

# FANTOME ISLAND

## PRODUCERS' STATEMENT

### **The Genesis and Development of the Historical Documentary *Fantome Island***

Fantome Island was first conceived as a documentary project in 2007 when Strong & Smart Inc. began working on Palm Island, a remote Indigenous community adjacent to Fantome Island off the coast of Far North Queensland. In July 2007, Strong & Smart director Mark Newman visited Palm Island together with video production trainer Adrian Strong to investigate possibilities for establishing a video training program. At a meeting with the Bwgcolman School Cultural Committee, we met Winnie Obah whose parents, Wilfred and Rachel Obah, had been patients on Fantome and got married there in the 1950s. Winnie proposed that a historical film about the now uninhabited island would be a worthwhile long term project for Strong and Smart particularly in view of its largely forgotten history and the importance of remembering those patients who had lived and died there.

In August 2007, at the invitation of the Palm Island community, Strong and Smart initiated a video training program at the two schools on the island. With filmmaker Sean Gilligan joining the Strong and Smart team in November 2007 the training program took off during the next two years and several short films (both fiction and documentary) were made with pupils from the two schools on the island. One of the films, Miss Lil's Magic Egg Rock, won an ATOM award in 2009. In November 2007 Sean and Adrian made their first landing on Fantome Island accompanying a school trip during the course of which they helped a group of Palm Island kids make a short film: The Phantom of Fantome Island.

In between teaching sessions at the schools, Adrian and Sean began researching the history of Fantome Island, and conducting interviews with anyone on Palm Island who had a connection to Fantome, including the two remaining elders on Palm who had been patients at the leprosarium, namely George and Paddy Tanner. Sadly, a month after giving us a short preliminary interview, Paddy passed away in April 2008. We knew that he had terminal cancer, but the passion with which he spoke about his time on Fantome seemed to revitalize him and his enthusiastic manner belied his medical condition. We were shocked to hear of his sudden death on our subsequent visit when we had intended to conduct more in-depth interviews with him.

The issue of key characters was central to our documentary as we needed authentic personal stories from former Fantome Island residents which we could weave into the film. This problem would only be resolved a year later, illustrating the need for patience, or waiting for the intervention of 'fate' in making this kind of documentary. During the mixed fortunes of the documentary's progress and reversals throughout the years of its making, we often commented wryly to each other: "The Island Giveth and the Island Taketh Away."

In August 2007, Adrian had mentioned the prospective Fantome Island documentary project to French anthropologist Lise Garond who had been conducting historical research on Palm. This chance conversation revealed the existence of 'forgotten silver,' buried treasure for documentary filmmakers like us, in the form of an old film on Fantome Island, shot in 1954 on 16mm film during the time (1945-1973) when the leprosarium was being run by the nuns from the Franciscan Mission of Mary (FMM). Subsequently Adrian and Sean were able to track down a DVD copy from the FMM nuns on Palm, initially only a copy without sound could be found, but eventually a copy with sound was located at the FMM archives in Sydney in 2009. Although the original 16mm print could not be located, the material from the DVD was converted into useable form for the final film.

Throughout 2007 and 2008 we were working in piecemeal fashion, trying to squeeze in bits of research and the odd interview here and there. Documentary production really only started to gain momentum in 2009. By late 2008, funding for the media-training project on Palm Island from non-profit organization The Smith Family was coming to an end. However, in view of our initial work on the documentary, The Smith Family very generously agreed to provide seed funding which enabled us to go down to Sydney in January 2009 to visit the archives of the Franciscan Mission of Mary, and also paved the way for our successful application

for a larger production and post-production grant from the Australian Federal Government's Indigenous Heritage Fund.

We had met a couple of FMM nuns (Sister Christina and Sister Maria) on Palm Island previously and been overwhelmed by their generous support in showing us photographs and other material which provided rich pickings for our research. However, when we came to the FMM archives in Sydney we were like kids in a candy store. The FMM archivist, Sister Madonna let us loose for a whole day during which we spent hour after hour making high resolution scans of all Fantome related photos as well as other documents (diaries, letters, journals) which reflected life on Fantome from the 1940s onward.

It was during our visit to the FMM archives in January 2009 that we came across a note left by someone called Joe Eggmoss whom, we were subsequently to discover, had spent ten years on Fantome Island, having been taken there as a 7 year old child. This contact was to prove a seam of pure documentary gold for us as filmmakers and we lost no time in making contact with him.

Our first meeting with Joe was at a food hall in downtown Brisbane. He had come down from his home in Maryborough to meet us. Over a sandwich and coffee, we explained our plans about making a film about the history of Fantome Island. To our amazement, we then heard that Joe's own plans involved writing up his own history of time on Fantome, motivated by his desire to pass on his story to his grandchildren. His writings had also become part of a Masters thesis he had recently embarked on which he was keen to complete and even incorporate the Fantome Island filmmaking as part of his research. Our goals came together perfectly and from that time on, Joe became our primary film subject. We began to trace his story, through numerous interviews at his home up in Maryborough and visits up to Fantome Island where his memories came alive.

Joe's enthusiasm was infectious. Increasingly we began to realize the importance of Fantome Island not only as the geographical repository of poignant personal memories of those who had contracted the ultimate illness of social stigma, but also as a key symbol of past treatment of indigenous people in Queensland. We began to recognize that the story we had to tell would be an important one for reconciliation and healing in Australia. Having Joe tell his personal story seemed to be the best way to structure the film, yet we also wanted to weave in important contextual issues such as the racist and eugenicist attitudes of previous Queensland governments which are all too easily forgotten by most non-indigenous Australians today.

