

INTERVIEW



photos: Documa/Pierre St-Arnaud

RON MANN

by Steven Smith



Whatever else may be wrong with Canada's film industry, the Canadian documentary tradition remains alive and well. And no little credit for this is due to the work of 24-year-old Toronto filmmaker Ron Mann.

His highly-acclaimed jazz documentary *Imagine The Sound* (1981) was awarded a Silver Hugo as the best feature-length documentary at the 1981 Chicago Film Festival.

Man's latest film, *Poetry In Motion*, which he calls "the first-ever film poetry anthology" - premiered at the 1982 Festival of Festivals in Toronto and began a theatrical release there in November.

Awarded a Gold Plaque at the 1982 Chicago International Film Festival, *Poetry In Motion* was made on a \$200,000 budget. Like *Imagine The Sound*, it has been acquired by Britain's Fourth Channel.

In conjunction with American documentarist Emile de Antonio, Mann is developing two feature film dramas for Spring '83, both to be produced in Quebec.

Cinema Canada: What turned you on to making a film about poetry in North America?

Ron Mann: I went to a William Burroughs reading at the Edge (a bar in Toronto), last May (1981). John Giorno was opening for him. Giorno was fantastic. It was performance art and it moved me. I said then that this would be my next movie. Afterwards, I went up to talk to Giorno and discovered that he had been putting out the Dial-A-Poem series for years, a series of 12 records, featuring readings by contemporary North American poets. I discovered that this was an art form that goes back to the oral tradition of poetry, where poetry was the six o'clock news and poets were the conveyors of culture. I saw this as a film that would concentrate on contemporary poetry and artists that use their poetry as a performance art.

Cinema Canada: So, you and Giorno shake hands, and like each other. He says yeah and you say yeah and then

you say: "I have to find \$160,000 before we can go on." What do you do then?

Ron Mann: I took out a \$5,000 bank loan. I started shooting this film prior to having other money in place just because I believed in it.

Cinema Canada: When was that?

Ron Mann: That would be in October, 1981. I shot Irving Layton, John Cooper Clark, Allen Ginsberg and Ted Milton all in the same weekend because the opportunity arose. And the street poets. I shot them on that weekend. I wanted to do a 15-minute demo.

Then I went to New York with the loan money. This was a big gamble. I began making contacts there.

Cinema Canada: There are a lot of New York artists in *Poetry In Motion*, and of course some very important ones. How many poets did you film?

Ron Mann: We shot 65 poets in over 45 hours of footage. Of these, 24 poets ended up in the film. There has never been a poetry film with the scope of what we attempted. Some of the people in this film are, I think, the greatest living minds of the 20th century, like William Burroughs and John Cage.

Cinema Canada: Ron, let's back up a bit. How did you get started making films?

Ron Mann: I started in film when I was 12 years old. I made Super 8 films of bar mitzvahs and weddings. I just did it. I don't think you should study film. I believe in the value of a liberal arts education; that is, learning everything that has been said before, forming your own ideas, and then going out to express them. I think the technical side of film can be learned from a book in a day. It's the ideas that are tough. An additional impetus came a bit latter. I had a Grade 12 physics teacher, whose name I won't mention. On tests he would tell you to prepare for something, and then it wouldn't be on the test. It would completely fuck you up. I confronted him and he said: "It's tough." He was a very conservative teacher - in a free school system. I thought it was unfair, so I dropped out of his course. I had to pick up something very quick. It was my English teacher who suggested a film program, so I started doing films. I stayed away from all the sciences. If this

hadn't happened I probably would have been a doctor.

Cinema Canada: Was this the beginning of your work in 16mm?

Ron Mann: Yes, I started my first 16mm film when I was 17. I did a 60 minute docu-drama about friends of mine who lived beside a factory. It was really about the complacency of the '70s, about how in the '60s you'd be able to affect a change by demonstrating. In the '70s, you enter this period of political stasis - all you could do was talk about a problem, you couldn't change things. It's really about a generation that lost its impact.

