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Elliott undisputed king of mellow jazz sounds

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The credit goes to Chet Baker. It was the wistful West Coast trumpeter who moved Don Elliott, the latest visitor to Lytes at the Royal York Hotel, to introduce into jazz the mellophone, a graceful-looking but obscure member of the brass family.

The year was 1950 and Elliott was travelling as George Shearing's vibraphonist (or was it xylophonist?). While on the West Coast, he was hanging out at a California jazz room, playing trumpet. But Baker, toothless and still a member of the Marines, would come in and make all the good impressions on that instrument, so Elliott wired back east for the mellophone, the instrument of his school days. Now there would be no challengers.

Thirty years later, and a long, distinguished career in New York studios as a composer of film scores and jingles in between, there are still no challengers. Elliott says he likes the instrument's soft, puffy, edgeless sound - it is, after all, a mellow phone. His inspirations were tenor saxophonists like Zoot Sims, Al Cohn and Lester Young, of the smooth school of jazz, and he admits that perhaps the saxophone should be his instrument. He has even re-designed the mellophone so that the bell comes up from below (rather than curling over the top) as a saxophone's does.

Whatever, it has an elegant, call-to-the-hounds quality which is matched by Elliott's particularly neat and tasteful style of improvisation. Although the instrument turned into a wheezy elephant on a couple of occasions on Monday night, as he swept up into the higher registers, his control is otherwise impressive and his playing an effective mixture of lyricism and hard blowing.

Despite its similarities to the flugelhorn, Elliott takes it more as a valve trombone, and came up with some particularly good blues in Monday's last two sets. On the other hand, he made the instrument seem tailor-made for My Funny Valentine, even if that ballad is hardly tailor-made for the inattentive audiences at Lytes.

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Elliott is still playing the vibraphone, and with the same feeling for economy, and for what's necessary and what isn't. It's not fancy, and since he's obviously a "lefty," it looks a little awkward, but it swings and makes clear and immediate sense. When he combines the two instruments to close a tune, holding a note on the mellophone and arpeggiating the resolving chord on the vibraphone, there's not a hint of flash to the act.

That's the key to the success of his music, although it may leave him at something of a disadvantage at Lytes. Where Terry Gibbs could bully the place, and Anne Marie Moss could shout it down - to name two other recent performers there - he must rely on music alone; as good as it is, it may not be enough.

Lytes will be taken over tonight only by the CBC for a presentation as part of Radio Week festivities. The trio of pianist George McFetridge takes over to back up Don Elliott, Eugene Amaro and Joe Coughlin, and Ed Bickert.

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