

THERE ONCE WAS AN ISLAND

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Print media

Sunday Star Times, November 26, 2006 – New Zealand newspaper
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Aucklander, New Zealand Herald, October 27, 2007 – Auckland newspaper

radio and television interviews

Breakfast, Channel 1 TVNZ, November 2007
Nine to noon, Radio New Zealand, November 2007
1ZB, November 2007
Check Point, Radio New Zealand, December 2007
Breakfast, Channel 1 TVNZ, February 2007



'You have films like *An Inconvenient Truth* which give you all the facts and figures [about global warming]. This is the human story.'

The documentary crew, from left, Briar March, Lyn Collie and Zane Holmes, are heading to Takuu to make a film before it sinks.
Photo: Brendon O'Hagan.

Kiwis document island with that sinking feeling

By GREG MEYLAN

NEW ZEALAND film makers are to document the last days of the tiny Polynesian island of Takuu before it slips beneath the waves.

The island, 250km off Papua New Guinea, is home to 500 people and a unique culture - but its highest point is just 1m above sea level.

Tectonic activity at the junction of the Pacific and Australian continental plates means the island is sinking 20cm a year. Its disappearance is being viewed as a dummy run for other low-lying Pacific islands, as sea levels rise due to global warming.

Documentary director Briar March and cameraman Zane Holmes will accompany Auckland University anthropologist Dr Richard Moyle to the island next month.

Producer Lyn Collie, whose tiny budget is not large enough to pay any wages, will stay in Auckland and update a weblog from information sent via the film makers' satellite phone.

March said the island, only 300m², was the last place where traditional

Polynesian religion was practised, although some younger islanders schooled in Papua New Guinea had converted to Christianity.

Traditional musical performances, using a style of singing that sounds like speech played backwards, take up to 30 hours of the community's week.

A 40-year ban on Christian missionaries was only recently lifted and now the ariki, or chief, has invited the New Zealanders to film the island's final days above the waterline.

"This potentially could be what all the Pacific island atolls have to do in the future," March said.

"You have films like *An Inconvenient Truth* which give you all the facts and figures [about global warming]. This is the human story."

Moyle is one of a handful of researchers allowed to visit the island and has recorded 1000 songs, written a bilingual book of fables and almost completed a dictionary of the language.

Last year a king tide, which occurs biannually and can reach 1.5m, almost washed over the island. Already, rising sea levels mean soil is too salty



to grow taro, and within two years safe anchorage for the community's vital fishing canoes is expected to be lost.

The community has no firm plans for when or where they will relocate, but Bougainville is already home to a number of expats.

Moyle predicted the island will be uninhabitable within two years.

The film crew, which will spend two months on Takuu, will fly to Papua New Guinea early next month with a solar panel, small petrol generator and tinned food to supplement the staple diet of rice and boiled fish.

The island has no electricity, no toilets and the traditional thatched houses are built so close that their eaves touch.

From Bougainville, March and Holmes will take the four-day sea voyage on a boat that makes a trip to Takuu just four times a year.

In 2004 Moyle was left on Takuu for five months after the boat, the only one that services the island, broke down.

■ The documentary's progress can be followed on www.takuufilm.blogspot.com.

ANZ HOME & PLAY IT

Sunday Star Times
Nov. 26, 2006

That sinking feeling

Zane Holmes gives an account of working with director Briar March on *There Once was an Island*, a documentary about an atoll community that will soon lose their home to the rising sea, thanks to the climate change crisis. He discusses the image capture formats he chose and why, and the project's post-production path, as well as giving an insight into the ecological tragedy being faced by the people of Takuu.

An atoll 180km north east of PNG (Takuu) is under threat of sinking due to tectonic plate movement and rising sea level. Documentary filmmaker Briar March urgently needs a cameraman to travel with her to Takuu from the beginning of December to the end of January.

This was the message I discovered in my inbox when I returned from the (most excellent) AnimfxNZ symposium held last November in Wellington. Now, I was hardly the ideal candidate to reply to such a plea for help, primarily because I'm not a camera operator, but also due to having never heard of Takuu and having only really met Briar on one occasion two years previously.

But with no drama projects that would really suit my talents floating round and my own projects still in early development I thought, "Well, why not?" I'd held a camera a few times, I had no real commitments and, thoroughly depressed about the state of the world as I was, I also thought this might be a small chance to make a little difference. So I made the call...

Two weeks later, with another three weeks before we were to leave, the doco had become my fulltime, unpaid job. Briar, along with producer Lyn Collie, had stumbled on a rare opportunity to film an important story in a unique location: the islands of the Takuu Atoll, which are just off the equator in the western Pacific and pretty much as isolated a place as you

can find in the world today.

My lack of camera skills were trumped by the fact I didn't mind not being paid for three months and I have some pretty good contacts in the business. The challenge was this: we would have to film on an island for at least four weeks with no power or communications (bar a two-way radio) and pretty much no modern technology or medical facilities. We would have to get there by plane and boat, hauling enough gear to sustain the shoot through malarial areas of Papua New Guinea.

Briar and I would be the entire crew and accompanying anthropologist Professor Richard Moyle from the University of Auckland. Richard has been going to the island periodically for the past 15 years, recording the unique culture of the Polynesian tribe living there. He expected this would be his last trip and was making it to complete the first written dictionary of the island's language. The reason for our presence was that the paramount chief of the island Avo had asked for him to bring a film crew to help raise awareness of the island's plight and perhaps to record the culture before it is lost forever.

With Richard as our guide a lot of potential minefields would be avoided but we were still left with the conundrum of what gear to take, followed closely by how to actually get it there, power and maintain it, and – ideally – get it back to New Zealand in working order. And if that wasn't enough



Where's Wally – for beginners: The author in "downtown" Nukutoa – the street doubles as the marae and spans the 300 metre width of the island.

of a challenge, we only had enough of a budget (the bulk of which came from the Screen Innovation Production Fund, with additional money from Robber's Dog and Occasional Productions) to pay for our airfares, insurance and accommodation. So

along with working out what to take, my job also became to find ways not to pay for it!

So in mid-November with three weeks before departure I was getting an injection every few days as

part of a crash course of immunisation against the various diseases we might encounter (and taking some deprived pleasure in the fact that, thanks to a feral, jab-free childhood, Briar needed far more than I did).

In between injections I was racing around learning all I could about solar

power, small generators and smaller cameras. I knew I wanted to shoot HD as it would make a film blow-up more achievable, allowing us to aim at the top tier of doco festivals and – if the gods smiled – maybe a theatrical release.

in this particular environment P2 would require a whole other level of infrastructure and hence power consumption, as we would have to transfer all the footage to hard drives. Whereas the HVR's images would effectively be reduced to standard def by the end of post.

Then came a beacon of hope! Pre-release reviews from overseas alerted me that a new camera was about to be unleashed, and it looked like it could be the answer: the Sony HVR-V1. This was to be the 1080P companion to the Z1 and looked like it had everything I needed: progressive shooting, small size, easy to use and low power consumption. There was only one cency teency issue – there were none in the country; in fact the camera wasn't due for release until the week we were to leave...

