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Maui
filmmaker

Tom Vendetti's new film

WHEN THE MOUNTAIN CALLS

explores how tourism preserves

TIBETAN CULTURE,
the Bhutanese's focus on something called
GROSS NATIONAL
HAPPINESS

and a clandestine flute-playing
mission with the

"FATHER OF NEW AGE MUSIC."

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Inside Maui Filmmaker Tom Vendettis When The Mountain Calls

by Anuheia Yagi

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"When a path opens before us that leads we know not where, don't be afraid to follow it. Our lives are meant to be mysterious journeys, unfolding one step at a time."

-Ann Mortifee, In Love With The Mystery

What calls you? What beacons with a burnish so bright you're compelled to move without abandon and beyond rationale? And if you heed that call-life's uncertainty notwithstanding-what then?

Maui psychologist and Emmy-winning filmmaker Dr. Tom Vendetti says it's the Himalayan Mountains that have called him. For nearly three decades, he's answered that call time and again. Though none of it was easy, Vendetti says the solution was as simple as "just showing up."

Since 1983, despite myriad political and logistical obstacles-and later, his own battle with prostate cancer-Vendetti's repeatedly made the arduous journey to the Everest region. And in "searching for life's meaning," as Kris Kristofferson explains in the film's prologue, by answering the colossal range's consummate call, Vendetti's found answers in return.

Chronicling his 30-year adventure in the Himalayas is Vendetti's latest feature-length documentary, *When The Mountain Calls: Nepal, Tibet & Bhutan*, which makes its world premier this Saturday, Nov. 5 at the MACC's Castle Theater.

A cinematic scrapbook of sorts, *When The Mountain Calls* culminates work from three of his previous films: *Journey Inside Tibet* (1999), which aired on PBS and screened at film festivals internationally; *Sacred Tibet: The Path To Mount Kailash* (2006); and *Bhutan: Taking The Middle Path To Happiness* (2007), which to-this-day airs nationally on PBS and earned Emmy Awards for both he and composer Christopher Hedge, for best Historic/Cultural Program - Feature/Segment and Musical Composition/Arrangement, respectively.

This composite film tells the tale of Vendetti's personal journey through it all and the ways by which he-a mild-mannered career scientist with no religious

background-was ultimately relinquished from the idea that coincidences are without meaning.

His journals' insights, narrated by fellow producer Robert C. Stone (Taylor Camp, Native of Owhyhee), are layered with the richly hued digital imagery he's captured over the years: of the world's most massive peaks, swathed in snow and skirted with glacial serrate, and of the cultural tapestry created by the region's exotic people who revere these places as sacred and who, by the lifestyle leant by their deep convictions, maintain some of the oldest continuous cultures on the planet.

But who cares about the Tom Vendetti story? It's a question he and producers had to ask themselves as they created *When The Mountain Calls*. What they found was that Vendetti's story is inextricable from the stories he found along the way-stories that speak to the human condition and our shared questions and challenges, however we are called.

And so the film touches on kaleidoscopic themes and concepts-from spirituality to ecological sustainability, and above all, the pursuit of happiness. Featuring interviews with the Dalai Lama himself, proponents of Greenpeace East Asia, and political leader Yeshey Zimba (then-Prime Minister of Bhutan, a country that weighs its wealth based on what they call Gross National Happiness), the film explores how-despite the eternal return of the past's clash with the present's push toward the future-progress and preservation cannot but coexist.

This integration of ideas also speaks to Vendetti's spiritual reconciliation that coincidence is not mere whimsy, and that so long as we are open to its whim, we open ourselves to a wonderful world. Further still, Vendetti's story says that the paths that call us intersect with and influences others.

This is perhaps best exemplified by his friendships with authoress Ann Mortifee, who narrates the film (written by the Maui News' Rick Chatenever) and her husband, flutist Paul Horn, who's heralded as "The Father of New Age Music" thanks to his famous recordings from inside the Taj Mahal and Egypt's Great Pyramids, as well as his relationship with nonpareil Indian composer Ravi Shankar, forged around the time of the Beatles' late-'60s Transcendental Meditation pilgrimage to India.

Both Horn and Mortifee will join Vendetti in presenting Saturday's film premier, performing a pre-screening concert plus a reading from Mortifee's new book, *In Love With The Mystery*, a collection of poetic passages which Vendetti says speak to the larger themes of *When The Mountain Calls*.

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"Below the surface of the conscious mind there lies a reservoir of knowledge. Few take the time to drink from these waters. Those who do, become channels through which inspiration flows into the world... Dive deep. Drink deep. And the deep thirst that haunts us all will be quenched."

-Mortifee

"Being around people who are bipolar or schizophrenic-which I am every day-my job is to ground people," Vendetti told me. "When people talk about something that doesn't appear real-hearing voices or seeing things that aren't there-in my profession, I've always been in the position of saying, 'No, that isn't really what's happening.'

"But when I look back at the films, there are all of these things that are kind of unexplainable," he continued. "I used to blow them off or discount them, but something hit me. It's OK to not know everything. There are things in our lives we can't explain. To be able to let go of that was a kind of surrendering. It was a relief off my shoulders not having to figure out everything all the time."

