

a Cinema Guild release



Opens May 20th in U.S. theaters  
2020 / 90 min / DCP  
In English

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Press Materials:

[http://www.cinemaguild.com/theatrical/canefire\\_press.htm](http://www.cinemaguild.com/theatrical/canefire_press.htm)

## SYNOPSIS

The Hawaiian island of Kaua‘i is seen as a paradise of leisure and pristine natural beauty, but these escapist fantasies obscure the colonial displacement, hyper-exploitation of workers and destructive environmental extraction that have actually shaped life on the island for the last 250 years. *Cane Fire* critically examines the island’s history — and the various strategies by which Hollywood has represented it—through four generations of director Anthony Banua-Simon’s family, who first immigrated to Kaua‘i from the Philippines to work on the sugar plantations. Assembled from a diverse array of sources—from Banua-Simon’s observational footage, to amateur YouTube travelogues, to epic Hollywood dance sequences — *Cane Fire* offers a kaleidoscopic portrait of the economic and cultural forces that have cast Indigenous and working-class residents as “extras” in their own story.

## CREDITS

Director/Editor/Camera	Anthony Banua-Simon
Producers/Writers	Michael Vass, Anthony Banua-Simon
Music	Mike Cooper
Executive Producer	Steve Holmgren
Associate Producer	Sam Schild
U.S. Distribution	Cinema Guild

## SELECT FESTIVALS & AWARDS

Winner - Grand Jury Award, Best Documentary, Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival  
Winner - Best Feature Documentary, Indie Memphis Film Festival  
Winner - Vijay Mohan Social Change Award, Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival  
Winner - Jason D. Mak Award for Social Justice, DisOrient Asian American Film Festival  
Official Selection - Hot Docs International Film Festival  
Official Selection - MoMA Doc Fortnight  
Official Selection - Hawai‘i International Film Festival  
Official Selection - Centerpiece Documentary, Seattle Asian American Film Festival  
Official Selection - Prismatic Ground (Maysles Documentary Center and Screen Slate)  
Official Selection - DOXA Documentary Film Festival

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

My Great Grandfather immigrated to Kaua'i from the Philippines in the 1920s as part of a massive migrant labor force brought to work on the island's sugar and pineapple plantations. He started a family there, but when he began organizing with the union, he was harassed by the company until he had no choice but to return to the Philippines. The rest of his family stayed on Kaua'i, where many of my relatives still live today.

I first visited Kaua'i in the early 1990s as an awkward only child from Seattle. My cousins would call me *haole* which means "white boy" in Hawaiian slang. When I returned home after visiting, I would watch every film I could find that had been shot on the island, in part as a way to relate to my family. Kaua'i has long been one of Hollywood's favorite shooting locations, hosting more than a hundred productions over the last century.

I started thinking about making a film on Kaua'i while doing research on sugar production for an earlier short film, *Third Shift*, which I made with *Cane Fire* producer Michael Vass. The film examined the conversion of the Domino Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn, NY into luxury condominiums, and I could see a direct parallel with the changing political economy that was affecting my own extended family on Kaua'i.

I began making regular trips to the island in 2014, initially filming interviews with my family members and then eventually branching out to talk to a wider array of residents. Since I didn't grow up on Kaua'i, I had a unique perspective on the personal stories they shared. I was struck by their incredible resilience and determination to stay on the island, particularly from members of the younger generation who are increasingly trapped in service work and facing rapidly rising costs of living.

The film really took shape when I began spending time with a group of Hawaiian sovereignty activists restoring the grounds of the now shuttered Coco Palms Hotel. An iconic tourist destination and symbol of Hollywood's Golden Age, the Coco Palms was built on a site considered by Native Hawaiians to be the island's most sacred place. The activists' struggle offered a stark contrast between the way Kaua'i is represented in the popular imagination and the reality of life on the island, past and present.

