

LOOK WHO'S TALKING

BY SHANE BRYEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID MURPHEY



WHERE THE SIDEWALK ENDS: Wagner takes five by the road.

THE REEL McCOY *Creative overdrive? Filmmaker Brett Wagner wouldn't have it any other way*

More often than not, the best artistic minds are born of a deep appreciation for life's contrasts, subtle or not. Brett Wagner is no exception. The 36-year-old immersed himself in film school in the concrete labyrinths of Manhattan surrounding NYU. His projects documented what he saw: A melting pot of races and the bustle of the world's fastest moving city.

In 2002, Wagner completed his first feature-length film, entitled *Five Years*, which garnered awards such as Best Feature (Victoria Independent Film Festival) and Best Screenplay (Avignon Film Festival) during its 30 film festival tour, after which it was picked up for distribution.

But as commercial production gigs drew Wagner further and further west, it was a different set of contrasts—blue ocean, deep jungle, Chinatown—that landed him on Oahu in 2003. "I came of age in New York, I was forged by that iron," he says. "What I found in Hawaii was an incredible amount of inspiration from both the natural environment,

coupled with the diversity of the people. There's a magic here."

Shortly after his island move, Wagner met Samoan Chief Sielu Avea. A chord resonated within the filmmaker as he learned of the dissimilarity of Avea's life as a Samoan leader, to becoming a performer and educator in Hawaii. Thus, the short film *Chief* was born. The picture marked Wagner's foray back into creative filmmaking and proved that he still has the touch—his cinematic short made its world debut just last January during the crème de la crème of independent film fests—the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. *Chief* will continue to make rounds at other exhibitions this spring as well, including San Jose's Cinequest.

Wagner related well to the concept of seeing a unique culture through the eyes of his transplanted cast. He imparts, "Sometimes, growing up somewhere, you don't always think as clearly as you might have if you had stepped into it from a very different place." ■

HOTS Honolulu's small-town vibe, Chinatown on First Fridays, the urban jungle just five minutes away from the real jungle, rRed Elephant, Epic, the turquoise water off Kaaawa, haupia malassadas, my wife—Hawaii's hottest redhead! **NOTS** The egregious lack of an alternative movie theater on Oahu, drivers whose forward progress can be detected only with a time-lapse camera, nature being trampled by real estate