



Representing the Culture

by Berni Isaac

Melissa Gomez was always a good student, so nobody was surprised that she excelled at Ryerson University in Toronto. What might have surprised some was her decision to make the switch from academics to art. Despite earning good grades, this self-confessed “visual person” felt unhappy and unaccomplished in her academic pursuits and longed to be doing something more creative and expressive. So, trusting her instincts, she transferred into the Image Art Department of the university, eventually graduating in June 2004 with a degree in new media.

The switch proved the right one for Melissa, and her proficiency in all of the subject areas that constitute new media – film, photography, digital art, video art, web design and graphic design – has allowed her infinite creative expression and put her on a career path that is rich with potential in this fertile media environment.

While at Ryerson, she was awarded a few scholarships in her discipline, and three of her short films were successfully entered into the National Students Short Films Festival. But Melissa and her considerable talent first came to our attention, here at home, at the premiere of the Howard Allen film *No Seed*, where her short film, *Two Dolla' Picture*, was previewed. A mere two minutes long, the digitally animated short told its story with a depth, vibrancy and humour that left the audience cheering and some folks asking, “Melissa who?”

Her most ambitious project to date is a thirty-five minute documentary titled *Silent Music*, which tells the very personal and very moving story of a hearing child growing up with deaf parents. Melissa spins her tale in two places – Antigua, her father’s home, and, Missouri, USA, her mother’s birthplace – and solicits accounts and remembrances from family members, friends and acquaintances on both sides.

The approach to this delicate subject, the sensitivity, and the level of technical skill employed belie Melissa’s 23 years and leave one to only imagine where experience and maturity will take this gifted artist.

She is not sure whether it is her intimate involvement in the story, her perfectionism, or a combination of both that has delayed the release of this documentary. She speaks of wanting to raise funds to have it professionally edited; then she speaks of perhaps releasing it as it is. Whichever way she goes, Melissa is confident that this labour of love will not be on the shelf much longer.

For six months last year, Melissa was employed as a production manager with HAMA. She enjoyed her work, partly because of the creative expression it allowed and partly because of the support and encouragement she got from her bosses. “They are very much about encouraging me to do my own thing,” she said. “I feel so much support from them and I am so grateful for that.”

And she is making good use of the support and the encouragement they gave. Together with her boyfriend, Christopher Hodge, himself a student of film, Melissa has established a production company, Cinque Production, within which is her own design label, Crimson Bliss Designs. Partly through their own solicitation and partly through referrals from HAMA, Melissa reports that the business is growing.

Her plans for the future include more documentaries and more involvement in every aspect of new media. Her mind is on a particular script – a fiction piece – that she wrote while at school and hopes to develop into a film. “The producers are already standing by for that one,” she offered. “There are a lot of projects to do. I see so much potential here in Antigua and in the region. There is a whole market to tap into, and my main goal is to help give Caribbean culture a voice through my work.”

But what Melissa most wants to see is the establishment of an arts council here in Antigua & Barbuda that will support and fund local artistes. “Our culture is vibrant,” she declared, “and it is begging to be represented.”

So what is the impetus that keeps this young, up-and-coming producer/film-maker motivated? “I keep an open mind about everything,” Melissa stated. “I take life as it comes and learn to live and not merely exist.”