I started to revisit all the Kaua'i films I had watched as a child. Seeing these films as an adult, I saw how they articulate the colonial relations between the American culture industry and Hawaii. I also saw how this dynamic endures in contemporary self-produced media, from amateur YouTube travelogues to New Age retreat videos. By employing these sources in *Cane Fire*, I want to show the chain of media projections that have cast such a long shadow over the island, obscuring the residents' real lived experiences. At the same time, I want to highlight the lesser-known stories of labor and sovereignty struggles that have unfolded in parallel. These stories, and the infuriating, seemingly implacable injustices that undergird them, are the heart of the film.

-Anthony Banua-Simon

## **DIRECTOR'S BIO**

Anthony Banua-Simon is a documentary filmmaker and editor named one of Filmmaker Magazine's 2021 "25 New Faces of Independent Film". In 2014, his short about the workers of the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn, NY, *Third Shift*, won best documentary at the Brooklyn Film Festival. His films have also screened at venues such as the Brooklyn Museum and MoMA PS1, as well as featured on The Criterion Channel, MUBI, Jacobin, Pioneer Work's "The Broadcast", and HuffPost. Anthony attended The Evergreen State College and was a fellow at the UnionDocs Collaborative Studio Program. He's currently a member of the volunteer-run Spectacle Theater in Brooklyn, NY.

## **PRODUCER BIO**

Michael Vass is a filmmaker and writer based in Montreal. His award-winning films have screened at festivals and galleries, including the Toronto International Film Festival, Anthology Film Archives, ICA Philadelphia and MoMA PS1. His writings have appeared in publications such as Cinema Scope, Cineaction, Momus, Canadian Art, and C Magazine. Michael received his BFA from Simon Fraser University and his MFA from York University. He's an alumnus of the Canadian Film Centre's Directors' Residency as well as the UnionDocs Collaborative Studio Program in Brooklyn.

## **EXECUTIVE PRODUCER BIO**

Steve Holmgren is an Entertainment Attorney and Film Producer originally from MN. He specializes in independent film and television legal, providing services to projects from Development through Distribution and is licensed to practice law in CA and NY (where he is presently primarily based). As a Producer, he has worked with numerous filmmakers including Adam and Zack Khalil (*INAATE/SE/ [it shines a certain way. to a certain place./it flies. falls./]*), Matthew Porterfield (*Putty Hill; I Used to be Darker*), Marie Losier (*The Ballad of Genesis and Lady Jaye*), Cory McAbee (*Crazy & Thief*), and John Gianvito (*Far From Afghanistan* feat. filmmakers Travis Wilkerson, Soon-Mi Yoo, Minda Martin and Jon Jost). He is an Executive Producer on Bayley Sweitzer and Adam Khalil's *Empty Metal*. Holmgren was a co-producer on Matt Yoka's *Whirlybird* as well as an Executive Producer on Sky Hopinka's *matni—towards the ocean, towards the shore*, both of which World Premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. He is also an Executive Producer on *499* (Rodrigo Reyes). He helped build the documentary arts nonprofit UnionDocs, organizing hundreds of screenings and events from 2009-2014, and is currently connected via their Advisory Committee.

## **MUSIC COMPOSER BIO**

For the past 50 years Mike Cooper has been an international musical explorer, performing and recording, solo and in a number of inspired groupings and a variety of genres. Initially a folk-blues guitarist and singer songwriter his work has diversified to include improvised and electronic music, live music for silent films, radio art and sound installations. He is also a music journalist, writing features for magazines, particularly on Pacific music and musicians, a visual artist, film and video maker, collector of Hawaiian shirts and appears on more than 60 records to date.

## **ASSOCIATE PRODUCER BIO**

Sam Schild is a filmmaker based in Brooklyn who works as an Editor, Cinematographer and Producer (in addition to writing & directing). Schild was part of the producing team for Sky Hopinka's debut feature-length documentary *małni—towards the ocean, towards the shore*, which premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. He is currently a member of Filmshop, where he is finishing a feature length doc on the mid-western antique industry that examines value and material collections. Schild is a volunteer with UnionDocs and works with the production label Steady Orbits.