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Hooves and Flippers

Portland singer/songwriter adds animal documentaries to list of accomplishments

by Rebecca Ragain

If you lived in Oregon a decade ago—or even if you didn't—you probably heard the news when Keiko the orca, the star of the movie *Free Willy*, was relocated to the Oregon Coast Aquarium. You may even know that Keiko was later returned to his native waters in Iceland in 1998.

If you lost track of Keiko after that, you're not alone.

That's why Theresa Demarest, a Portland lesbian musician and budding filmmaker, is so excited to tell Keiko's story.

Demarest is engrossed in the production of "Keiko's Dream...Keiko's Legacy," a 15- to 20-minute educational DVD about his five years in the wild.

"The movie we're doing with Keiko is a story that hasn't been told," she says. "We get to tell the story and show people footage of him swimming free, looking for a mate, interacting with wild orcas."

She continues: "Most people don't even know what happened to Keiko, and it's powerful, really powerful, what happened."

Demarest has followed Keiko's story since he was moved to Newport in 1996. At the time, she was confined to bed because of complications related to a bout with breast cancer. It was her second run-in with the disease.

"I was very ill, and all I could do was watch television," she recalls. "I became mesmerized with the story."

Inspired by Keiko's strength, Demarest wrote a song called "Keiko's Dream." That in turn led to Keiko's Dream Tour, a series of grant-funded and sponsor-supported concerts/presentations during which she and her band performed and ocean conservationists spoke about the famous orca.

When 27-year-old Keiko died in 2003, the Free Willy-Keiko Foundation asked Demarest to put together a film honoring his life. But for a number of reasons, the project didn't happen until now.

"There were a lot of bigger players vying to put out big documentaries about Keiko's life," says Demarest, who at the time chose to walk away from

the film contract and the political quagmire surrounding it.

Four years later, no one had made a film. Groups including the Free Willy-Keiko Foundation, OrcaLab and independent videographer Eric Engleton decided to send their footage to Demarest so she could go ahead with the project.

Although there is still a chance that her film could stir up the controversy between the various groups involved in Keiko's life, she is not letting that slow her down. "I feel like I'm just like the average person: I don't care about those guys...I care about this," she says, gesturing to a computer screen displaying footage of Keiko swimming free.

So now Demarest spends hours each week poring over footage of Keiko, piecing together his end-of-life story and setting the scenes to her own music. The work is time-consuming and meticulous, but she loves it.

Demarest plays a five-second bit of footage on the computer and explains how it has taken her hours to get the timing of the accompanying music just right: "Just that little thing, that's like creating a piece of artwork."

"I get to take film and my music to tell an epic story," she says, sounding awestruck. "Wow! Oh my God, that's wonderful!"

This isn't the first time Demarest, who is mainly recognized as a professional musician, has ventured into filmmaking. She spent the past couple of years producing and editing her first film, a 26-minute documentary called "Herd of Two: First Time Horse, First Time Owner."

The idea for "Herd of Two" originated about three years ago, when Demarest fell in love. Her partner of two decades probably wasn't too jealous, though, because the recipient of Demarest's affection was a 6-month-old filly.

In response to a newspaper ad promoting riding lessons, Demarest had trekked out to a barn in Canby. It was there that she first saw the little horse that she bought and named Tehya Takoda, or Precious Friend.

"I had never been around horses before, ever,"



Because of her film projects, Theresa Demarest is spending less time performing with her band, Good Company.