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ON THE COVER

THE LUMINOUS JENNIFER LOPEZ CHANNELS LEGENDARY MUSICAL MOVIE STARS FROM HOLLYWOOD'S STUDIO ERA IN BILL CONDON'S *KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN*, PRODUCTION DESIGN BY SCOTT CHAMBLISS.



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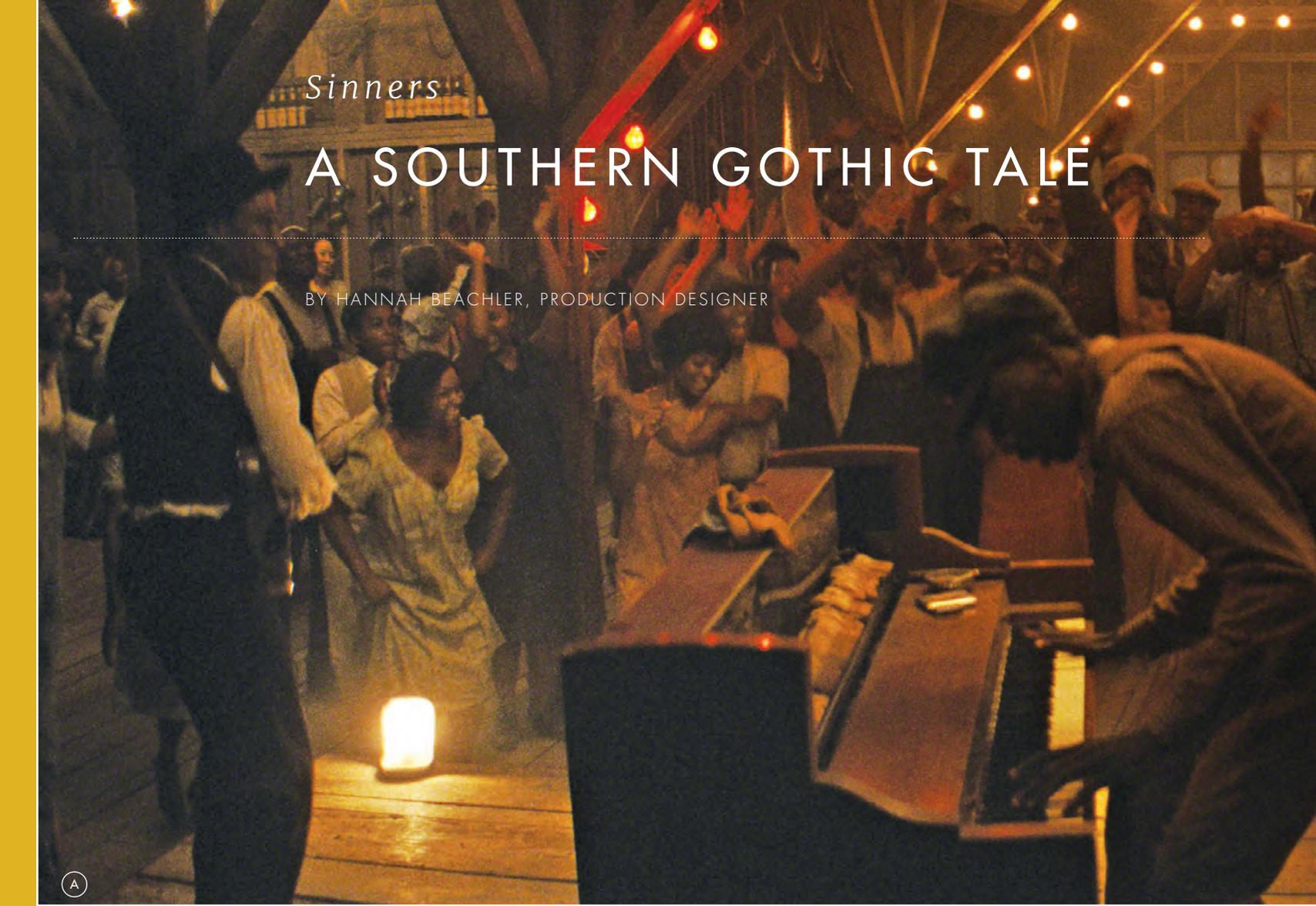
PRODUCTION DESIGNER SET DECORATOR
HANNAH BEACHLER MONIQUE CHAMPAGNE

