

The Barnstormers

by E.H. Decker

The Barnstormers is a one-hour serial drama about a team trying to survive in the chaotic world of black baseball in the years before World War II. Given its epic scope and substantial production demands, it is best suited for the limited-run season model of premium or basic cable shows like *Boardwalk Empire* and *The Knick* or subscription-based service series such as *Marco Polo*.

Under the direction of baseball outcast Wild Bill Lee and his shadowy backers, a team of the best black and Hispanic ballplayers in the country hustles its way past gangsters, Jim Crow, and the Klan to bring the game to post-depression America.

In the series pilot, Wild Bill is forced to improvise after an exhibition game against major league players is disrupted by the Klan. He hustles up another game for the club against a small town team, but angry locals, his employer's shady dealings and his own schemes leave little room for error, on the field or off it.

The Show

In this series, we will tell one of the great untold stories in modern American history, the story of black baseball before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier. It is a story that goes beyond what we may know about the Negro Leagues and stars like Josh Gibson, Oscar Charleston and Satchel Paige and winds through the vast expanse of America between the World Wars, picking up farm boys, outcasts, gangsters, tycoons and prodigies along the way.

Though the game of baseball is central to the series, the show is not a baseball procedural, with each episode centered on a game to be played. It is a serialized view of the complicated and dangerous world around the black baseball at this time.

The show tells the stories of the players, the owners and managers who make up the team, with each episode focusing on one key character. We watch as all of our characters struggle to succeed in a world built to keep them down. We see the incredible and often illicit methods required of owners and managers to run these teams without access to credit or financing. With numbers-runner, bootleggers and thugs backing most of these clubs and Jim Crow laws, the Klan and other racist institutions opposing them, the biggest plays being made are not always on the field.

The show is a historical drama in the truest sense. Employing a style similar to the one used so successfully on *Lost*, this series will highlight one character in each episode and explore key events in their life before they joined up with Wild Bill along with the present day tale of the team fighting for survival. This story is not just set in the past. It is about the way history makes us what we are- both our own personal history and major world-changing events. Each of these flashback stories shape the events in the show's present tense.

Characters

Black-listed by the Major Leagues for jumping his contract and working with gamblers, promising white lefty WILD BILL LEE found himself doomed to the life of a baseball ronin, a gun-for-hire, wandering the country looking for a game. During his wandering years, he found himself facing off against STONEWALL ARMSTRONG, a black catcher with unmatched abilities. Recognizing the chance to build something special that would be his own, Bill assembled Wild Bill Barnstorming Giants- an all-

black team of the best players he could find. His eye for talent and his ability to hustle anyone keeps team on the road, but his partnership with Chicago madam GLORIA DEVINE, casts a shadow over everything he has built.

STONEWALL is Bill's first star and his true partner in running the Barnstormers. He might have been the best catcher in the country in his prime, but the color barrier kept him from proving it in the majors. Now, he is closing in on 40 and his knees are shot. He is still the team's unquestioned leader and a force behind the plate, but the drugs and booze he uses to keep the pain in check are slowly destroying him.

When Bill and Stonewall first met up, they traveled played throughout the Caribbean where black and white players could share the field freely. In 1916, they came to the Dominican Republic, where they met another black ex-pat, Willie Walker, who had caught the eye of Isabella Jimenez De Spana, the daughter of a late sugar baron. Their young son, later to be dubbed JOHNNY SPAIN by Bill, grew up sheltered in his mother's compound, his father's identity kept secret to prevent a scandal. Years later, Bill returned and discovered that Johnny had grown into one of the finest right-handed pitchers he had ever seen. Bill attempted to guide him to the majors until the secret of his race got out and ruined his chances. Johnny is Bill's ace and surrogate son. His light skin allows him to "pass" as white at times, which can be an asset in Jim Crow America, but it also sets him apart from his teammates and leaves him insecure about his place in the clubhouse.

The undisputed star of the team is LEGS JOHNSON, their center fielder. He is their biggest draw as well, bringing in crowds of white and black baseball fans wherever he goes. People show up just to see him. This makes him irreplaceable for the team, but it also breeds resentment among his teammates and makes him a prime target for other clubs looking to steal him away. Never one to hold someone to a contract, Bill has let Legs come and go in the past, but his fame has been growing and that has made it harder to live without him. Legs is part Willie Mays, part Ty Cobb. On the field, his indomitable will makes him nearly unstoppable, but off the field, it can be disastrous.

