

Byron Bay Film Festival rides the waves of the world

Surfers, like musicians, speak a universal language, the language, or melody, of the ocean – Big Wata, as it is called in Sierra Leone.

A film of that name, **Big Wata**, is a stand-out feature in Byron Bay Film Festival's annual showcasing of surf films.

In its opening scene, young men in the poor fishing village of Bureh Town, are looking through a magazine at photos of the surf in the country next door – Liberia: "Wow that wave is very powerful," one says. "It has 'room'. You can turn and catch it back again."

And they discuss whether it is possible to ride a wave for 20 minutes.

They are members of Sierra Leone's only surf club – a place that gives them a sense of identity and purpose in a country still recovering from a prolonged civil war involving Liberian militias, and the outbreak of the ebola virus in 2014.

One, Mohammed, runs foul of the village headman and is suspended from the club: reinstated months later, he joins a group of his surf-mates in a trip to Liberia. The surf's great there, but it's not home, and when he returns it's with gratitude for everything he has there, including his local break.

Big Wata is full of great characters, beautiful landscapes, insights into village life in West Africa, and of course, plenty of stunning surf footage.

You'll find that blend of surfing and social commentary in another festival documentary too, this time set on the legendary North Shore of Kauai.

The Edge of Paradise: Taylor Camp - Kauai -

1969-1977 tells the story of a hippie commune that came into being when Elizabeth Taylor's brother Howard bailed out 13 young Mainlanders jailed for vagrancy and invited them to live on his ocean-front land.

Taylor Camp was seven acres of paradise: sun, sea, sex, plenty of drugs – and surfing the pristine Pacific waters.

For most it was the best time of their lives, says director Robert C. Stone. But some locals and the authorities hated the hippie anarchy and things got heavy.

“Heavy” for a surfer is when they get held down under the water after coming off their board and **Hold Down**, by 19-year-old Port Macquarie filmmaker Noah Cornale, recreates the experience. The “hold down” feels dark and deadly and can go on for a nightmarishly long time; his short film captures the heart-pounding breath-taking reality.

Adventure photographer Krystle Warner spends a lot of time beneath the waves, looking for that perfect career-defining shot. **In Perpetual Motion** we see her in her element, see things as she sees them, and share some of the effort – and fear – behind her photographs.

As much as Warner is a global nomad, Bob Bevern was a man who found his happy place – by the water at Avalon headland, Sydney – and stayed there, living in a van, surfing every day, loving his life, until he lost it in a monster swell in August. **Home** by Spencer Frost, is a celebration of Bob's simple, fulfilled life.

Another man who has devoted his life to the surf is Mark Rabbidge, a professional longboard surfer who shaped many boards for champion surfers in the 80s/90s, including his wife, the 1990 world champ Pam Burrige.

Hand Made, by Jonathan May, offers a portrait of the man who is still in constant pursuit uncrowded waves – and who finds them!

Finally, someone who avoided the fatal hold down is Ric Friar, who relates the story and his personal philosophy in **Phenomenality**, a film by Lucas Jatoba. Friar became a pioneer of big waves surfing in 1966 when he and others were among the first to surf the gigantic waves of the Cribbar in Cornwall. He survived the experience to become an artist, peace activist, film-maker and pioneer grower of commercial hemp – his colourful life spent engaging in phenomenal things to make a difference.

**Byron Bay Film Festival runs from October 12-21.
For full program and tickets, go to BBFF.com.au**