

BALI HIGH – LINER NOTES

It was 1983 and I was on Kauai when Hurricane Iwa struck with little warning. It badly damaged properties around the island but the worst hit was the south side where I lived at Makahuena Pt., right at first-impact zone. Roads were closed, no phone or electricity for weeks and many homes and hotels were destroyed and damaged. Suddenly, there was no demand for my PA rental business or one-room recording studio so I went into survival mode and became a carpenter. I had previously taken two years of carpentry at KCC, just for the fun of it, when I learned that they had no music courses; it came in handy. Another studio had sprung up on the east side and one day I got a call to rent them an electric piano for a session. The owner, Sam Holt from Oahu, had retired to Kauai and built a studio in a former art gallery near the beach in Kapaa. I delivered the piano and as we waited for the session to get rolling he and I talked in the control room. I had never been in a real recording studio so I was keen to learn how it worked. He told me he was looking for a buyer for the studio, and that in fact, *I would be the perfect person*. I was intimidated because I was completely self-taught to that point and really only used my studio for my own compositions. Still, I had accumulated several albums worth of originals and a few people had come to me to do albums on cassette so I was already in business. Sam said he knew a guy at the bank and because of the recent disaster small business loans were easy to come by. About a week later we closed the deal and I was the owner of an 8-track studio with *real* mics, monitors and isolation booths. It was a big step for me.

Before long I moved to the east side and was renting out sound systems as well as doing recording. Being more of an artist than a technician I was always in some state of composition or recording but now I was also learning about sound. With new tools I could be more creative and I pushed myself to find new projects. The one that changed my life was a commission to write an underscore for a local real estate agent who had just come back from her African vacation. I had never written film scores and this was an eighteen-minute video but it set in motion my desire to be a film composer. I loved the challenge of trying to come up with music that wasn't built around a theme with exposition. Instead, scoring was about creating a feeling or mood without drawing too much attention to the music itself.

Kauai is a unique place in that we have the Hawaiian culture with families that have been there for generations, centuries really, and they live with the tourists, honeymooners, vagrants and jet setters. Everybody shares the same beaches, stores and post office so it's an eclectic mix, not economically or racially segregated like on the mainland. Kauai attracts people that exist on the extremes of society, in every way. I never knew who would come through my door. Once there appeared a Peruvian medicine man with bright green feathers stuck in his ear and wearing boots made of Condor bones and leopard skin - we toured the island doing songs of his homeland and eventually made an album. Once a NYC hipster walked in and asked to rent a guitar case "big enough to hide a shotgun". There was the grower who needed to 'enhance' his yearly expenditures by overpaying for sessions for a local band. And then there was Larry Rivera, a fixture on the Hawaiian music scene for decades, who absolutely could not record without his dancers. He became so accustomed to performing at the Coco Palms six nights a week that he could not sing and play without his daughters in full traditional costume performing in front of him. We did a whole album in two days.

So when Steve Spaulding appeared at my studio one day asking if I could write a score for his surf film it was not only not unusual, it was expected. That's another thing about island life, maybe peculiar to Kauai. You have to be careful because you *will* manifest your thoughts and dreams there. Ever since the African film I had been anxious to write music for films but there were no filmmakers on Kauai. Steve suddenly offered me the chance to do what I wanted at exactly the right time. He told me that he'd inquired around the island and my name came up. He'd shot this film and was towing a projector and would screen it with music and narration on a cassette. He was hitting theaters up and down the West Coast. He must have made it to the East Coast at some point because I know someone who saw it in South Carolina! Back in the 70s and 80s the

surf culture was basically knitted together by Surfer Magazine and word of mouth. When a new surf film like *Five Summer Stories* came out, everyone would talk about it and be there for midnight showings. It was the equivalent of going to a concert for America's first counter culture, the surfers.

He gave me a VHS and a music cassette. The request was to write my own compositions but stick to the vibe of the bands he'd edited the video to. I had been writing since I was eleven and one of the services I offered was to write background music for kids competing in the high school Brown Bags competition. It was the precursor to American Idol. For \$50 I would reverse engineer any recording and pump out a music track. I did it for weddings, proposals and funeral homages. I was doing these "knockoffs" regularly so when Steve said "gimme a Stones track" I was up for it. And so it went, 81 minutes of original wall-to-wall music written in the spirit (and the tempo) of his guide, tracks that included Oingo Boingo, The Fixx, The Rolling Stones, etc. Every cue was an opportunity to challenge myself either technically or artistically. I set up parameters to write within to see if I could pull it off. "The Plains of Ginsasha" was my attempt at what later became known as jazz fusion. A lot of what I write is in odd time signatures and it was difficult finding players who could execute. That's what got me into multi-tracking in the first place, I just couldn't find players able to read and play in 7/8 or 13/16. Scoring often requires a quick shift or a hit at a specific place so playing in odd meters is a must. I played most of the tracks entirely myself but brought in specialists like the female vocalist for the theme song. I got my friend Nik, a classical pianist, to wail on the Moog on the theme, too. There was a mainland band in town that played at our only nightclub, Club Jetty. I invited them in to track "Cannonade", a rewrite of an earlier composition. I spotted a kid playing a plastic toy whistle at the county fair around then. I bent down and asked him where he got it and his parents made him give it to me, they knew I would put it to use and it's heard on "Martial That Thought" (sorry kid). "Agatha Trim", a very popular tune to my surprise, is the result of a dream I had. The dream was so lucid and strong that I awoke and decided it needed a song - right then. I spent the next 24 hours straight writing and recording it to a finish. The lyrics are literal. At the time, I did not have the resources to play a VHS tape electronically synchronized to my reel-to-reel deck so everything was manually synched. I would watch for a specific moment on the video and then hit record. For each cue I'd copy the tempo, conceive what I wanted to hear and then track the drums first, beginning to end. After that it was layering and mixing. In between sessions I was playing with bands and running sound for backyard luaus and concerts.

