Whatever else may be wrong with Canada's film industry, the Canadian documentary tradition remains alive and well. Ron Mann gets a lot of credit for this 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.

Mann'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 $30,000 budget. Like Imagine The Sound, it has been acquired by Britain's Fourth Channel.

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

**Interview**

**Ron Mann**

**by Steven Smith**

"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. Afterwords, 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.

**Ron Mann:** I wanted to do that concert film because the producers who were putting on Heatwave were interested in me, but I didn't have money in place just because I believed in it.

The idea of non-narrative documentary film is what I should do. I consider it a little films, but he's taken it upon himself to make his own little films, but he's taken it upon himself to express my appreciation.

"What's your idea of film as a tool for social documentation and comment at this time?"

**Ron Mann:** Yes, knowing your place 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 tradition and Emile de Antonio's legacy of non-narrative documentary film making.

**Ron Mann:** 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 this time?

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**Interview**

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"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 film. 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 instructor 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.

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the project. I had made all those shorts up to that time, but they wanted someone who’d overcome the production problems. So I approached De Antonio. He hadn’t made a film since Underground, and was writing his autobiography. He got sparky by the idea of making a film. At 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 Ellington, and my own (slightly disparate) 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 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 that confined structure. I tried to break 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 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 what they want to say. But that’s not denying my own viewpoint. It’s saying yes, I agree with that, or no, I disagree. It’s the same way 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 parties and particular governments. Political in how we define that larger sense.

Ron Mann: It comes down to 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 make a film that distorts reality and distorts your culture, then that’s irresponsible. In films, often the representation of poets or jazz musicians reflects, as with the new generation, the way 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. I’m an enthusiast about film - I used to go to the movies, like you’re still a long way from being able to sign a contract for a film, or the sort of political chaos that’s happening. I’m an enthusiast about film - I used to go to the movies, like you’re still a long way from being able to sign a contract for a film, or the sort of political chaos that’s happening.

Cinema Canada: Do you think, in your most optimistic moment, you yourself might make a film about what you’re doing?

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 realised. That’s my real satisfaction.

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

Ron Mann: I think there should be programs by the CFDC, by independent producers to inform the potential investors or the independent producers about film. They have these inflated budgets, and the investors will never see any money, so they won’t invest in any new films.

The economy as well is a major factor. People don’t want to invest. They wait to see the money in the bank, or they don’t do something safe like a term deposit. Investors, when they do go to films, try to go with safe projects with a lot of money up front. They 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 new films.

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Cinema Canada: How would you define the financial package or the investors' package?

Ron Mann: I have a lawyer do that.
**Interview**

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

**Ron Mann:** It's a good idea, but ticket prices are $5.50 and up high now, and that levy probably would 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, needs a lot more money, it's the kind of money that other film producers like myself for years. They need more money. All these people need more money to work. The CBC cuts back this money for all these independent 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 to income to support their projects and then they need help in producing their projects, otherwise we're never going to develop those filmmakers, and they are the ones who will be doing the next generation. The National Film Council and the Ontario Arts Council are doing good things for the young independent filmmakers.

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 20% is crazy. Making the deadline so that you have to shoot the movie before Dec. 31 without getting an extension by January, which is tough for a film like my Canadian certification is a problem. Pay-TV may offer hope, but I'm not optimistic. There are people like Audrey Colc at C-Cervis. They're doing very well. I think there are many, many more people who have the talent, the ideas, but they're not getting paid.