

The Soul Is A Bird

Laurie Anderson

In 1984, as part of the press for the tour I was doing in Japan, I was asked to go to Bali and speak about the future with the prince of Ouboud. Now the idea was that I would represent the Western world, the prince the Southern world, and the Japanese press representative would represent whatever was left. The conversations would be published in a large book, scheduled for release one year after the concert tour. Now as press this didn't really seem like a great way to advertise concerts but it sounded like fun anyway.

And I stayed at the palace in one of the former king's harem houses. Each of the king's wives had had her own house guarded by a pair of animals, a bear and a fox for example. By the time I got there, years later, the menagerie had dwindled a bit. My house was guarded by two tropical fish. Bali was extremely hot in the afternoons and the conversations with the prince drifted along randomly from topic to topic. The prince was a bon vivant trained in Paris and he spoke excellent English and when he wasn't in the palace he was out on the bumpy back roads racing cars. So we talked about cars, a subject I know absolutely nothing about, and I felt that as far as representing the Western world was going, I was failing pretty dismally. Then, on the second night, the prince served an elaborate feast of Balinese dishes. At the end of the meal, the conversation slowed to a halt, and after a few minutes of silence he asked:

" Would you like to see the cremation tapes of my father?"

The tapes were several hours long and were a record of the elaborate three-month ceremony shot by the BBC. When the king died the whole country went to work, building an enormous funeral pyre for him. After months of preparation, during which time the corpse continues to reside in the living room, they hoisted the body to the top of this rickety, extremely flammable structure, and lit a match. The delicate tower crumbled almost immediately, and the king's body fell to the ground with a sickening thud. Suddenly, everyone began to cheer.

Later, I learned that the Balinese believe that the soul is a bird and that when the body falls it shakes the bird loose and gives it a hit start on its way to heaven.