

House of Saints  
A film by Gerry Melendez

I'm excited to submit my short film to this year's festival for two main reasons. One, I'm a native of El Salvador, born and raised. "Visiones" is the perfect opportunity for me as Latino American filmmaker to showcase my work. Two, this story touches on Columbia's black history and one man's life in a historically celebrated house.

"House of Saints" is a labor of love and a Southern story that I've been filming the past two years.

Reggie Scott, 86, grew up on Arsenal Hill in the heart of Columbia. As Historic Columbia describes it, "As the highest point within the capital city's downtown, with impressive vistas to the south and west, Arsenal Hill became a desirable residential area for white elites during the antebellum era and then for middle- and working-class African Americans during the later 19th and 20th centuries."

Reggie's home, The Harriett M. Cornwell Tourist Home, provided an alternative space to black travelers to stay when traveling during the days of segregation. Cornwell Tourist House was one of six in Columbia, but the only one in the western part of the city. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2007.

Scott's tale is one of fortune and famine. As a child surrounded by educators including his aunt, Harriett, "Mae Mae" Cornwell, Reggie dreamed of a life as a musician, yet in a family of doctors and educators his path had been laid out for him. From an upstairs window in the historic home, Reggie would try to get a glimpse of the prison yard at The South Carolina Penitentiary. "I always knew I would end up in prison," he said. "As a matter of fact, I remember asking my family if anyone had ever been to prison."

Reggie witnessed segregation first hand but also was present for many of Columbia's greatest black history moments. He immersed himself in jazz music, longing to be on stage as he watched the many traveling black musicians that would stop in Columbia.

His life was set as he honored his family and became a successful dentist in Southern California. He even managed to celebrate his love of music, jazz in particular, by becoming one of the first black instructors at Cal State Northridge, teaching a class on jazz legend John Coltrane.

He had it all, but one night of excessive drinking ended in him committing murder. Scott would go on to spend 33 years in some of the toughest prisons in California.

The story could end there, but Scott survived and served his sentence, making his way back to the home that he says was calling for him. His "House of Saints," where today he honors those that raised him, protected him and continue to guide him. All with the help of "Saint" Coltrane and his jazz music.

Reggie's new life is one of doing what he's always loved best. Play music. And to listen when the spirits guide him to do right as he continues to bring life back to the house he grew up in.