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The Beat Goes On

by Robert Render Harrison

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SEE ‘KEEPER OF THE Beat’,” a crew member at this fall’s Mill Valley Film Festival told me, “it’s about this amazing woman drummer who lives in Mill Valley. It’s incredible!”

Actually, I had come to the festival late this year, and viewed only one movie—”Cheba”, an impressive first feature from French director Francoise Charpiat, which won the Audience Favorite in the World Cinema category—and I was wondering what to see next.

I’ve long been a devotee of true reality cinema—not that pseudoreality crap that degrades TV these days. “Keeper of the Beat” (“KoB”) is about the life of former jazz drummer Barbara Borden. I say “former” because she has expanded way beyond just drumming with jazz musicians and singers.

“Music and drumming is my path,” said Barbara in a later interview, “but what gives the movie its resonance is that it shows the power of drumming, of community, as well as aspects of my inner heart and soul, rather than just simply talking about them.”

“One of our goals was to open people’s hearts; another was to inspire people to be the best they can in their lives. I wanted to have a way for people to walk out of the theater saying that they wanted to march to the beat of their own drum.”

By the end of the 62-minute film, “KoB” had become one of the most enjoyable documentaries I’ve seen in years. As the movie faded to black, I felt energized and uplifted, ready to dust off my old drums and start playing again.

But a further treat was in store for us: Barbara appeared on stage with her djembe (an African drum). Her virtuoso performance soon had the Christopher B. Smith Rafael Film Center jumping like I’d never seen it before. Members of the audience got up and danced in the aisles. Like many of those who remained seated, I was attempting to follow Barbara’s complicated drumbeat rhythms, keeping time with my hands against my thighs. About half way through her performance, I found that my hands were in perfect synchrony with hers. “Entrainment,” was Barbara’s explanation when I had a chance to talk to her later. An interesting, and rather bizarre experience, indicative of the power of the drum to communicate on a non-verbal level. A sort of human genlock!

I was delighted to discover that “KoB” was directed and produced by Bay Area veteran documentary maker, and three-time Emmy Award-winning filmmaker, David L. Brown. And a masterful job he made of it, despite the fact that he later told me it was “seriously under-funded.”

No! An under-funded doc? Seriously though, with all the independent documentaries, we have to do the best we can with the funds available. Fundraising can be an uphill slog, often more so than for a fictional feature, where funders can have pipe dreams that their investment may turn a huge financial success.



Barbara playing drums at her own wedding.
photo: courtesy B. Borden

But most docs aren’t made with the intent of great financial gain, a good thing, given only rarely do documentaries make any money. Despite the “golden age of documentaries” that we’re supposedly in, they just aren’t commercial enough for most major distributors. Having said that, I doubt that anyone seeing “KoB” would have any criticisms based on a low budget—or anything else, for that matter!

I first encountered David Brown, the producer/director and principal cinematographe over a decade ago. A 35-year veteran documentary filmmaker, David has accrued some 80 awards, and PBS International has picked up no fewer than eight of his documentaries, including “A Question of Power,” “Bound by the Wind,” “Of Wind and Waves,” “Seniors for Peace,” and “Surfing for Life,” what I’ve heard described as the best surfing movie ever.

David is an instructor in documentary filmmaking at City College of San Francisco, and also consults with documentary movie makers. If you are an aspiring documentary cineaste, wondering exactly how to go about making a presentation in order to raise funds, just take a look at www.kobmovie.com. It’s all there.

“KoB” is now one of my favorite docs; seeing it again on DVD [soon to be available for \$24.95] confirmed its excellence in all respects. David has blended legacy footage and old stills seamlessly into the footage shot specifically for the movie. The quality of his cinematography, and the all-important audio, are first rate.



Barbara Borden exhorts her Hearts on Fire Band to boogie down at the concert closing the “Keeper of the Beat” movie.
photo: Irene Young

Starting her passion for drumming at the age of five, Barbara got a drum set at ten. When asked how she stood the noise, Barbara's mother replied "What's to stand? It's a lot better than a squeaky violin."