However, I had two things in my favour. First, *An Inconvenient Truth* and other media and publicity have inspired people to try and do something to help fix the climate change crisis, with the net result being industry people were incredibly interested in our doco and eager to help. Second, experience has shown me that when asking for free stuff it's usually easiest to get the newest flashiest gear rather than the old work horses. So consequently I wrote to Shane Ormsby at Sony and asked if we could have an HVR-V1 for our doco – ideally two if he had a few lying round, as we'd need a back up. Shane wrote back to say he was due to receive the first two cameras in the next few weeks and, as they were demo cameras and our project would be a great field test – not to mention the importance of the subject matter – Sony would gladly lend us one if they arrived in time.

As luck would have it the cameras did arrive in time and we took delivery

of a new HVR-V1, still in its unopened box, about a week before we left.

Next up I needed tape and a back-up camera in case the V1 suffered some mishap. I decided that, if the HVR-Z1 would have to be de-interlaced to match the V1's footage, we should take a progressive standard def camera as back-up instead, as that would ultimately give a higher resolution picture. As far as progressive DV cameras go there was only one contender – the DVX-100 from Panasonic.

I sent out a plea for help to friends and through a google group (<http://groups.google.co.nz/group/cinestuff>) I belong to (as an aside, if you're in camera or post I definitely recommend joining this group, started by DOP Kevin Riley).

Nick Braxton at Oxfam responded with an offer to loan their new DVX and sound gear, and Rick Heywood and Peter Fullerton at Panasonic also came to the party by offering one of their demo DVXs, plus 100 DV tapes to handle our stock needs. By this stage I was feeling a bit overwhelmed by the generosity of the industry, a feeling that would grow as *Cinestuff* offered free lights, South Pacific Pictures gave us batteries for the Sony cameras and Rocket Rentals offered a generator, tripod and road cases.

So now I had all we needed to film with – but how to power it? Our producer Lyn gave me the contact details of a New Plymouth company called Eco-Innovation that specialises in providing solar power to homes. A few calls to EI's Michael Lawley and a drive down to their workshop on the slopes of Mt Taranaki taught me all I needed to know about solar panels, regulators, lead-acid batteries, invertors, and hydrometers. Without

However, I knew a full-size camera was out of the question – they're too heavy and bulky to transport, use too much power and I didn't have enough time to properly learn to use one, bearing in mind the last full-size camera I'd used was a JVC KY-27 a decade ago.

So making the HD choice and opting for a small camera immediately narrowed my list to three candidates: the Sony HVR-Z1, Panasonic HVX-200 and JVC GY-HD110U. A quick look at power consumption knocked the JVC off the list (it uses 17W compared to the HVX's 12W and the HVR's 8W). Then I was confronted with the fact that, although the HVX can record a 1080P picture, it can only do so to P2 cards, while the HVR only records an interlaced picture that needs to be de-interlaced for a film transfer, effectively making it 540 lines of resolution less than that of a standard def camera.

So what to do? While I'm in favour of the movement by Panasonic towards solid state media using P2,

going into too much detail, we then got two panels from Auckland's **AA Solar** that would supply 55W each (in full sunlight). We then bought all the accessories we would need and arranged for two car batteries to be waiting for us in Buka, our last stop before getting on the boat to the island (we couldn't take batteries with us due to their weight and dangerous goods classification). We also had Rocket Rental's **Honda EU10i** generator as a back up power source if the solar power failed for some reason, and would pick up some gas in Buka.

With power sorted, communications was the next hurdle. Lyn had set up a deal with **Roccom** in Auckland for us to use **Richard Moyle's** personal sat-phone, with Roccom supplying a data connector so we could send and receive email by plugging the sat-phone into a computer. This would allow us to keep a blog running on our trip, and send text and photos from the island. My challenge was to find a computer that would handle the abuse it would inevitably be subjected to – humidity, salt, heat, shock, and possibly water splashes.

Sitting at the traffic lights on Khyber Pass one day, the answer hit me – or rather, I nearly hit the car in front as I saw a billboard for Panasonic's **Toughbook** laptop. Shock resistant and trusted to work after a one-metre drop, it was completely "ruggedised", as well as dust and water resistant. Damn! Could here be a more perfect answer? I swiftly emailed the wonderful **Jo Lynch** at Panasonic, asking if she felt like giving one of the world's most over-engineered laptops to a group of fool filmmakers heading to one of the most electronics-unfriendly climates on Earth. My luck held up and she gave us their flagship model, the CF-29, a brutal looking machine like

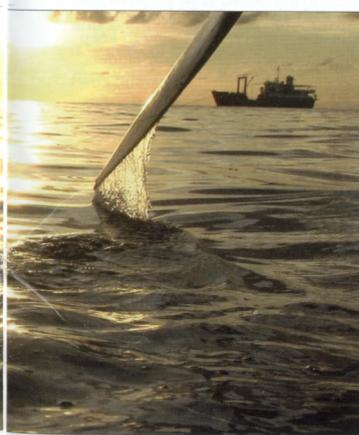
we arrived, so three days before the planned departure date we were told we would be on the plane the following morning. An all night packing session and final (in some cases the only) checks of the gear ensued.

I had ordered some smaller foldable solar panels from the States to try and help make up for the power shortage we now faced. They arrived in the country an hour before we left, and Lyn raced them from the courier depot to the departure terminal just before Briar and I – bleary-eyed and sleep-deprived – boarded the plane for Brisbane, the first leg of our voyage.

Richard guided us from Brisbane to Port Moresby where a sponsorship deal Lyn had hooked up meant a stay in one of the country's nicest (four star) hotels. The barbed wire,



Sunset screengrab: "Water is a big part of our film," notes Zane Holmes. "[Director] Briar [March] captured this great shot with the V1 camera while out in one of the local Vakas (canoes)."



a puddle of liquid had formed where the camera and battery joined and shorted the data connections to the battery that allowed the camera to gauge how much power was left. And what exactly was this liquid? In the 40-degree heat, the sweat was quite literally pouring off me, running down from the eyepiece to pool at the base of the battery. Vowing to be a little more careful with my perspiration in future, I dried the battery terminals and switched the camera back on. And for the next 60 days we shot in the tropical heat with the camera working flawlessly, despite all the abuse it was subjected to.

The ship we boarded was the **Sankamap** (pidgin for "Sunrise") – the only vessel to service the atolls off the coast of Bougainville. Its current mission was to deliver all the students

A quick walk around any of the 15 islands in the Atoll quickly renders redundant any debate about whether the sea level is really rising. Indeed, before we even went ashore, Richard pointed out where an island had been when he first visited – now there is just a rough patch in the sea; another island in the group has been split in two by the advancing waters. And on the largest island in the group, where the gardens lie, the sea is held back by ancient earth mounds surrounding the crops; nevertheless the sea still attacks – from below. Saltwater is slowly contaminating the ground and poisoning the crops.