Cinema Canada: That sounds like an ambitious bit of social analysis for a first film by a 17-year-old. Did you have a sense of film as a tool for social documentation and comment at that time?

Ron Mann: Yes, knowing your place and time in the history of film is very important. You have to know who you are and what you are and what you're doing. I see myself in the Grierson heritage and Emile de Antonio's legacy of non-narrative documentary film making.

Cinema Canada: What is Emile de Antonio's influence on you; what has he taught you?

Ron Mann: First there's the privilege of knowing him - because of his work, and because of the ideas within that work, and the ideas that he has on film in his time. I am aligned with his politics



and the ideas in his films. There is no other filmmaker in documentary that I respect more. I think he is one of the greatest film makers alive. He's also a friend. He's taken me under his wing. Emile has helped me with distribution ideas and structuring of content. He's an incredible resource. He's a bohemian, a radical who's never grown up; he's a very funny, intelligent man. He's very Socratic too; the old principle of the tutor and students. He used to teach philosophy. In terms of the style of his films, I very much agree with the principles he originated. Emile is the inventor of non-narrative documentary and of using collage in a particular way. A lot of his ideas come from visual art. The first page of Andy Warhol's biography says "I owe everything to Emile de Antonio." He's been a tremendous influence on me. The dedication to him in *Poetry in Motion* was something I could do to express my appreciation.

I'm just this kid who's making his own little films, but he's taken it upon himself to look after me. He made me feel confident that what I really believed in is what I should do. I consider it a privilege to produce his next film, and he's producing my new film.

Cinema Canada: Tell me about De Antonio's work.

Ron Mann: He's a legendary documentary filmmaker, politically minded, who's based in New York City. He struggles to make films he really believes in. He made *Milhouse*, and *In the Year of the Pig*. His most recent film is *In the King of Prussia*, on which I'm acting as his Canadian distribution agent. It's with Martin Sheen and music by Jackson Brown. It's a very powerful, moving film about the passion of the Berrigans to do something active about their beliefs.

Cinema Canada: How did you strike up a relationship with him?

Ron Mann: A friend of mine with whom I went to college at Bennington used to work for him as a researcher; in turn my friend worked on the research of *Poetry in Motion*: his name is David Segal. It's a complicated story but, I had wanted to do that concert film *Heatwave*, so I went down to New York because the producers who were putting on *Heatwave* were interested in me, but wanted a known director attached to

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the project. I had made all those shorts up to that time, but they wanted someone who was recognized as a filmmaker who'd oversee the production so I approached De Antonio. He hadn't made a film since *Underground*, and was writing his autobiography. He got sparked by the idea of making a film, so from the initial meeting we became friends and later he was production consultant on *Imagine the Sound*.

Cinema Canada: How would you define his work stylistically?

Ron Mann: He's in the tradition of Eisenstein montage and in the Marxist tradition. Breaking down the form of the film is what his principles were, and in turn he made a new form. I tried to do that with both the jazz film and the poetry film - breaking down the form of film, breaking away from conventions. As poetry broke away from the academic tradition, I wanted to break away from the filmic tradition of the narrative form of the documentary. I wanted to break away from that confined stricture. I tried to relate the structure of the film itself to the subject, because I think they're very closely connected. It has to do with language. The language of film and the language of poetry and the language of music. In my film it's the politics, and the juxtaposition of images that are the potent factors.

Cinema Canada: Then you consider yourself a political filmmaker?

Ron Mann: I think both films are political in the sense that I'm trying to say something political with those films, from the perspective of letting those artists speak about their politics. But, that's not denying my own viewpoint, it's saying yes, I agree with that, or no, I don't. And we're talking about the oppression of black musicians in *Imagine the Sound*.

Cinema Canada: It's political in that larger sense, beyond liberal and conservative, beyond parties and particular governments. Political in how we define that larger sense.

