

How two friends' lives became 'The Last Black Man in San Francisco'

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Ryan Kost



A portrait of Joe Talbot, left, and Jimmie Fails, the two friends behind "The Last Black Man in San Francisco." Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

There's a story that's been passed around for a few years, a story about how Jimmie Fails and Joe Talbot met. This was some 13 years ago; Fails was 11, Talbot somewhere around 15. They were hanging out in Precita Park, a stretch of green that served as the midway point between Joe's comfortable-enough home in Bernal Heights and the Mission District Army Street projects that Jimmie spent four years in.

The story goes that Jimmie saw Joe there, getting into his first fistfight with another kid. Maybe it was about a girl. The details are thin. Joe doesn't really remember.

When the story comes up now, Joe and Jimmie share an exhausted sort of laugh.

"That (story) just goes and floats around so quickly," Jimmie says.

Sure, it was one of the first times they'd talked, but probably, most likely, they'd met in a quieter way before all that.

Maybe they just exchanged a look.

The thing is, it doesn't matter, not really. With this story — and the stories Joe and Jimmie tell, something might not be strictly factual, but that doesn't make a thing any less true.

Joe won the fight, by the way.

"He did. He did," Jimmie says. "I'll say that so he doesn't have to."

"Barely," says Joe.

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Joe Talbot and Jimmie Fails are about to be famous. People already recognize them. Like a guy who came up to introduce himself while they visited City Hall. Pretty soon, that's going to happen more often.

The two are the backbone of "[The Last Black Man in San Francisco](#)," one of the year's most anticipated films ever since it debuted to rave reviews at Sundance in January. The movie, which opens Friday, June 7, is based on Fails' life. He stars as himself, not a strictly factual version of himself but a true enough version of himself. Talbot directed and wrote the film.

"The Last Black Man in San Francisco" isn't any one thing — that's one of the movie's central lessons really. Nothing (nobody) is ever just one thing.

The movie is about the myths we tell ourselves, the stories we speak into truths. It's about a friendship between two men, two best friends. It's about coming to terms with a changing and fading city. It's about letting go.

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In July 2013, Fails [wrote an article](#) for a website called "Caribbean Today." The piece was the first of an ongoing series that looked at San Francisco's black community. Fails wrote about his family's Victorian in the Fillmore, a place he lived until he was 4. His grandfather had built the house. It felt big, he wrote, maybe because he was so small at the time.

"Eventually, drug abuse would lead to my aunt losing the house and the family being split up and scattered across the city, forced to live in housing projects." Eventually they scattered further — to Las Vegas or Waco, Texas. His dad wound up in the Tenderloin. Fails ended up in the projects and then in a group home.

Some days, he wrote, he'd sit outside that three-story Victorian, hours on end, smoking cigarettes, warm with nostalgia even as the rain fell on him.

“It is tough having to accept the fact that San Francisco is no longer as diverse as it once was,” he wrote. “Walking around the Mission District, I sometimes feel I may be the only black person in the whole area.”



Jimmie Fails (left) and Joe Talbot in San Francisco. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

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Talbot grew up in a home of journalists, including his father, David. Their door was always open. Friends stayed over; neighborhood kids would grab milk out of the fridge for their cereal. His parents encouraged him to make art, even after he dropped out of high school.

Dreaming was something that happened daily. His mom had always wanted to live in a Victorian. They couldn't afford one, but every day on the way to school, they'd scan the streets. “We'd pick out our favorites.”

And just like Fails, outside that house in the Fillmore, they'd imagine filling them up with life.

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“Fight for your land. Fight for your home.” That's the movie's tagline. A call to arms, even if the fight may already feel lost.

On a recent afternoon, clouds rode a fast wind through the sky. Occasionally they'd threaten to crack open, but nothing much came. Talbot and Fails were outside a building they call the "Greek Chorus House," a place right off India Basin where Fails' character lives for a time with his best friend Montgomery (Jonathan Majors) and Montgomery's grandfather (Danny Glover).

The house itself is modest but beautiful all the same. It's set back up off the road, pale blue, white picket fence and a staircase lined by a brick pathway. The yard is overgrown in places. They'd had their eyes on this place for years. Fails remembers going to a house party there once, back in high school.

In the movie, the house sits tall and proud, no neighborhoods on either side. But that was then. Now, right next door, a new, boxy house, brown and beige and gray, has sprung up.

"This block is almost ... like it's almost unrecognizable," Talbot says. "We had to beg them not to ..."

"Build," Fails finishes. He looks at the new house. "Polished cardboard box."



Joe Talbot and Jimmie Fails mined their childhood years to create the film "The Last Black Man in San Francisco." Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Across the way, a fence had gone up, and a green tarp attached to it, so you couldn't see the bay. Part of the wire fence had been cut, though. Wide enough to slide a small body through, or your head, just to catch a glimpse. There were wildflowers everywhere. The grass was so tall it was hard to see a path down to the water.

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Later that day, the two stood on South Van Ness Avenue, right between 20th and 21st streets. The House — the Victorian that Jimmie dreams about in the movie, and ultimately squats in for a good part of the film, isn't in the Fillmore at all. It's right in the heart of the Mission District.