Despite this, the people there are for the most part upbeat and go about everyday life seemingly oblivious to the problem right at their doorstep – just like... well, just like the rest of the world ("Problem, what problem?").

For the next month-and-a-half, Briar would lead us into every nook and cranny of the island and together we adapted to life without all of the conveniences we take for granted, like electricity, running water, toilets (if you're curious as to the challenges posed by this, check out our blog www.takuufilm.blogspot.com – it's covered in intimate detail). We got on with our jobs and, aside from the workload and a few minor irritations like my jellyfish attack, it initially seemed pretty much like a holiday. This perception changed a week before Christmas, however, when the isolation of the island was illustrated in the most brutal way.

Every year at Christmas the island has the **Tukamai** celebration – a series of rituals and events to both mourn and celebrate the people who have died during the year. One of the events

something the Marines in **Aliens** would use. Along with the attributes already mentioned it had a touch screen, wireless, Bluetooth and GPS capabilities, plus it just felt cool to carry around! By this stage I was little snowed under, so I was grateful to have Chris Edwards on hand to handle getting the sat-phone and Toughbook paired up, set up our email, and place a whole heap of open source software on the PC to handle our needs on the island.

So everything was going well. Too well. (Cue ominous music.) The shit hit the fan a few days before we left. Due to the ship being delayed, we were informed, the Christmas rush was now on in PNG and we didn't have a hope in hell of getting all our excess baggage from our stopover in Port Moresby to Buka in Bougainville where we were to board a ship for the island. So out went the generator, along with one of the bulky solar panels, any luxuries, our emergency food, and any sense of complacency. Then we were told there was a real risk the ship would leave Buka before

gates and guards surrounding it reminded us that having a Caucasian face here made us potential targets. After barely 12 hours we were on a plane to Bougainville, where we were greeted by NZ police stationed there who had purchased supplies for us and promptly threw us in their trucks and raced us to the ship that was due to leave within the hour. We stowed our gear – which had all miraculously made it – pulled out the V1 and began to shoot people boarding the ship.

Ten minutes later the camera stopped... dead. I switched it off and on again, the message "Use Info-lithium" flashed on screen – then it died again. Oh shit! We were just about to set sail on the only boat that goes to the island, it wouldn't be making another voyage there until the next year and our most vital piece of equipment had just failed!

Quietly, calmly, and without panicking the director I tried to diagnose the problem. The Info-lithium message suggested the battery was at fault, even though it was an official Sony Info-lithium. A quick check revealed

studying on the mainland back to their home islands for Christmas. We would travel with the students to the island of Nukutoa on the Takuu Atoll. Then, all going well, in four weeks the ship would return and collect us... The problem was that things seldom go well for the ship. Often, for example, the company running the service would run out of funds or the ship would break down and wouldn't visit the islands for several months. Looking at the ship, which was covered in rust and obvious signs of wear and tear, we were a little nervous, especially when it became obvious the ship was well overloaded and the life rafts were half a decade past their servicing date. (Ominous music builds...)

Despite all this, the voyage went swiftly and the next day we arrived at our destination. The only inhabited island in Takuu is called Nukutoa – it's about 300m by 300m, is triangular in shape and at high tide is barely a metre out of the water. Around 400 to 500 people live here and, to put it simply, their very existence as a people is at stake.

that takes place is an all night singing vigil on the marae (which is also the island's largest street). We filmed late into the night using the V1 and a smaller consumer DV camera with night vision to cover the singing, which happens in almost complete darkness. The next morning, while I still slept, Briar ventured out to film the singing at sunrise. As she walked out into the main street where the villagers still sat singing, a man in his 50s slumped and slid off his chair. Within seconds people realised what had happened and soon he was surrounded by a throng of wailing people.

He died. Back home he would probably have been in hospital within an hour and saved from what was most likely a heart attack. Here, however, he was being buried 24 hours after his collapse, before his body had a chance to go off in the heat. As this incident underlined for us, getting sick or injured here is no trivial thing – there's no ambulance or paramedic to rush to one's aid. Your only hope if you get seriously ill is that the Sankamap

IMAGE CAPTURE & WORKFLOW



Camera envy: "Sometimes I think the director liked this Sony HVR-V1 camera more than she liked me," muses the author.

happens to be close by and you have the \$9000 needed to pay the ship for a mercy dash to the mainland – if you were very lucky you might get there in two days.

With this event to sober us, we set up our production office, got our solar power system up and running, and were soon able to film pretty much all we wanted without too much fear of running out of

power. We had over 120 hours worth of tape stock, so we were also pretty comfortable in this area. We started communication with NZ using the sat-phone, although the call rate by sat-phone was fairly high so messages were brief and calls were usually interrupted by the signal being lost. Both of us also began submitting material to the blog via email (at a whopping 10kbs!).

Another issue we had to cope with was translation. While a high proportion of the island speaks good English, a number of interview subjects – especially the older ones – spoke Takuu or pidgin. To deal with this after shooting we captured these interviews into the Toughbook and trained Sio, our host and minder on the island, to operate the computer so that he could go through the interviews answer by answer and transcribe them into both Takuu and English.

We ended up staying on the island for over six weeks, during which time we conducted many, many interviews, ate many, many fish (and, I'm sorry to say, quite a few sea turtles), and tried to capture as much of the culture as we could. We knew that if we missed something it would be extremely difficult to get back and pick it up, also, given the speed at which the ocean is eroding the island, it's

questionable whether things would be as we left them.

Briar and I grew to love the V1 during our stay – its ease of use and wealth of features helped us cover all the different scenarios the island threw at us. I had lacked the time before we left to run any comprehensive visual (or for that matter audio) tests with the camera – at Rocket we'd simply plugged it into an HD monitor to check what the picture looked like and that it in fact worked. While doing this we switched the monitor back and forth between the V1 on the HD input and a PD-170 plugged into an SD port. It was pretty scary seeing how poor the 170's image looked in comparison to the V1 (did we really find that acceptable?!). We also captured some footage off tape into **Final Cut Pro** and had a quick look to make sure that side of things worked.