Ron Mann: In the approach and what's in it certainly... I think the filmmaker has a political responsibility whatever he's doing. If you're going to make trash, or if you're going to distort history and distort your culture, then that's irresponsible. In films, often the representation of poets or jazz musicians reflects a white middle-class culture that doesn't acknowledge the arts that are working towards the ideals of change. And I certainly see poetry as defining the sort of political chaos that's happening right now. As a filmmaker, I have a responsibility to make films which are really true to my own beliefs, not to compromise.

Cinema Canada: Did you have a more specific purpose, related to poetry itself?

Ron Mann: I wanted to change people's preconceptions of what poetry is. Poetry is a populist art. It has a public surface. It is interested in reaching an audience. That is perfect from my point of view. I'm just extending that as a filmmaker. I'm a means of getting poetry across. You've got to get away from this academic treatment of poetry. You've got to get it out of the library, out of the book. Otherwise it becomes something abstruse, something not easily accessible.

In the arts we have a splintering. There is, with the new generation, the lost generation, a search for something to hold on to, because everything is so

fast. The discovery of poetry by some of these people is something new, but not something that's fleeting.

Cinema Canada: I agree. Ron, I'd like to pick up a loose end. Money. A sometimes grim reality for a filmmaker. After shooting in New York you had the whole film ahead of you. What did you do next?

Ron Mann: I went to my distributor, then the CBC. I did everything that an independent producer does and found that there was interest in it. When it came down to the wire, luckily I had the help of Film House who invested money. My production manager, instead of taking a salary, invested in the film - that's Ratch Wallace. My researcher invested in the film.

Cinema Canada: This sounds to me, with the exception of maybe Film House, like you're still a long way from \$160,000. So where is the other money coming from?

Ron Mann: Doctors, lawyers, dentists, my distributor, my accountants. It's very difficult, there is no formula for an independent production. Look, there are a thousand ways of putting together a film.

A lot of the investors in my last film put money into this film because they saw that I was really sincere about my work, I did it well, they liked what I'd done, and I'd made some money for them.

Cinema Canada: You're your own producer. You've raised a lot of money then.

Ron Mann: Yes, in both films. In the last year I've raised over \$300,000.

Cinema Canada: Has *Imagine the Sound* begun to return?

Ron Mann: Yes.

Cinema Canada: How long did it take you to get the money in place for *Poetry In Motion*, and where do you find the doctors and the dentists?

Ron Mann: I'm very lucky, I raised all the money in three weeks. My distributor was in part responsible for that. You don't find investors in the streets. You get them through various funnels and people that you know. You meet a person at a cocktail party and say you're a filmmaker and he says he owns a McDonald's, so you ask for his business card and you talk to him later. It happens like that. But you have to have a strong proposal. And it has to be a good deal.

Cinema Canada: How did you learn to structure your financial package or an investors' package?

Ron Mann: I have a lawyer do that.

Cinema Canada: Where did you come to find this lawyer?

Ron Mann: I grew up with him. He's a friend of mine. He's the best lawyer in the country. When I was 14 he turned me on to reading. He gave me *On The Road*. He's somebody to whom I'm indebted; certainly it's very important to have somebody give you advice.

Cinema Canada: Let's say I'm a chartered accountant and because I'm a jazz fan you come to me to get some money.

Ron Mann: Or your clients.

Cinema Canada: Or my clients. And I get back a modest little profit and you come along with another project on poetry. But I only read the *Toronto Sun* and *Reader's Digest*.

Even though you've shown me a little gravy from *Imagine the Sound*, I know that poetry has never made any money for anybody. So why would I want to invest?

Ron Mann: I convince people that there is an interest in this film, that it's ground-breaking. There are various factors that you tell different people. One guy might know Tom Waits, another might know John Cage, so I show my track record. I don't twist people's arms. I'm quite honest with them because I'm making an honest film and if they want to invest in it they will.

Cinema Canada: It's wonderful that you're doing so well in art forms that are not widely understood.