SINNERS



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Sinners

A SOUTHERN GOTHIC TALE

BY HANNAH BEACHLER, PRODUCTION DESIGNER

When Ryan Coogler called to tell me about his new story, sometime in the fall of 2023, he said Sawmill, Mississippi. Period Piece. Vampires. And I said, “Of course.” He was still in the throes of writing the script and decided to tell me the tale, like a Griot recalling an age-old story from years ago. It’s how we work. It’s how we’ve always worked since *Fruitvale Station*—he tells me the story of the people and what they want, what they’re going through, and in this case, who’d they be if they were alive today. And always, an important part of the story is the place, and how that place intrudes upon and/or supports the people who live there, how the place influences their decisions, actions and outcomes. This story takes place from sunup to sunup, twenty-four hours.

It was a story of ownership in a place where the land was rich, but most of the people were living

in poverty, of the sun moving through the sky. The period and place were very specific from the start, 1932 Clarksdale, Mississippi, Northern Delta. Twin brothers, Elijah and Elias aka Smoke and Stack, were coming home to Clarksdale from Chicago, Illinois, with a truck full of bootleg liquor stolen from Al Capone, or so the rumor goes. The twins time in Chicago was spent infiltrating the Italian and Irish mafias that were running the city. Once they loaded up the loot, the twins headed home to Mississippi to open a juke joint in an old sawmill on the Sunflower River.

The vision was big landscapes à la Sergio Leone, Tom Ford, Sam Peckinpah, on 70mm film, wide screen and IMAX, flipping aspect ratio during pivotal scenes to open up the environment and, at times, intensity. Did I mention, it’s a horror film with vampires?



At first, I put the vampire part aside. Now, I love the supernatural. Especially vampires. And if I felt guilty, it would be a guilty pleasure. But the bigger world was a lot to bite off (no pun intended) and I knew I needed to go as in-depth as I could, with the time I had, into researching the Mississippi Delta in 1932. I started with researching cotton gins and sawmills in the region, the companies that ran the big mills in the bigger cities and the independent mills run by small businessmen, the cotton revenue in the state vs. the lumber industry and the plight of Mississippi before, during and after the Great Depression. Sawmills died out in Mississippi in the 1920s, so it seemed reasonable that there would be a long-abandoned sawmill ready to convert into a blues club. First, I really got a handle on the process of how lumber is milled, the innovation of the machinery between

the early 1800s and the late 1920s, and the functional vernacular of small and large mills, and the people who worked in the mills, local vs. migrant, as some mills provided dormitory-type accommodations. Then I could get an initial layout to Ryan while he was writing, giving him the room to conceptualize the blocking and flow of the scenes. This saved a lot of time during a tight preproduction. I did the same for cotton gins and eventually, Ryan settled on a sawmill. I thought a sawmill was perfect for creating the Juke Joint. There was something about it that screamed horror film.

As I continued researching, looking through thousands of black-and-white images of Clarksdale and surrounding towns from the early 1900s to mid-1940s, I came upon photographs of author Eudora Welty, who was born in 1909 and

A. INTERIOR JUKE JOINT. PEARLENE SINGS ON STAGE AS THE CROWD STOMPS AND DANCES TO THE MUSIC. PRODUCTION STILL.



A



B

raised in the Delta. Her photography took my breath away. It was both architectural and geometric, using shadows and silhouettes to create an abstract overlay. It was the way she captured the small details of her subjects, and the textures of their environments. You'd see a tiny delicate silk bow on the inside of a little girl's white gloves on a Sunday morning as she walked down a dirt road holding her shoes, or the little bit of mud around a

woman's heels as she window shopped in the city. That was the feeling I wanted to portray in our world of Clarksdale.