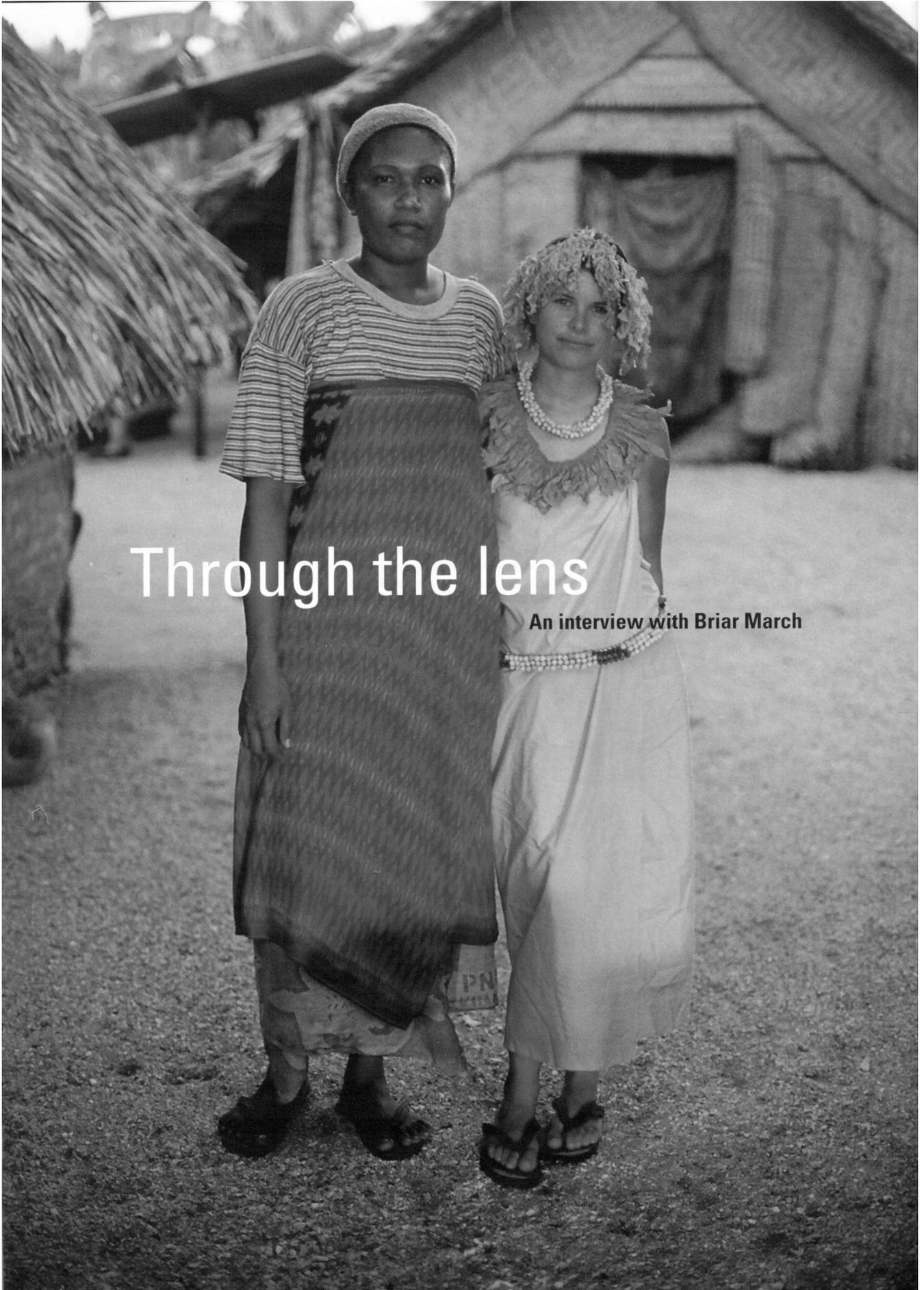
However, in terms of fine-tuning the visual performance of the camera, I knew I'd have to do what I could on the island, using the camera's LCD panel or the Toughbook screen as reference. Far from ideal, obviously, but I didn't have time for anything else (time was so tight I had to ask my mum to go buy me underwear for the trip). As far as the camera's settings went I knew I'd just have to keep them all as neutral as possible, do my best not to clip the whites by over exposing

(praise the pagan gods of Takuu for zebra patterns) and aim at giving the film its look in post.

Once shooting was underway we found there were times where we needed a second camera and so we had to pull the DVX-100 out of its case in order to cover all the action going on. When the DVX was flicked on Briar immediately gushed about how good the images looked on its screen. This was true – I had switched on the camera's 25P mode and engaged the cine-gamma functions, which immediately gives everything a great filmic look. However, this feeling was short-lived because we found it near impossible to shoot with the DVX in the extreme sunlight of midday (when it seemed all the important events took place) because the luminance range it allowed us to expose for was so narrow. Even with the ND filter set to maximum, the camera would white out with the smallest tweak of the aperture control, and trying to keep both the dark features of the islanders' faces and the sunlit background correctly exposed was near impossible, resulting in under-exposed faces with bleached out backgrounds.

As I got to know the V1 better I found Sony had built some cine-look features into the camera and there were independent controls for luminance and colour cine-look options.

CS ARTS, October 2007



Through the lens

An interview with Briar March

Director **Briar March** is well known for her first full-length documentary film *Allie Eagle and Me* (2003) a project she began while in her final year at Elam School of Fine Art. During her degree course, Briar worked in multi-media and moving image, despite an early intention to be a painter, like her father. Initially, she made video pieces that explore embodiment, identity and place, many of which subvert traditional film narrative. However, since graduating, Briar has worked mainly with narrative filmmaking.

Briar finds this a very direct way to communicate her ideas to a wide audience. She also identifies her art practice as a process of exploring her own beliefs (whether spiritual, political or personal) in relation to what she sees through the lens. Besides *Allie Eagle and Me*, recent works include three music videos, a commercial for the NGO ECPAT (Non Government Organisation End Child Prostitution and Trafficking) and three documentaries on activism that she edited with producer/director Claudia Pond Eyley. Never one to sit still, Briar is currently developing several television documentary ideas and working on her latest film about the sinking island of Takuu, 250km off the coast of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea.

How did you get started as an artist?

'I was one of those lucky people who grew up in a nurturing, creative environment where there were crayons and paint and dress-ups. Also, my parents were never-ending in their activities. For example they made these masks for a play and we kept them for a long time because they were absolutely brilliant—these huge masks that you stuck over your head, made of papier mâché and chicken wire. Later on in our teens we'd stick them on and dance to Spanish music, and it looked really funny, as you can imagine. And my Dad is a painter and has always dealt with very serious themes to do with the environment, to do with spirituality, to do with the world. That has probably had an influence on the way I work.'

What was it that attracted you to the medium of film?

'I went to Elam Art School in the second year of my degree (having completed the first year at Unitec). I majored in Intermedia [Studies], which is a wonderful word that really refers to what happens when art forms collide, fuse together or cross over one another. The word could also relate to the process of filmmaking, which combines so many different elements together, and I guess this is why I was attracted to it.

'During my time in Intermedia, I worked mostly in the medium of video, making installations and performances. I orientated myself with editing software, cameras and stuff that one would call the tools of a filmmaker. In my third year I went to a course on documentary-making, and this was really the beginning of my direction towards making longer-form pieces that have a narrative and tell a story.

