



Previous Movers and Shakers!



Kim Dalros



Sala Cafe - 4 friends, 1 great cafe



Tonia Kim - Going Against the Grain



Michael Kang - Asian American Film-maker



Karin Chien - Asian



Greg Pak - Asian American Film-maker

Movers and Shakers

Aloha 'Aina (Love of the Land)

story by Win-Sie Tow



Aloha 'Aina: Edgy Lee

Although films ranging from South Pacific to 50 First Dates have exoticized Hawai'i as a plush, romantic backdrop of hula dancers, cabana boys, and lazy palm trees against which their characters meet and fall in love, very rarely does the Aloha State take centerstage as in Edgy Lee's new documentary *The Hawaiians: Reflecting Spirit*. The hour-long "crash course" on the history of Hawai'i and the intrinsic relationship between nature and man features interviews with such Hawaiian leaders as U.S. Senator Daniel Akaka, artist Keal'i Reichel, celestial navigator Nainoa Thompson, and a moving segment with a Kauaian saltmaker, Wilma Holi, to name a few.

With nine feature documentaries to her credit, Lee, a fifth generation Hawaii-born artist and model-turned-filmmaker has won numerous awards including the 2002 New York International Independent Film & Video Festival awards for Best Cinematography and Best Documentary Editing for *Waikiki in the Wake of Dreams* and the 2002 Chicago International Film Festival Gold INTERCOM Plaque. She has produced a CD with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and has appeared on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. She currently continues to work in New York and Los Angeles, while residing in Honolulu where she is happy to be back home, "the only place where restaurants offer you a choice of three starches."

Lee just completed touring the nation with *The Hawaiians: Reflecting Spirit*, and it is scheduled to air on PBS throughout May 2006. Please check your local listings! Visit www.filmworkspacific.com for more details.

If you know a **Mover & Shaker** that you'd like to have featured right here, send their name, bio and contact information to us at info@asiansocialnetwork.com

Asian Social Network: Your name says it all. What makes you "edgy"?

Edgy Lee: My name was given, like Sneezzy, Happy, Grouchy. I kept my parents on edge crying from colic, and they'd take me to Waikiki and rock me to sleep on the beach so I didn't drive the neighbors nuts.

ASN: Describe your experience growing up and how it influenced you to get into the entertainment industry.

EL: My mother is a classical singer. She had a scholarship to Juilliard in the 1940s, and at 16 she was a "Breck Girl", which helped her get to New York. My father is also gifted musically, and growing up our family was different. We laughed a lot, and my sisters and I would think nothing of watching my parents perform for friends. My sisters and I were used to performing for people and maybe it came from the attention, the desire to please, the neurotic need of someone who is driven to be seen and heard? I'm not sure.

ASN: You were a model, went through several career changes, then became a documentary filmmaker. In Asianweek.com, you were quoted as saying that it was a natural progression. Why was it natural, and how did your former careers shape your experience in making documentaries?

EL: My godfather was a film composer in the early days at MGM after his escape from Poland during the war. He gave me great advice on many aspects of life. He said, "Edgy, what makes you think that being a child whose family says 'Ah, yes she will be a doctor,' and at 16 you go to college and then med school and you never think about doing anything else or you never venture outside the world that you were born into? What happens then at 35 if you realize that you'd rather paint or play the violin instead of performing heart surgery?" When I heard him, my confusion about why I had been gifted with more than one talent and why was I compelled to move through different careers yet settle on none, dissipated.

Broni died before he saw my Hawaii films but I realized that all my time in art school, on film sets, being in front of the camera, at the engineer's desk making records, and finally behind the camera making films—all of this was a natural progression. Every lesson I learned expanded my abilities and enhanced my sense of how to recognize and translate someone else's story, someone else's point of view.

ASN: How did your family react to your career decisions?

EL: The word model was just a strange notion to my parents. So what do you really do? And I think it wasn't until I was the Chun King girl and my Dad watched me on TV. I had done lots of small television roles and was in fashion magazines but when I entered the stage with big stuffed monkey, handed it to Johnny Carson as a surprise in celebration of Chinese New Year, that seemed for them to be the point of realization. Oh, our daughter actually gets paid to do this and my, she does it well. I was so nervous. I wore Nancy Kwan's original cheongsam* from Flower Drum Song and I was hyperventilating. It was totally adlib and I made him laugh, the audience laughed, and knowing that hundreds of millions of people were watching—I could do anything after that.

ASN: What feedback for *The Hawaiians: Reflecting Spirit* has stuck out for you so far?

EL: There are a great many people in this country looking for something more. If they're 60 and older, they wonder what happened to a simpler, slower and they say better way of life. Baby boomers wonder what happened to (our) generation. Younger audiences are often disillusioned by the quality of their lives and at such a young age, but I don't blame them.

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|  | Cat Chow - Avant Garde Artiste |
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| | The stars of <i>Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle</i> |
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| | The directors of <i>Take Out</i> |
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| | Team DoBoo - Korean Performance Troupe |
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| | The actors of <i>Score!</i> |
|  | The owners of <i>Green Ginger Cafe</i> |
|  | The cast of <i>Tea!</i> |
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| | Members of the Mayor's Advisory Council |

ASN: Why did you decide to make films specific to Hawaiian culture?