In this regard we were assisted immensely by historian Joanne Watson. Her meticulous research acted as an invaluable guide to the past. In 2008, in the Bwngcolman school library on Palm, Sean found a copy of Joanne Watson's PhD thesis concerning the fascinating history of Palm but it was her chapter on Fantome Island which became our 'bible' for background research on both the leprosarium and the lock hospital. Conducting an interview with Joanne was an essential part of filling in the contextual history.

Our research also led us to Peel Island which had existed as a leprosarium before Fantome but which, after 1940, became a 'whites only' establishment resulting in the forced removal of all non-European patients. Fortunately, the current custodians of Peel Island's history, The Friends of Peel Island Association (FOPIA) were more than happy to help us with our research. Through FOPIA we made contact with Dr. Hugo Ree, a leprosy specialist who, in lengthy interviews, tirelessly provided invaluable information on the medical aspects of the disease. Furthermore, the Peel Island connection led us to Doris Gabriel – mother of Ruth Gabriel who kindly gave us more archival footage taken by her husband, the late Dr. Gabriel who looked after leprosy patients at Peel and Fantome during the 1950s and 1960s. Sadly we heard that Ruth Gabriel passed away on the last day of 2009, so she was never able to see our final film and how her husband's footage of Peel Island had been incorporated. Also through FOPIA we met historian Peter Ludlow who accompanied us on a filming trip to Peel and passed on the wealth of his historical knowledge on the spot.

In terms of the Palm Island community, Winnie Obah was an essential link to the story especially as the old FMM film actually portrayed the marriage ceremony of her parents, to which Joe was the page-boy. Although we did not capture the moment on film, we were both touched by the poignant meeting of Joe and Winnie on the ferry crossing over to Palm Island. Even though they had never met, they immediately came together like brother and sister, bound together by a shared history. It was this sense of personal closeness between people that we tried to capture in the film, but as far as we could see, more than anyone else, it was Joe who provided so much of the glue to bring together all those who had some connection to Fantome, and hence following his journey back to the island became the narrative thread we chose to weave the story together.

Inspired by Joe's tireless efforts we also tried to help with arrangements for the Fantome Island Remembrance Day and organized for photographs we had scanned to be printed so the community on Palm

Island could look for old friends and relatives. Unfortunately, the timing of the Remembrance day had several false starts – in further manifestations of “the Island taketh away”. Adrian had postponed his return to the UK for a couple of months in 2009 in order to assist with shooting the event, but in view of another delay he had to return to Australia the following year as the event finally took place only in June of 2010. Ultimately this was for the best, as everyone had plenty of time to prepare for it to make sure the event went off smoothly. Finally, without any shadow of doubt, it was a case of “the Island Giveth.” The Catholic Church in Townsville were major players in facilitating this, together with the FMM nuns on Palm Island and everything went off perfectly enabling us to capture many beautiful and poignant moments providing closure for so many people associated with Fantome Island. Indeed for an event of such historical importance we were the only people covering it. Apart from the Palm Island News, no media outlets showed any interest.

With his remaining time in Australia, Adrian began work on editing the documentary; logging and structuring some of the early scenes. Following Adrian's return to the UK in July 2010, the editing and post-production was taken over by Sean who became the main creative force behind the structure and look of the film. In discussing the style of the documentary we drew inspiration from other documentaries such as *First Australians*. Sean in particular was drawn to the documentaries of Errol Morris who's visual and soundtrack aesthetics provided many influences and clues. Feature film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) also offered visual inspiration in capturing an evocative vintage aesthetic. Sean drew from this in his September 2010 visit to Fantome Island to secure much needed additional footage. While most of the shooting had been on HDV cameras, the Canon 7D was used for later interviews and some of the more creative, artistic shots in the film.

As you can imagine many hours were invested into the editing. Our major advantage was Sean being able to edit the entire film on his Final Cut Pro system at home. In April 2011, with roughly two thirds of the film edited, Sean conducted follow up interviews with Joe to re-examine aspects of certain stories and explore a few new ones. It soon became clear that to bring this story to life in the way it deserved, we were creating a feature length documentary.

In post-production, after some initial experimentation with hang drum music, Sean decided to approach local composer David Lazar to really flesh out the soundtrack possibilities. By using our hang drum guide music as a reference along a few nods to Philip Glass and Danny Elfman (the Errol Morris connection) David created a truly wonderful moody unique soundtrack that envelops the film perfectly. All the audio was brought together by Tfer Newsome who's sound design enhanced the flow of the film in beautiful subtle ways. The final stage of post-production was a colour grade and the Post Lounge stepped in with a very generous sponsorship deal to provide a full grade for free.

The coming together of the film was a gradual process and for much of the time we didn't have a definite plan and we certainly were on a shoe string budget. However, while our earliest intentions were simply to produce some kind of record intended primarily as a resource for the Palm Island community, the documentary gained a life of its own, wanting to be made into something which would be seen by a far greater number of people. As our horizons expanded, we met the right people who further facilitated the crafting of the film into something better and more polished and to all these people we are profoundly grateful. What started out as a tiny project we were doing in our spare time expanded into a film which has received acclaim at international film festivals. We hope it will continue to be a tribute to all those who have lived and died on Fantome Island, as a symbol of reconciliation in Australia, and as a testament to the heroic journey of boy aged seven who contracted an awful disease and was separated from the bosom of his family but who ended up becoming the most respected elder of Fantome Island and the subject of our film.