The design aesthetic became about the details, small exaggerated geometric shapes in front of a vast never-ending landscape, and the process of creating the tone and textures of the sets. Even with so tight a schedule for prep, the Art Department allowed the time to resource materials that were used during that era for each specific build. We found a great wood salvage yard where we were able

to source quite a bit of siding for Bert and Joan's farmhouse, which became a reference for the wood that was scenic'd by grinding down the wood planks and using an acid wash, a couple different cool and warm gray washes, and then painting on the shadow under each plank on the exterior to define the lines. The farmhouse was all about lines. Annie's store was on Maybell Plantation (shot at Creedmoor Plantation in St. Bernard Parish), surrounded by centuries-old oak trees, their branches like tendrils reaching around her store, like the arms of the ancestors. Her store had a lean, as if it was moving into the arms of the oaks, and standing in spite of itself. One side of the porch overhang dropping down, held up by a mostly straight branch. Jars of colorful pickled food sitting at the porch's edge. The interior of her house, built with rough sawn wood, was acid washed and as time went on, it naturally grayed, and as the wood dried it shrunk, giving the edges a beautiful warped feeling and creating gaps that DP Autumn Durald could push light through. We used true-cut wood, as I call it, a two by four was exactly that, and so on and so forth with all the various sizes throughout the sets. It added a sense of heaviness, and almost an oddly skewed feel. Everything got considered, and it was important to me to steal the time to do just that. Of course, there were times when we were right up to the wire, but with the great team of talented craftspeople and department heads, I knew we'd get there.

As I continued to research, I came upon a photo series of Clarksdale, Mississippi, and surrounding

A. CLARKSDALE PASSENGER TRAIN STATION. LOCATION BOGALUSA, LOUISIANA. AUGMENTED LOCATION. SAMMIE AND STACK FIND DELTA SLIM AND MARY. PRODUCTION STILL.

B. CHILDREN IN JEDIDIAH'S CHURCH. PRODUCTION STILL.



C

areas, mid-1934 to late 1938, from the Library of Congress in big, bold beautiful color. There were not many of these photos, but suddenly the people weren't history or ancestors, they were relatives and my contemporaries. These were vibrant reds, blues and greens, patterns and prints that suddenly felt tangible. I could see a woman wrapping her hair in the morning in a white scarf with a small yellow flower print, or the new paint on a house or shack. The color of the cans and bags in a makeshift kitchen of a sharecropper shack on one of the various plantations. This all existed because the FSA (Farm Services Agency) had a contract with the government, under Franklin D. Roosevelt, to document the agriculture industry throughout Southern and Northeast America with photos and filmed interviews. A propaganda of sorts to bring people into the farming industry as pickers and laborers. It added a whole new understanding of the time period. Color became a driving force in the creative collaboration.

Come December of 2023, I started to see where the world and the environment wanted to go, and

the themes within the story that I wanted the environment to mirror and extend. I did a few sketches of the main sets, The Juke Joint (red), the church (white), Annie's store/house (blue), as if in a trance, one right after the other. When I was done, I took photos of the sketches with my phone and sent them to Ryan. He was on board with the direction, and we both dug in to the color concept. What did each color mean to us, thematically and ideologically?

Ryan wanted to bring in black for Jedidiah (the hardliner), Sammie's minister father. My first instinct was to make it so that we experienced the church two ways to incorporate both white and black, on two different mornings, bookending our time in 1932 Clarksdale. The first early morning after Sammie finishes up his work in the field, he goes to the church looking for his guitar. Ryan wanted Sammie to feel daunted by the church, by his father, and his fathers' expectations. He wanted Sammie to challenge his father a bit in the scene, if not defy him for the blues music that pulls him away that morning. The double entry doors are wide

C. SMOKE SHOOTS A THIEF IN DOWNTOWN CLARKSDALE, MS. AUGMENTED LOCATION (3 BLOCKS) OF DOWNTOWN DONALDSONVILLE, LA. PRODUCTION STILL.

