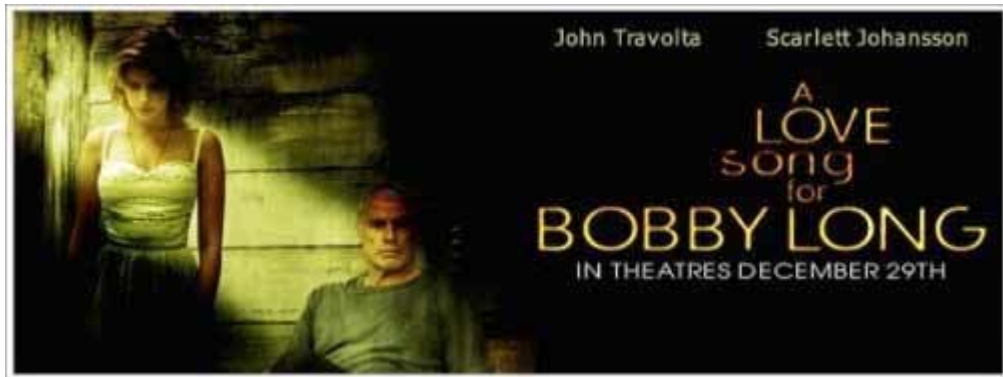


## Big Easy life inspires movie

from The Times-Picayune, dated October 28, 2003, by Elizabeth Mullener



The son lived in a local commune of creative types, which inspired the father to write a novel. Now John Travolta is starring in a movie based on the father's book, being filmed in New Orleans with a musical score written by the son.

As far as Grayson Capps is concerned, his halcyon days were in the early 1990s, when he was fresh out of Tulane University and living on South Front Street near Tipitina's, an area that was a latter-day commune where a pack of creative types were all pursuing their own muses. There was John the guitar player, Gary the writer, Joe the painter and two mangy Chihuahuas, not to mention a flock of chickens, a one-eyed cat without a tail and a horse named Sonny in between the buildings.

"Right next to the horse named Sonny was this church called the Stone Ezel Baptist Church," Capps says. "And then my friend John, then me, then this guy Gregory.

"Next to them was a family called the Drotts with two little kids named Bear and Scooter. And next to that was Ike's house, and then there was the witch of the block. If you kicked your ball into her yard, it was gone."

And of course there was Capps himself -- blond and lean, looking one part California surfer-boy and another part Southern farm-boy. Never encumbered by the notion that his ego was tied up in his money-making skills, he was turning his attention at the time from theater to songwriting, and he ultimately wound up as a staple on the New Orleans music scene.

The site, off Tchoupitoulas Street, was a stretch of old New Orleans doubles bordering the railroad tracks, with a field of wildflowers between them and the river. The houses were in various stages of decline and disrepair. Only one had electricity; the others borrowed from it with extension cords that ran through the windows. Most of them had no heat or air-conditioning. Capps had gas and therefore the only stove. They had a kitchen garden in the back yard where they grew much of what they ate. And they played music on the streets downtown to make enough money to survive.

"It was real magical at the time. We were all real creative," Capps says. "A lot of people got inspired off that neighborhood."

One of the people who got inspired was Capps' father, Everett Capps, who came to visit and wound up writing a novel with Front Street as a setting, called "A Love Song for Bobby Long." Now that unpublished

novel is being turned into a movie of the same name, which has been filming recently around New Orleans.

Capps wrote the music for it. John Travolta is playing the leading role, opposite Scarlett Johansson ("Lost in Translation"). The director is Shainee Gabel, whose last movie, "Anthem," took viewers on a cross-country tour of America just before the turn of the millennium.

"This whole thing is just surreal," says Capps.

Everett Capps lives in a swampy area on the outskirts of Fairhope, Ala., where he spends his days writing, painting and making sculptures -- "bizarre mobiles made from strange objects," he calls them. He is an earnest man with a lush drawl and a philosophical bent, who seems to be kindly disposed toward human beings for the most part.

He has a soft spot for New Orleans, especially its underbelly, and when his son was living on Front Street, the elder Capps was a frequent visitor.

"It sort of reminded me of 'Cannery Row,' " he says, evoking John Steinbeck's novel about down-and-out California. "It was just a little neighborhood full of interesting characters -- people who got along with each other in spite of their social differences. One fellow came from a well-to-do family, Grayson came from a middle-class background.

"They'd sit out front and spend hours just talking and playing music and playing with those kids. It was a marvelous place."

As his father describes it, Capps and his friends had created an impromptu family of sorts, a multi-generational mixture of people who looked after one another and formed strong connections. The novel he wrote has something of the same theme.

It's about two upper-middle-age men, well-educated but mired in booze and decadence, who come to New Orleans to while away the rest of their lives. By accident, they encounter a headstrong young woman and the three grow close, in the process bringing out what is fine in one another.

