

SKYDANCER

A Film by Katja Esson



Jerry McDonald Thundercloud as connector in NYC

*»They say Mohawks are fearless. They say we can walk up there on the steel beams as if we were on the sidewalk, Mohawks don't get scared – I say that's a myth, because this one does get scared.«
Jerry McDonald Thundercloud (Protagonist)*

Synopsis

The Brooklyn Bridge, the Empire State Building, the World Trade Center: for more than 120 years, six generations of Mohawk Indian ironworkers have raised New York City's skyline, built the highways over the boroughs and crossed the rivers by weaving carpets of steel. They are called ›sky walkers‹ because they walk fearlessly atop steel beams just a foot wide, high above the city streets.

As a German filmmaker living in New York City, I heard about the legend of the Mohawk ironworkers and - reflecting the inherent German fascination with Native Americans - I was always intrigued by that story. After the collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11 it surprised me to hear that despite the controversies that exist between the Native Americans and the US Government over issues such as sovereignty, land disputes and smuggling, Mohawk ironworkers from all over

the country rushed to Ground Zero. They worked many months in the ruins, dismantling what their grandfathers and fathers had built. I wanted to know more about these men who live as ›outcasts‹ of American society and yet are American down to the bone.

Who are these Skywalkers? What is their secret for overcoming fear? Has ›skywalking‹ replaced an ancient rite of passage? Or is it the pure need to adapt in order to survive? And what is their life really like, when every Friday at quitting time, they jump into their cars and make the eight-hour drive back north to their families on the reservation?

Skydancer is a feature-length documentary that takes a provocative look at Indian life in the 21st Century: from the fragile hierarchy on top of the breath-taking steel structures

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Mohawk actors on film set



Jerry, 1978



Jerry's father

in New York City to life ›on the Rez‹ where problems like unemployment and crime make it hard to see the pristine beauty of the surrounding lands. These Mohawk ironworkers giving me, the foreigner, exceptional access to their lives, and in the process offer an intriguingly different perspective on life in general. Working itself deep into the fabric of America, the stories told with humor and sensitivity will shatter the clichéd image of the oppressed and victimized Indian too often portrayed in the media.

The spine of the film follows Jerry McDonald Thundercloud, 45, the charismatic, self-proclaimed »Ironworking Superstar« who followed in the footsteps of his father who he never knew. Jerry provides vibrant insight both into the danger and fascination of the work on the high steel and his life ›on the Rez‹, an unflinching look at his (often failed) relationships, his close-knit but split community, and what he calls »his learning curve as an Indian«.



Tom Porter, Mohawk chief, former ironworker



Akwesasne reservation



Bear and her family

Starting out as a Catholic altar boy with no idea of his identity, Jerry's story truly began when an uncle took the headstrong teenager on a sacred journey on which he met many of the most prominent spiritual leaders of our time. (Not until much later did Jerry realize who they were, including the Dalai Lama and the Pope). Jerry shares his difficult decision to move off the reservation with his third wife Jeannie, 37, and his successful second career as a Native American consultant, patiently educating people about the old rituals and traditions. The prejudice on the construction sites or movie sets make him laugh as he tirelessly explains to the »white man« that Indians don't jump into a canoe when they want to cross the lake – they have speedboats.

Jerry's destiny is linked to Tom Porter, 65, the famous

renegade Mohawk chief who worked with Jerry's father and who fought all his life and against all odds to keep the nearly extinct Mohawk language alive. He was the one that lit a spark in Jerry as well as in many other young Mohawks who previously did not care about their heritage.

Jerry's story is paralleled by that of Sky Fox, 37, who learned everything he knows about ironworking from Jerry. They are close, although Jerry is sometimes a bit too »flamboyant« for the serious Sky. Sky and his wife Bear, 36, could never imagine moving with their five kids off the reservation. At the same time they successfully keep their family away from ›bad medicine‹: such as smuggling and drugs, which are major issues on the reservation. Because of its location – the reservation straddles Canada to the North and the US to the

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South with the mighty St. Lawrence River and its thousand of deserted islands flowing through the middle – it has become an important link for organized crime. More than once our interviews were interrupted by heavy machine gun fire between the Border Patrol and smugglers.