D. FIRST PENCIL ON PAPER SKETCH OF JEDIDIAH'S CHURCH AT SUNFLOWER PLANTATION, CLARKSDALE, MS. SKETCH BY HANNAH BEACHLER.

E. JEDIDIAH'S CHURCH. PHOTOSHOP ILLUSTRATION BY TESSA WESSELS.



D



E



A. SAMMIE LOOKS FOR HIS GUITAR AT JEDIDIAH'S CHURCH. PRODUCTION STILL.

B. MORNING AFTER THE JUKE AT JEDIDIAH'S CHURCH. PRODUCTION STILL.

C. INTERIOR ON JEDIDIAH'S CHURCH ON SUNFLOWER PLANATION. PRODUCTION STILL.

open, begging Sammie into the interior darkness, inviting him into the fray. The triangle window at the top of the gable is open, it's now a black triangle hard in its edges, suggesting something more foreboding. As we pan around to see inside, the dark figure of Jedidiah stands at the pulpit framed by the white walls draped in early morning shadow, the open door behind him (an ode to the shotgun house) backlighting his imposing figure, almost like an aura of light surrounding the darkness of his figure. I wanted everything about the church to be heavier, entering wearier, more

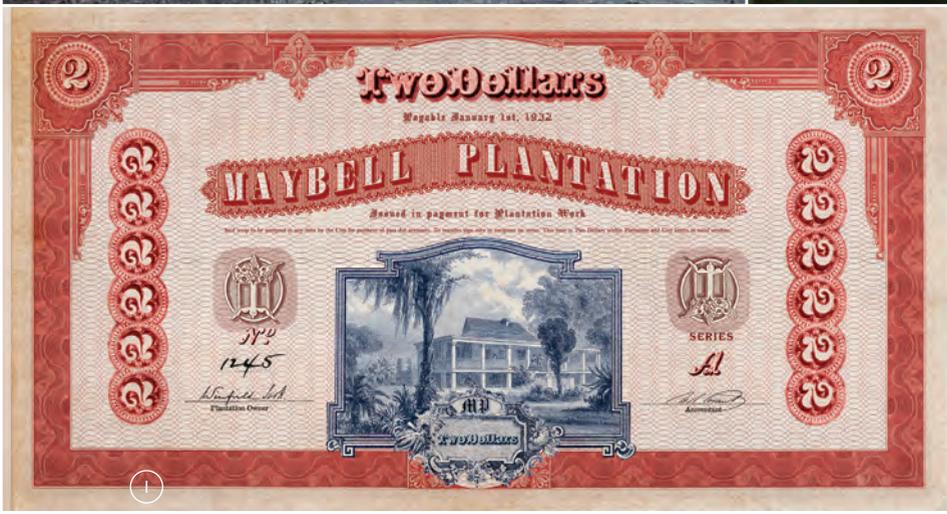
reluctant. The next morning, we see the church after the events at The Juke, the church doors and the small triangle window at the peak of the gable are closed. The church gives a more ethereal all white, save the wood planked doors each decorated with wood X braces. This morning, there is a softness to the sky, the white of the church beckons Sammie to its warm embrace, to safety and exultation.

Red represented capitalism, hedonism, the secret parts that people hide during the day, but



E

F



properties of water. It is the ocean that separated Annie and Smoke, it's the deepness of the loss of their child. I wanted that blue to surround Annie when she comes to the backdoor as Smoke lays flowers on their child's grave. She is oceans away from him in that moment, protected from him, or the evil that war brought to him. She is surrounded by the teal blue dappled in warm light.

