



# TIBET in SONG

Written, Directed and Produced by Ngawang Choephel

## Awards

- Special Jury Prize – Documentary - Sundance Film Festival
- Best Documentary - Calgary International Film Festival
- Emerging Director Award - Documentary Feature - Asian American Intel. Film Festival
- Audience Award - Watch Docs - International Human Rights Film Festival
- Special Jury Mention - Watch Docs - International Human Rights Film Festival
- Winner - Cine Golden Eagle Award

## Distribution Contact:

Guge Productions  
 Ngawang Choephel  
[Nchoephel@gmail.com](mailto:Nchoephel@gmail.com)

## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

In the West, surrounded by iPods, instant downloads and an ever-changing onslaught of new music and performers, a simple song is something easily taken for granted. Folk music exists for many Westerners as another musical brand or label — something to distinguish a certain kind of song from thousands of others.

In the East, in Tibet, a large country the size of Western Europe, folk songs serve as the connective tissue between regions, passed down in the oral tradition through an increasingly fragmented country and region, much of which remains under harsh Communist Chinese rule after 50 years of occupation.

Tibet was a sovereign nation for thousands of years, with its own music, heritage, laws and customs. Its folk songs convey and preserve ethnic, religious and philosophical customs that date to primeval times — in effect, the DNA shaping an endangered people's identity, one that has been rigidly co-opted by China's "patriotic reeducation" of Tibetan citizens through its dissemination of nationalistic pop songs designed to wipe out Tibetan culture through a rigid, unwavering system of control.

TIBET IN SONG examines what happens when one man, a Tibetan native who fled his country of origin for India at the age of two, returns home to capture the music of his people — like lightning in a bottle — before all is lost to the ashes of time and history.

Director and producer Ngawang Choepel was arrested in Tibet on charges of espionage by Chinese authorities in 1995. Accused of collecting sensitive material on China, thereby endangering its national security, he was sentenced to 18 years in prison, serving nearly seven years before his highly publicized release in 2002.

TIBET IN SONG is Ngawang's story, but it also gives voice to the thousands of Tibetans engaged in the fight for the life of their cultural heritage. For the first time, voices never before captured on film dare to speak out against Chinese policies in the name of artistic freedom. Sometimes all it takes is a song...

### **TIBETAN FOLK MUSIC**

Tibetan folk music is not merely the soundtrack to a traditional rural life dating back thousands of years; it is completely integral to this way of life, representing the heart of Tibetan culture, expressing values of compassion, loving kindness and harmony, designed to accompany the daily activities of Tibetan life: working in fields, cooking, drinking, falling in love, churning butter. These songs capture the rhythms of an ordinary day through the actions of those performing often rudimentary or routine tasks. A milking song, for instance, can make an otherwise repetitive task seem effortless, even enjoyable – for the person singing the song, and for the animal bearing the milk. “There is no one who can't sing a song,” is a familiar Tibetan expression. What makes these folk songs precious is their unique origin, descending from ordinary Tibetans, unlike Tibetan Buddhism and literature, which came from India. These songs constitute the quintessential historical roadmap of the lives of the Tibetan people over the past 2,500 years. “Growing up in exile in South India, I could hear people singing these songs in the fields,” says Tibetan native-in-exile Ngawang Choephel, the director and producer of TIBET IN SONG. “The songs had a long-lasting impact on me. They brought me much closer to imagining Tibet. They made me who I am today.”

