



After three years spent making a documentary about the remote Pacific island of Takuu and its precarious future, Briar March is now heading for Stanford University.

STORY SIMON FARRELL-GREEN

to the island

TO GET TO the island of Takuu, 250km east of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, you have to get your timing right. There is a boat, the *Sankamap* (pidgin for “sun comes up”), which goes to the island four times a year: its schedule is erratic, although it always goes in December, when it brings the island’s children back from boarding school in Bougainville, and leaves again in January, when it takes them back.

Documentary-maker Briar March has been there twice, filming for *There Once Was an Island*, which has had positive early feedback from film festivals.

Takuu, a tiny atoll in the middle of the Pacific, has 400 inhabitants of Polynesian origin, with a unique language and customs largely untouched by the outside world.

But the island is in trouble. Rising sea levels caused by climate change, regular flooding and the resulting salination of the land are making life almost impossible for its inhabitants. In December last year, a series of floods washed away crops, homes and churches. Many have considered moving away, which will mean the loss of the singular culture.

March happened on the story through the research of University of Auckland ethno-musicologist Richard Moyle, who has been recording the island’s music and language for a decade. “At the time,” she says, “I wanted to make a film that had more of an international audience. I also wanted to make a story about climate change from the human perspective.”

So, at the end of December 2006, she and a small crew spent two months living on the island with the villagers. A year later, March returned with a bigger team and a couple of scientists. She found Takuu has problems other than climate change — its isolation means the young are seeking opportunities elsewhere and there is a lack of government support. “I think probably what was most frustrating was that not much had changed,” she says. Bougainville’s government is new; it has only just emerged from decades of civil war with Papua New Guinea.

She finished the film in September, after three years of hard work. A few days later, she flew out to Palo Alto, near San Francisco, to start a Masters of Fine Art in documentary film-making at prestigious Stanford University. Only eight students a year are admitted into the two-year course and March is the first New Zealander to attend Stanford’s art school. Last year, Werner Herzog was a guest lecturer on the course, which excites her no end. “A week with Werner Herzog, that’d be pretty amazing, eh?”

March is diminutive and quick, with a big laugh. She grew up at Bethell’s Beach, a stunning, wild beach on Auckland’s west coast, and went to the local schools. “That was probably what made me get into documentaries, without knowing it,” she says. “Because I was exposed to so many different cultures, ways of life and socioeconomic groups.”

After graduating from Elam, the University of Auckland’s School of Fine Arts, March set herself up as a documentary film-maker. It was a way of exploring the same issues, but with a bigger audience. “There was something that didn’t feel right for me with the art-gallery context because I felt the work wasn’t always getting to everyone,” she says.



Briar March visited Takuu twice during the making of her documentary. She and her team lived with the island’s villagers.

“What I love about film is the way it reaches so many people. I think it’s one of the most powerful art forms of our time.”

Her first film, *Allie Eagle and Me*, was about a New Zealand artist who lives at Bethell’s. She’s a controversial figure who started out as a lesbian separatist and wound up a Pentecostal Christian. It was a demanding project on which March and Eagle often grappled for creative control. While she wouldn’t repeat that experience again, she does like polarising subjects. “I find that really fascinating, when you have people who are controversial or contradictory in their nature.”

Making documentaries is not an easy road in New Zealand: there are few outlets for serious-minded documentaries and funding is limited. The team on Takuu, which included her co-producer and business partner Lyn Collie, didn’t pay themselves. March has worked as an assistant to the noted New Zealand documentary-maker Annie Goldson — “she’s a real mentor for me” — and worked as a wedding photographer. “Hundreds of weddings. Every summer,” she says slightly ruefully.

That’s part of the reason for heading to Stanford, where, she hopes, she will make enough contacts and learn enough about the American film-making system that she is able to make a career back in New Zealand. “I can’t rely on the industry changing overnight and making it perfect for me,” she says. “So I had to find a way to make it right for myself.”

Which is typical understatement from March, who has a habit of resolving difficult situations. The Takuu project cost more than \$100,000 and March and her team had to seek funding from American foundations because of the limited pool of funding in New Zealand, although they did get a small amount of funding from the Screen Innovation Production Fund for the first shoot. She and Collie, through their production company, sponsored a young woman from Takuu to come to New Zealand and work on the film and will donate a portion of the proceeds of the film to a trust for the islanders.

The cost of attending Stanford is around \$160,000, much of which has come from the Fulbright Foundation and the AMP Foundation. March had begun to wonder quite how she was going to pay for accommodation in Palo Alto when she was offered free board by a family who live near the university in return for childcare.

When I spoke to March in September, just before she left for Stanford, she was looking forward to the experience. “What I’m excited about is making films from an outsider’s perspective,” she says. “I like to find stories when I feel there’s something there that needs to be told, an important thing that needs to be recognised.”