'At the same time a deeper thing was going on for me. Probably like many people who go to art school, I was grappling with the experience of being an artist. I had shows where I'd spend heaps of time on a work, and then see that only a small portion of society came to the gallery to see it or understood what I was on about. I still think of myself as an artist, and I do

believe art is very important and would like to return to making it one day, but my move towards film was a reaction to some of these things. Film can reach people in ways that I haven't seen other art forms do. We all relate to moving image, having grown up with TVs and cinemas. Also I loved the experience of making documentaries on so many levels—I wasn't totally involved in my own personal views on the world—I had to think about others and their views (in relation to mine) a lot more.'

What led you to make a film about Allie Eagle?

'The birth of a project is often very organic with no one particular thing being the main impetus for its creation. Should I tell you it was because I wanted to buy a camera and making this project was an excuse to do that? Or should I tell you that I was interested in the issues around Allie's work, or that Allie is actually one of my neighbours and long-time family friend? All of these answers could be partially correct, but in the end, after having talked to Allie about it in some depth, I think I realised that it could be a very interesting story. And at the time I was very inspired by the Agnès Varda film, *The Gleaners and I* (2000). I liked the way Varda put herself in the frame, which is reflected in the style I chose for *Allie Eagle and Me*.'

Allie Eagle and Me considers Allie's spiritual and religious motivations. How do you think your filmmaking is informed by your own spirituality?

'I grew up in a Christian home, so I've always had an insight into Christianity from that experience. Like lots of people, when I reached my twenties I realised I couldn't easily accept the idea that there was only one way to God—through Jesus Christ. What about all the other religions out there and the other spiritual teachers? And that questioning has come through in my work.

'Allie is an artist who has moved from being a lesbian separatist to being a Pentecostal Christian. She was brought up in a Christian home, meaning her upbringing is similar to mine. I thought, "this is an interesting story about an artist who seems to have moved from one camp to another, or in her older life gone back to her childhood roots—and what does this mean?" But there was also a personal searching, with me thinking "what is my opinion?" and "what's my relationship with this idea?". It's something that's slightly subconscious. Why am I interested in certain themes? Potentially it's because I'm trying to find out certain ideas for myself—it's about using your art practice as a way of trying to understand things—which is what artists are doing all the time.'

Is this a motivation in your other work as well? What about your foray into more commercial works like your music videos or your editing and shooting on Claudia Pond Eyley's activist pieces?

'I get excited about a lot of things, so maybe that is the best answer! I am still developing a style to my work, so I like to cross a whole lot of genres of filmmaking, and I am still discovering things I am interested in. I've made three films with Claudia Pond Eyley. They've all been about activism in New Zealand, including about the Rainbow Warrior (*The Women who Launched a Rainbow*, 2006), New Zealand becoming nuclear free, and the nuclear testing in

Briar March in a toha dancing costume with friend and production assistant Rosevita Tione. Photo: Zane Holmes.

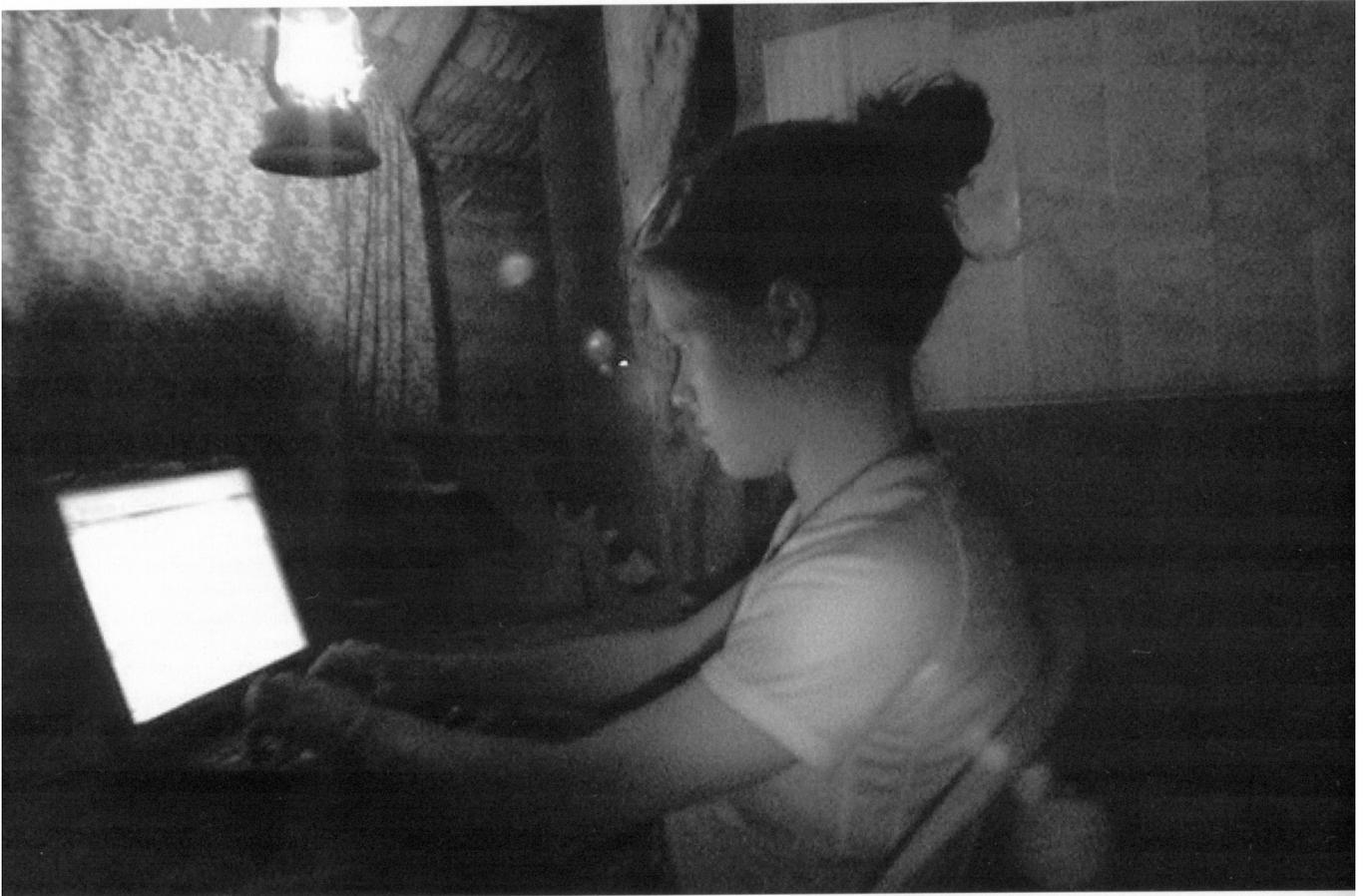
Mururoa. The music videos are fun and very visual, and get me back to my purely creative side. I wanted to make them as a way into directing commercials, since I thought making commercials would support my documentary projects, but to be honest I'm not sure how I feel about this any more—it doesn't sit very well with my politics.'

Your current project is a documentary about a sinking island. What inspired this, and what challenges did you face?

