be done and how it was done in the first place.”

Next:

Baghdad on the Bayou:
Disaster Capitalism and the War on Equality

Part One: “Wasting the Wetlands”

¹ Klein, Naomi. The Shock Doctrine, Henry Holt and Company, New York, p. 411.

² Reports of as many as 70,000 body bags have been published, but have since vanished from Internet archives. In September 2005, the Modesto, California Bee and the AP reported, “The federal government is trying to purchase an additional 50,000 body bags for use in the Hurricane Katrina cleanup and in Iraq,” according to John Hassapakis, manager of Central Valley Professional Services in Modesto. “Those were sent directly to New Orleans.” Previously, the Federal Emergency Management Administration purchased 25,000 body bags and shipped them to New Orleans.

³ George W. Bush instituted a “zero tolerance” for looting in the aftermath of the flood, even if someone was “looting” “food or water.” Louisiana’s governor, Kathleen Blanco, added a “shoot to kill” order to Bush’s “zero tolerance” proclamation (see various media reports from BBC, ABC News, CNN et al). When National Guard troops from other states entered New Orleans five days after Katrina, troops aggressively pointed their rifles at black survivors who approached them while seeking aid (see People’s Hurricane Relief Fund www.peopleshurricane.org). The private military company Blackwater issued a press release stating they were in New Orleans: see www.blackwaterusa.com/press/katrina2.asp. Reporters Jeremy Scahill and Daniela Crespo

quoted Blackwater operatives in September 2005: “They say they are on contract with the Department of Homeland Security and have been given the authority to use lethal force” (www.Truthout.org).

⁵ Sun Oil & Gas Corp., a development stage company (China 3C Group), engages in gold mining and exploration for oil and gas principally in North America. The company has a participation agreement in the first test well that would be drilled on the Clovelly Prospect located in Lafourche Parish, Louisiana. Sun Oil & Gas was incorporated in 1998 as Editworks, Ltd. and changed its name to TriLucent Technologies Corp. in 2001. Further, the company changed its name to Anza Innovations, Inc. in 2002 and to Gaofeng Gold Corp. in 2004. Later, it changed its name to Sun Oil & Gas Corp. [source: <http://www.sunoilandgas.com>; <http://www.secinfo.com/d11Mkj.zc.htm>]

⁶ On July 14, 2006, the Registrant also completed the acquisition of a 5% minority interest in an oil prospect property from Sterling Grant Capital Inc. (formerly Sun Oil and Gas Corp.), a Nevada corporation located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana (“Sterling”). The property is the Clovelly Prospect’s Allain-Lebreton No. 2 well (“Clovelly”) which is located in southeast Louisiana in the Lafourche Parish. [source: <http://www.secinfo.com/d14yVe.vGq.htm>]