

SKYDANCER

A FILM BY KATJA ESSON



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SYNOPSIS

SKYDANCER is a feature-length documentary about work, masculinity, and what it means to be Native American in the 21st Century. The film takes us into the breathtaking and dangerous world of Mohawk "sky walkers". These specialized ironworkers, for six generations, have raised America's cityscapes from The Brooklyn Bridge to the World Trade Center and the new Yankee Stadium, building highways over boroughs, and weaving carpets of steel across rivers. They are famous for being able to walk – and work – on steel beams just a foot wide, at spectacular heights above the city. Who are these sky walkers? What is their secret for overcoming fear? Are Native Americans somehow specially gifted with this ability? Is it a modern version of an ancient rite of passage for native men? What is their life really like?

We follow two legendary sky walkers, old friends now in their forties, over what turns out to be a pivotal year in their lives, experiencing the real complexities of their lives. From the fragile hierarchy atop high steel in New York City to life 'on the Rez' atop New York State on the Canadian border, the film gives a fresh perspective on Native Americans as working Americans. Jerry Mc Donald Thundercloud and Sky Fox struggle with the same issues as other blue-collar men today, but with "extra twists" – the unique challenges and gifts of being Mohawk today, and the special stresses of working on the high steel. Over the course of our filming, Jerry and Sky both separately end up taking the radical step of quitting ironworking, stepping out into the unknown and courting new risks, leaving their lives up in the air in a whole new sense.

75 / 56 / 45 minutes – HD – 2011 – USA / Germany // www.skydancer-documentary.com

PREMIERE / FESTIVALS



Sky Fox and his son Leo on top of steel structure at New York City's Time Square



Jerry McDonald Thundercloud in NYC

CREDITS

Directed and produced KATJA ESSON Co-Producers HEINO DECKERT, SABINE SCHENK
Associate Producers REAGHAN TARBELL, KATHARINA TREBITSCH Editors ANKE WIESENTHAL, FELIX DRAWE
Camera MARTINA RADWAN Additional camera KATJA ESSON, FERNE PEARLSTEIN, WOJCIECH SZEPEL
Original Music MATTHIAS FALKENAU, ROBBY BAIER
Additional Music BEAR FOX, JERRY MCDONALD THUNDERCLOUD, SCOTT ANDERSON
Commissioning Editor CHRISTIANE HINZ

SKYDANCER is produced in association with WDR and ARTE. Supported by the Jerome Foundation.
Fiscally sponsored by Women Make Movies.

SKYDANCER was in part edited at the Hall Center for the Humanities. Esson was a 2007 fellow.

PENELOPE PICTURES **arte** **WDR®** **MEGACORP**



Jerry McDonald Thundercloud as connector in NYC



Bear Fox and her family



Sky Fox

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FILM DESCRIPTION

Skydancer is a feature-length documentary about Indian life in the 21st Century: from the fragile hierarchy on top of the breath-taking steel structures in New York City to life 'on the Rez', a community at the top of New York State's border with Canada. The film allows exceptional access to the lives of these ironworkers and offers a fresh perspective on contemporary Native Americans as working Americans. They struggle with the same issues as people from other cultural backgrounds, but with some "extra twists," unique challenges and gifts that come with being Mohawk today.

The film tells a dramatic tale of two friends in their forties, Jerry Thundercloud and Sky Fox. They are both superstar

ironworkers, as their fathers and grandfathers were before them. When we meet them, they are at the top of the world, and at the top of their field. They bring us into a thrilling, beautiful, and even heroic world of work where men are men: strong, brave, and making a good living for their families.

We learn the fascinating history of Mohawks in construction and witness the lives of active and retired ironworkers, both in the male-only world of work in the city and in the mixed world of family and home upstate. There, in the Akwesasne reservation, a movement is growing, as many of the 14,000 residents work to revive the Mohawk language, arts, and spiritual practice, and create an independent school –



Jerry, 1978



Akwesasne reservation



Jeannie's and Jerry's wedding

inspiring cultural activities enabled also part by ironworkers' income. Jerry and Sky each have 5 or 6 kids and are married to women who seem devoted to them.

We see that, just as they walk the beams in the air, Jerry and Sky are also finding their balance between a series of dualities in their world: life up in the clouds and down on the ground; family upstate and work downtown; spiritual concerns versus material pressures; and masculine and feminine aspects of themselves and their world.