### **TIBET IN HISTORY**

Tibet was an independent nation for thousands of years and developed one of the most advanced classical cultures in the world, a culture which remained esoteric within Tibet itself. Neighboring Chinese forces invaded in 1950, and set out to assimilate Tibet into the People's Republic of China. It was a move made out of greed, disguised as an amicable Communist “liberation,” characterized by

modernization at an outlandishly fast pace. While human rights are innate, China delegated superhuman control over Tibetans, dictating even what it means to be treated humanely — as an excuse to exert brutal force while furthering its materialistic goals inside the nation. Thousands of Tibetans were killed in resistance movements, most notably a 1959 uprising by 300,000 Tibetan natives that resulted in the deaths of 86,000 Tibetans as well as the exile of His High Holiness the Dalai Lama to Dharamsala, India. While their land and culture diminished — most rapidly during the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s — Tibetans continued to resist peacefully for five decades, until March 10, 2008, when the largest Tibetan uprising against Communist rule erupted after Chinese security forces suppressed a protest by monks in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, commemorating the anniversary of the Chinese occupation that led to the Dalai Lama's flight into exile. One quarter of Tibet's total territory has become a militarized zone, resulting in injury, death and imprisonment for untold numbers of Tibetans. The Land of Song and Dance has become a veritably hell on earth for Tibetans, who can no longer open their mouths freely — and where as much as uttering the words “Free Tibet” will land one in jail.

### **THE GENESIS OF THE FILM**

Ngawang Choephel was born in 1966 in the village of Dawa in Western Tibet, not far from the sacred Mount Kailash, revered by many as the center of the Buddhist universe. By 1968, the bloody Chinese Cultural Revolution had spread into his village. Red Guards plundered priceless treasures, denigrated citizens and ordered locals to follow their lead. Local monasteries were ransacked and desecrated. Monks were forced to marry; children watched as their parents were shot or humiliated in the street. At two years of age, Ngawang escaped to India with his mother, journeying across the Himalayas on a yak. Until the age of 20, he lived in a refugee camp near one of Tibet's largest monasteries in exile.

Ngawang's childhood was shaped by his innate attraction to the folk music of his ancestors — it would become his life's work to preserve Tibetan culture

through its native song. Growing up in a refugee camp in South India, Ngawang heard this music every day; songs of longing and heartfelt compassion for a homeland these exiles assumed would be theirs again in time.

Enchanted with the Tibetan folk songs of his youth, and knowing that this music was quietly dying out, Ngawang pursued a career as a music teacher, enrolling at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) in Dharamsala, which had been established by the Dalai Lama in the wake of forming his Tibetan Government-in-Exile in 1959. To this day, TIPA is the only institute in the world devoted to the study and performance of traditional Tibetan arts and music.

At TIPA, Ngawang heard his native folk songs every day. “That school changed my identity,” Ngawang explains. “(My studies) helped me to realize how Tibetan culture is deeply embedded in those folk songs. I immersed myself in that culture and it quickly became the central focus of my life.”

### **“THE MUSIC WAS CALLING AND THERE WAS NO TURNING BACK”**

During his first year of studies at TIPA, Ngawang saw a video of a Chinese-run Tibetan performing arts troop from Tibet performing in Japan, something that left an indelible mark on his own identity — and propelled him forward in his studies. “I was shocked because it was neither Chinese nor Tibetan in terms of the style of music, dance or even the costumes,” Ngawang explains. “They were singing Chinese melodies in the Tibetan language. It sounded like a folk song, but the lyrics were about Communism. It looked like traditional Tibetan dress, but it felt more like a comedy skit because the costumes were exaggerated and slightly off. It was very surreal and I felt proud that I knew what real Tibetan music was, and that I was able to make the distinction.”

Ngawang returned to Tibet in 1995 with a Hi-8 video camera intending to capture the raw quality of Tibetan folk music in its natural setting, something he had never seen in his lifetime. He shot multiple hours of footage over two

months, capturing the compassionate and loving nature of the Tibetan people through songs like this one, sung by a young girl he met in a rural village:

"There are three adornments on the land  
They are the trees, pasture, and flowers,  
I pray that I see them often."

"They were warm-hearted and opened up to me with their compassion," Ngawang says of the rural villagers he met during his travels. "It felt instantly like the experience of a lifetime — these were extraordinary people without jealousy or hatred. It was an amazing experience but at the same time it was deeply sad because I knew these songs were in danger of disappearing completely."