Showing up for serendipity is Vendetti's simple answer to how-to-answer the call. His story is replete with instances of how, just by going where you're led, leads to remarkable things.

Case in point: on his very first trip (an adventurous treat after completing graduate school), he found himself hurtling toward the Himalayas on a tiny turbo prop with Tenzig Norgay, who was named to Time Magazine's "Time 100: The Most Important People of the Century" for having been one of the first two men to summit Mount Everest, alongside Sir Edmund Hillary in May of 1952. Norgay and his daughter were returning to Everest to reunite with Hillary for the 30th anniversary of their accomplishment, and invited Vendetti to join them.

"It was amazing," Vendetti said. "As we walked up the side of the mountain, National Geographic was waiting for us. Their cameras were rolling. First, [Norgay and Hillary] embraced. Norgay then introduced his daughter, Deki, then said, 'I want you to meet my friend, Tom,' and I was suddenly shaking hands with Hillary!"

His returning journeys also took him to Lhasa, the administrative capitol of the Tibet Autonomous Region, and its sweeping Potala Palace (formerly the residence of the Dalai Lama), considered one of Tibet's most sacred sites. In the film, Vendetti recounts a vision of Horn playing in the palace-a vision which years later came to fruition, though not without the hand of fortunate chance.

After exhaustive efforts in getting permission to have Horn play and record in the palace-the first Westerner to ever attempt such a thing-Horn and Vendetti

found themselves relegated to a small ancillary room that "reeked of cigarette smoke [with] questionable acoustics." But during a tour they discovered the ambietic main exhibition hall-the perfect place to capture Horn's flute music.

A kind monk informed them they could use the space-but only in secret, when the Chinese guards were out to lunch. Outside, Chinese propaganda blared incessantly on loudspeaker, shattering any memory of calm, while Tibetan pilgrims still prayed and prostrated outside, urged by their faith. Inside, "The Father of New Age Music" clandestinely played his flute while Vendetti filmed.

"Back in those days in China, if you got caught doing something it could have meant severe consequences-not only for us, but for the monk who allowed that to occur," Vendetti said. "On one hand we were elated by the opportunity, on the other hand it was quite risky."

But the resulting performance, clips of which are featured in the film, proves the risk's worth.

"When I look back on it, when I weigh the two, it was just meant to be," said Vendetti. "I don't know how else to explain it."

* * *

"Everything we build will be torn down. Everything that is lost will return again. When both sides of the paradox are held with equal reverence, we are truly free."

-Mortiffee

This anecdote leads to another interesting phenomena happening in Tibet; that unknowable amounts of Tibetan culture could have been lost were it not for the publicity of the Dalai Lama's exile and China's attempts to accommodate a growing number of tourists responding to that international interest by refurbishing religious sites of interest.

"Even though the Chinese say there's freedom of expression and so forth, when it comes to Tibetan culture, there's a major effort in my opinion toward changing that, making it more Chinese-based," Vendetti said, referencing incentives given to Han Chinese to relocate-to and "homogenize" the area.

"By preserving monasteries and the Potala Palace, they're also preserving the culture," he added. And after repeat visits over decades, noted that "I was really just delighted with how this is all coming back. I don't even know if the Chinese are even aware of what's going on, of what they're preserving in the process while thinking that it's going to attract tourism. They're doing it basically to bring money into China, but as a result of that, people are coming

and learning more about the Tibetan culture."

Cultural preservation became a key theme in Vendetti's continuing discoveries, especially as he traveled to neighboring Bhutan, where the cultural and ecological preservation are the crux of their identity, the wealth of which government calls "Gross National Happiness."

And finding happiness-the impetus of heeding your call-is what Vendetti describes as the most important of the film's many messages.

"The most important thing is looking at happiness in the way that our culture and our surroundings affect us," he said. "For me, I became very interested in that because I'm also a psychologist, and I've been dealing with those issues throughout my professional career. One of the things that the Bhutanese talk about is that if you really, truly want to be happy, you have to live in a beautiful environment. They have a real sense of their own identity, and I was fascinated with that aspect in how it relates to preserving culture."

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"The mystery of our appearance here on a planet revolving through space is a mystery that will always remain... As we cultivate wonder, awe and reverence, the heart opens to receive the miracle of it all. We finally awaken to realize that we are, in fact, simply an intricate part of the great mystery."

-Mortifee

The mysterious Himalayan Mountains-"The Mystery" itself-continues to call Vendetti. His mission of filmmaking-for-social change continues to call him, too. Following the release of the *When The Mountain Calls*, next on his agenda is the Angkor Wat International Film Festival, of which he's a founder, scheduled to debut in February 2012 in Siem Reap, Cambodia (a significant locale given it's a city with no movie theaters, no-thanks to the Khmer Rouge).

And, he plans to return to the Himalayas during trekking season next fall, in celebration of his 60th birthday.

The mountain called Vendetti - and he answered. What calls you?