As these Mohawk ironworkers try to make sense of the world by reclaiming, preserving and transforming their traditions, their personal stories become a metaphor for larger issues of identity, pride, and integrity.



Peter Skaronhiati Stacey (Mohawk), 3rd from left; Joseph Jocks (Mohawk), 4th from left; Peter Sakaronhiotane Rice (Mohawk), 6th from left; at Rockefeller Center, 1928

Jerry McDonald was only three days old, when his father died. One of the most famous ironworkers of his time, Jerry's father was working on the Hilton Hotel in 1962 when a steel cable snapped, throwing him 40 stories down into the street. Jerry's mother took her two little boys and left the reservation and her Indian life behind. She cut her hair and raised her sons as Catholics in New Jersey. But at age 17, Jerry decided to follow in his father's footsteps and went to New York City.

There is great pride in walking steel and ironworkers are very respected on the reservation. But their life style requires them to be away from their families for long periods of time, which puts great pressure on relationships. When his first wife confessed to Jerry that their youngest son wasn't his, they got divorced. Jerry left the reservation and followed

Tom Porter to found his own Indigenous, traditional commune. It was there that Jerry – a kid raised in New Jersey, who longed for his Mohawk roots – began to question who he was.

As a highly respected Mohawk elder, Porter is unforgiving toward the »Americans«, as he refers to the non-Natives. He has an almost encyclopedic knowledge of Native American history and is the most politically outspoken of all the leaders, condemning Bush's treatment of Mexicans and calling Bush himself an immigrant. He also insists on the theory that the US Constitution is not based on the French but on the Iroquois constitution. But Jerry had different ideas »Why do we live in the past? They took our traditions, our songs, and our dances? Let's take it back!« He eventually became rest-

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Mohawk flag



Jerry and his crew on Ground Zero



Ground Zero

less and left the commune, married his third wife, moved to Connecticut, and went back to work on the highest skyscrapers in the City while beginning a second career as Native American performer. But even here the past inevitably gives way to the future. Jerry's oldest son recently joined the Air Force. Jerry is proud that he is serving his country, although »country« has a different meaning for him. At the same time Jerry is worried about Storm, his 16-year-old son who is getting into trouble »on the Rez« by hanging around the crowd that is smuggling. Jerry's hope is to take Storm with him to work »on the steel« but he and his ex-wife don't get along and according to tribal custom raising the children is the woman's job.

Back in the city at work, Jerry puts on a brown hard hat bearing the insignia of an eagle feather, a potent symbol of blessing and protection worn by many Mohawk ironworkers. When he walks through New York City, he points with pride to the buildings his father and grandfathers have worked on. Jerry remembers admiring the Twin Towers as they rose high above the skyline. »I used to see those towers at night, and always thought how cool it must have been to walk the steel on the highest floors.«

After the towers came down on 9/11, Mohawks came rushing to help from reservations all over North America.

Jerry and his crew spent more than 3 months down on Ground Zero, putting in 12-hour days, cutting through the red-hot steel, looking for survivors. »I ended up standing on that steel,« he says, »but not in the way I thought.« When you ask him why he came rushing down to a site that represents US power and repression, he does not need to think in order to answer »We built it. It's our history, too.«



Ironworker in front of Chrysler Building, 1979

Today, nearing the end of his career as ironworker, Jerry has one last ironworking dream: to stand high atop the steel of the new »Freedom Tower« – maybe with his son, Storm. Since this is the most prestigious building of the century, the best ironworkers of the world will want to be part of it. Jerry hopes that he has a shot. »Our fathers built it, we, the sons, buried it and our sons will rebuild it as the Freedom Tower.«

With one foot in the past and one foot in the present – these men master a delicate and dangerous balancing act in the human struggle of assimilation versus resilience, modern ways versus tradition.

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Jerry connecting

Visual Style

Filmed in New York City and on the Mohawk Reservation of Akwesasne, *Skydancer* will deftly weave together interviews and verité footage with sensual cinematographic contrasts and startling juxtapositions of city and nature: High up on the steel skeleton, the streets of New York City look like canyons cut deep into prehistoric rock; the stillness and concentration atop a beam resonate in the stillness of a ›vision quest‹, high up on a mountain; and the grace of ›skywalking‹ echo in the dances that the community holds in their ›Longhouse‹. Silence and city noise, earth and sky, hunting in the forest and swinging a beam – these are some of the contrasts the film will employ.

