

Jazzman who defied definition

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PITTSFIELD – An air of mystery and puzzlement continues to envelop the memory of Don Ellis, a trumpeter, composer and band leader who raised considerable commotion in the music world during the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

The stir caused by Ellis did not occur as a result of alcohol abuse or drug addiction, two vices that prevailed in some profusion within his industry. From all reports, Ellis was abstemious, a family man. The waves Ellis made occurred from the music he created and played.

Jazz might be the easiest label to affix to Ellis, but that would not tell the entire story. Classical and, yes, rock were genres in which his rich expressions fit comfortably, and fans from that era might agree that often they did.

By the nature of his work – unusual and changing time signatures, harmonies that sounded strange to ears grounded in standard procedure, and instrumentation that did not fit the big band formula – Ellis defied categorization, and this may be why his name did not become a household word. He was hard to market, as the moneychangers in today's temples of music might conclude.

Don Ellis' remarkable career is the subject of a new documentary, "Electric Heart: Don Ellis, The Man, His Times, His Music," to be shown tomorrow afternoon at 2 in the Little Cinema at the Berkshire Museum. The film is part of this week's third annual Pittsfield CityJazz Festival, and is on a double bill with Ben Barenholtz' widely discussed documentary, "The Music Inn," which was well received in May at the Berkshire International Film Festival in Great Barrington. The screenings represent a new element for the jazz festival, and it is expected to continue in future years, according to Ed Bride, the festival's director.

"There's a host of documentary films becoming available, both new material and through the reissue of old films or television shows that people under the age of 50 may never have seen," he said, noting what he perceives as a growing interest in jazz and jazz history. "We'd like to keep that going."

Like the Ellis film's subject, the project itself was not easy to accommodate.

"I've done a lot of documentaries, and this was the hardest," said John Vizzusi, the film's director, writer and producer.

"Being that it's a musically oriented documentary I had presumed that the jazz audience of the world knew of this man,

and I was wrong."

Vizzusi confided that since he completed the project earlier this year he has encountered difficulties in launching his film in places that would be natural for its exposure, such as public television. He is aiming for the film festival circuit to establish its presence and the unique character of Ellis' contribution to music.

Vizzusi said he first encountered Ellis and his orchestra while taking a college class in Northern California, upon the recommendation of his professor. "He was playing in Oakland in 1972, and it was a rock-oriented audience," explained Vizzusi who recalls that one of the evening's earlier attractions was the group Moby Grape.

"It was the finest concert I've seen in my life. There was a standing ovation after every song, and dancing. He ended up dancing with us."

Vizzusi was listening to a San Francisco rock station on the day of Ellis' death in December 1978 at the age of 44. He listened to a couple of Ellis albums that day as a kind of private memorial.

As time moved on, Vizzusi became a filmmaker and even after many projects, the memory of his experience with Ellis' music remained with him. Then, in 1996 when Ellis' name came up in conversation, he decided to reach back to that memorable past. The internet had little information, disclosing only unofficial Web tributes to Ellis. But he found names, of band members and others who were part of the Ellis legend, and Vizzusi began writing to them.

At the outset, Vizzusi envisioned a short film, perhaps with some live dance and spectacular avant-garde cinematography for a staging of some of the Ellis musical oeuvre. A friend dissuaded him from what he called "the kooky" approach. Vizzusi decided instead on a feature-length documentary that relates Ellis' real story.

"My film is not about jazz," insists Vizzusi, "it's about a man who set out to define and redefine jazz. Ellis went on his own way and kept doing it. He had to change constantly; he had a saying that once it's gone cold, it's time to move on."

And that, according to Vizzusi is what Ellis did. When he recordings began to sell, he would change to a new orchestra, or add strings to the ensemble. "He drove the producers nuts, but he never got fired from a record company. They just didn't know what to do with him. They attempted to market him in a gimmicky way."

Vizzusi spent more than three months interviewing the people close to Ellis, and in his film they tell the story – Gunther Schuller, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning composer who coined the term "the third stream" to describe Ellis' fusion of jazz, classical and rock; Maynard Ferguson, the legendary band leader for whom Ellis worked for a time and, according to Vizzusi, Ellis' best friend, and, most important, the players whose affection for Ellis clearly reached beyond mere admiration, Milcho Leviev, Fred Selden, Sam Falzone, Jay Graydon, Paul Bogosian and Ralph Humphrey.

The film explores the various episodes of Ellis' life, including his quest for the fabled four-valve Holden trumpet and its modifications that allowed him access to those

important quartet tones, the special tours in which new music was introduced and Ellis' fascination, late in his life, with North Indian musical literature, which he said he found far more complex than any in western music.

Ellis wanted his listeners to understand his music, according to Vizzusi's film, and therefore made efforts to explain the intricacies of each new work so that it would not be a mystery. His performance of "Bulgarian Bulge," for example, based on folk melodies and brought to this country by Leviev, bore a time signature of 33/16, alternating, said Ellis, with 36/16. It's fun to hear and watch being played.

The film includes tributes by some impressive observers of the Ellis era: Ferguson, who declared that "jazz had to invent a new term when it came to Don Ellis," and Leonard Feather, the dean of jazz critics and writers, who called Ellis "the most innovative jazz musician of all time." Most significant, Vizzusi said, is the tribute to Ellis' amazing fusion of genres, which was adopted by such luminaries as Miles Davis. Vizzusi, who will appear at tomorrow's screening for questions and answers, said his film was shown recently in Los Angeles. It was followed by dinner in a sold-out hotel ballroom event that also offered a performance by what is being called the Don Ellis Alumnus Orchestra. He said Leviev has reassembled a group that includes Selden, Falzone, Humphrey and Graydon to rekindle the Ellis flame.

Vizzusi said he did not dwell in his film on the untimely death of Ellis, but rather on his contribution to the world of music, and the persistence that propelled it. He includes a horoscope for Ellis' birthday, July 25, 1934, drawn from the diary of Ellis' mother:

"A child born on this day should have many talents, ambitions and business acumen, but may have a restless, nervous and unsettled temperament."

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