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LOCAL FILM MAKER KEVIN BIRD POISED TO SOAR

By Jon Letman

Overcoming cultural differences, language barriers, potential governmental interference and many other manners of problems, a Koloa film maker is readying release of what could be his work of a lifetime.



What started as a simple documentary of a rising balinese dance star gradually grew into a five-part documentary. The producer became fascinated with the Balinese culture, which he sees as having many similarities to the Native Hawaiian culture.

"Basically, I get off shooting all kinds of dance," confided Kaua'i independent film maker and music producer Kevin Bird. Seated in his Koloa studio, Bird is joined by the star of his current documentary and music video project, Kadek Dewi Aryani, a Balinese dancer, choreographer, singer and rising cultural ambassador for her island home.

Bird, who produced the 2000 documentary "Fences," which examined protecting the Hawaiian monk seal, has moved onto decidedly more graceful subjects.

Recalling his first visit to Bali in 1989 Bird said, "it was such a colorful, beautiful place, I wanted to capture it on film." Fast forward to his next visit, Bird returned with a digital camcorder to document Balinese dances to include in a film which examined the lives of Balinese hotel workers.

"I was filming a Kecak (pronounced ke-chak) dance north of Ubud when I was approached by a Balinese man who suggested I meet his cousin," Bird recalled. "He told me she was one of the best dancers in all of Bali."

Bird was skeptical, but followed the man to the family home of

Kadek Dewi Aryani (she goes by Dewi, pronounced de-vee) who lived in a traditional Balinese home in the village of Junjungan, near Ubud, the cultural capital of Bali.

"When we first met, we were both a bit cautious," explained Bird, "but after one interview, I knew that this project was meant to happen."

Dewi, the second daughter in a family of artists, musicians and dancers, has been performing since she was a child and now teaches traditional Balinese dances like Kecak and Legong as well as classical, traditional and contemporary dance. Well known and respected in the Balinese dance community, Dewi regularly performs at cultural presentations, temple festivals and with international dance troupes in Europe, Asia and the United States.

Initially Bird planned on producing a 30-minute documentary about Dewi's dancing, but soon realized he had encountered something much deeper. Bird was fascinated by the interplay between the natural, spiritual and cultural aspects of Balinese life which he sees as sharing similarities to traditional Hawaiian culture.

Bird put it this way, "The Balinese have retained a closeness to the earth and their traditions while maintaining communal harmony. Balinese still own their own land, but once the land is sold, the culture is jeopardized."

Bird's documentary, Dewi-Portrait of a Balinese Dancer, has grown into a three and a half hour five-part series which examines Balinese culture, society and religion through the medium of Dewi, her dance, family and village. Filming in Bali and Kaua'i started in 2001.

For an independent Kaua'i based film maker whose subject lives 6,000 miles away, the making of the film has not been without challenges.

For starters, the logistics of moving heavy equipment across the ocean and the costs involved in traveling between the two islands has meant the project has been "difficult but always pleasurable." Bird has traveled to Bali five times in three years while Dewi has come to Kaua'i four times, three this year alone.

Then there is the noise. One would imagine that for Bird who lives in Koloa, roosters would not be a distraction, but like the garden island, Bali is blessed with cacophonous cocks which cackle and crow, irrespective of cameras.

Add the racket of passing motorbikes, power tools, screaming children and routine clatter of village life and you get lots of shooting and re-shooting.

But the sound of life's bustle is something Dewi found noticeably absent in Kaua'i. "Even though the trees and climate are the same as Bali, it is so quiet here," said Dewi. "No life in the streets, just cars."

Dewi quickly added that she found people on Kaua'i exceptionally kind and welcoming but was surprised when people told her they didn't know where Bali or Indonesia were. "They thought I was Filipino," Dewi said.

Language has also presented challenges for Bird and the host of the fifth segment of the documentary, German Christophe Hartke, who has flown to Bali twice to assist in production. Bird and Hartke speak minimal Indonesian and many of the Balinese in the film do not speak much English. This has placed Dewi in the role of translator-interpreter, one which she admits she has become more comfortable with over time.

"Explaining culture and religion is especially difficult," said Dewi who travels with four dictionaries. "But it teaches patience and understanding," she said.

Dewi's friends, family and community see her as an overseas cultural ambassador and so Dewi is very conscious of representing Bali positively and accurately. She added that she appreciates the freedom her family has given her, allowing her to perform in, among other places, Holland, France, Korea, Japan, India and at the 2002 World Festival of Sacred Music in Los Angeles.

In addition to her family and village, Dewi has also received support and assistance from none other than the Minister of Balinese Culture, Prince Tjokorda Raka Kerthyasa who has allowed Bird to film interviews and dance scenes on the palace grounds.

While shooting the documentary, Bird and Dewi have also produced a CD of traditional folk songs and a ten-song DVD with original music and videos. Bird wrote and performed most of the music with Dewi writing all the Indonesian lyrics.

Kaua'i viewers will recognize a number of locations in the videos including Maha'ulepu, Hanapepe, Waimea Plantation Cottages, the dry cave at Ha'ena, Shipwrecks beach, Polihale and other places which are artfully mixed with the exotic imagery of Balinese rice paddies, temples and palaces.

The folk CD and first two parts of the documentary are slated for release in autumn of 2004.

After Dewi returns to Bali, Bird will continue to edit, format and re-work scripting and narration for the documentary which he plans to begin marketing first in Indonesia and then across Asia, particularly Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Japan.

"The U.S. market is generally much less open to unknown non-English language musical performers, but if Sony wants to have a listen..." Bird chuckled.

Bird describes their music as "world pop" with an eclectic feel, mixing Balinese traditional instruments with computer-based keyboards and instrumentation samples such as Indian flutes and nimble percussions.

So what makes this documentary about a Balinese dancer different from others? Those films focused primarily on the dance and dancer, without examining the lives of the dancer's family and community. Bird, however, wants to reveal how Balinese live and work harmoniously, blending modern and traditional. Bird feels that there is so much to be learned from the Balinese and believes the message has a global appeal.

As for Dewi, she said, "I just love introducing my culture to the world and enjoy learning about something new, like Hawaiian culture."

Bird chimed in, "even if you can't physically go there, through this documentary viewers have a chance to enter another world and in the process, reflect upon their own."

Ultimately though, it is the thrill Bird feels when surrounded by Bali's rich tapestry of color, sound and song and the friendships forged that keep him crossing the ocean with a camera and microphone.

"Bali is still like a completely different world, a fantasy land for me," Bird said. "It's not just shooting images, but experiencing Balinese life that inspires me to share this beauty with others."

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