The movie captures the time when her two older sisters (the Borden twins) worked as singers in Las Vegas with Jimmy Durante and Peter Lawford; as Barbara says, "We'd go to the Desert Inn and sit back stage. It was a lot of fun for a twelve year old." An amazing clip shows the twins performing on "I Love Lucy".

By this time, Barbara was sixteen she was the drummer for the Jewish Youth Orchestra and traveled with them to gigs all over LA, her gear stuffed into a Nash Rambler. At 19, she moved to San Francisco, at a time when both women's music and the feminist movement were beginning to take off.

"There weren't that many women jazz players," she said. "A women's group called Alive! became one of the key groups that brought jazz to women's music."

"In 1979, the notion of a woman sitting at a drum kit was very new," says Derk Richardson, music critic and host for KPFA public radio, in the movie. "We were all stunned that there was an excellent women's jazz band on the scene...and here was Alive! with Barbara Borden driving the beat from a drum kit."

These days, youth may wonder why a woman shouldn't be a drummer, but 40 years ago, things were very different. The movie opens with Barbara saying "I would get the comment, 'gosh, you play really good for a girl.' Every once in a while, if I was feeling my oats, I would go up to some fellow drummer who was a boy or a man and say, 'gosh, you play really good for a boy.'"

Barbara said she never thought about the fact that she rarely saw any women drummers—except in the Ina Rae Hutton Band (an all-woman band on TV) that Barbara's older sisters exposed her to.

Filed interviews with members of Alive! are intercut with historical footage, bringing to life this crucial part of Barbara's career as a jazz drummer. After the demise of Alive! Barbara joined Sheila Glover and her trio, Nicholas, Glover and Wray. In the movie, there's a dynamite rendition of "If It Ain't Got That Swing", accompanied, of course, by Barbara's drumming. With Sheila, she went on to make five CDs in a couple of years, during which time she discovered through ancient Goddess culture that "women were the keepers of the drum." From here, the movie traces Barbara's path as she started teaching drumming, and exploring the djembe, and the different rhythms she could create on it.

The movie documents Barbara's evolution into what Derk Richardson calls "world music drumming" which she explored on her albums "All Hearts Beating" and "Beauty and the Beat". At the same time, as Derk says, "she was becoming a one-woman percussion orchestra."

That doyenne of dance, Anna Halprin, says in the film that she's known Barbara since the 1980s and they "formed a bond instantly as like-minded artists." They've worked together on an annual event in Union Square, San Francisco, called the Planetary Dance.

"Barbara uses her drumming as an instrument of connectedness," Anna says, and "Barbara has taken her drumming into a different direction, almost the way a shaman might operate. Drumming for healing, drumming to create harmony between people, drumming as a way of enhancing people's lives."

There's dramatic footage (taken by friends) of Barbara in the former Yugoslavia, on a peace mission with eight other women ("The Doves") during the Bosnian war, performing in refugee camps. At this time, Barbara worked for months to try to remove all violence in her approach to the drum, to become "its lover rather than its master."

She comments that so many of the terms used in drumming have connotations of violence, of dominating the drum.

"Barbara is like a drumming diplomat," comments Naomi Newman in reference to that trip. "Wherever we went, as soon as she started playing whatever she was playing, garbage cans or drums, they could feel her communicating with them, her love, her wish to be connected, her wish to heal and understand, and be understood."



Barbara has drummed around the world; here she is playing a 'djembe' with a woman's group in Zimbabwe. photo: courtesy B. Borden

Ishmael Beah, Barbara's former student and a former child soldier forced to fight in Sierra Leone, says in an interview in "KoB" that it was music that "opened the door" for him to recover from trauma, and that "music has a way to make people reassert their faith in their own humanity again. from there arises this desire for us to live together in peace."

Ismael met Barbara in 1998, and immediately became her enthusiastic pupil. Barbara told me, "I feel that the heart of drumming and all our popular music is based on African rhythms."

In addition to scenes in the former Yugoslavia, the film features compelling footage of Barbara practicing her "drumbeat diplomacy" in Zimbabwe, where she is seen drumming in marketplaces, healing rituals and dance sessions. In another act of drum-related generosity, she purchased and gifted a large drum for the community of an Ononga medicine man.

