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Journey to Planet Earth: The World Through Very Human Eyes

By Nancy Camp
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Journey to Planet Earth, Hal and Marilyn Weiner's documentary series, brings a fresh slant to environmental issues by showing the interconnections of ordinary lives in different world ecologies.

With substantial support from a fleet of underwriters, the series is both ambitious and noble in its intent to make complex issues understandable and personal. Each episode explores a specific problem from scientific, economic, political and historical perspectives. More unique, perhaps, is the attention given to how different communities are addressing these problems. Unlike so many well-intended environmental documentaries, *Journey to Planet Earth* frames its concerns with hopeful answers.

It was the Weiners' Emmy-winning Earth Summit Pledge, commissioned by the United Nations to open its Environmental Summit in Brazil, that was the impetus for this series. Designed to pique North American interests, it will likely have substantial overseas distribution as well because of the many world regions it encompasses. And even the most casual viewer will sense the Weiners' love of travel and adventure, which has sustained them through three decades of work.

Wanderlust still propels them. "With our children grown and on their own, we're free to pick up and go whenever we want," muses Marilyn Weiner. As husband and partner Hal notes, "We're very lucky that we're not jaded, so if an idea presents itself that looks like fun to pursue, we say 'Let's go!'"

When they say go, they mean it. For *Journey to Planet Earth* they visited twelve different areas around the globe. With an equally ambitious shooting schedule in the works for the next series, one might assume they've got the logistics process nailed down. In fact, it's old fashioned leg work that gets them through. That and a willingness to jettison plans to accommodate surprises along the way.

"I do what every producer does, spending lots of time researching and talking with experts," Marilyn says. "We also hooked up with NGO's (non-governmental organizations) with staff in the locations we wanted and that's a tremendous help to gain access to programs and people. But even with lots of planning, something else happens and you must be prepared to deal with it. Besides, it's the accidents that often yield the best stories."

With some 225 documentaries, 12 PBS "After School" dramas and another four PBS series to their credit, Hal believes it's their three feature films that help them turn those accidental encounters into serendipitous moments. "Our work on features has given us a heightened sense of the drama of an event and how it can shape the overall story that we're seeking. I think that

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influence shows in how we develop a scene, how we put a cap on it and in our overall pacing and tempo in telling the story.”

Years of travel have also made them particularly adept at field work. For all twelve series locations, they maintained a four person crew: Producer Marilyn, director & location sound specialist Hal, director of photography, Dennis Boni and his assistant. Streamlining the operation kept them in one vehicle and under Marilyn’s watchful eye.

“At first we were going to be economical and pick up crews overseas as we went, but I really wanted the luxury of a team we knew well, so we just worked that much harder to raise the money to make that happen,” she says. “More than a luxury, a tightly knit crew can work more efficiently with maximum creativity.”

“There needs to be a fundamental trust between the producer, director and cinematographer,” Boni observes. “Hal and Marilyn’s trust is evidenced by the fact that they don’t use a monitor to see what I’m doing in the field. It’s my responsibility to make sure that when we get back they have what they need to build the story, and it’s a big step on their part to let go and trust that I’m doing my job.”

Trust underpins the couple’s relationship as well. “I had my own career success earlier, so the idea of working in a close collaboration was foreign to me in the beginning,” says Marilyn. “Luckily, Hal was patient with me because he was convinced it would work. He let me find my natural niche in the partnership.”

“By now, we have such a foundation of trust that we’re comfortable allowing for some pretty stormy confrontations. We’ve both walked out of editing sessions, but we know a creative clash is not the end of the world. In fact, if you both think the same way all the time, then one of you is dispensable.”

Each show took about four months to put together. The shooting was done on Super 16 Kodak with a variety of stocks.

Some locations, mainly cities, were pre-scouted, while the majority of places were approached cold. “Half the scenes in the show were never planned, so we know to take more film than we’ll need,” Hal notes. “We don’t go crazy with unlimited shooting, but we shoot as much as we want. It works out to about a 20:1 ratio. On a good day, we’ll shoot about an hour of stock and wind up with two or three usable minutes.”

“I’m familiar with the footage and all the sequences, so I write to that,” he says. “I usually do location sound and the off line editors oversee the final mix. For original music, I send our composer a fine cut and then we’ll talk about what’s needed for each sequence. At times we’ll bring in studio musicians and this series runs the gamut from Paul Simon’s percussionist to a jazz trumpeter to an intriguing female vocalist.”

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The Weiners are also savvy about getting their products to the marketplace. For years they made films on speculation and sold them through their own distribution company to the educational market. They plan to tackle that audience through their own efforts with this series as well. Their company's web site (www.screenscope.com) is linked to the PBS site and a comprehensive outreach program in partnership with several environmental organizations supports the broadcasts.

An overseas distributor launched the series at the huge and prestigious International Television Program Market (MIPTV) in Cannes and expectations are high. "We have no problem with reversioning or renarration of our products to gain viewership in other areas," says Marilyn. "I've never felt any of our other programs were harmed by this."

They're busy with a series on sacred music and then there's the next feature film in development — though that may idle a bit while they participate in a cultural exchange visit to Iran. There's little chance their passports will gather dust.

Journey to Planet Earth is underwritten by NASA, the Kellogg Foundation, The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, Continental Airlines, the World Bank, The Rockefeller Foundation, the US Department of Agriculture Sustainable Agriculture Program, and the American Honda Foundation.