Ngawang was extremely lucky to find Tibetan folk singers who were willing to sing in their native environment: "They sang for me on the spot, with the camera rolling. They had no time to prepare. I felt like there was no camera between us — it was very natural. They really understood what my concern was and what I was hoping to capture." They were as concerned as he was that their music was disappearing, and that the Chinese policing of wiping out Tibetan culture was well underway.

Arriving in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, Ngawang at once noticed the Chinese influence on everyday life — imported pop music in particular was everywhere he turned — on TV, in restaurants and stores, blaring from loudspeakers mounted above virtually every corner. Chinese-run karaoke bars and nightclubs dominate nightlife in most Tibetan cities. "Tibetans in the city had completely given themselves over to Chinese culture — it's their modern identity," Ngawang explains. "Everyone has to speak Chinese. Everything is taught in the Chinese language. The lawmakers are Chinese. Tibetans have come to accept that this is their culture now."

Ngawang observed urban Tibetans staring dumbfoundedly at televisions in cafes broadcasting bizarre propaganda in which Tibetan performances were embellished with Chinese music and lyrics, often championing the Communist spirit. “There’s no feeling in these performances, no sense of communication or understanding,” Ngawang explains. “They didn’t seem natural to me. In fact, everything about them was *unnatural*. The music just didn’t connect to the Tibetans.”

Even in rural areas, Ngawang observed confusion on the part of Tibetan locals as they watched these state-organized propaganda plays, like the one he witnessed near the famed Samye monastery in Central Tibet, where Tibetan civilization originated. “I was told there was going to be a performance by one of the original Tibetan opera groups, which had arrived by bus to perform in this village,” Ngawang explains. “From the moment I began watching it was like the video tape I saw at school, it was a short piece about the Chinese Army helping Tibetan farmers and villagers — who acted thankful for the Chinese help.” Nothing about the performance was genuine or authentic, from the choreography to the costumes to the music. “It was extremely flashy, a blend of Tibetan and Chinese styles,” Ngawang continues. “They openly lie in the song lyrics. There was dead silence from the audience while I was filming them watching — they were not enjoying it because it didn’t reflect their reality at all. It was so obvious to me at that point that the Chinese government was taking advantage of the Tibetans by trying to fool them like that. This was not a traditional dance by any means.”

## **A JOURNEY INTERRUPTED**

In Lhasa, Ngawang discovered that it was possible to travel to the provinces by a chartered truck system that provided more freedom of movement than on state-run tourist buses. He decided to journey to his birthplace in Western Tibet, to Ngari, to record the folk songs of his native villagers and re-connect with his own father in Dawa, whose face he had not seen since he fled Tibet with his

mother at age two. “In Ngari we speak at least seven different dialects; I very much wanted to record native folk songs in the dialects of my birthplace,” Ngawang explains.

After sending half of his tapes back to India with a friend, Ngawang departed on his journey, only to be stopped by Chinese officials who had been tracking him from Lhasa. Among articles confiscated by the Chinese were Ngawang’s camera, his field notes and 16 hours of footage. He was arrested and imprisoned for more than a year before he was charged with espionage — without a fair trial. His musical footage was deemed “sensitive material” that threatened the national security of China.

Ngawang spent the next 6 1/2 years in prison, where he continued to learn Tibetan songs from his fellow prisoners, writing lyrics down on cigarette wrappers, and gradually developing the larger story he wanted to tell in **TIBET IN SONG** — one emphasizing artistic freedom and the determined resistance of Tibetans to regain both political and cultural autonomy within Tibet: “I think most Tibetans see Communist rule in Tibet as something temporary,” Ngawang explains. “They feel that the progression of life and society in Tibet is somehow unnatural because it is lacking the basic substance of life, which is religion, culture and human rights.”

Ngawang was determined in his own right to effect change through his sudden reversal of fortune. Luckily, so were thousands of supporters.

