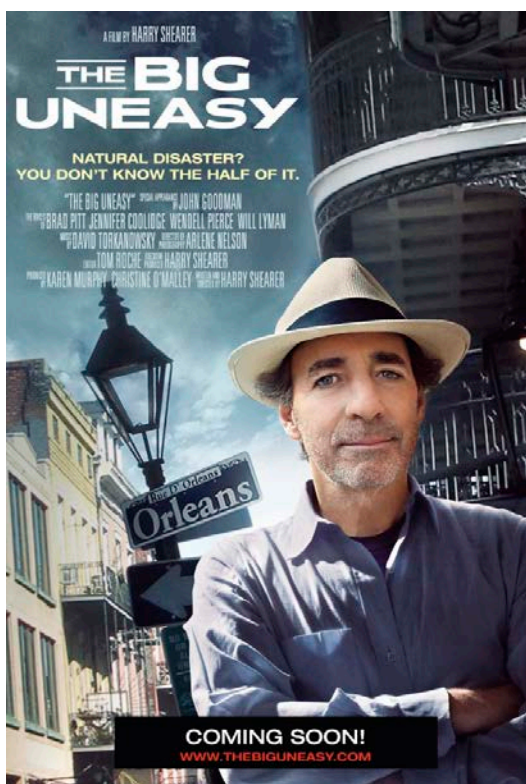


*Natural Disaster?  
You Don't Know The Half Of It.*

# THE BIG UNEASY

A Film by Harry Shearer



[www.thebiguneasy.com](http://www.thebiguneasy.com)

Running Time: 98 Minutes

Rating: N/A

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## **LOG LINE**

The first documentary by long-time "mockumentarian" Harry Shearer, *The Big Uneasy* follows three remarkable people--the leaders of two scientific investigation teams, and one whistleblower--as they reveal the true story of why New Orleans flooded, why it could happen again, and why it could happen in your town, too.

## **SYNOPSIS**

In 2005, a disaster struck New Orleans. You know the rest. Or do you?

The media reported that what happened in New Orleans was a natural disaster primarily affecting poor black people. On both counts, the media was wrong. But its inability or unwillingness to report the hard truth – that these tragic floods creating widespread damage were caused by manmade errors in engineering and judgment - has failed both journalism and public safety. For what happened in New Orleans could happen again in other cities across the United States.

In his feature-length documentary *The Big Uneasy*, humorist and New Orleans resident Harry Shearer gets the inside story of a disaster that could have been prevented from the people who were there. Shearer speaks to the tireless investigators and experts who poked through the muck as the water receded, and uncovers a courageous whistle-blower from the Army Corps of Engineers. His dogged pursuit of facts reveals that some of the same flawed methods responsible for levee failure during Hurricane Katrina are being used to rebuild the system expected to protect the “new” New Orleans from future peril.

In short segments hosted by actor John Goodman (*Treme*), Shearer speaks candidly with local residents about life in New Orleans. Together, they explore the questions that Americans outside of the Gulf region have been pondering in the years since Katrina: Why would people choose to live below sea level? Why is it important to rebuild New Orleans?

Shearer’s film is also laced with computer imagery that takes you inside the structures that failed so catastrophically, and boasts never-before-seen video of the moments when New Orleans began to flood and the painstaking investigations that followed. Likewise, the film demonstrates what awaits people on the inside who try to report painful truths to the powers that be.

*The Big Uneasy* marks the beginning of the end of ignorance about what happened to one of our nation’s most treasured cities—and serves as a stark reminder that the same agency that failed to protect New Orleans still employs the same flawed science in many other cities across America. Without improvements to engineering and accountability in oversight, the film cautions, we will be very sorry to see history repeat itself elsewhere. Nothing less than public safety is at stake.

Of course, why it took the bass player from “Spinal Tap” and the voice of Flanders, Smithers and Mr. Burns to reveal these tragedies is a story unto itself.

