



DON ELLIOTT

Horns of Plenty

■ Multi-instrumentalist Don Elliott has embarked on several careers in jazz.

The trumpeter-mellophonist-vibist-singer, who has won *Down Beat's* Readers poll for miscellaneous instrument (mellophone) five straight years, has slowly moved out of club work and into often more lucrative, but equally demanding fields of jazz.

He is constantly on call for studio recording work on any of his horns. He also does jazz recording work, and makes concert appearances as a soloist or with a quartet. He writes and plays or sings on radio and TV commercials, a field which more and more jazzmen are entering.

These days, 31-year-old Elliott is concentrating his efforts on creating a vocal group composed of musicians.

"That way," he said, "You have people with jazz conception. The other way, you have singers to whom you have to teach jazz conception.

"I want this group to play and sing."

What is the market for such a group within a group?

"The colleges," Don smiled. "Here in the east is a concentration of major colleges and universities. This group could go as its own package, or with a name singer or another group."

Don went to the corner of his studio-apartment on New York's west 58th st. and started poking through stacks of tape boxes. Dominating the corner was a huge portable console, containing his amplifier, his stereo tape recorder, his turntable, and a network of wires and hookups. Nearby, where he was searching for the tape, was a large cabinet with LPs and tape boxes neatly stored vertically. Somewhere in the stacks of LPs were the 20 which Don has cut as leader or featured soloist.

He doesn't own a copy of every record on which he has appeared as a sideman.

"This will give you an idea of what we're working on," he said as he threaded the tape. Involved in the vocal session were Don, Joe Derise, Pat Easton, Ernie Furtado, and Bob Gay. What came off the tape was a vocal group with a rich blend and a swinging approach to a walking-tempo tune. Don clicked off the set. "We're getting there" he said. "What I want is to get a good, musical, honest singing jazz quartet."

Don has long been popular at campuses because of his manner and his demeanor onstage.

While not performing, he is affable, readily available for interviews, impromptu jam sessions, story-swapping, jazz panels, and any kind of concert promotion within reason. It is this quality of giving that has made him more than just another jazz personality playing a concert.

Onstage, Don always appears freshly shaved, well groomed, and dressed neatly in well-pressed clothes. "I think that a good appearance helps

the audience know that I'm serious about my music. You don't catch any classical performer on stage without good grooming. As a jazz musician, appearance is important. Whether we realize it or not, there are a lot of people who may not like jazz and expect it to look like the bottom of the barrel of the music field."

Every stage performance is not without its elements of comedy. And it is precisely this quality that has endeared him to many who have earned him the scorn of others.

His comedy bits, including parodies of well-known singers and comedians, are always done with a knowingness. They indicate that he has a sense of humor yet untapped in jazz.

"I really believe there's a lot of comedy in jazz," Don said. "The colleges have proved it's accepted. I don't use it all the time but I use it as a comic relief to break the tension during a concert.

"In drama, for instance, breaking the traditional mask is important. There are times when a bit of comedy goes a long way to point up a climax or pad out a performance. I've found that the

"I don't want to be known as a funny jazzman, but I do want to bridge the gap between entertainment and pure art. I don't think a jazz musician should do anything but I do believe that he should show some of his personality as well as his music, with an audience.

"I sincerely believe that the key to jazz by using some good comedy onstage. The smiles afterwards are worth a lot to me.

"It's as if I was telling you that I don't laugh at jazz. I want them to be entertaining as well as educational."

Don has built his position on the foundation of his horns and his versatility. He has been called "Mr. Miscellaneous" because of his prowess in the polls in that field.

The versatility goes back to his earliest school days at Scotch Plains, N.J., where he began studying the accordion at the age of 7. In school he played mellophone, baritone horn. Later, he added trumpet and on his discharge from the army in 1946, he swapped a trumpet for a set of vibes.

