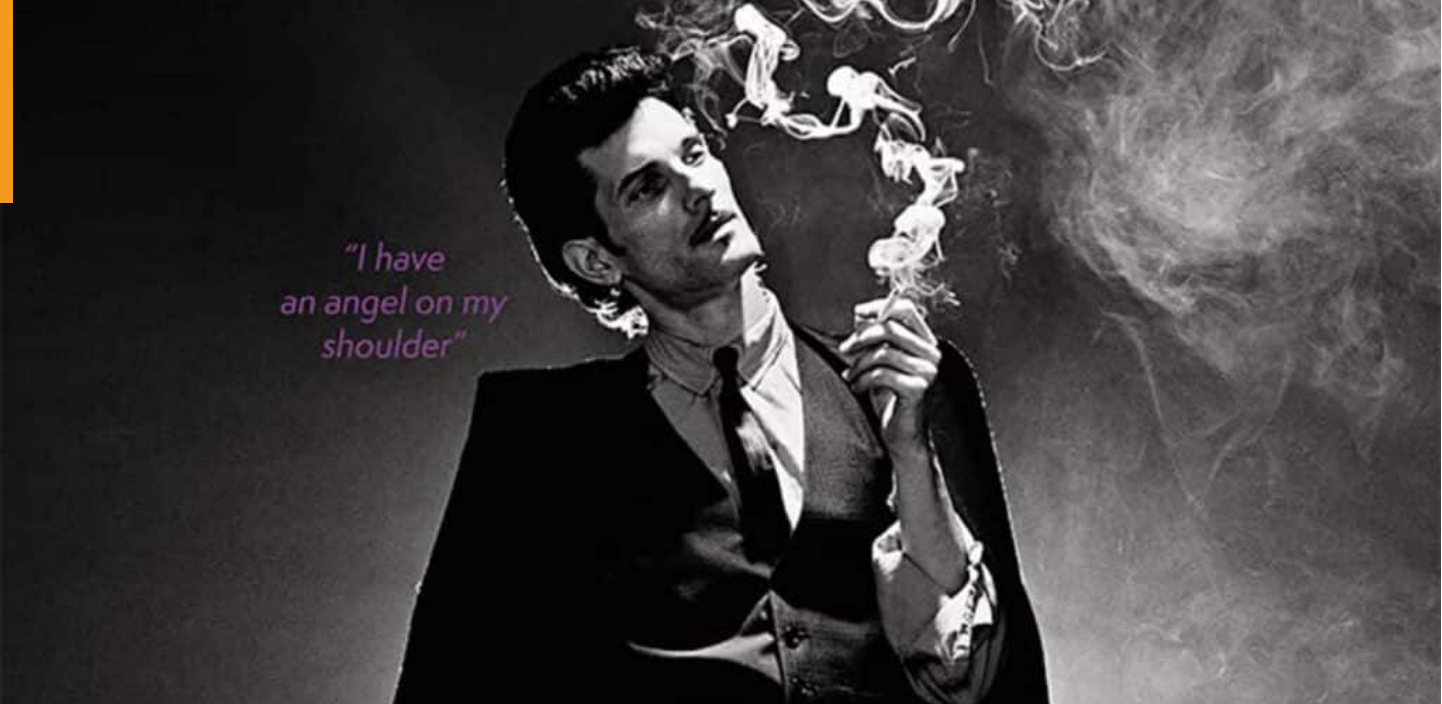


□
□
□



"I have
an angel on my
shoulder"

‘HEAVEN STOOD STILL: THE INCARNATIONS OF WILLY DEVILLE’

While Europe embraced Willy DeVille’s Bohemian multi-genre artistry, most US listeners remained ignorant of his music. The documentary *Heaven Stood Still* was made, in part, to rectify that.

By [George de Stefano](#) / 1 June 2023





**HEAVEN STOOD STILL: THE
INCARNATIONS OF WILLY
DEVILLE**

LARRY LOCKE

4 November 2022 (UK)

Willy DeVille had all the goods to be a major rock star: striking looks and a theatrical yet streetwise stage presence; a powerful, soulful voice; songwriting chops; and a genre-transcending versatility that encompassed early '60s rock and R&B, the blues, New Orleans R&B, French chanson, country, and Latin pop. As the leader of the band Mink DeVille (1974-1986) and then as a solo artist, he earned the praise of critics and the admiration of many of his peers.

One fan, Bob Dylan, insists that DeVille belongs in the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame. But this gifted and unique artist never found the mass audience he craved. Although he had a devoted following in the United States, he was a star only in Europe. The US music industry didn't know what to do with him, and a turbulent personal life of addiction, marital strife, illness, and suicide kept getting in the way. Willy DeVille died from pancreatic cancer in 2009, a year after releasing his final album.