*With the right hurricane protection, said Professor Raymond Seed, the result of Hurricane Katrina would have been different: "we call it 'wet ankles.'"*

**-The New York Times, May 30, 2006**

### **FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT**

I am a New Orleanian. The city adopted me, and I adopted it. When 80% of the city flooded at the end of August 2005, I was in Los Angeles, getting ready to act in a movie. Like the rest of the country, I was glued to the TV and the Internet, and like the rest of the country I assumed that the obvious explanation was correct: massive hurricane, city below sea level, natural disaster.

When the film wrapped, I flew back to New Orleans on the first plane out. Arriving in the city on November 5, I had the first meal in one French Quarter restaurant not served on paper plates: the hot water had just been turned back on. The sidewalks were still lined with thrown-out refrigerators, and the only vehicles you saw on most streets were National Guard Humvees.

But already the local newspaper and radio talk shows had interim reports from two independent teams of investigators looking into the flooding, and already the story they were telling was diverging from the obvious explanation.

Within a few months, both investigations had released their (remarkably similar) findings: the flooding of New Orleans was not a natural disaster, but rather the product of more than four decades of design and construction flaws in a system Congress had ordered the US Army Corps of Engineers to build to, ironically, protect New Orleans from serious damage from a hurricane.

As each new piece of the investigatory puzzle was put in place, I blogged about it at the Huffington Post, and I interviewed the lead investigators (as well as a whistleblower from inside the Corps) on my weekly radio broadcast, Le Show. But, in October 2009, as I sat watching President Obama's town hall appearance in New Orleans on an Internet feed, I heard him describe the flooding as a "natural disaster", and my head exploded. I realized that blogging and radio had failed to make a dent in the narrative of the disaster that had solidified into the national consciousness. That's literally the moment when I decided to make a documentary about this story, featuring the investigators, the whistleblower, and everyone else I could contact who actually knew what the hell had happened to New Orleans.

I also resolved to make the film in a shockingly short period of time, so as to take advantage of the media's DNA programming, which would have them return to the story on the fifth anniversary of the flood--an evening on which we planned nationwide screenings of the film. And I pretty much decided to stay out of the film myself, lest audiences be distracted by questions like, "What's the guy from Spinal Tap and the Simpsons doing here?" Given that time schedule, there was no question of going through the normal process of raising money to make the film. Fortunately, through my day job, I had access to some of Rupert Murdoch's resources.

And one more thing: given the mass media's sentimentalism about the subject matter (one network anchor told me, when I asked why viewers of the broadcast didn't yet know why the city had flooded, "We just think the emotional stories are more compelling for our

audience”), I determined to make a film filled with the facts of the story. That meant a relatively information-dense movie, which led me to make two other choices: really good-looking cinematography and vivid animation of the concepts being discussed. I never wanted a moment when people would think they were watching an educational film. Now we’re into the post-anniversary period, where the film is seeking, and finding its real audiences at festivals and theaters in this country and abroad. The truly startling thing, to me, about this part of the project is how defiantly the national media, even outside the NY-DC axis, is wedded to the original storyline, how reluctant they are to embrace this “new” information--on the public record for some time now, but unknown to most Americans--and how insistent they are that “everybody knows what happened in New Orleans”. If only. Because American taxpayers, after having paid half a billion dollars over four decades to nearly destroy the Crescent City, have just spent \$14 billion on a “new, improved” system that the whistleblower in this film maintains, with independent certification from an agency within the US Department of Justice, has a serious design deficiency at its heart.

And because taxpayers in more than 100 American cities are being similarly “protected” by levee systems designed and built by the Army Corps (not to mention all the communities around the country battling short-sighted, environmentally-damaging Corps projects). What happened in New Orleans could happen next in Sacramento.

Yep, another "natural disaster".