## **FIGHT THE POWER**

Ngawang’s imprisonment attracted devoted followers around the world, who connected to the deeply human message of his story, in addition to major coverage from world media outlets in print, film and television. Awareness of Ngawang’s plight was heightened through organizations like Amnesty International and Students for a Free Tibet as well as through the Tibetan Freedom Concerts over the years 1996 to 2001, turning him into a cause célèbre



among celebrities and politicians including then-Vice President Al Gore, Senator Patrick Leahy, Paul McCartney, Michael Stipe, Natalie Merchant, Cypress Hill, Alanis Morissette, Rick Rubin, Flea, Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys, Bonnie Raitt, Dave Matthews, Ben Harper, Sheryl Crow and Tom Petty, among others. Annie Lennox personally delivered a petition to the Chinese embassy in London, emphasizing how Ngawang personally risked his life in order to record the footage he film on the last trip to his homeland. “This was a particularly poignant and harrowing case because Ngawang had been given an incredibly harsh sentence for merely going back to his homeland as a Fulbright scholar to record the songs and dances of his own culture,” Lennox says, “Several organizations, including Amnesty International, were campaigning for his release and I took an active part. Needless to say we were all overjoyed when we heard he had been freed. I’ve always been fascinated by the rich variety of ethnic music from all over the world but Tibetan culture is uniquely special in all kinds of ways and I believe that the heritage needs to be cherished and passed along as the representative heart, soul and identity of the Tibetan people themselves.”

Ngawang’s mother, Sonam Dickey, began her own campaign of solidarity for her son in front of the Chinese embassy in Delhi, where she attracted the attention of more activists. Soon she was invited to travel worldwide and speak out against her son’s unjust imprisonment. This worldwide support, spearheaded by his mother’s efforts, led to Ngawang’s release from prison in January 2002. Now it was time for Ngawang to turn the sense of purpose he had cultivated in prison into TIBET IN SONG.

### **A FILMMAKER IS BORN**

Ngawang moved to New York City, declining numerous media requests to capture his story in favor of picking up where TIBET IN SONG left off prior to his imprisonment in 1995. He immediately settled into the role of filmmaker,

securing funding, producing, shooting, writing, translating and directing. Since Ngawang could not return to Tibet himself to shoot, he arranged to send an American camera crew to liaise with a Tibetan production manager. Ngawang set about creating a trailer for his film, which was narrated by actor Richard Gere and used to secure more funding via benefit screenings of the trailer.

In February 2004, another shoot took place in Tibet that further cemented the visual evidence of the Chinese destruction of Tibetan culture throughout Tibet. Led by Carrie Lederer, armed with Ngawang's treatment and interview questions in hand, the crew garnered 20 more hours of footage, including intimate testimonies from Tibet musicians (among them opera master Pema Dhondup) as well as shots of Tibetans performing folk music in a variety of situations — most notably Lhasa street beggars who are harassed by Chinese officials in the film. Lederer boldly ventured into nightclubs and secured a rare interview with a nightclub owner, who on the spot admits his allegiance to the Chinese Communist Party and the nature of the music performed in his club.

Five months later a second Tibet shoot took place, this time in the hands of Laura Corwin and Director of Photography Hugh Walsh, who filmed striking images of Lhasa in a candid portrait of a city in peril under the influence of prostitution, propaganda and ruthless commercial growth, rounding out what then amounted to 100 hours of filmed footage in total.

“The Chinese pretty much run everything — the Tibetans are marginalized and live on the edges of the system,” Walsh explains. “But even so, I was struck early on by the openness and guilelessness of the Tibetans, who treated us with courtesy and warmth. This was not the case with the Chinese we met, who generally treated us with a sour distrust that made you think they had no desire to be in Lhasa — or had any curiosity for Tibet or Tibetan culture. Seeing this was especially saddening for me. Here you have this ancient culture just being

overwhelmed and driven into extinction by cold and indifferent economic opportunists.”