A new documentary, *Heaven Stood Still: The Incarnations of Willy DeVille*, presents DeVille as an important but underappreciated artist, highlighting his achievements and career frustrations. The film doesn't shy away from his addiction and other problems but doesn't dwell on them. Its talking heads—Sting, Mark Knopfler, the late Ben E. King, Peter Wolf, producers Jack Nitzsche and the late Hal Willner, and one former Talking Head, drummer Chris Frantz—offer insightful commentary. But unlike many rock docs, the on-camera testimonies have no repetitiveness or sanctimony. [Peter Wolf](#), who says he was so besotted by DeVille that he became his evangelizing “John the Baptist”, also recalls confronting him over his heroin use.

Directed and produced by [Larry Locke](#) and co-produced by [Crispin Cioe](#), a saxophonist who played in DeVille's band, the film, which takes its title from one of his best songs, traces the singer's life from his childhood to his death. DeVille was born William Borsey in 1950 in Stamford, Connecticut, a place he describes in *Heaven Stood Still* as “nowhere”. He moved to Greenwich Village when he was 15 and formed his first band.



Billy Borsey fashioned Willy DeVille from different influences, particularly Latin and Latin-influenced pop. “The sound of Spanish Harlem always stuck in my head,” he says in an interview. With his black pompadour, thin mustache, and high cheekbones, many people

thought he was Latino. [Chris Frantz](#) recalls wondering, “Is he Puerto Rican? Is he Dominican or what?” DeVille actually was of Irish, Basque, and Native American descent; as he said, “A little of this and a little of that.”

When he was 17, he married Susan Berle, known as Toots, a wild child who sported two nose rings, white face makeup, and a jet-black beehive hairdo. She also abused drugs and could turn violent toward women she thought were coming on to her husband. In 1971, the couple moved to London, where Borseley hoped to find musicians who shared his vision but returned to New York after two years.

In 1975, he changed his name to Willy DeVille and his band’s name to Mink DeVille. (He got the idea from the name of a California motel.) From 1975 to 1977, Mink DeVille was one of the house bands at CBGB, the East Village home of punk and new wave. In 1976, they were signed to Capitol Records. [Jack Nitzsche](#), who had apprenticed under Phil Spector and helped shape Spector’s “wall of sound” production technique, produced the band’s debut album, *Cabretta* (released as *Mink DeVille* in the United States.) The album, with its mix of rock, soul, and blues, won the praise of critics and generated a UK hit single, “Spanish Stroll”. But it sold poorly, as did its follow-up, *Return to Magenta*.



In 1979, DeVille took his band to Paris, where they recorded [Le Chat Bleu](#), an album featuring accordions and strings. Capitol declined to release it in the United States, which devastated DeVille. After the record sold well in Europe and then as an import in DeVille's home country, Capitol relented and released it for US distribution. *Rolling Stone's* annual critic's poll ranked *Le Chat Bleu* the fifth-best album of 1980. Mink DeVille then went to Atlantic Records, recording two albums, 1981's *Coup de Grâce* and 1983's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. Both were hits in Europe but underperformed in the United States. *Sportin' Life* (1985) was the last Mink DeVille album; a year later, DeVille filed for bankruptcy, broke up his band, and embarked on a solo career.

DeVille's career got a lift in 1987 when he recorded the album *Miracle* in London, with Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits producing and playing guitar. One of its tracks, "[Storybook Love](#)", was the theme song of director Rob Reiner's comedy, *The Princess Bride*. The song was nominated for an Oscar as Best Song, and DeVille performed it at the Academy Awards telecast. The next year he relocated to New Orleans where, with producer [Carlo Ditta](#), he recorded one of his best-reviewed albums, [Victory Mixture](#), a collection of classic Crescent City rock and R&B tunes featuring such stellar sidemen as Allen Toussaint and Dr. John. DeVille followed up with *Backstreets of Desire*, the first of four albums he made with producer John Shenale. The album, which reunited him with Dr. John, also featured David Hidalgo of Los Lobos and included a mariachi version of "[Hey Joe](#)", the rock murder ballad best known from Jimi Hendrix's version. *Backstreets of Desire* was critically acclaimed and sold well in Europe, but Capitol Records was uninterested; the indie label Rhino released it in 1994.



With earnings from his European record sales and tours, De Ville and his second wife and business manager, Lisa Leggett, purchased a horse farm in Mississippi, splitting their time between the farm and the apartment they kept in New Orleans. With no American record contract, he cut two albums for a French label before making 1995's *Loup Garou* with producer Shenale. Like *Victory Mixture*, it was steeped in New Orleans culture, particularly its voodoo lore. But by the mid-'90s, De Ville was broke, despairing, and, as he acknowledges in *Heaven Stood Still*, "taunting death".