The House is majestic, some shade of white with red trim, gingerbread paneling, stained glass and a "witch's hat." In the movie, the house becomes a character. The camera catches the way the light caresses the walls, the way floors creak and the walls breath.

Fails doesn't like to go too deep into what separates him from the character he plays in the movie. They both lost a family home, both grew up in a group home, both spent hours staring at a place that represented safety until it represented exile.

"Everything was real for me emotionally," he says. "I feel like I grew a lot in this role because I kind of dealt with and faced a lot of demons, and stuff that I hadn't gotten over, you know what I mean?"

"There are times when you shoot the scene and you think you're OK, and then when they call 'cut,' you go around the corner and go cry real quick and come back."

The South Van Ness house is not the original house, of course. They never thought about using that one for the film. "It's still there," Fails says. "It's different. I don't like the color they used. It's OK. It just didn't feel right."

"It's been changed," Talbot says.

"It's not the same," Fails says. "It's not how I remember it anyway."

The house on South Van Ness, Fails never grew up there. But that doesn't matter, really. It feels like the truth now.

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The two of them say they've been working on this movie for 10 years. It might be longer, though; it feels like something they've been planning ever since they met and started taking long walks around the city, dreaming.

The whole thing took off five years ago when they dropped a concept trailer online, and it went viral. Donations came pouring in from people in the Bay Area — but also from as far as the East Coast and Europe. Barry Jenkins, the director who won a best picture Oscar for “Moonlight,” kicked in some cash. “I was broke as hell and I gave \$250 to that Kickstarter,” Jenkins said.

Recently, Jenkins watched that concept trailer — he calls it their “proof of concept.” Jenkins remembered back to reading the script, and then he watched the feature. “There are certain things I remember the kernel of, but the flower that comes out of it is so much more beautiful than I ever could have expected.”

Talbot and Fails have been getting emails from famous people — they’re not sure they’re allowed to say who. But one of them has several Grammys. Shia LaBeouf is a fan. He showed up at a Q&A. “Yo, best movie the year,” he shouted after Talbot called on him.

“He slapped the hell out of my back,” Fails says.

“I thought he was going to fight at first,” Talbot says.

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A week before the San Francisco premiere, Fails and Talbot made their way to City Hall. “We’re actually getting married today,” Talbot said, joking. Fails’ eyes traced the faces and the shapes of the ornate, domed building. “I want to know about the architecture. Whose face is that? Who is that?”

Inside the meeting chambers, District Nine Supervisor Hillary Ronen introduced the two. “It is my pleasure to honor Joe Talbot and Jimmie Fails today, respectively the director and the star who together co-wrote the most beautiful film of the year, a stunningly moving, heartbreaking love story to San Francisco.”

The trailer played, a round of applause when it finished.

Fails kept his eyes down and chewed hard on a piece of gum. Talbot squeezed Fails’ shoulder and then his arm. Ronen read some prewritten remarks, but finally she let the formality drop. “You absolutely have to see this movie. It will knock your socks off.”

Fails spoke a little, Talbot spoke a little more. And then they were presented with leather-bound certificates of honor.

All of this, and the two were still nervous, still wary. It’s hard, sometimes, to know how to wear success. “The biggest thing for me is the premiere in San Francisco,” Fails said. “Getting to be there with all the people.”

Outside City Hall, a black Escalade waited for them, along with their handler for A24, the studio that's releasing the film. "Hey Lindsey," Talbot said. They didn't need the car. "I think we're gonna go for one our walks."

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"If you're going to San Francisco/ Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair/ If you're going to San Francisco/ You're gonna meet some gentle people there"

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"The Last Black Man in San Francisco" premiered on the last Wednesday in May at the Castro Theatre. The fog had gathered itself up on the horizon and the wind blew so hard trash cans went sliding down the sidewalk.

Talbot showed up first, a small, lavender flower tucked behind his ear. Fails came a little later. "Look at this fresh cut," somebody shouted. He was chomping on gum. A24 Lindsey had him spit it out before he got to the red carpet.

Escalades showed up, one after another, dropping off the movie's stars. It was formal, but not really. Every time somebody showed up there were more shouts, more hugs. "My people, my people, my beautiful people." Talbot picked a woman up and spun around. "I'm so proud of you," she screamed. And she really did scream.

Talbot and Fails hardly left each other's side. If the movie is about change, it's also about the things in your life that are constant. The people who you can lean on. Always.



Childhood friends, now actor Jimmie Fails and director Joe Talbot, at the Wednesday, May 29, premiere.
Photo: Paul Kuroda / Special to The Chronicle

Before the movie began, Fails spoke a little to the audience and Talbot spoke a little more. Then the lights went down and the curtains opened.

Earlier, Talbot had said that the hardest part about sitting through a screening, surrounded by all those people, is waiting to see whether you'll get that first laugh. Until then, it's all nerves.

They got that laugh. And every local who showed up onscreen got a round of applause. And when it was all over, the city they love gave them a standing ovation.