

Obituaries

A guerrilla and a one-man band

Mark Worth, documentary filmmaker and journalist, 1958-2004

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Asia-Pacific photojournalist

IN THE coastal village of Abepura in West Papua, one of Australia and the Pacific's great underground artists was recently laid to rest. His name was Mark Worth, although he went by a variety of nicknames, including Kurtz, Captain Kino, Captain Kaos and, affectionately, 'Worthy'.

Worth, who died of pneumonia at 45, was one of Australia's finest frontier cameramen. He aspired to the pantheon of great Australian documentary filmmakers and conflict cameramen – Frank Hurley, Damien Parer and Neil Davis – and his contemporary peers included Dennis O'Rourke, Bob Connelly, Mark Davis and David Brill.

Invariably, the first thing Worth would say when introduced was, 'I was born in New Guinea'. In many ways it defined him and he wore it as a badge. He was spiritually caught between black and white worlds and his art came out of this tension, which he was never quite able to reconcile. He had the ability to tell stories at apparently opposite ends of the spectrum, from social histories of Australia's avant-garde to sober political documentaries about the region.

One story, in particular, gripped Worth for decades – that of West Papua and its struggle for independence. Worth believed it to be the great untold story of injustice in our region and completed his documentary for Film Australia on the subject, *Land of the Morning Star*, just months before he died. It was shown on ABC TV on 3 March 2004.

Worth leaves behind perhaps a dozen other films, from experimental collages to anthropological documentaries to news and current affairs pieces for ABC, SBS and the Nine Network.

A whole generation of video journalists have him to thank for opening the door to the one-man-band style of guerilla filmmaking to be found today on



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Mark Worth: His films opened the door to one-man 'guerrilla filmmaking'.

ABC and SBS current affairs and programmes such as *Race Around the World*.

Although his life was cut short, Worth packed a lot into it. He lived his art more than most and was utterly uncompromising in his approach. At times I see his life as one long performance piece, an epic soliloquy traversing the whole range of human emotion.

While his films will resonate across time, for those who knew him, his film, radio and writing were in a way just offshoots of the art of himself, his day-to-day existence which displayed his generosity and grand storytelling ability in the great oral tradition of our region.

Storytelling was a compulsion for him, as was his need to argue. It sometimes made him a cantankerous, stubborn and brittle character and he was capable of verbal decapitation of the unsuspecting. Yet his rages were more often than not his way of drawing you closer, to engage with you more deeply. He would say ‘I can’t live without fighting’, and almost daily attacked a variety of countries, governments and individuals. He could also be perfectly charming.

His hero was Lou Reed and he retained his punk sensibility until the day he died. He managed to combine the sensitivity of a Beat poet, the angry energy of punk and an academic’s drive for historical accuracy.

‘He was an absolute original,’ said Mark Davis, the SBS *Dateline* presenter and journalist who knew Worth since their days at Swinburne Film School in Melbourne.

He was more Papuan than even he realised and he landed, like a Martian, into the greyness of Melbourne, bursting with stories of other worlds. There was no art, no music, no political crisis that didn’t have a brilliant parallel in tribal Melanesia. A generation of artists, journalists and filmmakers were drawn into the region through Mark.

He was a steam train and a lot of people wanted to get on board. I certainly did. He changed my life and I will miss him forever.

Worth was born on Manus Island, off the mainland of PNG, when it was an Australian naval base. His father, Geoff, was chief petty officer on the base and Mark would later describe the idyllic childhood he spent there, playing around the World War II wrecks, exploring the jungle and cruising the islands in patrol boats.

He was a Scout leader who visualised the day when perhaps he would be

trekking through the rugged interior of PNG as a *kiap* (patrol officer), dispensing justice in a 'firm but fair' way. However, there was pressure on Australia at the United Nations to begin decolonisation and PNG moved quickly to independence in 1975. It was time for 'Territorians' to go 'home'.

'Mark would have made for a good patrol officer,' said John Allen, himself a former *kiap* and ASIO agent.