He had to sell the horse farm to pay off his tax debts, and his marriage began to fall apart. In 1999, he released *Horse of a Different Color*, a folk- and blues-based outing that the online music site Allmusic called "the most consistent and brilliant recording of Willy DeVille's long career." But in 2001, tragedy struck: Lisa Leggett committed suicide by hanging. Willy discovered her body. He had been off drugs for a while but resumed his heroin habit.

The singer would release three more albums, all on small, independent labels: *Acoustic Trio Live in Berlin* (2002), *Crow Jane Alley* (2004), and *Pistola* (2008). The quality of each album was exceptional; his addiction and personal tragedies hadn't diminished his voice or songwriting.

After living for 15 years in New Orleans and the Southwest, he began a new relationship in 2003 in New York with Nina Lagerwall, who became his third wife. Interviewed in *Heaven Stood Still*, she comes across as a warm, sympathetic presence and the kind of level-headed person DeVille needed in his life. They remained together until his death, three weeks before his 59th birthday.

Heaven Stood Still recounts Willy DeVille's various incarnations efficiently; it covers considerable ground, but at barely an hour and a half, the film necessarily leaves out many things about his life and art. Nonetheless, it is an engaging, often compelling portrait of a singular artist whose gifts weren't sufficiently acknowledged and rewarded. *Heaven Stood Still* was first shown in November 2022 at the [Doc'n Roll Film Festival](#) in London. Its US debut was in late April 2023 at the Nighthawk Cinema in Brooklyn, followed by Westport, Connecticut in May. Fall 2023 screenings are planned for Los Angeles and Boston. (See the film's [Facebook page](#) for future dates.) After the Brooklyn screening, I spoke with director Larry Locke and co-producer Crispin Cioe. What follows is an edited version of our conversation.

How did the Brooklyn audience react to the film?

Locke: It was a really great night. You know, we have two problems with Willy DeVille. Number one, most people in the country don't know who he is, and number two, young people don't know him at all. Willy has a certain base in big cities like New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Orleans, maybe a little bit, and Boston, but not much more.

But that night in Brooklyn, the audience was not limited to Willy's fans from CBGB and the early New York days. They really got into it because it's the story, you know? It's not just his music. It's how he lived his life – that he stuck to his guns even though his life was chaotic. There's a certain integrity to how he lived, and they got it.

What was the impetus for making *Heaven Stood Still*? Did both of you decide you wanted to make a film about Willy DeVille?

Cioe: Larry decided to make this film almost ten years ago. Larry comes from the New York City film world. He asked friends if they knew anybody who knew Willy, who either had

played with him or was close to him. Through a circuitous route, it came to me. I had Larry's number, and I called him. We had coffee, and we were off and running. I worked with Willy in the '80s, on and off. In 1980, I was working with three other horn players in the Uptown Horns in New York. We were serious about being a great horn section, live and on recordings.

At the same time, my friend [saxophonist] [Louis Cortelezzi](#), who had been playing with Mink DeVille, wanted to do some other things. So he needed somebody good on saxophone to play with Willy. My first show with him was at The Ritz in New York. On the first song, with a pin spot hitting him, he came up to the microphone and went through this whole thing, smoking a cigarette into the mist. Then he started singing. Before that song was over, I decided, "I'm going to play with this guy as much as I can."

So that happened for about ten years, various tours in North America and Europe, and it ended around the time Willy and his second wife Lisa moved to New Orleans. I didn't think about him at all because we had a little falling out over getting paid, which happened with many of his musicians. I didn't think about him until, say, 16, 17 years later when I read that he died. A friend called me, who had also played with Willy, and said, "Do you want to go to the funeral?"

I went, and it was very moving. I met Nina, his widow. I saw all these musicians I hadn't seen in years, and we just started talking. We thought, "We should do a memorial concert for Willy," which we did six months later at B.B. King's in New York and sold out two shows. Weeks after that, I got a message to call Larry. So I took all those things as signs that I really had been influenced in my musical life and positively by my work with Willy. So that led me to do this film with Larry.

Crispin, what was it like to work with Willy DeVille?

Cioe: There were ups and downs certainly for me, touring with him. We ended up in jail once for a couple of nights in Oslo, Norway, thanks to Willy and Toots' shenanigans. But pretty much every musician I know who played with him has the same feeling about his music and his performing – how he could move people as a singer.

With the Uptown Horns, I toured with the Rolling Stones for a couple of years, the "Steel

Wheels” tour. I’ve worked with Aretha Franklin, Joe Cocker, and many others. And yet, in retrospect, I would say one of the top two most emotionally moving singers I ever worked with was Willy De Ville.

