

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

OFF THE GRID IN BRAZIL – “CALL OF THE HUMMINGBIRD” HOLDS UP A DOCUMENTARY MIRROR TO OUR STRUGGLE TO BE GREEN

After 25 years of publishing NOW Magazine, why would NOW editor and co-founder Alice Klein go into central Brazil and shoot a documentary about eco-warriors and Mayan time?

“I first encountered the main characters in *Call of the Hummingbird* ten years ago covering an environmental event just outside Mexico City. I was there when they announced they were converting an old school bus into a traveling caravan to take their environmental message from Guatemala to Tierra del Fuego. Here in North America, the big media story was about whether global warming was a conspiracy theory!

A decade and much networking later, the Caravan had finally made it to the tip of the continent and was preparing to realize its other founding dream — an international gathering in Brazil. I was intrigued. I knew I could get rare access to a diverse group of eco-movers and shakers who were completely off the radar of the mainstream media.

And with Hurricane Katrina ravaging New Orleans, the idea this group had, to bring together a thousand people to live outdoors on the land implementing the practices of permaculture — using infrastructure almost completely created from what the earth around could provide without harm to itself — for a thirteen day peace eco-village experiment seemed rich with potential messages for a larger audience. The fact that it was taking place in the chapadas of Goias, Brazil's crystalline mountain watershed, certainly added to the appeal of telling this story in a visual way.

Based on the idea that the living earth is calling her children to awaken, the event was called *O Chamado da Beijaflor* – the hummingbird's call of the title. And truthfully, I am one of the many who do feel called to respond to the earthly and human emergency we find ourselves in.

I would say a big focus of my life is developing the most powerful communication I can muster on these issues. But is it enough? How do we all get to a place where we understand, for example, as I say in the film, that the very idea of garbage is a crime against nature.

So I was drawn to learn about filmmaking because, let's face it, when it comes to forceful communication, film is top dog.

Despite my inexperience, I managed to convince Toronto DP Donna Mobbs and Brazilian-Canadian sound recordist Mike Filippov to join my indie-adventure. Two friends from New York, Brendon Blake and Gregory Astor (okay, one is related to me) joined us on second camera and a Mexican friend Odin Ruz who is also the son of one of the film's main characters, agreed to be our location manager for this primarily

Portuguese and Spanish-speaking event.

The whole crew was interested in seeing how these people would pull it off. And we were impressed with the fact that our main characters had given up the comfort of the flush toilet and the same comfy bed every night to live completely dedicated to the earth. If they didn't have some lessons on how to get green, fast, the way we all need to now, who would?"

Then along came Hurricane Katrina. In its wake, the whole idea of learning how to live simply yet skillfully in contact with nature, felt even more relevant.

I can't really say what possessed me to think I could do this film. I had never made a film before though my first writing for NOW was actually as a film reviewer. I never would have done it if some of my filmmaker friends hadn't inexplicably offered encouragement. In the end, I think I took the leap because of course, when I started NOW Magazine, I had never done anything like that before either. And that's turned out quite well.

On a personal level, after close to 25 years of working exclusively on a weekly, I needed to go to my creative edge on a longer form. Thankfully I got the opportunity to do that with the amazing talent of Toronto editor Caroline Christie at my side.

On a more transpersonal level, I really felt compelled to find a way to vent my frustration with the way traditional lefty blame and shame politics which are, in my view, dangerously out of step with the task at hand.

The Call of the Hummingbird seemed like an opportunity to delve into what a more holistic view of political, social and cultural change might be about.

To get the job done, I felt I could count on great characters to do some of the heavy lifting. And there was the irresistible allure of an out-there story. I knew Alberto Ruz, one of the Hummingbird leaders, had a mysterious connection to the ancient Mayan calendar. I have a family connection with Mexico, and I've long been fascinated with the science and culture of the ancient Mayans. Their sophisticated calendar system coincidentally has our 5,000-year span of post-agricultural human civilization coming to an end on Dec. 21, 2012, a grim fact that has both Hollywood and new-agers agitated. As a storyteller, I really treasured the idea of getting to play with some of the elements of that dramatic coincidence/synchronicity.

Also I didn't want to leave the end of the Mayan calendar story to the doomsday crowd or to Mel Gibson! The ancient Mayans were great students of nature and in nature there are no endings without new beginnings just like spring always follows winter.

2012 may be prophecy, it may be coincidence, but to me it just sounded like a great way to tell a story that could energize us to see that our job now is to lay the foundation for the beginning of a whole new way of living and thinking

I was on a quest to engage in the somewhat mysterious idea of learning from nature. Like I say in the film, nature is the only teacher I trust. So, I really wanted to tell the story from that point of view.

The result is *Call of the Hummingbird*, a verite documentary about a very different set of issues than the ones covered by the environmental docs already out there. I feel it picks up where an Inconvenient Truth and others leave off because it isn't trying to convince us there is a problem. Our science brains finally get that now. But what about the other parts of ourselves? How will we find the energy, the unity and the new thinking we need to avoid shooting ourselves in the foot or taking stupid wrong turns that go nowhere, like we progressives have so many times in the past?

I found many surprises in Brazil. The youthfulness and inexperience of most of the participants was a source of both inspiration and chaos. There were setbacks and illness for the community, lots of problems around decision-making and getting things done. And of course, lots of beauty, too, in the creativity of the whole situation. But what really struck me was that what I saw around me were the same problems that bedevil social change everywhere.

I went halfway around the world to see a mirror of our own challenges right here and everywhere. It was an eyeopener. At the same time, I got to witness how some participants brought new skills and tools to the table for dealing with these problems. When I came back to Toronto, I found myself really focusing in on this part of the story.

With decades of movement-watching behind me, I felt those of us who are trying to make change need to take the lid off these recurring human problems and develop new skill-sets, or we aren't going to be ready to deal with the big upheavals — which are also big opportunities — that are coming our way. Luckily, story editor Julia Bennett helped me unfold that idea in film time.

In the end of the film, all these strands of the story come together into my own 2012 manifesto. It's a very short manifesto and it seems surprisingly simple, even soft. But I think on deeper reflection, it uses a light touch to point to the main issues and the big pay-off of laying the foundation for living sustainably in harmony with nature.

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