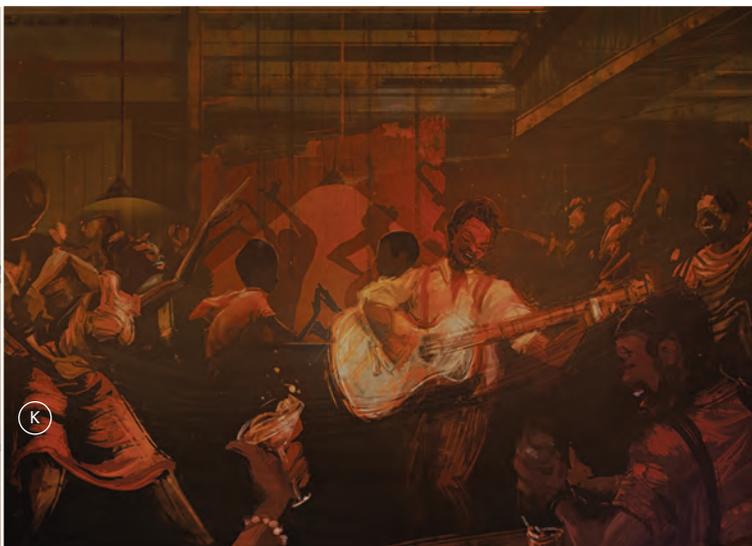
- D.** JOAN AND BERT'S FARMHOUSE. PRODUCTION STILL.
- E.** FIRST SKETCH OF ANNIE'S STORE BY HANNAH BEACHLER.
- F.** ANNIE'S STORE. PHOTOSHOP ILLUSTRATION BY TESSA WESSELS.
- G.** ANNIE'S STORE. PRODUCTION STILL.
- H.** INTERIOR ANNIE'S STORE. PRODUCTION STILL.
- I.** MAYBELL PLANTATION MONEY. PHOTOSHOP GRAPHIC BY LOGAN LEDFORD.
- J.** FIRST SKETCH OF THE JUKE JOINT BY HANNAH BEACHLER.
- K.** KEYFRAME. PHOTOSHOP ILLUSTRATION OF THE JUKE JOINT BY NIKKOLAS SMITH.

celebrate when the sun goes down, transforming us into something else, someone else, free from the judgmental eye of the sun. Blue was Annie's color and represented protection. Haint Blue to be specific. I learned about the evil spirits called Haints up North in my hometown. But I learned about the protection from Haints using color in New Orleans. The Haint Blue I used is more of a green blue, or teal that is prevalent in the lower Atlantic states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida and Georgia. It is a spiritual color that also represents the power, clarity and healing

That color was hers, and hers alone.

White was the flip side of the coin to the red in this world. Yes, white represents purity, cleansing of the soul and grace. It also represented the extremes of worship, prosperity gospel and ownership of the soul. It is the twin to the Juke and in opposition of Annie's spirituality and hoodoo.

The world and environment had its foundational visual concepts and thesis, but I needed something more tangible. I called Ryan and told him I





A. INTERIOR JUKE JOINT. MARY SEDUCES STACK. A WALL IS NEVER JUST A WALL. SET, COSTUMES AND LIGHTING COMBINE TO MAKE A MOMENT IN THE FILM. PRODUCTION STILL.

B. CLUB JUKE KITCHEN. PRODUCTION STILL.

C. CLUB JUKE EXTERIOR SIGN. GRAPHIC BY LOGAN LEDFORD.

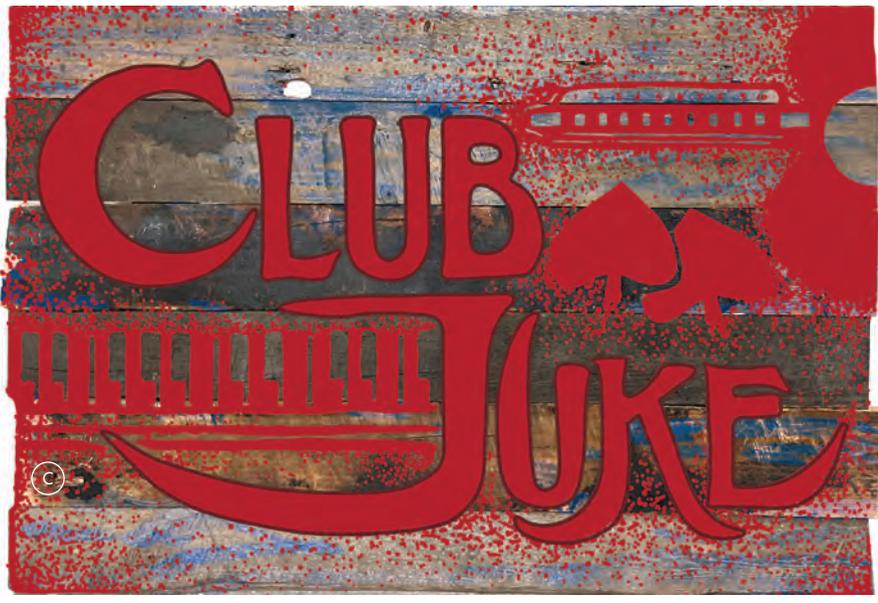
D. INTERIOR JUKE JOINT. GRACE LIGHTS THE MOLOTOV COCKTAIL THAT STARTS THE BLOOD BATH AND ENDS HER LIFE. PRODUCTION STILL.

