

Composer Don Elliott Is Loaded with Talent

Stern, Harold

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By HAROLD STERN

Probably the greatest stumbling block to Don Elliott's career as composer is his ability as a musician. Invariably, whenever Don's compositions are utilized, part of the deal calls for him to come along and play them.

Last season Don wrote the score for the Broadway show, "A Thurber Carnival," and ended up not only playing his music on stage, but walking off with the

show. Currently, Don and his combo may be heard on the daytime quizzer — I mean game show — "Number Please" (ABC-TV, 12:30-1:00 p.m., EDT, Mon-Fri.), playing Don's original theme for the show, plus all his original background music. When he isn't occupied with "Number Please," Don spends a good deal of his time writing music for TV commercials, and a lot more time playing it.

He feels, with obvious justification, that if he didn't have to spend all that time interpreting his music, he could be spending his time profitably composing that much more of it.

But, that's the price Don Elliott has to pay for being talented. A wizard at almost every musical instrument (he sings too), Don has devoted most of his performing time during recent years to the mellophone and has been rewarded by placing first in the Downbeat Jazz Poll under "Miscellaneous Instrument" for eight straight years.

"I'm proud of that category," he told me, "because it means I had to beat out more competition than in any other category."

Though he did score a couple of TV pilots that didn't sell, "Number Please" is his first television show. It won't be his last.

New Field Opened Up

"It's opened up a whole new field of composing to me," he remarked. "On Number Please" we have definite music cues and I've learned the importance of timing and how to ad-lib without letting the music override what's being said. To me, soap operas and quiz shows have been musically boring and they don't have to be,

I think our theme is light and gay and we have no use for an organ. I'm hoping to do more TV themes and there's now a good chance that I'll be doing the score for a TV film series."

Don Elliott's been scoring TV commercials for the past four years and he claims to enjoy that sort of work.

"I was very surprised after all I'd heard," he said, "but writing music for commercials can be creative. Maybe it's because I have such a wide musical background, but I get a free reign when I write for commercials. I take a jazz approach and I don't find the agencies nearly as rigid as I'd been led to believe. I have yet to run into the proverbial old agency president who says 'I want a good polka beat.'"

"I've learned to write for Madison Avenue," he continued, "without losing my own identity. I was used to playing for the 'Hippies' at Birdland and now I feel I can write for the masses. I hope I've seen the last of the inside of a jazz club except as a spectator."

His work with "A Thurber Carnival" has also given him a desire to do more work for Broadway.

"I'd like to do a Broadway

musical with a small combo," he said. "I've never liked Broadway musicals. I love the music, but those arrangements kill me. Some 97-year-old arranger works on it and gives it to a gang of wood winds. That's why I liked 'Bye Bye Birdie.' The score wasn't much, but it was arranged beautifully."

As a sample of what he means, Don has an ABC-Paramount record of the undistinguished score of "Jamaica," beautifully arranged in a jazz version by Gil Evans. In all, you can probably find over two dozen Don Elliott albums available on some 12 labels. Two other ABC-Paramount records, "Don Elliott At The Modern Jazz Room" and "The Voices of Don Elliott," show off his various instrumental and vocal talents admirably.

Because of all his recent exposure on Broadway, television and on commercials, Don is in no hurry to record again.

Along with most other musicians, Don feels that TV is becoming more receptive to jazz.

"But imagine," he said, "they're using 'Peter Gunn' music on westerns! If they're not careful, they're going to run jazz into the ground."



VERSATILE MUSICIAN: Don Elliott, complete with mellophone, can be heard playing his own original music on the daytime ABC-TV game show, "Number Please."