'With the film on Takuu, I was looking for a new story and one day I was reading an article about Richard Moyle, an anthropologist who has been to Takuu many times, and also written about it. He was describing the island and I was really fascinated, firstly because the article claimed that the island was sinking and

that I imagine some people would have found pretty uncomfortable. What should I mention? The mosquitoes, the chickens running through our house and the roosters crowing on our roof at all times of the morning and night? The rat that loved to watch me from the edge of my desk? Being made to dance in front of a crowd of laughing women in my underwear? Going to the toilet in the ocean every morning? Well, I actually love these kinds of experiences!

'On a more serious level, one of the biggest concerns I had with a project like this was the responsibility I had to accurately capture on film a culture different to mine. Everything is subjective to a degree, but how could I go in there and make a sensitive and fair record? Also, perhaps I wasn't the best person to be making the film—some people might argue that somebody from Takuu should make it.



Briar working at her desk on Takuu. Although the Panasonic Toughbook laptop is powered by stored solar energy, light is provided in the form of a very old-fashioned kerosene lamp. Photo: Zane Holmes.

that the community would potentially have to leave, and secondly because they were a very unique community, quite isolated, and for them a shift would be such a huge thing.

'We had enormous issues with visas, getting the right equipment, booking travel through Papua New Guinea, the logistics of shooting on a tiny budget, no power and no way to buy peripherals like batteries. Getting the funding was tough too; fortunately The Screen Innovation Fund was very generous, and we found the rest of the money from Robbers Dog and Occasional Productions, two companies I've worked for.

'On a day-to-day level, there were lots of things

'While we were shooting I was having to think about Christianity again, because another important issue is the religion on the island. The people on Takuu still practise their traditional Polynesian religion, and they're one of the last places in the world to do this, although Christianity has recently been introduced. When I went to the Christian churches on Takuu, what I perceived, in a lot of the practising Christians, was a very simplistic sort of faith—God loves us, we trust God and so everything will be okay. So when it came to issues like whether the island is going to go under, or any of the dangers that a low-lying atoll could face at this point in time, the response was God loves us, we trust God, we will be okay. And I, personally,

didn't want to think that way about God. I found it made people optimistic about their situation to the point that they believed nothing bad could happen, and they weren't prepared to challenge anything. But then, similarly, some of the old people who practise the traditional religion think the same way. They told me the spirits will protect them, that they could stop a tidal wave from coming.'

How does that relate to the way that you shot the film, and what you're thinking about for the edit?

'I would never say that the Christianity practised on the island is a bad thing and should never have been introduced, and neither would I say that the traditional religion is a bad thing and should be stopped. I would prefer to explore all the different ideas around these issues—look at different people's perspectives on it.

have a very analytical mind (it drives my friends crazy), but the documentary medium is perfect for this way of thinking, and the best place for me to use my time breaking things down into arguments or ideas. It's important to try and understand where your subject is coming from, and to have sensitivity to their values and beliefs. I'm continually being challenged and opened up to new ways of thought, and always having to re-think or re-consider my views, and that's what I love.'

Lyn Collie

Find out more about the making of the *Takuu* documentary on the blog www.takuu.blogspot.com



Dawn on Takuu. A woman washes as the tide reaches her kitchen's edge. Photo: Briar March.

I think that to be an interesting filmmaker, you don't want to preach one kind of view, you want to show different ideas and the debate amongst them. I also have to recognise that in some ways I am not in a position to judge my characters, as they are from another culture and way of existing that is completely different to mine. At all times I have to balance these kinds of considerations, and it is these considerations that make a film more interesting and potentially more truthful.

'What's more, I have to admit that through the process of telling somebody else's story, I will often learn more about myself, and even change my own views. This is why making documentaries, for me, is so rewarding. I

State of Independence

As we all know, making a film is hard work and it often takes a little DIY ingenuity for new filmmakers. If you have to go it alone, BEATRIX COLES advises on ten rules for self-funding

The term 'breaking into' the industry is ridiculously apt when talking about working in the film and television world. In reality you might have more luck planning some kind of heist than getting your project off the ground. Structurally, the system isn't geared for newbies, and there is no clear avenue to encourage young blood. After countless rejections from funding bodies, sometimes the only available route to get your film made is to self-fund (and hope for some post-funding later). Whether you dream of making the great independent movie or want to leap across to the mainstream, a self-funded project will at least give you a calling card.

It is a particularly tough market at the moment, with short and feature film seemingly geared towards international sales and overseas festivals, and television looking at the long-running series rather than one-off dramas or documentaries. But what if you have a burning project that you can't give up. Ducking out to do your own thing might seem like the best – indeed, only – option. However, let's not forget that with real budgets comes freedom from some very basic worries, such as paying the rent and grocery bills. So although no one claims that self-funding is an easy road to take, if you do decide to make a film outside the conventional funding routes, how do you go about it and survive?

1 HAVE FRIENDS

The first rule in independent filmmaking is make good friends who will help out. Writer-director Amit Tripuraneni has completed two self-funded, low-budget digital features. His second feature, *Five*, has recently got distribution. As he points out, "It is always a team effort and the synergies that form during any project can make or a break a project." Tripuraneni works in collaboration with friends on both sides of the camera. If getting people on board is difficult, then keeping them going is even harder. Kirsty MacDonald has directed several short films, including *Black and White*, which won Best NZ Documentary at the DOCNZ Festival 2006. She says that if the project is an 'independent' film, and you have very little money but a strong idea and vision, collaborators can be amazingly generous with their support. "I find [friends'] practical help is essential in getting a strong film idea made cheaply, and then this can attract funding to keep going."

BELOW LEFT:

There Once Was an Island,
co-produced by Lyn Collie

BELOW RIGHT:

Mani Bruce Mitchell, *Black and White*,
directed by Kirsty MacDonald

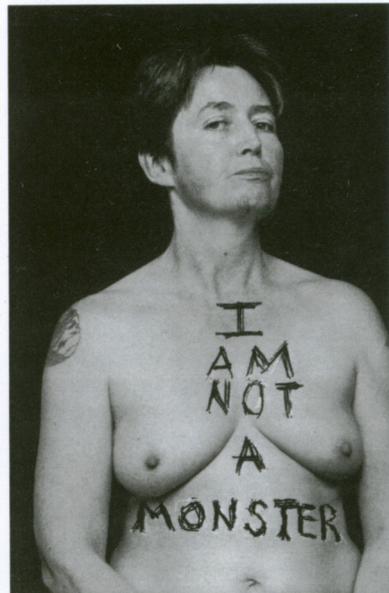


Photo: Rebecca Swan

There Once Was an Island: Director Briar March, Producer Lyn Collie and DoP Zane Holmes



Blur, DoP Chris Pryor and director Kirsty MacDonald, with Jack Byrne Photo: Rebecca Swan



2 OFFER SOMETHING

One way to keep people on board is to offer them something they can't get elsewhere. Director and video artist Tim van Dammen has completed two self-funded, low-budget feature films, including one Dogme certified feature (*Despair*). He knows that a self-funded project must offer something to the cast and crew to get them involved. "A 'something more' can manifest itself in various forms," says van Dammen "From artistic input, to an amazing location, to simply a personal belief in the idea. But there must be room for people to take ownership of the project and everyone should feel as if it is their own – because it is."

