

Top Jingle Writer Returns to Jazz Roots: JAZZ REVIEW

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By OWEN McNALLY
Courant Jazz Critic

Don Elliott is perhaps best remembered by jazz fans as a fine vibraphonist with the George Shearing Quintet and as a most capable mellophone player who seemed perpetually to win the top spot for that brass horn in the annual Downbeat polls.

Elliott made a special appearance in Hartford Thursday night at the 880 Club, the South End jazz spot, and showed that his touch on both vibes and mellophone has not been blunted over the years as he's focused his talents on commercial pursuits.

Elliott has achieved enormous success in the advertising world as the producer or writer of 5,000 musical commercials for products ranging from Burger King's burgers to General Motor's cars. At his recording studio and home in Weston, Elliott has become a legendary one-man jingle industry king whose clients include most of the 500 corporations on Fortune Magazine's list. The commercials are jazzy sounding and use Elliott's skills as an arranger and composer, as well as an elec-

tronics whiz. Back in the 1950s, he was a pioneer in developing multiple track recordings. Always a musical maven, Elliott has also written scores for films and for Broadway plays including "The Thunder Carnival."

JAZZ REVIEW

More recently though, Elliott has decided to return to his jazz "roots" by playing jazz clubs and teaching jazz clinics on college campuses. Hartford became part of his happy roots odyssey Thursday night as he played a pure jazz date. The only sign of commercialism was in a funny little jingle that he improvised on the last few bars of his final number — a jingle which plugged the name of the 880 club.

"The jingles pay the rent, but this is where the heart is," Elliott said between sets at Al Casasanta's jazz bistro in the South End.

Obviously, with his many current jingles jingling the greater glories of Muriel Cigars and Colt

45 malt liquor, the residuals must be paying for more than the rent or mortgage at his Weston home where he lives with his wife and two children.

And, just as obviously, Elliott's heart was very much in his non-commercial music as he played with a rhythm section led by pianist Kent Hewitt. His playing on mellophone — a sort of first cousin to the French horn — was warm and mellow. Sometimes it was as sweet as a Tommy Dorsey trombone solo or as pithy as a vintage Miles Davis chorus on trumpet. His ballad rendition of "My Funny Valentine" — a tune that Davis turned into a tone poem so many years back — was a delight.

On "Watch What Happens," a tune written by Michael Legrand, Elliott began on mellophone, switched to vibes for some tasteful mallet work, and then returned to mellophone for the closing bars. This pleasant timbral mix of vibes alternating with brass worked well right through the closing number, a blues which started out with a Charlie Parker line and then meandered amiably over pleasant musical territory.

Between sets, Elliott regaled the audience with light patter and "musicians' jokes" — gags whose punchlines depend on some knowledge of music or musicians. Elliott, who back in the 1950s was a summer replacement on television for Jackie Gleason, is one musician who seems to like to banter as much as he likes to play.

Being away from the grind of writing odes to products such as Sunkist and Listerex and Orange Plus seemed to agree with the New Jersey native who's been living in Connecticut for more than 20 years.

Elliott's labors for the night were made much lighter by a first-rate rhythm section that consisted of Hewitt on piano, Steve LaSpina on upright bass and Ted Moore on drums. LaSpina, an excellent young bassist, has worked with pianist Marian McPartland. Moore, who lives in Connecticut, is the drummer with the Paul Winter Consort. (The Winter Consort, Moore said, has been scheduled to perform in concert at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Hartford in September.)

Hewitt has been leading an on-going jazz vocal series at the 880 Club which resumes Thursday night with an appearance by Marion Cowings. Cowings is a New York vocalist who has been the protégé of Jon Hendricks. Hendricks was a member of the celebrated jazz vocal trio of Lambert, Hendricks and Ross.