E. SMOKE AND STACK MEET HOGWOOD AT ABANDONED SAWMILL. PRODUCTION STILL.

wanted to go to Clarksdale. Research scouting is something we've done on every film we've made together. I called one of the local Art Directors, Tim Davis, and we headed to Clarksdale, Mississippi. The drive to Clarksdale from New Orleans is not far, about 3 1/2 hours give or take. We drove past fields and fields of harvested cotton. Fields that stretched back over two miles from the road, wide open, big sky. The dirt was a strawberry blonde, not the southern Mississippi blood orange red dirt that you associate with the South. We pulled over. I jumped out and scooped up a handful of dirt and put it in a bag. The cotton field dirt was different. It was dark brown, almost black, Mississippi black mud where anything can grow. There was water everywhere (but strangely it wasn't humid), standing water in roads, yards, fields, parking lots, even if it was dry, it was wet.

Board and batten ruled the older architecture; skeletons of ship lap sharecropper cabins speckled the sides of the roads.

And, of course, we went to find famed Po' Monkey's Juke Joint. It's not on any map and there seemed to be different ideas about where it was. After following dirt roads and lots of U-turns, I spotted an older man standing outside his old Chevy truck at one of the dirt roads, and yes, it was said to be the crossroads where Robert Johnson met Papa Legba and became the greatest blues guitarist there ever was. I stopped the car, hopped out and ran over to the old man. I asked him if he knew where Po' Monkey's was located. He took a minute and said, "Follow me." He was in his truck and moving down the road before I got back in the





D

car. We turned down the road and, after a while, saw a small sharecropper house at the edge of a cotton field. It was adorned with all types of bric-a-brac, string lights, bicycles, hubcaps, signs, pictures and bits of shiny beads. There was a historical marker with a sentence or two about the old Juke. It had certainly seen better days. I could just imagine the nights of dancing and drinking, couples walking down the road to the Juke. I imagined a group of men throwing dice outside on the side of the house turned Juke. To see Po' Monkey's Juke was to see the world that gave it life.

On the way back to New Orleans, I started to understand the complexity of this place, and the complexity of the people who lived through the best of it and the worst. This was more

than just a Southern town. It was more than the supernatural evil of vampires. It is red, white and blue. An American story through and through with the ever-present culture of wealth, poverty, ownership, loss, culture, ancestors, future ancestors, freedom, gangsters, big sky, hard work, dreams, horror and hope.

One thing I love about working with Ryan is I never know what's next, where he'll take me, take us, or what the journey will be. There's an excitement and anticipation that I love the closer we get to principal photography, like a kid getting butterflies in their stomach before a game or recital. There's a creative freedom and collaboration that is comfortable, nurturing and familiar. **ADG**

Hannah Beachler,
Production Designer
Jesse Rosenthal,
Lead Art Director
Jon Cappel,
Timotheus Davis,
Art Directors
Otto Dinkelacker,
Assistant Art Director
Jessica Stumpf,
Set Designer
Tessa Wessels,
Nikkolas Smith,
Illustrators
Logan Ledford,
Graphic Artist
Monique Champagne,
Set Decorator



E