

## Interview, Audio: Documentary Director Steve James on ‘Abacus: Small Enough to Jail’

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CHICAGO – The documentary maker Steve James, one of the best in the history of cinema, has a resume of quality reporting through feature film that is stunning in its context. The director of “Hoop Dreams,” “Stevie,” “The Interrupters,” “Head Games” and the Roger Ebert biography “Life Itself” has a new doc, focusing on one repercussion of the financial crisis of 2008, subtly entitled “Abacus: Small Enough to Jail.”

The film is about the Abacus Federal Savings Bank of Chinatown New York City, a financial house built through the sweat and toil of Thomas Sung, who opened the institution because he wanted to help his community... he was inspired to do that from the film “It’s a Wonderful Life” and the George Bailey character. His successful enterprise had one bad apple in it, which resulted in fraudulent mortgage applications, much like the “too big to fail” banks that did the same thing. The New York District Attorney, flanked by federal government officials, decided to make an example of this community bank. The film chronicles the turmoil that Thomas Sung and his family had to endure.



Director Steve James in 2014

*Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com*

Steve James needs no introduction in documentary circles. His seminal film “Hoop Dreams” (1994) ushered in a modern sensibility for the doc art form, and remains one of the most lauded reality films ever rendered. But he didn’t stop there, because through his home production base Kartemquin Films – based in Chicago – he has released nine full length documentaries since that breakthrough film, and several documentary shorts. HollywoodChicago.com spoke to Steve James via phone about his latest, and the interview is split between the transcript and an audio portion below.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is your process for deciding on your documentary subjects? How did you run into the story of Abacus and decide it was ripe for exploration?

**Steve James:** I first heard of Abacus from Mark Mitten, who is one of the producers on the film. He called me up because he was friends with the Sung family, and he told me about the trial that was about to kick off, and how crazy the situation was. He spelled it out for me, and I was very much intrigued. I went to New York City to do some filming, to decide whether to pursue the subject as a film, and it worked out.

Film ideas come to me in all kinds of different ways. Frequently, the idea is mine, regarding something that interests or fascinates me. In other situations, like this film or even ‘Life Itself,’ the documentary opportunity is brought to me. Someone else had the idea and thought I would be the right person to do it – I feel fortunate in that regard.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** We heard about the financial crisis as it was happening during 2008 in the media, but rarely did we hear any follow up either having to do with punishment or the backlash from it. Why do you think that happened?



**James:** I think there was a lot of anger generated regarding that crisis, once people truly began to understand it. The result of course is that none of the big banks were broken up, the Obama administration said they weren't going to do that, thinking the collateral consequences would be too great, and there were some that disagreed with that as well. The outcome was bailouts, fines and no felony charges, except for a few individuals.

So what makes 'Abacus' so important is that this little bank in New York City's Chinatown is targeted by District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr., and he clearly wanted to connect the prosecution of the bank with the 2008 crisis. He made a show of it at the announcing press conference, and he emphasized that Abacus was doing the same things that brought about the crisis, which was untrue. Yes, there was fraud at Abacus, but it wasn't even close to what happened at the big banks. But this is a story that the media decided not to tell, because maybe the bank was 'too small to care about.' [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What lessons do you think the New York District Attorney was trying to send to the rest of the country, with the prosecution of Abacus?

**James:** I think he wanted to say, especially by having federal officials at the initial press conference announcement, that he and the American government were going after a bank that was a part of the 2008 crisis. In general the feeling was the bank was small enough to be made an example of, but it wouldn't have any impact on the financial system. If Cyrus Vance decided to go after Bank of America, or Chase Bank, that would have gotten a lot of coverage, and he would have had a more difficult fight, because the big banks have deep pockets and more lawyers. It would have been a much riskier gambit for him. A small bank in Chinatown was a very easy target.



The Sung Family in 'Abacus: Small Enough to Jail,' Directed by Steve James

*Photo credit: PBS Distribution*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** We live in an era where the money changers are now in charge of the temple. Why, of all the seven deadly sins – in your research in doing this doc – is gluttony and greed now seemed more admired than despised?

**James:** [Laughs] Yes, some people say we're living in a new gilded age. There has never been a bigger disparity between the rich and the poor, and even between the ultra-rich and the rest of us. And yes, this wealth is more accepted and revered. Maybe it's the media presentation of the super wealthy, but I'm bewildered as to why it's so acute now. There has always been wealth, and it's always been revered in a way. But in the past, the rich weren't regarded as celebrities. Many years ago, the richest people in the world tended to be businessmen, but not the public figures that billionaires seem to be now.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In a filmmaker's pursuit of subject in storytelling, they are continuing their education. What was the greatest lesson about this story that you learned, and how does that knowledge change your life?

**James:** Yes, I'm happy to say that in every film I've done, I've had a steep and varied learning curve. First off, by delving into this small bank, I learned a lot more overall about the 2008 financial crisis. But I also learned a lot more about the community, specifically the Chinese immigrant community. Like everyone else who has visited New York City, my experience in Chinatown had been as a tourist or a diner, but never spent any real time there.

That's the great thing about doing documentaries, that you get to know people as individuals or as part of their community, in ways that go way beyond just visiting a place. Also I've met a lot of inspiring people, whose only notoriety comes from the film I'm doing about them. They are courageous, and deal with obstacles and tragedies at times, and I've been privileged to be there to see and record how they deal with it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Did that include Roger Ebert?

**James:** Of course. When I began ‘Life Itself,’ there was no indication that he was going to pass away soon. While it was sad to see that happen, I also felt privileged again to capture the way he courageously went about living the last few months of his life.

**In the audio portion of the interview, Steve James talks about the Oscar snub of “Life Itself,” his personal favorite documentary and what he has observed from audience reactions to “Abacus: Small Enough to Jail.”**

*“Abacus: Small Enough to Jail” continues its limited release in Chicago on June 16th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring interviews with Thomas Sung, Jill Sung, Vera Sung, Heather Sung and Chanterelle Sung. Directed by Steve James. Not Rated. For more information on the documentary projects of Chicago’s Kartemquin Films, [click here](#). [21]*



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