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BALI 1928



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"TIME-CONSUMING
WORK TO PRESERVE
THE EARLIEST
BALINESE MUSIC
RECORDINGS AND
FILMS"

WORDS **DESY NURHAYATI**
PHOTOS **ANGGARA MAHENDRA**
AND **COURTESY OF BALI 1928**





The hard work and perseverance put in to restoring historical recordings made in Bali in 1928 have finally paid off.

After more than eight years of research and two years in production, the project team behind “Restoration, Dissemination and Repatriation of the Earliest Music Recordings and Films in Bali” has successfully produced five CDs, five DVDs and the accompanying scholarly papers.

A seminar and concert last week at Bentara Budaya, Gianyar, marked the launch of the collection of CDs and DVDs.

All the materials were sourced from recordings of gamelans and Balinese songs made by German company Odeon and Beka in 1928. The movie materials were taken from footage recorded by Miguel Covarrubias, Rolf De Mare and Colin McPhee between 1928 and 1938.

McPhee (1900-1964) was a Canadian composer and pianist who heard some of the Odeon and Beka recordings when he was in New York in 1930. Hearing the music inspired him and his wife, Jane Belo, to live in Bali from 1931 to 1938.

In his memoir *A House in Bali*, McPhee wrote that he had never imagined the recordings would change his whole life, as they had encouraged him to visit the island to learn more about the culture — something that he called an indescribable experience.

It was a difficult task for the team to repatriate the recordings and films as they were in the possession of different institutions on different continents, all of whom needed to be convinced that the repatriation would actually turn into concrete results and actions.

“It was a very challenging, yet touching, process,” project coordinator for Bali, I Made Marlowe Makaradhwaja Bandem, recalled.

“One of the toughest challenges we faced was about the copyrights, especially how to convince the inheritors to lend us the recordings to be reproduced,” he said.

As the team managed to convince people that the project was aimed at educating the younger Balinese about their culture, they finally agreed to hand over the recordings.

The team faced difficulties restoring the audio quality of the recordings, as well as arranging the speed of the films to match the actual speed of Balinese dances. The New York-based Arbiter of Cultural Traditions used state-of-the-art equipment to restore the audio quality.

This prestigious project could be realized by the school of computer science at STIKOM Bali thanks to a US\$25,000 grant by the City University of New York and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The nearly decade-long research was carried out by Edward Herbst, an influential ethnomusicologist who first visited Bali in 1972 and later spent years learning from the island’s best musicians, composers and singers. He visited and interviewed hundreds of individuals across the island to verify the content and detail of the historical recordings and films.

Among the repatriated materials were recordings of gamelan *gong kebyar* and related dances that were starting to be seen and heard across north and south Bali in the 1920s, part of a collection of the first and only commercially released recordings of music made on the island prior to World War II.



According to Herbst, the compositions recorded in 1928 in some areas in the north and south represented a revolutionary shift in Balinese musical and choreographic aesthetics.

Herbst said it was a crucial time in the island’s musical history as Bali was in the midst of an artistic revolution with *kebyar* as the new dominant style of music.

However, as these landmark recordings were distributed worldwide, the ambitious plan to develop an indigenous market was a complete failure, since only a few Balinese were interested in this new and expensive technology — especially when there was a world of live performances happening daily in the thousands of temples and households throughout the island.

McPhee was the only customer to purchase these 78 rpm discs in an entire year from one frustrated dealer; his collection contains most of the copies that are still preserved to this day, for the agent later smashed the remaining stock in a fit of rage.

The only original record with Balinese script on its label was found in the archive of Jaap Kunst of the University of Amsterdam.

Meanwhile, the films in the Bali 1928 collection depict the natural beauty of Jatiluwih, Tanah Lot and the Ayung River, as well as portraying Balinese traditional markets of the time, the process of burying the dead, burning the remains and scarring the ashes into the sea.

Herbst said that although it was a silent film, it would be meaningful for the younger generations of Balinese as it enabled them to learn about legendary Balinese artists, some of whom have had their names immortalized as place names.

The Bali 1928 collection is crucial to inspire the younger Balinese to learn about the creativity of past Balinese artists, including the gamelan and dance groups that produced landmark creations that are enjoyed and practiced until now.

“Considering that it was not an easy task, the key to successful project completion was hard work and openness,” Marlowe noted.

In spite of all the difficulties, the Bali 1928 restoration has saved a small part of the diverse Balinese culture and arts heritage that had been scattered across many places overseas.

The team is now preparing to produce the CDs and DVDs in bulk to be sent to cultural institutions and schools in Bali. ■