Ron Mann: Yes, when I first went to my accountants to raise money for *Imagine the Sound*, they thought that Bill Cosby should narrate the film; they thought it was with all these big bands. With the poetry film no one knew what the hell I was talking about. One guy threw me out. When I cut the demo, I showed it to this top executive at the CBC. He sat through it, finished watching it, looked at the screen, looked at me, then looked at the screen, and at me again and said "Ron, all these people should be in a mad house." From that moment I knew I was doing the right thing. No one could discourage me.

When I was out of college at Bennington, I decided to go to Europe. When I went to school, I went for 1/2 year and

1/2 year I travelled. It was sort of my way of getting through university. In Europe I was travelling with a friend of mine and decided to go to the Cannes Film Fest. I was 17, I attended the festival and slept on the beach, and I returned there consecutively for about five years. It was the big shock of my life, I was a big enthusiast about film - I used to go to the Roxy all the time, so I grew up completely saturated with film during the period.

At the Cannes fest, sleeping on the beach, the biggest shock was discovering that film was a business, that all these decisions were made behind closed doors. That the people involved have a lot of money, have a lot of power. The power to manipulate fashions and pop culture based on the films that they produce. Film has the greatest impact on lifestyle today, and television. The same media.

So it was a big shock for me and I didn't want to be involved with film at all, because I said this is just a corporate extension and I disagreed with it completely. I felt misled and disillusioned about film. Then I started making my own little films and I went back there and still do, because it was just the presentational films I wanted to see, because a lot of the filmmakers did do films that I really grabbed onto.

But it was a shock. I had to conform a lot because you need money to make these films. My ambition isn't to participate and go behind closed doors and make those deals; my ambition was to get those films seen. I became accustomed to it.

Cinema Canada: How much money do you think, in your most optimistic moment, you yourself might make from *Poetry*?

Ron Mann: I haven't made anything. It's all deferred. How much will I make? I don't have a clue. I want the investors to get their money back first. After that, I own a percentage in the film. Not much. My satisfaction is seeing the film that I want made realized. That's my real satisfaction.

Cinema Canada: But what about the fame and fortune that many seek?

Ron Mann: In this industry, we've got a lot of producers who've put a lot of money up for bullshit films and really ruined the investing climate for people like me. It's because some of those guys take a lot of money up-front. They have these inflated budgets, and the investors will never see any money. So they won't invest in any more films.

The economy as well is a major factor. People don't want to invest. They want to close the hatch, put the money in the bank or do something safe like a term deposit. Investors, when they do go to films, try to go with safe projects with big names.

I think there should be programs by the CFDC, by independent producers to inform the potential investors or the business community that film is not in trouble, or not as disastrous as they might think. Canada has a great number of professionals working here. They can make and distribute world-class films. If there's going to be another boom period at all in this country, it's going to come with a change of attitude. Producers must make films that are going to be attractive to the investors, films that are credible, films that people want to see, that are professionally executed. That's within the ability of the craftsmen here.

● The mentor, Emile de Antonio, and Mann at the Festival du nouveau cinéma



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Cinema Canada: Do you think the idea of taking a percentage of the box office on any films screening in this country and routing it back into our industry is suitable?

Ron Mann: It's a good idea, but ticket prices at \$5.50 are too high now, and that levy would probably be passed on to the film audience.

You have all these American films shot up here and printed down south. The labs don't have any work. It's a real problem. Maybe not a levy on ticket sales, but some kind of duty should be imposed to encourage American film companies to print their films in Canada, so the labs can continue functioning.

In distribution, certainly you need money to launch films, to get theatrical openings for Canadian films, it's one area that hasn't been assisted at all. Canadian films getting into Canadian theatres is very important. I think that the CFDC needs more money. The CBC, especially the department at CBC that is in charge of acquisitions of independent films, have been helping young filmmakers like myself for years. They need more money. All these people need more money to work. The CBC cutbacks threaten me because, if I want to sell my films to CBC, they don't have any money to give me. Somehow money should be directed into the Canadian film industry.