Bill's team is just one part of the empire former-prostitute GLORIA DEVINE has built for herself. This heavy-set madam runs the numbers rackets and brothels on the South Side of Chicago. During Prohibition, she built a bootlegging ring that ran booze throughout the Midwest under the guise of the Barnstormers and the many traveling musical acts under her control. Now that alcohol is legal again, Ms. Devine has started shifting her business to running heroin and the newly-illegal marijuana.

Gloria's enforcer MULE BRADLEY serves as Bill's backup catcher on occasions when the boss lady feels the need to keep a closer eye her investments. A World War I vet, Mule is more adept with a machine gun than a catcher's mitt. Bill would never admit it, but there are many times he needs Mule, as a catcher and in other capacities. His help comes at a price, however, and Bill would gladly trade the extra muscle to be free of Gloria's spy.

Singer RUBY SLIPPERS and her accompanist FLOYD GREEN are one of the other acts that Gloria manages. Like Bill's club, they travel around the country hustling up work. Ruby's silky voice and long legs draw the crowds, but Floyd is the real talent. He played guitar with Jay McShann's band and clarinet with King Oliver in his youth, but he is at his best when seated at the piano- a true virtuoso. Ruby was just another girl in Gloria's employment when Floyd fell for her and taught her to carry a tune. She has never shared his affection, but she is grateful to him for putting on stage and scared to be up there without him.

NIGHTINGALE LAYNE is the team's shortstop, a slick fielder with a rocket arm, lightening quick reflexes and incredible instincts on the field. As his nickname implies, he is also the team's jukebox,

thumping out popular songs and blues tunes on his guitar as the team. Prior to this tour, Nightengale, never much with the bat, had started to rival Legs as the team's star, batting ahead of the centerfielder and raking. When Legs jumped ship the last time, Night's bat went cold and he has yet to recover. That has left him bitter towards Legs, but that may not be the only source of animosity between the two stars.

Season 1 Episodes

Ep 2: "Squeeze Play"

After racing out of Liberty with local Klan members on their tail, the team hides out on the bus. With all but a few dollars tied up in the bets he left behind, Bill will barely be able to get the team to Kansas City for their Sunday game, a true Negro League match. Rather than sending Mule to collect and being forced to pay a percentage of his bets to Gloria, he sends Johnny back to see Slim and get their money. Johnny collects with the help of Ruby and Floyd, but the three of them are forced to hide when Johnny is recognized and more Klan members start to flow into town. Legs has abandoned the club and the team needs him for tomorrow's game so Mule heads out to find him and bring him back.

Backstory: Bill shepherds a younger Johnny Spain toward the majors, coaching him and caring for him as if he were his son. Johnny is insecure and easily intimidated, on the mound and off, but Bill teaches him to be tough, to own the plate and to trust his stuff. Johnny is on the verge of breaking into the majors, but an old enemy of Bill's resurfaces and exposes Johnny's race, leaving him on the wrong side of the color line. Johnny is devastated. Did Bill do this for him or to get back at the people who ran him out of the game?

Ep. 3 "One O'Clock Jump"

The team rolls into Kansas City, the capital of Jazz and black baseball, home to Count Basie and Lester Young, Satchel Paige's Monarchs and a young Charlie Parker. They are still missing Legs, who headlines all the promos for the game around town and Johnny, who remains trapped in Liberty. Without, the money from his bets, Bill can't check the team into the hotel until after the game or give the guys money to spend in town. Some would leave if they had anywhere else to go. The crowd boos the team when they see Legs is not with them and the tired, hungry men play lifelessly. Mule finally returns with Legs for the fifth inning and they make it close. His split of the gate money lets Bill pay the guys and the hotel, but he begins to seriously worry about Johnny, who has yet to make it back.

Backstory: Legs grows up desperately poor on a farm in Texas. He watches as his dad is routinely arrested for use in the chain gangs. Legs fends for himself and spends every free second he can working on his game. Later, he discovers the riches and complications that can come with baseball stardom.

Ep 4: "Kansas City Blues"

Despite everyone getting paid and getting some time off in Kansas City, tensions are running high. Nightingale is still fuming from Legs not showing up on time and he makes it known. In the rest of the games in K.C., Legs slumps and Nightingale gets hot- or at least lucky- and suddenly he is the one getting all the attention from the female fans. When Nightingale jumps on stage at a local night club and mocks Legs, the divisions in the club become explosive. Johnny returns with Ruby and Floyd, but he has accidentally exposed Bill's schemes to Gloria. We see a glimpse of how Stonewall is handling the pain that comes from years behind the plate.