Gabel, meanwhile, had passed through New Orleans while making "Anthem" and had befriended Capps. She was smitten with the place and said she wanted to make a movie that would be set here. She was looking for a story to tell. Capps gave her the manuscript of his father's book.

"She read it and fell in love with it," he says.

As for Everett Capps, the call from the movie director made him happy, if a little skeptical.

"She asked my permission to use it," he says, "and I told her, yeah, go ahead."

But he hardly sees it as a life-changing event.

"I don't want to get carried away with this kind of stuff," he says. "I just want to do what I do -- painting, sculpture, writing. I don't want to get caught up in the attention stuff.

"Next thing you know, your ego starts playing with your mind and you're running off places where you're just wasting your time. I've got things I want to do."

When it came time to film the movie a few months ago, Front Street didn't look like Front Street anymore. So in venerable Hollywood fashion, the movie-makers re-created it on Ocean Avenue in Gretna. Everett Capps visited the set one day and was astounded to find that his fantasies had leapt from his imagination to the West Bank of New Orleans.

"It was really kind of spooky, realizing this was fairly close to what I had intended," he says.

"In fact, when I went into a room they had created as the girl's bedroom, I got tears in my eyes. Shainee and I must have crossed paths in the cosmos before. She knew just what I was thinking."

Intent to get the elder Capps' manner of speech down, the movie-makers recorded him at length.

"Travolta wanted to get a feel for my voice and the Southern flavor," he says, "so they brought some equipment over and set it up in the living room and I spent an hour and a half just talking about the characters."

At the same time, the younger Capps was busy writing the music for the movie -- including music based on songs his father sang to him as a baby. Others include a song called "Slidell," another called "Washboard Lisa" and a third called "Lorraine's Song."

"Theresa Andersson ended up singing that and it sounds real pretty," he says.

"It was strange watching John Travolta and Scarlett Johansson dancing on the levee to that song. It was so poignant. The sun was going down and it was playing really loud and they were just dancing on the levee."

He took a liking to Travolta, Capps says, and was impressed with the actor's unaffected ways.

"He looked into your eyes intensely when he talked to you," Capps says. "He was very gentle, perceptive, genuinely interested in anything he asked about."

Although the movie is vastly different from the novel, Capps says his father doesn't mind a bit.

"What he's seen of the movie," Capps says, "my father thought that what he tried to capture comes through beautifully."

"It's not the same story, but it's the same intention -- it pays homage to the invisible people. The intention is that there's beauty everywhere -- you just have to open your eyes. It's easy to tell a story like that in New Orleans."

At 36, Grayson Capps has put Front Street behind him. The commune scene is long over anyway, having broken up when a new landlord -- one of a long string of them -- arrived on the scene and had the nerve to demand rent.

"We don't pay rent," Capps says he told him. "So we all moved."

And that was that.

Today he has a 2-year-old daughter named Sadie and a house in Gentilly -- a "grandma neighborhood," he calls it. He likes to divide his time between the music business and the landscaping business.

His musical style, he says, is eclectic.

"It's like singer/songwriter and it's Americana and New Orleans and blues and folk," he says. "If you crossed Bob Dylan and Nick Cave and Doc Watson and Tom Waits -- that would be what I'm doing. With a touch of Mississippi Fred McDowell."

When he's not on the road, he has a regular gig in New Orleans playing with the Stump Knockers at the Matador on Friday nights, and occasionally at the Circle Bar, the Neutral Ground coffee shop and Dos Jefes Cigar Bar.

But it is gardening -- both design and installation -- that keeps him grounded. Although he once did it to keep his bank account healthy, he does it now to keep his body and mind healthy.

"I do landscaping for sanity, so I don't have to depend on music," he says. "You can get too involved in your own music. It's like this ego trip, this whole thing that happens to people. They start thinking of music as their life, the most important thing. And actually it's not, you know?"

"Selling music is no different than selling toilet paper. It's just a product. Just a job."

Gardening, though, is different for him -- especially gardening in New Orleans, where things grow fast and thick and higgledy-piggledy.

"Music, you can't see it," he says. "But a garden, you can see it and watch it grow."

Blessed as he is with a gift for the verbal and an astute sense of place, Capps is attuned to all the city's idiosyncratic charms. They inspire him, he says, informing both his music and his gardening.

"The deformity of life is noticeable here," he says. "There are no straight lines in New Orleans. You can see the beauty of that, of no-straight-lines.

"The thing about New Orleans is, it's used, it's worn. And that's beautiful. Like age and wear -- those things are apparent here. When you buy a shovel from a hardware store, it's not nearly as appealing as a shovel that's been beat up and has got years of sweat on it. That's the beauty of New Orleans -- it's used, it's not pristine.

"This is a place to live, not to pretend to live."