3 HAVE ANOTHER JOB

Unless you are independently wealthy – and let's face it, how many of us are? – it is rare to meet a young independent filmmaker who doesn't do something else for a living. Kirsty MacDonald has worked as a Director's Assistant for Vincent Ward and is about to work for Niki Caro on her latest film. She is juggling her work with Caro with her own project – a feature-length documentary about alternative gender identity and creativity. Amit Tripuraneni is currently working for TVNZ as a video tape editor.

4 INDULGE

Take advantage of the fact that while you are working independently you can indulge in projects close to your heart. Producer Lyn Collie and director Briar March are currently in post-production on their documentary about a sinking island, *There Once Was an Island*. For Collie, artistic and political criteria currently take centre stage with her filmmaking projects. "I loved taking a very small role in Claudia Pond-Eyley's three films about activism (*No Nukes is Good Nukes*, *Departure and Return* and *The Women Who Launched a Rainbow*), and in Briar's film *Allie Eagle and Me*. Although all of these documentaries had support from various funding bodies, they weren't commercially driven. They're films I'm pleased to have supported." Kirsty MacDonald admits that "the documentary subject

matter I've been focusing on for the last couple of years [alternative gender identity] is not an easy area to attract funding. But then, I don't think anyone finds it easy to get money for their films, mainstream or not." For MacDonald, having artistic control over content and aesthetics is important. "So while of course money is very helpful, I have thus far been able to collaborate with my participants without compromise and make the films I want."

5 MUTUAL SUPPORT

There's plenty of cause for complaint when working independently, but supporting each other should be obvious. For Amit Tripuraneni the most difficult aspect of working low budget is the fact that "no one seems to recognise the mammoth efforts taken to complete these independent projects". Morgan Williams, of Christchurch production company Gorilla Pictures, expresses what many of us feel: "Feeling like you have to beg for things gets a little demoralising ... but as long as you keep your head up, the hard work will pay off."

6 BE REALISTIC

Applying for funding forces you to take a long hard look at your project. It (hopefully) makes you draw up a realistic budget and forces you to condense that 300 page script to 20 pages. You have to think about how you'll crew it, how you will get actors on board, how you will survive the post-production if you do manage to shoot the film. It's not fun to struggle, but it at least it makes you ditch superfluous material.

7 IT'S LONG TERM

You'll be with this project for a long time, believe me. With any short, feature or documentary remember that you're going to eat, sleep and breathe it. You'll probably hate it at some point, but chances are you'll come full circle again.

8 KEEP GOING

As Lyn Collie points out, there is usually no external validation of what you are doing, so it can be hard to continue to convince yourself that it is really

worthwhile. You can't stop because the whole gang would grind to a halt. And the people who are working with you have invested time, resources, even money, by this point.

9 REALISE THE POSITIVE

On the bright side, it's good to recognise the amazing positions that working independently can find you in. For Lyn Collie this meant working on a documentary about a place which is literally sinking. "*There Once Was an Island* is about an unique culture which will disappear when the island the people live on sinks. So it's really important to document this, even if the film never sells. It's important to record those stories and that moment in time because it will be something that the community can hang their identity on after their relocation."

10 POSITION YOURSELF

Use this time to position yourself. If you want to use a film to get yourself noticed in the mainstream, bear that in mind. Or if this is the beginning of a beautiful indie career, you need to play to that card. Tim van Dammen is in the former camp: "Eventually I think most low-budget filmmakers will end up in the mainstream if they want to be due to their passion, drive and determination. In the time a hopeful director has worked as production assistant, runner, boom-operator, AD etc, the low-budget filmmaker has written and/or directed (and often produced) four or five feature films, and chances are they have reached a level where one of these films has been noticed." Kirsty MacDonald leans more towards the latter camp of arthouse. "I hope to become a better filmmaker through working as a filmmaker, so will pursue any interesting opportunities wherever I can find them. I'm not sure what use the mainstream would have for me, but I'm open to many things."

There's a groundswell of filmmakers who are working without conventional funding (at least initially), but they are working with passion and mutual peer support. Creating your own opportunities isn't easy, but undeniably it is a process that many new filmmakers must go through. ■

PARADISE LOST

Making and funding an independent documentary is never easy, but shooting on a remote island is even trickier. Producer LYN COLLIE on the struggle to get 'There Once was an Island' made

Since April 2006 I've been co-producing Briar March's documentary, *There Once was an Island: Te Henua e Noho*, about a sinking island off the coast of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. The film is a compelling story about a group of people in a remote place facing the extinction of their culture and the destruction of their homeland. These people have few resources to help themselves, and their story is a chilling insight in to what is likely to become reality for an estimated 100 million people living in low-lying coastal areas over the coming century. The film has a strong concept, a topical cause and is a worst possible case scenario for funding, scheduling, logistics, indeed everything. Getting it in the can has required relentless production work, excellent networking and a story that people are prepared to get behind.

Briar found out about the island, Takuu, from Richard Moyle, an Auckland University anthropologist who has undertaken fieldwork with the people there over the last decade and a half. Despite our independent status, he decided to support our film and help organise access to the island. But that was the easy part. Richard warned that we would be heading to a place without regular contact with the outside world – no electricity, phones, medical care or money economy. We knew that production on the island was going to be a physical challenge, that's if we managed to get Briar and a DoP there at all.

Unsurprisingly, funding was a struggle. Takuu's story has no obvious New Zealand angle and so offers little to entice the networks. Briar and I called, emailed and sent proposals, but with no luck. With established producer/director Annie Goldson on board as executive producer, we also cold-called and submitted open-call applications directly to the larger overseas documentary channels and pitched the idea to Top Shelf and Natural History New Zealand. We applied to Canon, to the DocNZ pitching forum, to the Pacific Development and Conservation Trust, the French Embassy's Fonds de Coopération Économique, Sociale et Culturelle pour le Pacifique, and some others. We discussed the project with the New Zealand Film Commission. Everyone said different things and there was much encouragement, but no one could offer financial support.

Finally, the Screen Innovation Production Fund generously gave \$25,000 and production company Robbers Dog topped up the fund to get Briar and a DoP to the island and back. TVNZ's satellite service to the Pacific also chipped in with an offer to screen the film on completion for a small fee. After eight

months of solid work, the gut-tightening reality of making a feature film on a remote island for the cost of a bad infomercial had to be faced. It was October. Production had to begin in December when Richard Moyle was undertaking his final stint of fieldwork and the boat was making one of only four annual trips to the island. This meant a huge scramble to find a DoP and equipment for free, visas and tickets, a portable way of generating electricity, some method of communication with the outside world and appropriate healthcare and insurance.