*-Harry Shearer*

### **What This Film Is NOT** **by Harry Shearer**

Media coverage of tragedies can become so pervasive that we no longer remember the tragedy anymore, we only remember the coverage. So if I say "New Orleans" and then say "flood," you immediately think, "Katrina." As in Hurricane. This is not your fault: it's a reflex now, like your leg kicking upwards when the doctor taps it. Only that tap is causing you to kick me, and my fellow New Orleanians, squarely in the crotch.

The reason I made the film is because the hurricane did NOT cause the flood, despite what you may have heard on the news. However, poor science and even poorer management *did*.

So this film is NOT:

- A "Katrina documentary."
- A documentary about the preparation or after-effects of Katrina.
- An examination of the Bob Dylan song "Hurricane," nor the boxer who inspired it.

Unfortunately, the looming myths and buzzwords that sprang from the tragic flooding of New Orleans have provided a rather large windmill to tilt against. But I thank you, New Orleans thanks you, Bob Dylan thanks you, and Derek Smalls is simply confused.

My best,  
Harry

## **ABOUT THE CAST**

### **ROBERT BEA**

Robert Bea has been an engineering professor at the University of California at Berkeley since 1989. With 55 years of experience in engineering and management of design, construction, maintenance, operation, and decommissioning engineered systems including offshore platforms, pipelines, and floating facilities, Bea has researched system failures from space shuttle explosions to hurricanes to drilling disasters. Bea was the co-leader, with his U.C. Berkeley colleague Raymond Seed, of a scientific investigation of the levee and floodwall failures in New Orleans during Katrina. The main target of this investigation was the Army Corps of Engineers, the organization where Bea began his career. Bea has taken on a key role in evaluating the response to the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

### **IVOR VAN HEERDEN**

Ivor van Heerden, born in South Africa, holds a doctorate degree in Marine Sciences. He was the co-founder and deputy director of the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center, the director of the Center for the Study of Public Health Impacts of Hurricanes, and the associate professor of civil and environmental engineering at LSU. His research focused on the Atchafalaya River Delta and his ongoing research areas include disaster preparation and response, coastal geomorphology, environmental management, and habitat restoration. For years before Hurricane Katrina hit, van Heerden had been warning state and local officials about New Orleans' vulnerability to flooding, but it wasn't until afterwards that he was able to reveal the truth about the reasons behind the disaster, resisting pressure from LSU to keep quiet about his claims. Van Heerden's book about the Katrina tragedy, *The Storm* (Viking) was released in May 2006. LSU announced in April 2009 that they were firing van Heerden, effective at the end of the spring 2010 semester. Highly respected by citizens of New Orleans and the Louisiana Gulf Coast, Van Heerden is regarded as an expert in his field, and has continued to advocate for an improved hurricane protection program for New Orleans and the surrounding region.

### **MARIA GARZINO**

Maria Garzino is an engineer and a contract specialist for the Los Angeles district of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. After Hurricane Katrina, she led a team whose job was to test and install large water pumps to protect part of New Orleans from flooding. In 2006, Garzino released an internal memo warning that the Corps was installing defective machinery that would most likely end in failure. She exhaustively pursued federal and redress for her claim that the pumps would not work, first from her superiors, then from federal oversight agencies. The memo triggered a whistle-blower investigation by the U.S. Office of Special Counsel. In 2009, Garzino was named Public Servant of the Year.

## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**

### **HARRY SHEARER (DIRECTOR)**

Harry Shearer is a comic personality who takes “hyphenate” to new levels—first and foremost an actor, he is also an author, director, satirist, musician, radio host, playwright, multi-media artist and record label owner. The Los Angeles native and New Orleans resident has enjoyed enormous success over the last twenty years for his voice work for *The Simpsons*, on which he plays a stable of characters including Mr. Burns, Smithers, and Ned Flanders. Shearer began his career in the late 1960s as part of a satirical news team at KRLA-AM called The Credibility Gap, where he befriended Michael McKean. Shearer and McKean joined forces again in the early 1980s with Christopher Guest and director Rob Reiner as they began work on the cult hit *This Is Spinal Tap*, thus launching the mockumentary genre. The band reunited in July 2007 for The Live Earth Concert at London’s Wembley Stadium and again in early 2009 for their first ever “Unwiggled & Unplugged” tour. Other collaborations with Guest and friends include *A Mighty Wind* and *For Your Consideration*. In the world of fine art, Shearer’s installations have been featured at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Fullerton Museum Center, Washington, D.C.’s Conner Contemporary Gallery, and the Susan Inglett Gallery in Manhattan. Shearer’s first novel, *Not Enough Indians* (Justin, Charles & Company) was released in October 2006. Shearer joined the online video world in July 2007 when The Harry Shearer Channel became a cornerstone of My Damn Channel, an entertainment and new media platform. Theatrically, Shearer collaborated with writer Tom Leopold and composer Peter Matz to create the book and lyrics for *J. Edgar!: The Musical*, about J. Edgar Hoover, currently being developed for Broadway. Shearer has worked in the Los Angeles and Boston bureaus of *Newsweek*, has been a columnist for the *L.A. Times Magazine*—his most memorable columns are collected in the book *Man Bites Town* (St. Martin’s Press)—and contributes to magazines ranging from *Film Comment* to *Gentleman’s Quarterly*. He pioneered the digital coverage of the second O.J. Simpson trial for Slate.com and has his own popular column on the Huffington Post. His one-hour radio program *Le Show* airs weekly on stations worldwide. He has won two Cable Ace Awards.

### **TOM ROCHE (EDITOR)**

Tom Roche is a longtime writer, filmmaker and editor based in Atlanta, whose passion for music, film, radio, and history envelops his work. A former DJ, his credits include the edit of the earlier R.E.M. videos, Georgia artists as varied as TLC and Vic Chesnutt, and concert DVDs for artists as diverse as Norah Jones, Japanese noise-rockers Melt-Banana, and in 2009, *Unwiggled and Unplugged*. Roche’s editing and co-producing credits include the National Geographic/PBS special *Katrina’s Animal Rescues*, and the acclaimed and revelatory *Sacco & Vanzetti*. His eclectic oeuvre also includes 57 episodes of the Adult Swim series *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*. His new doc, *Alley Pat: The Music Is Recorded*, lovingly recalls the era of 1950s-60s R&B radio in Atlanta and its effect on the civil rights movement. This self-produced-edited-directed film came in first place in both the 2010 Atlanta Film Festival and Kansas City CinemaJazz Film Festival. His sideline as a music writer earned him

a spot in *DaCapo Best Music Writing 2005* for his story of the passing of legendary BBC DJ John Peel.

### **ARLENE NELSON (CINEMATOGRAPHER)**

Arlene Nelson is an artful film, television and commercial cinematographer best known for her naturalistic work on the documentary-style comedies of Christopher Guest. Her feature documentary credits include last year's heavily-awarded *Les Plages d'Agnès (The Beaches of Agnès)*, the Emmy nominated *Troubadours*, and *The Brothers Warner*. Nelson shot and directed *Naked States* in 2000, a film about the work of artist Spencer Tunick, the legendary photographer capturing masses of naked people around the world. *Naked States* won the Discovery Award for Best Documentary at the AFI Film Festival and the Florida International Film Festival Audience Award. It screened as part of the Clinton Library Opening in Arkansas, among 11 other contemporary documentaries considered to be America's best. Nelson began her film career working with Spike Lee on *Do the Right Thing*, and over two decades, has made her way through short films, music videos, then to commercials, documentaries and feature films. She has traveled and worked on every continent in the world, with the exception of Australia, shooting everything from secret passageways in St. Petersburg, Russia's Hermitage Museum to Nelson Mandela's former prison cell in South Africa. She is currently working on a hybrid narrative/documentary film with Academy Award nominated director Paola Di Florio and co-director Lisa Leeman, about the life and work of Parmahansa Yogananda, the man known as the spiritual father of yoga in the United States.

