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STREET TALK

August 20, 2008

French Filmmakers Follow Marching Bands at VSU, U.Va.

by Amy Biegelsen

A clutch of lawyers and French filmmakers gathered on the 17th floor of the James Center last week to celebrate a documentary about college marching bands.

"We are interested by the situations of American college students," says Annie Miller, the film's producer and the director's wife. With an Andy Warhol sweep of hair, canvas sneakers printed with tiny hearts and beer in hand, Miller, from Paris, looked very much the part. A lawyer at the Williams Mullen firm had helped wrangle visas and work permits for the crew.

The crew plans to film bands at Virginia State University, a historically black college in Petersburg, and the University of Virginia in Charlottesville during the run-up to the presidential election. There's even a chance that one of the bands featured will be invited to join the inauguration parade in Washington, D.C., in January.

To Americans, race and politics may seem like the obvious trail of inquiry, but those involved with the film insist the social issues are the backdrop for the cultural oddity of marching bands and the fanatical school spirit they represent.

"This is not a political documentary," says co-director Pierre-Nicolas Durand, a 27-year-old with a buzz cut and soccer-player good looks.

Damien Stankiewicz, a doctoral candidate in New York University's anthropology department, says "the French fascination with American universities is everywhere these days."

The French government is looking to overhaul its higher education system, but evidence of a pop interest in U.S. coeds can be seen on French MTV shows glamorizing the college social scene.

"On French streets you see plenty of teenagers wearing American university-style paraphernalia," Stankiewicz says — "usually emblazoned not with an actual university motto but something generic, like an ivy league-looking crest with the actual word 'university' in block caps, printed above it, and then a year like 1887."

The stature of the film's lead director, Claude Miller, suggests how serious the interest has become. The celebrated French director, due to arrive later this month, has won a César, France's academy award. Last year he served as the honorary chair of Virginia Commonwealth University's French Film Festival.

So far the filmmakers have identified a drum major from U.Va. who's studying civil rights, and a pair of roommates on the VSU drum line as principal characters. Still, Durand marvels, "Forty percent of life on campus is spent on marching band, something they will never do again when they leave."



French filmmaker Annie Miller talks to Virginia's film commissioner, Rita McClenny, at the James Center last week.

Photo by Scott Elmquist

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