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Surfs Up, Mate

By JOYCETSE
 RAFU STAFF WRITER
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Three years after its release in Australia, Japanese surfer film “Bondi Tsunami” emerges in the North American market.

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Courtesy of Burlesque Productions
Gunja Man (Nobuhisa Ikeda) is a beautiful enigma in "Bondi Tsunami."



The cast of "Bondi Tsunami" poses with their 1961 EK Holden.

It just takes one word to sum up "Bondi Tsunami": Cool.

Part road-trip film, part music video, "Bondi Tsunami" is the brainchild of Australian writer/director Rachel Lucas, whose visionary approach to filmmaking—blending dreamlike vivid colors and surrealistic images with ganja-fueled dialogue and sexy surfing mavens to create what amounts to a music video motion picture—has earned her much acclaim in Australia and abroad.

A throwback to the 1960s and '70s surfing greats like "The Endless Summer," Lucas's "Bondi Tsunami" is inspired by Australia's prevailing Japanese surfing subculture. For the last 10 years, it has become a custom for free-spirited young Japanese to spend working holidays in Australia, renting out rundown apartments, working in restaurants and buying second-hand cars to drive around the coast of Australia for surfing, camping and partying.

The film's unique presentation makes it work on multiple levels: as a feature presentation or as mood-enhancing background at a bar, surf shop or house party. Essentially, "Bondi Tsunami" is a film created for the multi-tasking, techno-savvy

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video game/flat screen TV generation of the 21st century. It's this crowd that can appreciate the film's limited dialogue and the more than 40 songs, many of which were written by Lucas herself, that comprise the chilled-out soundtrack. Even playing your own musical accompaniment to the film's stylish imagery would likely work well, since either part of the film holds it own.

Made on a budget of 12 maxed-out credit cards with a crew of four, this cult classic starring four first-time Japanese actors hit North America in September this year, although it first premiered in Australia three years prior. The DVD was released for the first time in Australia in April 2005, and in July that year, director Lucas was awarded Best Director at The Melbourne Underground Film Festival 2005. Most recently, the film screened at the Kansai International Film Festival in Osaka on Aug. 25.

The plot of "Bondi Tsunami" is simple. Shark (Taki Abe), a chain smoking, asthmatic surfer cowboy, embarks on a road trip along the east coast of Australia with his comedic, bleach-blond friend Yuto (Keita Abe) and flirtatious ex-girlfriend Kimiko (Miki Sasaki) in a sleek 1961 EK Holden.

There is no schedule and there are no rules as the trio travels wherever Australia's 6- and 7-foot swells take them. The crew spends each day surfing, driving in Shark's Holden and enjoying the sites of Australia's landscape before their chance encounter with Gunja Man (Nobuhisa Ikeda), a dreadlocked nomadic enigma who speaks relatively few words, but joins the gang on their adventures.

For the sake of accuracy, however, it should be said that "Bondi Tsunami" revolves more around road trips and the surfing lifestyle than it does around actual surfing footage.

Cinematically, "Bondi Tsunami" is stunning. Drawing on the natural beauty of Australia and borrowing from the bright colors of the characters'—namely Kimiko's—costumes, each frame is so hyper-colored and well composed, it's easy to see through to Lucas' passion for fashion, photography and art. The only difficulty is believing that the entire film was shot with a DV camera and edited with Final Cut Pro on a Mac computer.

Everything about "Bondi Tsunami" is budget, but like the cult classic "Napoleon Dynamite," we're reminded again that good films don't necessarily have to cost big money.

That said, "Bondi Tsunami" isn't for everyone.

That same free-spiritedness of the film's characters is what drives the plot, which pretty much consists of surfing, drinking and exploring the landscapes of one's own subconscious. This isn't an action-packed, dialogue-rich, Hollywood box office hit. In fact, there is no drastic revelation or big payoff at the film's end—except for a massive swell and a grandiose wipeout.

All that aside, "Bondi Tsunami" has done well for itself, gaining momentum and popularity internationally by appealing to the sensibilities of Aussie and Japanese fans alike. This cross-cultural hybrid of a film goes beyond race and space, making it appealing regardless of geography.

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"Bondi Tsunami" (2004) is written and directed by Rachel Lucas and produced by Anthony Lucas-Smith. North American release Sept. 18, 2007. Running time: 90 minutes. Language: English and Japanese (with English subtitles). To learn more or to purchase the DVD, visit www.bonditsunami.com.au or <http://mvdb2b.com>

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