### **KAREN MURPHY (PRODUCER)**

Karen began her career making documentaries for public television. Her first feature film was Rob Reiner's cult hit *This Is Spinal Tap*, which launched the mockumentary genre. She later teamed up with Christopher Guest in producing *Waiting for Guffman*. She has also produced David Byrne's highly-lauded first feature, *True Stories*, Gus Van Sant's critically acclaimed *Drugstore Cowboy*, Interscope's *The Cutting Edge*, and the indie favorite *Twenty Bucks*, directed by Keva Rosenfeld. She produced the premiere episode of Showtime's *Likely Stories*, featuring comedy shorts by Rob Reiner, Billy Crystal and Harry Shearer, an HBO pilot about the entertainment business written by and starring Eugene Levy and Christopher Guest, and *The Secret Life Of Mr. Ed*, directed by Michael Lehmann for *Saturday Night Live*. Her interest in animation brought her to the producing team of the popular children's show *One Saturday Morning* for ABC/Disney. Murphy is also a co-founder of the Nashville Screenwriters Conference and continues to pursue new projects while consulting with entertainment, advertising and internet companies.

### **CHRISTINE O'MALLEY (PRODUCER)**

Christine was born in Manhattan and raised outside of Chicago. She studied film and video production at Columbia College, Chicago. In 1995 she moved to Los Angeles and, after a brief stint working on feature films in the Art Department, switched to non-fiction production. Her first job in this capacity was as a researcher at Van Ness Films on several A&E Biographies. Later she teamed with Producer/Director Scott Goldstein where she produced several critically acclaimed documentaries for the Museum of Tolerance. In 2004

Christine served as Associate Producer on the Academy Award nominated documentary film *Enron: The Smartest Guys In The Room*. *Wordplay*, the first feature length film she has produced through her production company O'Malley Creadon Productions, was nominated for both a Critics' Choice Award and a National Board of Review Award for "Best Documentary of 2006." *I.O.U.S.A.*, O'Malley & Creadon's second documentary, had its World Premiere at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival in the American Documentary Competition. Kenneth Turan of the Los Angeles Times called it "the most unexpectedly frightening film at Sundance." In 2009 she Executive Produced *Square Roots: The Story of SpongeBob SquarePants* for Nickelodeon, for the 10 year anniversary of the hit series *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Most recently, O'Malley and Creadon followed up their film *I.O.U.S.A* with a CNN Special, *I.O.U.S.A.: Solutions*.

#### **END CREDITS**

Writer and Director	<b>Harry Shearer</b>
Producer	<b>Karen Murphy</b>
Producer	<b>Christine O'Malley</b>
Director of Photography	<b>Arlene Nelson</b>
Editor	<b>Tom Roche</b>
Music by	<b>David Torkanowsky</b>
Assistant to Mr. Shearer	<b>Pam Halstead</b>
Special appearance by	<b>John Goodman</b>
With the Voice Talents of	<b>Brad Pitt</b>
	<b>Jennifer Coolidge</b>
	<b>Wendell Pierce</b>
	<b>Will Lyman</b>

#### **Interviewees in Order of Appearance**

Dr. Ivor van Heerden  
Dr. Bob Gramling  
Dr. Robert Bea  
Dr. William Freudenburg  
Col. Jeffrey Bedey  
Michael Grunwald  
Karen Durham—Aguilera

Maria Garzino  
Clancy DuBos  
Libra LaGrone  
Phillip Manuel  
Thom Pepper  
Dr. Vera Triplett  
John Barry  
Denise Berthiaume  
Richard Campanella □  
Tab Benoit  
Sherwood Gagliano  
Carlton Dufrechou  
Garret Graves  
Stephen Perry  
Col. Robert Sinkler  
Craig Taffaro  
David Waggoner  
Pierce O'Donnell  
Hon. Stanwood Duval, Jr.  
LaToya Cantrell