This argument has been going on for years and nothing has been done. Now there is going to be a review of the cultural policy with regards to the film industry in two departments. One in distribution and the other in production.

I've been involved peripherally with stating what I believe needs re-organization. But people on these committees don't make films; they don't know what is going on. They take the advice of producers whose multi-million dollar productions have flopped. If they take their advice, they're going to get bad advice. You have to get advice from independents like myself because I'm continuing to work in film. Young filmmakers need access, they need support, they need help in producing their projects, otherwise we're never going to develop those filmmakers, and they are the future of the industry. The Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council are doing good things for the young independents.

We don't have to tear things down and then build them up again, we have an existing structure; it's just that it's not operating properly. Reducing the tax incentive to 50% is crazy. Making the deadline so that you have to shoot the movie before Dec. 31 without getting an extension in order for the film to get Canadian certification is a problem. Pay-TV may offer hope, but I'm not optimistic. There are people like Audrey Cole at C-Channel who are not going to take any chances at all. She said *Poetry in Motion* is too intelligent to program. They're just going to continue the same bullshit they've been doing. That's not supporting the Canadian film industry. The media sees people as being stupid, and they cater to a common denominator. They are owned by huge corporations that want to hide a lot of art, which in their minds is subversive. TV is the most misused medium. And the money they are offering is peanuts. It's very discouraging.

There are a lot of people suffering who shouldn't be. Holly Dale, Clay Boris - he can't get money to film, he can hardly pay his mortgage - we're all in



trouble. Professionals like Clay, who's made an internationally recognized, award-winning film should have support. It should be there for him to get the money, get it done, get it distributed, and get it shown. The Toronto NFB should be able to encourage projects. Now they say come back to us in 1984. They should be able to say come back next week, and we'll talk.

Cinema Canada: Have you considered basing yourself in the U.S.?

Ron Mann: I'm not interested in going down to the States, this is the only place I want to work. We're lucky we don't live in the States, with Reaganomics. Then things would be even worse. If I was in the States, I don't think I would have been able to make this kind of film. I mean, it took 20 years for *Imagine the Sound* to get done, because nobody had done anything like it. It took a Canadian to make a film about something that was really North American.

Cinema Canada: Is there any American money in *Poetry in Motion*?

Ron Mann: Yes there is, a friend of mine, just one investor. He didn't get a write-off, he just believed in the project. There is no U.S. money in *Imagine the Sound*.

Cinema Canada: Are you going to make any money on *Poetry*?

Ron Mann: I think the investors will make money from it, and I think it will get around. When I mentioned earlier that I don't have any money right now, it's simply because the film has just been finished. I think there is a market for this film. It won't earn a tremendous amount of money, but certainly there will be a profit for the investors.

Cinema Canada: Do you keep a share?

Ron Mann: I divided the money up with the poets in the film, with John Giorno the associate producer, and the investors. But the investors get all their money back, then it's a 50-50 split. The investors get half the money, and the poets have a participation in the producer's share.

Cinema Canada: So they get paid for performing plus a residual?

Ron Mann: Yes, the jazz film was made that way too. There's one or two people that have points in the film, but all of that is up-front. I believe that it's important to pay everyone for doing work. It's good to get people who are excited to do things for free, but if you have the money you should pay. You should have enough money to make that film, and if you don't, you should spend another six months getting that

money together. It will show in the end product. If someone will take \$150 a week instead of \$200 because it is a low-budget, independent film, then certainly that should be done. That's the way I make films. The budgets are low, but the people get paid for what they're doing - maybe not as much as a union film, but I'm certainly not ripping anybody off.

Cinema Canada: Some of your employees must earn more than you in the course of the production.