'He was a clever bloke who knew the people and was respected there. But there was a mad dash for independence and a whole generation of white Aussie kids who'd grown up there had to integrate themselves into Australia, sometimes not very successfully.'

The Worth family moved to the south coast of Victoria, where Mark threw himself into surfing (a lifelong passion), joined a sharpie gang and discovered the music of the Velvet Underground, Bowie and the Stooges.

By the late 1970s Melbourne had a lively punk scene and Worth took up semi-residency at the Chrystal Ballroom, where he hung out with bands such as the Sacred Cowboys, the Models and Dorian Grey. He did light shows for Nick Cave and the Birthday Party and Dead Can Dance.

'I first met Worthy around 1980 through the menace that was the Chrystal Ballroom,' said photographer Peter Bainbridge. 'People likened it to Berlin in the 1930s. The list of people who went through those doors and made it their house of learning is astonishing ... we made it our second bedroom.'

After putting himself through film school at Swinburne, Worth began making experimental films but was equally inspired to make documentaries with an anthropological bent.

His first documentary for Film Australia, *Super 8 Soldiers*, told the stories of Australian conscripts sent to the Vietnam War through the home movies they shot there. Home movies would recur in his later films and he became a master of blending archival footage and music.

In the mid-1980s he came into contact with the Melbourne band Not Drowning Waving. It became a long collaboration and friendship. Lead singer David Bridie, who has gone on to become Australia's foremost indigenous and Pacific Islander music producer and a film score composer, said:

To all the members of Not Drowning Waving, Worthy was considered its seventh member. It was he who persuaded us to go to Papua New Guinea, made us see the history, culture and music of grassroots PNG, which is an intense experience. He did great live show visuals for us, not

to mention the five PNG-inspired film clips and music documentary *Tabaran* we did for SBS.

In 1989 Worth moved back to PNG to run a lodge on the Sepik River. The tribal art dealer and economist Jim Elmslie hired him and the two became close friends.

‘Worth ran a lodge I partly owned on the Sepik ... By the end we were getting very little communication from him and he got quite deep into local *kastom* [custom],’ he said. ‘New Guinea was his great obsession and he was a living encyclopedia on the place.’

Worth’s 1995 film *Raskols*, about raskol gangs operating in the Highlands in the middle of a tribal war, was controversial, not least because he ended up raskoling his own film – after a disagreement, he pre-empted his film for SBS with a shorter piece for ABC TV.

For the past decade Worth had based himself in Sydney, working in television current affairs and making evocative documentaries for Radio National. His last radio piece was on survivors of the Voyager naval disaster, including his father.

Worth was haunted and inspired by the plight of the West Papuans for much of his life. As a young boy on Manus Island he had witnessed the arrival of refugees from the sham UN-supervised Act of Free Choice which rubberstamped Indonesia’s annexation of West Papua. Since then church groups estimate 100,000 people have perished under Indonesian rule.

Towards the end of his life Worth became increasingly haunted by the lives and deaths of two men. One was Errol Flynn, who had been a goldminer, prize fighter and patrol officer in Papua before he was whisked off to Hollywood by filmmaker Charles Chauvel. The other man was Chief Theuys Eluay, the West Papuan independence leader assassinated by Indonesian Kompassus soldiers in 2001. Worth had interviewed him at length and felt that Theuys knew he would soon be martyred.

His ties to West Papua went beyond filmmaking. Some years ago he fell in love with Hellen, from Biak Island, with whom he had a daughter, Inesoraki.

Both survive him.

His burial on the outskirts of Jayapura was attended by hundreds of people, including local leaders and human rights activists.

From Vanuatu, Andy Ayamiseba, of the West Papuan People’s Representative Office, said:

It is shocking news to all of us in the Pacific and what a disaster to our own struggle to be missing someone of his calibre.

Worthy was the best natural storyteller I have ever known, in a business where stories are real currency. In that regard, where it really counts, he died a wealthy man. He was wanpla Big Man tru.

Ben Bohane is an Australian photojournalist who has specialised in Melanesia. He was founding editor of the Pacific Weekly Review and was co-author of the 1993 book, West Papua: Follow the Morning Star (see review on page 215).

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