With jib arm and a small camera crane we will capture the incredible task of walking the steel at heights where one wrong step means death. Emotional beauty shots of the incredible ›ballet mechanic‹ of floating steel beams and turning cranes will be combined with exceptional still photographs and personal archival footage filmed by ironworkers

themselves. Point of view shots by the ironworkers as they walk along the one-foot beam, as well as a camera mounted on top of the floating steel beam, will bring the viewer still closer to the action.

As the seasons are important, both, on the reservation as on the high steel, we will film during the sweltering heat of the summer when the steel beams are burning hot as well as in the ice and snow of winter when the beams are covered in ice and even the St. Lawrence River is frozen.

Skydancer will record the rituals and ceremonies in the Longhouse and on the high steel. It will capture the sense of community in the every day on the reservation and show our characters coping in the modern world. It will enter deeply into the world of the reservation as well as the tight-knit world on the construction sites – always using the ›balancing act‹ as a metaphor.



Mohawk war party on film set



Jeannie's and Jerry's wedding



Mohawk actors on film set

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Connector on steel structure



Jerry connecting, 1986



Jerry's father, 1959

Production

Length: 90 min, 60 min
 Format: HD/DV
 Locations: New York City,
 Akwesasne Reservation (USA/CANADA)
 Production: Penelope Productions,
 German co-producer MAJA.DE
 Schedule: • Principal Photography
 Summer 2008 – Summer 2009
 • Delivery Winter 2009

Archive material

- Personal photos and films ironworking in New York City (1979 – 2008)
- Personal historic ironworking pictures 1962
- Historic ironworking pictures 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950
- Port Authority: construction of Twin Towers (1968 – 1971)
- Personal photos and footage of clean up at ground zero (2001)



Jerry McDonald Thundercloud



Bear Fox



Sky Fox

People and places

Jerry McDonald Thundercloud – *Ironworker; Wolf Clan Akwesasne, New York City, Stamford, CT*

Sky Fox – *Ironworker, Bear Clan, Akwesasne, New York City*

Tom Porter – *Former Ironworker, Bear Clan Chief, Akwesasne, Kanatsiohareke, New York City*

Jeannie McDonald – *Jerry's wife, Insurance company Executive, Taino Nation, Akwesasne, New York City, Stamford Ct.*

Bear Fox – *Sky's wife, Singer, Turtle Clan, Akwesasne, New York City*

Marshall Oakes – *Former Grand Council Chief, Former ironworker, Akwesasne*

Leo Fox – *Sky's and Bear's son, Ironworker apprentice, Akwesasne, New York City*

Storm McDonald – *Jerry's son from second marriage*

Hunter McDonald – *Jerry's son from first marriage*

Michael McDonald – *Jerry's Brother, ironworker, Wolf clan, Akwesasne, New York City.*

Louise McDonald – *Bear Clan Mother, Akwesasne*

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Jerry McDonald Thundercloud on top of steel structure, NYC

Status

In 2002 writer/director Katja Esson started researching the story of Mohawk ironworkers and found a deep-rooted distrust of the media in the Mohawk community. It took her several years to slowly and respectfully immerse herself into the lives of her characters, gaining their trust and friendship. Last year she was finally able to start filming and all key characters have granted her full access.

We are currently in production; to date, approximately 15% of the filming has been completed, mostly key interviews with the protagonists on the reservation filmed last summer. We are planning to start principal photography in July 2008 and deliver by December 2009.

We were able to put together a qualified and experienced crew (including Directors of Photography Ferne Pearlstein – who won best cinematography at Sundance for Imelda in 2004 – and Martina Radwan, who shot Katja Esson's Academy Award-nominated *Ferry Tales*).

Breathtaking archival footage of past and present ironworking on still photos and motion picture film is mostly owned

by the protagonists themselves, who have granted us world-wide exclusivity.



Jerry connecting

To finance the project, we already have strong backing from the German Television Station WDR. We are actively seeking co-production partners in the US. We also submitted to German film funding agencies.