In the late '40s, he sang with the Lo, Jack, and the Dame. So he became more absorbed in his horns again and let his singing wait until recently, when he decided to get off the road and into the studio where jazz could make some money. "For a jazzman, working

the audience know that I'm serious about my music. You don't ever catch any classical performers on a stage without good grooming. For a jazz musician, appearance is doubly important. Whether we realize it or not, there are a lot of people who may not like jazz and expect us to look like the bottom of the barrel of the music field."

Every stage performance by Don is not without its elements of humor. And it is precisely this quality which has endeared him to many, yet earned him the scorn of others.

His comedy bits, including impressions of well-known singers or vibes men, are always done tastefully and knowingly. They indicate the wealth of humor yet untapped in jazz.

"I really believe there's a place for it," Don said. "The college crowd proves it's accepted. I don't do it all the time but I use it as a sort of comic relief to break the tension of a concert.

"In drama, for instance, both sides of the traditional mask are important. There are times when a little bit of comedy goes a long way to point up a climax or pace a performance. I've found that this is true.

"I don't want to be known as the funny jazzman, but I do want to bridge the gap between entertainment and pure art. I don't believe a jazz musician should do acrobatics, but I do believe that he should leave some of his personality as well as his music, with an audience.

"I sincerely believe that I do a lot for jazz by using some good humor onstage. The smiles afterward are worth a lot to me.

"It's as if I was telling the audience, 'Don't laugh at jazz . . . laugh with jazz.' I want them to feel it can be entertaining as well as emotional."

Don has built his position in jazz on the foundation of his humor and his versatility. He has been dubbed "Mr. Miscellaneous" because of his prowess in the polls in that category.

The versatility goes back to his earliest school days at Somerville, N.J., where he began studying accordion at the age of 7. In high school he played mellophone and baritone horn. Later, he added trumpet and on his discharge from the army in 1946, he swapped a trumpet for a set of vibes.

In the late '40s, he sang with Hi, Lo, Jack, and the Dame. Soon after, he became more absorbed with the vibes again and let his singing lapse until recently, when he decided to get off the road and into the fields where jazz could make some inroads.

"For a jazzman, working on radio

and TV commercials is a challenge," he said. "The jazz musician can bring a fresh approach to a problem for which an agency has asked for the usual.

"It's a good deal, and the residuals are like record royalties. Actually, they're better because you get them whether the record is a hit or not. And in this case, it's not a familiar pop tune or progression you're working with."

Because of his versatility and the old saw that claims if you do a number of things you don't do any one thing well, Elliott is constantly assessing his playing, and constantly aware of areas in which he can strengthen it.

"I feel that the test of a jazz musician is, can he play a ballad?" he mused. "It's easy to swing. It proves your jazz ability but it doesn't prove your musicianship. Your tone shows.

"Jazz is more than the raucous stuff. A lot of jazz bands forget about dynamics. They can't play a ballad.

I can feel it getting across to people. And there are a lot of times when I want to create with my voice."

Like most jazzmen, Don would like to see more good jazz on TV, and be part of it when it happens.

"I think, though, that there has to be a strong element of showmanship to make it more entertaining to the non-jazz audience. You have to bridge the gap again.

"A guy like Gene Krupa is bridging the gap with his showmanship. Stan Kenton does it with the way he conducts. Erroll Garner with his facial expressions and the humor in his playing. This is getting across to an audience not especially interested in jazz. And we need them to survive" Don added.

When not pursuing his multiple jazz professions, Don is attacking multiple hobbies including photography, sound, and the construction of scale models of World War I airplanes.

A tour of college concerts for his



They forget that jazz can be beautiful as well as exciting."

As for his versatility, Elliott claims no allegiance to any one of his many instruments.

"I enjoy playing them all. Of course the vibes are rougher to carry around, particularly on a motor scooter, but each one has its merits. There are times when I feel I can do almost anything on the trumpet. There are other times when I feel the mellophone is perfect for ballads.

new group is scheduled to get underway soon. Recording work has picked up for the season.

The demand on his many talents is increasing.

"Sometimes they call me for a date" he smiled, "And I ask what horn they want me to bring. Sometimes, I don't bring any."

And, as the drummer said to the singer on a recording date "I dig playing my horn, but I'd much rather carry yours."