EL: There is an introduction to this latest film where two owls fly overhead in broad daylight. We captured this on the first day of filming at a sacred place on the island of Kauai where Wilma Holi's family gathered salt for 300 years. The tone of the entire film is set from this first day. This was a sign to her family—that our request "to document their story" was granted by her ancestors. Still today, Hawaiians look for signs in nature and they interpret them. I am certain that this is something our greater community will seek out and rely upon, in the next decade to come.

ASN: How has your production company Filmworks Pacific helped other filmmakers get their projects off the ground?

EL: Ten or so years ago, I was visiting Hawaii and looked for peers but could not find a company that independently produced films or television programming for national distribution. Then I realized that for decades the major studios and networks had come and gone, season after season, leasing Hawaii's landscape like you would a gym; and local talent served as towel boys and girls and ok, maybe an occasional trainer. But not a single production like Hawaii 5-0 or Magnum PI reflected Hawaii professionals in above the line positions.

I concluded that people must have gotten used to working for the major companies and when a series hit, that was and is great money in a very expensive place to live. Emphasis shifted from creative endeavors to service and support of major TV and film productions as 2nd unit camera crews, location scouts, drivers, extras, assistants and interns. I knew people in Vancouver who helped build the entertainment industry in their hometown after Steven Cannell established his company there, and the rest is history.

If Hawaii 5-0 had embraced even one local writer back then, who's to say that there wouldn't be a thriving TV industry there today, benefiting all foreign productions that come every season to shoot at least one pilot or major film? And the benefit I refer to is in reference to content, not just production support. So during my visit back home ten years ago, I decided to make films in and about Hawaii.

How have we helped others get projects done? We haven't done enough. We could do way more but I sense that we're just around the corner from being able to share our success in the mainstream market and also success in a peculiar, unique genre.

Tourism has been the driving economic force in Hawaii for nearly 100 years, even before Duke Kahanamoku was sponsored by the visitors' bureau to tour the country as an ambassador of Aloha. The films I've made in Hawaii seem to fulfill a need in this industry because as I said earlier, people are looking for more. If our films help preserve Hawaii's history and culture, and also educate and entertain the public so that people understand how precious Hawaii's environment and native culture are, this is a very good thing.

ASN: How do you find the money and resources to make each project a reality?

EL: Very carefully. If you don't have underwriters, patrons, or sponsors who understand what you're trying to do, keep moving forward and find people who do. It's not just funding that you need to see a project come to fruition.

Before each film, especially one that is shot in and about native people and culture, I have learned to ask permission from the elders of the community and from their ancestors. We ask for permission to tell the story. It is no different than asking to shoot on someone's property. This I learned with the first film I did in the islands.

ASN: Are there other Asian or Asian American filmmakers whom you draw inspiration from? How has your ethnicity helped or hurt you in making/acting in films?

EL: Of course there is Ang Lee, James Wong Howe, and people like France Nguyen who blazed a trail for any Asian girl who wanted to model or be in the movies. There are many people whose work and life accomplishments I admire. As for my ethnicity, I think it has helped and hurt me in my career in front and behind the camera. It has opened doors that would otherwise have been closed or taken years to develop; trust and opportunities that at times have come to me because of the way I look. Given my cultural background, I'd say this is stereotypical (and true) of many Asians. At times, I'm too shy or insecure about being acknowledged, standing in the light when others are in the background and go without credit. Don't misunderstand me, I'm often first to step out front to voice my opinion, and I'm happy to accept good luck and just as competitive as the other guy, but there is that curious cultural thing.

ASN: Can you cite specific examples of how it helped/hurt you?

EL: Short answer? Ethnicity was a plus when I was modeling and acting; and producing reggae artists. It has hurt me on occasion when I've encountered people who make assumptions as to my capabilities—a female and one who looks like me, and she is the producer, writer, director, editor and in most of my films I have worked closely with one of the greatest composers (Robert Wehrman) and he orchestrates but we often collaborate on the score. That is, for some people, far too much to handle. Not so much my ethnicity but my gender.

ASN: What is the biggest misconception of your work?

EL: That my films of Hawaii and Hawaiian people are only about Hawaii and Hawaiian people.

ASN: How do you respond to people who want to put you and/or your work into a box?

EL: It depends on whether or not they have said or done something to me that was not nice. I'm a strong A personality as I said before. When people underestimate me or assume things about me that are untrue, inaccurate, pure gossip, or because I'm a female (and I say this because it is in my realm of experience) that I didn't or rather couldn't have done the work I claim to have done—one really has to ask oneself if it's worth the agita.

ASN: What is your greatest fear?

EL: War, the loss of civil liberties in this country.

ASN: What do you wish people knew about you?

EL: Well not much, because privacy is so rare these days. I'd have to say that most people assume I'm male. I'm not.

ASN: Why do people assume that?

EL: My name sounds male, and the body of work and experiences I've had seem to many people, more the kind of life that a man would have led. This I have been told.

ASN: What is your motto?

EL: Imagine a perfect world.



ASN: What is your idea of the perfect world?

EL: If you imagine what the world would be like if it were perfect, that is not unlike what I would imagine, in a perfect world.

* **A cheongsam is a traditional Chinese women's dress.**