For Corwin’s part, the diversity and modernity of Lhasa was what struck her the most, having only screened Ngawang’s 1995 footage of the city prior to her arrival with Walsh. “The abundance of modern technology cut a striking contrast in this ancient place,” Corwin explains. “The faithful performed postulations in front of the Jokhang Temple while ten feet away a vendor stood at his DVD-laden stall, a monitor showing one of his latest movies for sale. At the next stall speakers blared the latest Justin Timberlake CD. These stalls were selling MP3 players, Sony Playstations, TV’s, cameras... Whether you were Tibetan or Chinese didn’t matter — no one was immune to the allure of this technology.”

Corwin was also struck by the sheer abundance of music on display in Tibet: “Music is everywhere — it is constant,” Corwin continues. “In the streets you’ll hear mostly Chinese pop music and some American and European pop music. In the clubs, there were Chinese, Indian and Tibetan performers. However, whether most of these Tibetan singers could be considered ‘authentic’ is debatable. There are singers who sing in Tibetan language who are ‘state sponsored’ or the Chinese version of what is deemed ‘authentic Tibetan folk music.’”

## **FILMING TIBETANS IN EXILE**

In the fall of 2004, Ngawang departed for India, once again in the role of cameraman, interviewing some of the key characters in the film. Over five years and five separate shoots, he garnered 150 more hours of 24p digital video footage, meeting new Tibetan exiles who could speak on camera about life in Tibet under Chinese rule. “I was only interested in the voices of Tibetans from Tibet, and not particularly Tibetans already outside of Tibet,” Ngawang explains. “I wanted to capture first-hand information from those who had been through the Chinese oppression up until the present day. I knew that Tibetans inside

Tibet can't freely talk about their situation, so I focused on those Tibetans in India who had recently escaped, and who didn't want to return."

Combing through hundreds of hours of footage back in New York, Ngawang made several work-in-progress cuts to raise funding and develop the story of the film, showing his efforts to a variety of people, from editors to politicians, who gave him feedback. A cut was submitted to the Sundance Film Festival and Ngawang subsequently received a grant, which helped him get that much closer to a final print.

Finally, Ngawang traveled to India for one final shoot with editor Tim Bartlett, capturing as many stories as possible within the topics that would be discussed in the final version of the film. After six years of production work in the U.S., Tibet and India, comprising 2 shoots in Tibet, 5 shoots in India and over 300 hours of footage in total, including 30 hours of archival footage, TIBET IN SONG was ready to enter its post-production phase.

### **MAKING THE FILM SING**

The year 2007 brought with it a host of new resources and opportunities for Ngawang to mould the story into a riveting testimony, among which was an invitation to attend the Documentary Lab Editing Program at the Sundance Institute in Utah. Several mentors gave feedback and advice on Ngawang's rough cut of the film, honing the narrative in an effort to more clearly underline the film's key themes. He returned to Los Angeles with the Sundance feedback to incorporate into a final cut. In Spring 2008, Ngawang was ready to show TIBET IN SONG at the Independent Film Project labs in New York City. At the end of the year, a final cut was ready.

## **FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Ngawang Choephel (Director, Producer, Writer)**

Ngawang Choephel has a lifelong passion for Tibetan music, and has devoted his life to its preservation and dissemination. He discovered his talent at an early age, and received a degree in Tibetan Music from the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts in Dharamsala, India. Upon arriving in the West, in 1994, as a Fulbright Fellow at Middlebury College, VT, he studied video production and international music in preparation for the production of TIBET IN SONG. After being arrested by Chinese authorities in Tibet during filming, his subsequent 6 1/2 years in prison in Tibet, and his resilience in the face of adversity, earned him the Courage of Conscience Award from Peace Abbey, which he received in 2002. Upon his release from prison that same year, he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Arts Degree from Middlebury College, as well as 'Best Act in Exile' award from Lobsang Wangyal Productions for his musical talent. TIBET IN SONG is his first feature-length documentary.