I submitted the recordings to Steve and he suggested I come to Carmel for the transfer session. We did it in a small local studio and Steve added the narration live as the engineer transferred the music onto video. It felt really good that we could do all this without even a contract! Steve had offered me \$500 and 10% of the proceeds from video sales and that was fine by me. Surprisingly, he has lived up "to the letter" of his word, and for years! I would get statements, usually handwritten on the back of posters put up where he was still showing the film, declaring the number of units sold and a check. I could not believe he would be so cool. A couple of years later he asked me to do another soundtrack for his next film, *Totally Committed*. We did that with equal ease, I think for the same amount, and I continued receiving checks. By that time Graham Nash had given me a MIDI sequencer and I had the newest thing in synths, a Yamaha DX-7 and drum machine, both were used liberally on *Totally Committed*. A few years ago someone told me about a website dedicated to punk music and that there was a forum about *Bali High*. I was shocked to find that people liked the score. I have written for TV, film, radio, stage and the internet and usually feedback is minimal, if there's any at all. I rarely learn if the audience even notices it so coming across a forum where people know and like the music was a real treat. And now, after all these years, getting a call from Anthology Recordings wanting to release it, especially on vinyl, is a rare privilege. Kudos to them!

One last anecdote: My studio was destroyed Sept 11, 1992 in *another* hurricane, Iniki. Yeah, disaster seems to bookend momentous events in my life. I lost a lot of gear and most of my tape vault so when it came time to release the score I had only a cassette of it. Luckily, it was a very good cassette (thanks Memorex!) recorded on a good machine. It was sent to my mastering

engineer, Chris Landen, and he has done amazing things to restore and bring it back to life. The music and the video may be anachronistic but the spirit lives on in Steve's amazing chronicle of surfing in the eighties. Many of these places no longer exist as we see them in the film and for that we have Steve to thank for documenting a time and place filled with exotic beauty, excitement and nature.

Michael Sena, Nov. 2014

Surfing films were an integral part of any young surfer's life growing up in the 60s and 70s. Many of my early dreams were shaped by the cult style surf movies prevalent in those days. Back then, any screening of a new surfing film was highly anticipated, not only as a great excuse to party with friends, but also to witness in motion what we could only see in still photographs in the magazines of that day. There were no videos back then, no television events aside from a rare surf contest being aired. Every surfer wanted to see the latest imagery of their glorified icons riding the life-threatening waves of Hawaii or the mystical perfection of far-off lands. That was what captivated me - the dreamlike surf on exotic islands. Movies like Alby Falzon's *Morning of the Earth*, or Greg Weaver's *The Forgotten Island of Santosha* had me dreaming of traveling to islands like Mauritius, Nias and Bali.

Fortunately I was able to realize those dreams in my early 20s when I made it to Bali in 1977. Those were the frontier days in that region. There was no Google Earth, no hi res satellite photos. There were only stories and the occasional photo of fantastic, uncrowded waves. Along with that, the island of Bali itself was so exotic with its Hindu culture, towering volcanoes and mysterious temples - it was the perfect setting to make a film. I spent the next 3 years shooting on Bali, Java and Kauai. I returned to the mainland to do all the editing during the spring and summer of 1981. It was my first attempt at producing a theatrically released film. I had the images, I had the script for my narration, but the soundtrack - ah, therein lies another story!

I had never been a musician, but I loved weaving footage I'd shot to music I was listening to at the time. In the summer of 1981 those were songs by the likes of Stanley Clark, Kraftwerk, Dave Mason, Spyro Gyra, and Brian Auger. I had approximately 15 hours of Super 8 film I intended to hone down to 90 minutes. My edit plan was basic, outline the various geographic locations I was going to cover, and fit in the narration I had written to describe it. Depending on the quality of light, the particular action occurring (eating mushrooms, swimming underwater or hiking thru jungles), I'd choose songs that fit those sequences. I'd lay down the music first and edit each separate shot to hit on a precise beat or fit any lyrics or mood the song set. It was just as exciting editing to Herbie Hancock and Grover Washington as it was capturing the original footage.

Back in those early days of underground surfing films, many filmmakers took liberties with unlicensed music in their soundtracks. We toured with our films, screening them in small little theaters or American Legion Halls and running our own projectors. We'd run the entire operation on a shoestring, so composing an entire original soundtrack, or paying for music rights was a low priority item. We stayed under the radar of BMI and ASCAP for years. It was really only until the mid-80s, when we released our films on VHS to chain stores like Tower Records and Music Plus, that we finally had to "face the music" and re-score our films with original soundtracks. That is when I was introduced to Mike Sena, who ran a top-notch recording studio in Kapaa called MANTRASOUND. He was a very successful musician in his own right, and worked with artists like Graham Nash and Buffy St. Marie. I explained to Mike how I'd originally designed the action of Bali High to fit the music that I'd chosen. I told him if he could take on songs like "Dealer" by Santana or "Exodus" by Bob Marley and maintain the same feel and excitement with his own music - I'd be thrilled to have him compose a soundtrack.

Three months later, he'd done just that. He recreated the entire soundtrack song by song. His opening piece was a strident guitar solo with a female chorus singing "Bali High". It completely

blew my mind. There were other songs that outdid the original artists. It was a great collaboration. I'm not sure if I ever expressed to him adequately how good a job he did, and how grateful I was for all his efforts. I certainly didn't pay him enough! I'm just so pleased this music score is now getting resurrected and reaching a whole new audience. Michael deserves that.

Stephen Spaulding, Nov. 2014