Backstory- Nightingale grows up in the black middle class of D.C., the only son of a nightclub singer/comedian and a maid. He lives in a segregated, but socially conscious world built around serving and

entertaining tolerant, but condescending rich white folks. His father teaches him to play baseball and guitar and to live within that complicated social scheme.

Ep 5: “Hitting the Wall”

The team leaves K.C. for more bush league games on the way through Memphis and Birmingham. When right fielder Cannonball Adams collides with an outfield wall and needs a doctor, Bill’s plans to escape Gloria’s control fall apart. Desperate to rebuild his bank roll, Bill sets up a baseball carnival, running gimmicky games for small change as he tries to reschedule the lost match with the big league stars. The players find the scheme demeaning and come close to mutiny. Stonewall keeps the club from collapsing, but he is rapidly deteriorating as he runs out of ways to self-medicate.

Backstory-A young Stonewall grows up protecting his mother and brother from his abusive, alcoholic father. He becomes hard and unflinching to the bone, qualities that serve him well as catcher in the sandlot games.

Ep 6: “Stuck inside of Mobile”

With his hold on the team slipping away, Bill plots to escape Gloria and the world of Jim Crow by returning to the Dominican Republic where he played with Johnny’s father. He ditches Mule and trucks the team from Birmingham to Mobile where his plan stalls as he tries to get a boat. When Gloria catches up with him, the gig is up. It is not all bad news though, the big lady has put together a tour for the club with the barnstorming major leaguers, starting in New Orleans. She advances them cash and ends the strife within the club. She re-unites the team with Ruby and Floyd, whose new band travel with them, touring on the same schedule and helping her keep an eye on things.

Backstory: Gloria Devine begins her life of crime as teenage prostitute who kills an abusive john. Instead of dooming her, the incident brings her in front of white Chicago gang leader Big Jim Colosimo and his protégé Johnny Torrio. Recognizing her sharp mind and ruthlessness, the Italian gangsters back her takeover of the numbers game in the black community in Chicago. With Mule at her side, she builds an empire through cunning and violence, eventually expanding to running bands and finally, taking up a young Bill on backing his black ballclub.

Ep 7: Separate but Equal

The team plays a series against some of the biggest stars in the majors and show they can compete and win against the best, but off the field, the lives of the major league stars and the barnstormers are night and day. Jim Crow laws make just finding food and a place to stay a challenge for the black players while the white stars living in comparative luxury. The games line the players’ pockets though and temporarily end the riffs among them. The money doesn’t flow all the way to Bill however. He is now given just the smallest possible stipend, leaving him completely under Gloria’s thumb. Heroin addiction leaves Stonewall incapable of coming to his aid in any meaningful way, as he has in the past.

Backstory- Picking up where Bill’s story from the pilot ended, we see Bill as a wandering man, trying to stick with one traveling team after another and scrap together money for his own team, a team of the best black and Spanish players around. He dreams of starting an integrated league to rival the majors. His key is Stonewall. Bill and the young black catcher go into business together, but Stonewall’s view of the prospect of integrated baseball is not the naïve one that Bill has. He helps Bill build his team, but it is a team built for the real world and not the one Bill dreams of.

Ep 8: “Strange Fruit”

The high-profile games the team has been playing put them on back on the Klan's radar. Sheriff McKinley issues a warrant for Bill and Legs accusing them of a series of made up crimes from their run in Liberty back in Episode 1. With the team playing in Little Rock, a violent collision between the McKinley, the Klan and the team ends with the club running from the law. Mule's intervention keeps Nightengale from being lynched, but Mule is killed in the process. Without her top lieutenant, Gloria pulls back from the club, leaving Bill and the guys to fend for themselves. He and Johnny finally arrange for escape to the Dominican Republic.

Backstory- Mule is a innocent young kid who idolizes the local black ballclub's catcher, until America joins the Great War. He serves in the trenches in Europe and they transform him from a scared kid into a hardened killer. When he returns to America, he finds himself unhonored and unwelcome back home. He uses the only skill he has to carve out a living as Gloria's enforcer. When she takes over Bill's club, Mule gets to live out a childhood dream, even if it is only as a pariah to Bill and Stonewall.