### **Tim Bartlett (Editor)**

Tim Bartlett has been shooting and editing documentaries and narrative films throughout his life. In 1998 he was awarded the prestigious Watson Fellowship, allowing him to travel throughout England for a year, documenting the ancient and esoteric musical art of "change ringing" and its practitioners. To date, Tim has shot documentary footage in Africa, China, Europe, the Middle East, and throughout the United States. Currently, Tim works as a picture editor on a number of unscripted television programs including Emmy Award winning seasons of CBS's *The Amazing Race*.

Tim is a graduate of Middlebury College and currently lives in Los Angeles.

### **Kate Amend (Consulting Editor)**

In December 2005, Kate Amend received the International Documentary Association's inaugural award for Outstanding Achievement in Editing for her

work which includes two Academy Award-winning documentary features: *Into the Arms of Strangers*, and *The Long Way Home*. Amend also received the 2001 American Cinema Editors' Eddie Award and edited the 2001 Oscar-nominated documentary short *On Tiptoe: Gentle Steps to Freedom*. Her other award-winning film credits include *Man from Plains*, *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*, and *Cowboy Del Amor*, *Steal a Pencil for Me*, *Thin*, *The World According to Sesame Street*, *By Peace: Women on the Frontlines*, *The Girl Next Door*, *The World According to Sesame Street*, *By Peace: Women on the Frontlines*, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*, *Bataan Rescue*, *The Great Transatlantic Cable*, *The Girl Next Door*, *Free a Man to Fight*, *Tobacco Blues*, *Some Nudity Required*, *Asylum*, *Legends*, *Metamorphosis: Man into Woman*, *Spread the Word*, and others. She has been an advisor at Sundance Institute Editing Lab, An Edit Room speaker, and juror for Sundance Film Festival. She is also on the faculty of the University of Southern California, and a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

### **Hugh Walsh (Director of Photography)**

For over twenty years, Hugh Walsh has been shooting film and video as well as working as a still photographer. In addition to working extensively throughout the United States and Europe, his work has taken him to the former Soviet Union, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. His clients include the History Channel, PBS, Frontline, The Food Network and National Geographic. His eclectic body of work includes documenting such subjects as life in Cuba both before and after the fall of the Soviet Union to the greatest chocolatiers of Paris, the meaning of the Wailing Wall to both Arabs and Israelis to fashion in India, apartheid and civil unrest in South Africa to the cuisines of Vietnam and China. His most recent work includes a documentary for director Ngawang Choephel on the traditional music of Tibet and how this music has changed despite the efforts of Tibetans to maintain their musical heritage since the Chinese occupation in 1951. Selections of Hugh's still photography can be sampled at: [www.bruegelwerks.com](http://www.bruegelwerks.com)

### **Carrie Lederer (Cameraperson)**

Carrie is an independent filmmaker who produces, shoots and edits for CNN, ABC, NBC, VH1, Democracy Now, a variety of cable production companies and special interest groups. Carrie's professional journalism career began during the 1991 Gulf War with CNN in Atlanta. After leaving CNN she joined the Peace Corps and served in the Comoros Islands and Senegal as an environmental educator and media specialist. Carrie is the founder of Carrier Pigeon Productions, an independent production company producing media programs and documentaries. Her credits include *Brat Camp*, *Counting on Democracy*, *Old Stories New Voices*, *In the Wake of Zaca* and *Yulce's Story*. Carrie now produces, shoots, writes, and edits travelogues and stars as the travel guide in Discovery Travel Channel's series *Not Your Average Travel Guide*.

# TIBET in SONG

written, directed and produced by  
NGAWANG CHOEPHEL

co-writer  
TARA STEELE

editor  
TIM BARTLETT

executive producer  
ANNE CORCOS

co-producers  
TARA STEELE  
YODON THONDEN  
DON THOMPSON

consulting editor  
KATE AMEND

original music and narration by  
NGAWANG CHOEPHEL

USA/2008/86mins/color/in English and Tibetan with subtitles

**Guge Productions, New York**

[nchoephel@gmail.com](mailto:nchoephel@gmail.com)