Then (in a dramatic clip from "She Dares to Drum"), Barbara declares "Yes, when I drummed with the elephants, drummed in airports,

marketplaces, ceremonies, celebrations...this is how I want to drum. Yes, when I drummed—not as a performer, for fame, money or approval—but as a ‘KoB’ in service of the spirits and the community. This is who I want to be. This is who I am, yes!”

The most dramatic example of Barbara’s drum-based generosity is the Heart Drum story. Barbara recounts that it took six years to find the maker (in New Mexico) of the huge Native American drum, then “two years to find your body... a dead cottonwood tree.” The “Heart Drum was a very big spiritual teacher. It taught me about listening deeply, and how to be with people, all different kinds of people in larger numbers, and be inclusive. I knew that I was to be the steward of that drum (for a time) and then it would move on.”

At a drum camp for women called *Born to Drum*, Barbara met Native American Susie Hawk, after which she says it became very clear that the drum was to go to Susie’s people, the Suquamish, descendants of Chief Seattle who live near Seattle. Later, we see the moving ceremony for gifting this huge and beautiful drum.

After being aware of Siberian shamanism for 25 years, Barbara journeyed to Siberia, also with filmmaker Brown, where she discovered that many shamans are women, and some are keepers of the drum. The opening shot of this sequence shows a lush and green land that looks wonderfully attractive – quite a contrast to most people’s image of Siberia as a land of snow and freezing cold.

We see Barbara gifting a beautiful drum to Tatiana, a local Siberian shaman. The drum is signed around the rim by the 100 people who have supported Barbara’s work. Like the Heart Drum, this was also made by the same Native American in Taos, New Mexico.

In an article written for CineSource [“Shooting with Shamans” January ‘09], David described his experiences on this trip culminating in ten days filming Barbara participating in a workshop on ecology-based shamanism in beautiful southwestern Siberia in the Russian republic of Khakassia.

An especially memorable sequence in “KoB” is when Barbara and teenage protégé Lotus play drums together in the ‘Hearts of Fire’ rehearsal and concert. Barbara had introduced Lotus to the joys of drumming at the age of one. As David told me this concert was shot with six JVC GY-HD100 cameras.

Using a Teranex standards converter, most of the footage was uprez’d to 1080x1920 at Colorflow in Berkeley; the remainder uprez’d where the online edit was done, ZAP Zoetrope Aubry Productions in San Francisco. David did the edit using Final Cut 7 with his co-editor, Steven Baigel.

After seeing his movie on a large screen for three screenings during the Mill Valley Film Festival, David said “we’re very honored to be one of only three documentaries to be selected for a third screening and to receive the Runner-up for the Audience Award for Best Documentary. The audience reaction at Mill Valley was extremely gratifying.” Previously, David has premiered *Seniors for Peace* [2004] and *The Bridge so Far: A Suspense Story* [2006] at MVFF.



Barbara Borden getting acquainted with The Heart Drum in New Mexico cave.
photo: courtesy B. Borden



Barbara with her protege, Lotus Belle-Glover, whom she mentored on drums from the age of 14 months.
photo: Sally Burr

I asked David what attracted him to making “KoB”: “I’ve been a lifelong drummer myself, and Barbara’s talent, spirit, and warmth – when I met her and saw her perform – simply knocked my socks off. I was asked to videotape [her solo percussion show] *She Dares to Drum* in 2004, and we soon filmed the fabulous *Alive!* reunion concert. I then told her the documentary was a total green light.”

Responding to my comment that there was a very long list of donors in the credits, Barbara said: “Funds were raised from a great many individual donors. We listed everyone who’d contributed over \$100; it was truly a community project.”

Ishmael Beah sums up the movie perfectly when he says, right at the end, “When I think of Barbara’s music, that’s what I really see..that constant reminder and renewal of our humanity and making sure that we care for each other, there’s love and understanding, there’s connections to different cultures to find that common ground where all of us meet. That’s what the “Keeper of the Beat” really is, just keeping the pulse of our humanity.”

Robert Render Harrison is a Bay Area producer, cinematographer, Steadicam op, stills photographer and writer. Posted on Nov 28, 2013 - 01:08 AM