Themes

Freedom

Above all, *The Barnstormers* is a show about freedom. The barriers to freedom that Jim Crow laws imposed are the most obvious battleground for this theme, but the idea of what it means to be free extends beyond just the social and the political limitations. Characters are held captive by their past, by their flaws, and by their appetites. The fight for freedom is constant, even for characters who are not oppressed by the society and true freedom always appears to be just out of reach, a destination down the road that might never be reached.

Individualism

Baseball is unique as a sport because it is a team game where winning and losing hinges on the effort of the group, but each event is largely left to the individual. The tension between inclusion and individualism is central to the series. It is embodied in the political reality of the "separate but equal" ruling of Plessy v. Ferguson that is so important to this time. The characters in this show all struggle with their place in the group and with the ideas of loyalty and brotherhood as they collide with their own desires.

Greatness

The series deals with the struggle to achieve at the highest level in a society determined to ignore the accomplishments of African-American's and other minors. On the field, the players in our series are unquestionably elite athletes, but thanks to segregation, they must ply their trade in small towns, on farms and on back fields just as often as they play in front of thousands in palatial stadiums. Major League Baseball is closed to them but these men still become stars and even end up with drawing power that exceeds that of major league stars. At the same time, on bandstands and in nightclubs all across America as well, swing music and the blues are bringing African American music to the forefront of music and black men like Charlie Christian, Robert Johnson and Charlie Parker are establishing their own legacy as some of the most important musicians in the county. That revolution is touched upon as well, both in storylines and in the soundtrack. This battle for greatness in the face of prejudice will set the stage for the end of segregation and the civil rights era to come decades later.

Historical Context

We begin the series in [1937](#). FDR is just beginning his second term, Stalin is violently consolidating power in the Soviet Union, Civil War rages in Spain and Hitler is quietly preparing Germany for War. In the American South and Midwest, where our show is set, the depression still hangs over the country. This year dust storms ravage the Midwest and California. There are more labor strikes than at any other time in US history, unemployment hit 20 percent and thousands of hungry men and women march on Washington to lobby for a minimum wage.

Major League baseball at this time is dominated by New York City, the Giants and the Yankees. There is no major league team West or South of St. Louis. With the high cost of train travel and few major highways running through the country, the majority of people outside the major cities have little opportunity to see America's Pastime played by professionals. Instead, the make-shift leagues, exhibition games, and ad-hoc tournaments give people a chance to forget their hardships. Teams of all kinds travel the country "barnstorming" for paying contests and strong competition. Among these clubs, the biggest draws are always the star-studded "Negro League" teams. These clubs play in loosely collected leagues with teams in major cities like New York, Boston and Philadelphia and smaller cities like Birmingham and Memphis, but between contests, they play anywhere and everywhere, [hustling up games for a few dollars or simply for room and board](#). At the best of times, these players were well-paid stars playing in front of adoring crowds. At the worst, they played in hostile environments against woefully inferior players for little or no money.

Segregation made running a black baseball team a nearly impossible endeavor. As baseball historian Bill James notes in his Historical Baseball Abstract, these teams had no access to lines of credit or financing. Unless owners had capital of their own, the team had to operate entirely on the money they made day in and day out. With few exceptions, the only people in the African-American community with the money to fund such risky ventures were gangsters. Pittsburgh Crawfords owner Gus Greenlee ran the numbers games in Pittsburgh. Eagles' owner Abe Manley did the same in Newark. James "Soldier Boy" Semler was a numbers man in New York with possible connections to the Luciano crime family. He partnered with dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson to run the New York Black Yankees. Even men who were not involved in illicit activities who ran teams were hard men with an iron will. Homestead Greys' founder Cum Posey was a partner of ruthless steel magnate Henry Clay Frick. Posey seems to have adopted the same brutal but effective management style that made Frick infamous, leading Negro league historian Wendell Smith to write, "Some may say he crushed the weak as well as the strong on the way to the top of the ladder. But no matter what his critics say, they cannot deny that he was the smartest man in Negro baseball and certainly the most successful."

This is the world of The Barnstormers. The players that make up our team are stars and pariahs at the same time. They are oppressed and exalted. They play a game for a living, but that game is underwritten by men (and women) who will destroy lives to make their fortunes. It is a world of contradictions and extremes.