Locke: He had the stagecraft too. Willy had a great line. He said that people listen through their eyes, and I always thought to a large degree, that’s what his performance was about. The reason he could create those kinds of things that get inside your gut was that he created the image, the movements on stage, the whole cabaret imagery, and then delivered the goods with the songs.

Given *Heaven Stood Still*’s running time, you couldn’t get everything in. You don’t cover all his recordings. I was surprised to learn how prolific he was as a recording artist. How did you decide what to focus on and what to omit?

Locke: Yes, he put out a lot of records. Much of what was omitted had to do with practical reasons and what was available. As much as there is material on Willy De Ville, he’s certainly not like some larger acts. One of the other problems was that Willy really suffered from his addiction. I was concerned that we would find the best footage of his performances, and a few of them are not as good because he wasn’t “there”. I felt that after the Berlin shows [in 2002], when he was about 52, he’d deteriorated physically. Also, when we were putting *Heaven Stood Still* out into the marketplace, marketers told us that Willy De Ville was not famous enough for two hours of film.

Cioe: The original cut was two hours long. We had to pare it down.

Willy DeVille never really got the recognition or audience he should have had. What do you attribute that to? How much did his addiction hold him back?

Lock: I think Willy didn’t want to be consumed. Willy wanted you to come to him, and I think that’s hard for an audience in America to do. In Europe, they’re a little kinder about that. I’m not saying they’re a higher-level audience, but they’re more open to that. Willy DeVille didn’t have the ability to pander. He didn’t pander and was consistent about that, which is why so many musicians love him so deeply.

His addiction was an overriding force. No doubt, had he not had that problem, he certainly

would have had a different career. But Willy was not necessarily built to be a giant star. When you become that successful, you have to work much harder. He liked living his life as a Bohemian artist, and the idea that he would have even more press obligations and all the pressures, all the people you have to deal with, and the number of records you have to make and the speed in which you have to write and produce songs for those records, would probably have been something he would not have been capable of doing. It might have caused even more grief for him.

He had a career with all these ups and downs, these incarnations where he'd recreate himself over and over again. Not only is he one of the most talented people you don't know about, but he may also be the single most unique artist of the last 50 years many people don't know about. I mean, the way he made himself into all these different things, the way he crossed all these genres of music and did them with real skill.

When he went to New Orleans, it was everything. It was the clothing. It was the food. It was the history. Willy DeVille was what I would call fully committed. He's somebody people should know about in the US. He should not just disappear.

TAGS [Ben E. King](#) [blues](#) [CBGB](#) [chanson](#) [chris frantz](#) [country](#) [Crispin Cioe](#)
[Larry Locke](#) [latin pop](#) [Mink DeVille](#) [music documentary](#) [peter wolf](#) [r&b](#) [rock](#)
[Willy DeVille](#)

FROM THE POPMATTERS ARCHIVES

[41 Essential Pop/Rock Songs with Accordion](#)

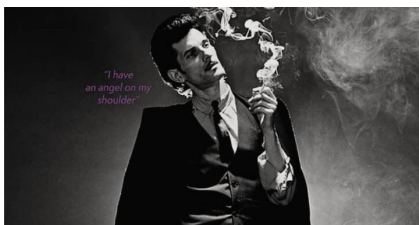
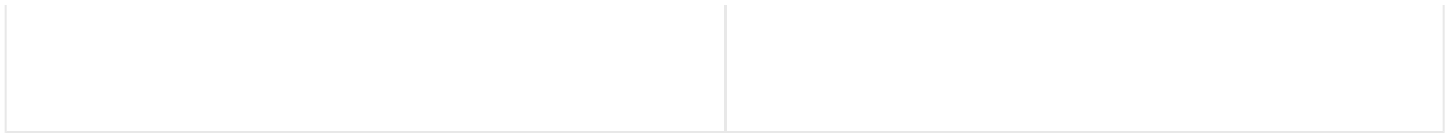
["Can you Recalibrate Yourself?": Larry Locke's 'Pin Gods'](#)

RESOURCES AROUND THE WEB

[Larry Lock Films: website](#)

[Heaven Stood Still: Facebook](#)

[Crispin Cioe: website](#)



'HEAVEN STOOD STILL: THE INCARNATIONS OF WILLY DEVILLE'

BY **GEORGE DE STEFANO**



POPMATTERS SEEKS TELEVISION CRITICS AND ESSAYISTS
BY **KAREN ZARKER**

ABOUT

[Masthead](#)

[Submission Guidelines](#)

[Mission](#)

BIZ

[Advertising](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

FOLLOW US

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Spotify](#)

CATEGORIES

[Music](#)

[Film](#)

[Television](#)

[Books](#)

[Culture](#)

© 1999-2021 PopMatters Media, Inc. All rights reserved. PopMatters is wholly independent, women-owned and operated.