Ron Mann: That's OK. I grew up with different values than most people. The main important thing for me is not to make money. I make about 100 dollars a week, which as you know is below the poverty line, and I can continue doing that because I can do what I do with that amount of money, and I don't have the desire to make millions of dollars. It would be nice, because I would be able to do what I want then. But, I don't have the desire to make films that would make that kind of money, if they are exploitation films. My real desire is to make films that engage my personal interest, and I can live quite happily with the satisfaction that I've made something that I like and that I believe in. The people I meet while making these films, I would never have met. I would never have the relationship that I have with de Antonio. It's very exciting to be able to express what I want with those films, or any films that I do.

Cinema Canada: Would you work under another filmmaker?

Ron Mann: I don't like working for anybody else. I get really sick if I work for somebody else. I get two calls after *Poetry*, for *Crazy Times* and *That's My Baby*. I read both scripts - terrible. One's soft porn and one's a TV movie. I have no interest in working on something I don't want to work on, even though I don't have any money. I still wouldn't do it.

Cinema Canada: So you don't worry about running out of money. Do you worry about running out of ideas?

Ron Mann: I never have a lack of ideas. I'm always going. I'm glad that I can be creative, conceptually creative, because it's very important if you're a director. You have to be able to approach a film in an interesting way, with a style that's your own.

It depends on which starting point you're talking about. I never get writer's block. I'm one of those odd creatures who never gets writer's block. I keep thinking. I keep thinking in my sleep. And I write things down. After finishing *Poetry*, everyone asks, what are you doing next, and I don't really say anything. I have 20 projects. I have a board of ideas in my room. The ideas are really there. All you need is time and money to make those films. It's the only criteria.

I have the projects and I never get exhausted with ideas. There's too much to be said and no-one's saying these things. You take that responsibility on your hands again and you say, it's incredible what's not being done, it's like looking in a room and seeing what's not there.

Cinema Canada: What's the most important stage, in your type of film, for you to leave your personal imprint?

Ron Mann: For me, the editing is very important. In the two documentaries that I've done, it took six months to edit *Imagine*, and eight months for *Poetry*, so that's the most important phase. The pre-production is tough but is very im-

portant in order to know what you're doing to do. Production is fun, flying around to all those places, certainly meeting all those people. Mixing is most fun. You can sit back and relax.

Cinema Canada: In the look of your film, you get a feeling, a very careful feeling - like nothing is a quick draft. Things appear to have been thought through.

Ron Mann: Yes, it is thought through with the collaboration of all those artists. Of course you don't always know what's going to come - like with Charles Bukowski - I didn't know what he was going to say. In the editing I juxtaposed his statements with other things to create impact for both. So the script is being made in the editing stage. The look of the film, that certainly is in the pre-production. You don't know how the set is going to look until it's built. You don't know what Tom Waits is going to look like in the Vietnamese cafe until you actually see it. Certainly planning is important; the concept, how you're going to approach the subject is very important.

Cinema Canada: Did the structure for *Poetry* come easy?

Ron Mann: We had so many different structures for *Poetry* that you could edit this film for five years and still not want to finish it. But the Festival of Festivals gave me this deadline. I work great under pressure. By the deadline, we did find something we were happy with. It's a matter of finding a formula, and there are different ways of finding the formula.

Cinema Canada: Is there anything about that formula that you're not happy with?

Ron Mann: I left a lot of people out. I wish I could have put more of the poets in. Otherwise I'd have to see it six months from now, and then I could tell you. Right now, I'm very happy with what we did.

Cinema Canada: Do you think you earn your \$100 a week?

Ron Mann: Yes, it's really hard work. I told Tom Benson at the CBC that I was lucky to be able to do what I wanted to do. He said: "Don't say you're lucky. It's hard work." I work harder than anyone would ever work for somebody else. Still, all I want is to continue making films that are relevant to myself, to my own experience, to my country, and culture. The type of film I want to make is similar to these two projects. I don't want to go to Hollywood. I would just like to have enough money to make that film more effectively, more professionally. Any filmmaker will tell you that.

Cinema Canada: Has working on *Poetry in Motion* inspired you to write poetry?

Ron Mann: No. I don't think I could be a poet, but I think I can be a filmmaker.