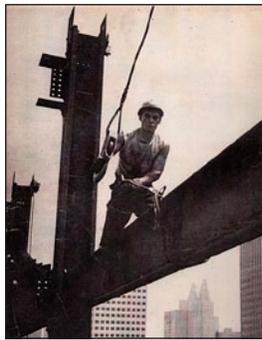
But soon things get more complicated, and we discover that not all is as it seems. The dualities emerge as conflicts, stress fractures that threaten to tear both men apart. The legendary "fearlessness" of the Mohawk turns out to have been an ingenious adaptation to cruel and persisting social realities: working high steel is such a terrifying job that whites were willing to hire Indians. And the local economy upstate has always suffered from extremely high unemployment, which greatly contributes to problems on the reservation such as smuggling, alcohol and drug addiction.

Jerry has survived three terrifying falls, and his body at 47 is feeling their effects. Union politics and stresses, including anti-Indian slurs, are increasingly hard for both men to handle as they face a changing economy and their own middle age.

We get closer to both men and see that their inner balancing acts are equally precarious and brave. Both survived painful childhoods. Jerry's father was a hugely successful ironworker from the age of 16 – until he fell to his death while building the Hilton Hotel at only 20, a few days after Jerry's birth. His mother drank herself to death in her grief. Like many men,

they lack emotional and communication "tools" in their relationships with their wives and kids. Seeing their families only on short weekends between grueling work weeks greatly exacerbates personal struggles with alcohol and relationships.

We come to understand that High Steel pays well but extracts a huge price. The work they love and need is also killing them. As our film unfolds, Jerry and Sky each separately undergo a personal crisis that leads them both to quit ironwork. We leave them poised on their own internal high wires, hoping against hope that they will make it across the dangerous passage of their middle age without falling.



Jerry's father, 1959



Ironworkers at Ground Zero



Sky Fox

FILMMAKER STATEMENT

As a German filmmaker living in New York City, I heard about the legend of the Mohawk ironworkers and – reflecting the 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 read in a newspaper article 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 were among the first to rush to Ground Zero, working many months in the ruins. I wanted to know more about these men who live as 'outcasts' of American society and yet are American down to the bone.

I started my research in 2002 and found a deep-rooted distrust of media and outsiders within the Mohawk community because of the ongoing feeling of misrepresentation. It took me several years to slowly and respectfully immerse myself into the lives of these Mohawk ironworkers. Deserving their trust and their friendships is an ongoing process in which I can feel myself changing as well. I had to rise to a new level as filmmaker through a project that itself demands new ways of listening and seeing and requires much more spiritual openness, commitment and time in order to truly be able to absorb the Mohawk culture with truthfulness.

Bear Clan Mother Louise McDonald said to me: "The Ironworkers left an incredible legacy for us to be proud of, but in pursuit of that also left a lot of wounds and scars but I guess any type of glory attained is a price to pay." Although throughout the years there have been films about the Mohawk ironworkers, they have been mostly looking at this 'curious' cultural phenomenon from the outside, from a more ethnographic perspective. I tried to look from inside out, tracing and contrasting the personal stories of these Mohawk ironworkers who are building the cities of the future while trying to re-build their traditions, letting these stories resonate as metaphors for a better understanding of our common humanity.

"We have a new generation of young people who are hungry to restore and rescue our old ways so it is a real powerful time that we are in." This is what I kept hearing from elders and spiritual leaders and after a while I could see how old ways and traditions were carefully restored. But I also realized that the restoration of one tradition might be the end of another. I could see that the new generation suddenly saw different options for their future and did not feel they had to become 'fearless ironworkers' like their fathers and grandfathers before them and I realized that Mohawk ironworking could become a dying trade.



Katja Esson and Mohawk actors on film set



Jerry looking at Ground Zero

KATJA ESSON BIO

Nominated for an Academy Award® for her film "Ferry Tales" which turns the unlikely setting of the Staten Island Ferry women's bathroom into a celebration of sisterhood, Esson's recent film "Skydancer" is a provocative look at Indian life in the 21 Century. Her previous credits include "Vertical Traveler" which explores the pioneering spirit of New York City through the metaphoric story of the city's unique relationship

with elevators; "Hole in the Sky", is a portrait of New York, five years after 9/11; "Latching On", about the politics of breastfeeding in America; "Hooker, Harlot, Whore" is about the history of prostitution in Europe. Esson's films have been shown at film festivals around the world and broadcast on HBO, PBS and ARTE among others. Esson lives in Brooklyn and shares her time between Germany and the United States.

www.skydancer-documentary.com