Everyone Briar and I approached to shoot the film loved the idea. No one could afford to do it. And then Zane Holmes, blessed with great connections and a respected ability to tell a story, agreed to join us. He also took on the task of sourcing all the equipment from industry heavyweights Sony and Panasonic, as well as Cinestuff and Rocket Rentals (with some help from Oxfam thrown in). We were very excited to be trialling Sony's new progressive HDV camera, the HVR-V1. With a Panasonic Toughbook, Richard's satellite phone, a data connector from Rocom and the help of boffin Chris Edwards we were able to organise a very slow Internet link. Zane also got the *Sunday Star Times* to do a story, from which almost all other print, radio and television publicity stemmed, and he sorted out the solar panels.

Our scheduling hinged on the fact that the boat to Takuu changes its departure dates almost on a daily basis. There was no control. Air tickets and insurance had to be changed more than once (made possible with the help of our long-suffering travel agent and a contact who works at Air New Guinea). The boat decided to go early so that Briar and Zane nearly missed it. There was no time to shop in Bougainville for things they needed. The visas were frighteningly late. But somehow the Gods were smiling as I shouted down the phone to the shipping company, Air New Guinea, Qantas, Adnan at Signature Travel, the New Zealand Police in Bougainville, Jim Robins at the National Research Institute, Port Moresby, the PNG High Commission in Wellington and Pace Couriers. We got the visas with seven hours to spare and portable solar panels with 30 minutes to go. The police in Bougainville shopped for us and bundled the crew unceremoniously onto the boat straight from the plane.

After the challenges of pre-production, the shoot itself proceeded under comparatively clear skies. While nothing came close to stopping production, the crew did face some serious situations like the sudden

death of one of the locals and the loss of all anchors on the boat before the journey home. There were also a variety of discomforts and irritations to overcome including clouds of mosquitoes, over-friendly mice, some unusual toilet arrangements and a backing-track of clucking chickens. However, Briar and Zane made it all look easy.

Without too much of the wrong kind of drama we've now slipped into post-production. Thanks to Paul Fairless' belief in the project, the lovely folk at Images and Sound have offered us editing facilities. With the help of editor Prisca Bouchet, this has allowed us to create a 4-minute promo, as well as to digitise our HDV footage (which looks amazing).

Given its off-shore narrative *There Once was an Island* is not the sort of film to easily attract a commission, but its human story and environmental message have made a call that everyone involved in the film, including myself, has answered. Thanks to the labour and equipment donated we've managed to get a \$250,000 film in the can for \$34,000 and change. The action behind the camera was dramatic and at times challenging, but I can honestly say it's all been made worthwhile by the action unfolding in front of it.

For more details:

www.takuufilm.blogspot.com,
www.thereoncewasanisland.com

Director Briar March (right) on Takuu island



Onfilm, November 2006

Doco team seeks urgent aid

That sinking feeling is becoming a reality for director **Briar March** (*Allie Eagle and Me, Departure and Return*). In December, she and **Zane Holmes** (*Maddigan's Quest, Being Eve*) will travel to the sinking Polynesian island of **Takuu** to document the crisis facing the people there.

"We want to capture the people's responses in a time of what will be enormous change," says producer **Lyn Collie**. "This is first-hand evidence of global warming and, because of additional tectonic activity under the island, Takuu is sinking unusually fast. The outcomes look pretty dire." The team aims to explore the limited options available to the people of Takuu when the time comes to evacuate. The most likely destination is politically unstable **Bougainville**. Some of the elders are refusing to leave, but expatriates and those still on the island are trying to find a good solution that will allow the community to stay together.

Accompanied by anthropologist **Richard Moyle** from **Auckland University**, one of the team's aims is to document a unique culture before its likely demise but the threads of a larger story will also be collected. This story is about a unique group that have done their best to remain independent and keep their traditional way of life, and who are now paying the price for the developed world's lifestyle.

The filmmakers are taking advantage

of what may be a once-only opportunity to shoot. Having been invited by the Ariki (chief) of the island to document their plight, the team is preparing as swiftly as possible to journey on the December boat, as the Island is only visited four times a year. However, the filmmakers face many obstacles. The island has no power, or communications infrastructure, so they must determine which camera equipment will provide optimum quality with the least power consumption, as well as take equipment to charge batteries and power satellite communication equipment.

The team encourages members of the local industry who are concerned with the climate crisis and may have been motivated by such overseas films as *An Inconvenient Truth* to take a role in helping show the world what will likely be the first entire culture destroyed by the effects of global warming. The tragedy unfolding on this island will be repeated around the Pacific unless action is taken. A well-told documentary will help raise public and political awareness that time has run out. Any support by industry members in terms of advice, equipment or sponsorship will be warmly welcomed.

The film is being supported by The Screen Innovation Production Fund, Robbers Dog and Occasional Productions. For further information: www.takuufilm.blogspot.co.nz or contact Lyn Collie (lcollie@southnet.co.nz).

nzherald.co.nz

Auckland filmmaker documenting threatened island

By Merilee Andrews

Briar March always has an eye out for a gripping story. Once the Bethells Beach born-and-bred film-maker is hooked, she's in all the way.

March's latest project is about a remote island 200km north-east of Papua New Guinea that is sinking, slowly but surely.

The island is Takuu, which each year loses 20cm to shifting tectonic plates and rising sea levels. Earlier this year, a king tide washed right over the island. None of which would be likely to merit a documentary in itself, were it not for the 600 native Takuu who live there – a small group who still practise traditions almost untouched by the modern world.

The island's habitable future, in years, can be measured on the fingers of one hand. As their home sinks beneath them, the islanders have no choice but to leave, probably to take refuge with their neighbour: politically unstable, malaria-ridden Papua New Guinea.

"I'm interested in how a community has to cope with such fundamental change," says March. "The problem is that there is no really good option for them."

The documentary will look at the islanders' uncertain future, with the help of English-speaking interpreters. One is a native who left the island, and is now a champion of its cause. The other is Auckland University anthropologist Richard Moyle, involved with the island for 14-odd years, who aims to complete a dictionary of the Takuu language.

The small documentary crew will go to the island in a few weeks, on one of just four scheduled boat-trips there each year.

It would be a bad time, muses director March, for someone to get appendicitis.

The filming costs are covered by Creative NZ's screen innovation fund, but none of the volunteer crew will be paid, and nor is there any spare cash to charter a boat.

The small crew will have their work cut out when they get to Takuu. They'll have to bring their own means of generating power for the camera batteries; there'll be no one on hand to fix equipment if it goes bung, and no trip out for at least another two months.

But they are determined to tell the story of a culture under threat, and one with lessons for all about dealing with climate change. Says co-producer and nzherald.co.nz content administrator Lyn Collie: "It's a global story. Somebody needs to tell it."

To follow progress, [>>> click here](#)



Director Briar March, left, and co-producer Lyn Collie. Picture / Sylvie Whinray