

by Josee Miville Dechêne

"It's as if you've been swimming around on your own, treading water, trying to keep your head above the surf when, suddenly, someone gives you a hand and pulls you up on dry land." This is how Brigitte Berman, producer, director, writer and narrator of *Artie Shaw: Time is All You've Got* feels about her film's Oscar nomination for best Feature-length Documentary. "It is quite thrilling to realize that others might also value your work," she says. "It gives a presence both to the film and to the filmmaker and that is marvelous."

Talking to Brigitte Berman, you get somewhat the same feeling as you do watching her film *Artie Shaw*. She shares with the great jazz musician an inner passion, an integrity and a love for work and perfection which explain both the quality of the movie and the friendship that has since evolved between the filmmaker and her subject.

Born in West Germany, Berman immigrated to Canada at the age of 12 and studied film at Queen's University, in Kingston. Unsure at first of her career objectives, she initially enrolled in six or seven different classes in a search for her true calling. But it was a chance encounter with Canadian film scholar Peter Harcourt which was to decide her destiny. After auditing one of his courses and editing an alumni film for him, she was hooked. From then on she concentrated all her energies on film studies. With time, Harcourt became a mentor for Berman and she spent her summers working with him on various in-house productions at Queen's.

After graduation in '73, Berman joined the CBC as a researcher in the Current Affairs Department. She soon began to produce and direct documentary films and TV shows including the CBC-produced *Take Thirty*.

All the while, undeterred by the demands of a full-time job, Berman was devoting all her free time to the production of a documentary on Bix Beiderbecke. "I was introduced to his music by a friend and fell in love. My feeling was that anyone capable of pouring so much of his soul into his art had to be a fascinating character... and I was right."

So from a half-hour film, *Bix: Ain't None of Them Play Like Him Yet* grew into a full-length documentary as Berman poured over archives and roamed the country in search of the legendary jazzman.

It was Berman's research into the life of Bix, who died at 28, a victim of the excessive lifestyle of the '20s, which led her to consider making a film on Artie Shaw, himself a man never lured by the trappings of success.

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Oscar nominee

## Brigitte Berman: High on the feeling

She had interviewed Shaw in the course of her film on Bix, and though the project was on her mind for over eight months, she patiently waited for Bix to be completed before mentioning her intentions to Artie Shaw.

The great musician had previously been approached by several filmmakers intent on capturing his story on celluloid, but he had always refused, saying

he wasn't interested in any 'popcorn movie' of his life story. This time he accepted, largely on the basis of *Bix*.

The making of *Artie Shaw* was a labour of love. Still employed at the CBC, Berman worked 100-hour weeks in order to complete her research on Shaw. She poured over archives, newspaper clippings, reviews, personal diaries; spoke with musicians, friends,

associates; traveled across the United States and to Europe in search of his various haunts and retreats, painstakingly stitching together the, as yet, unrecorded facts of his life.

Aware of the exacting nature of her subject, Berman very carefully prepared her interview with him, typing out a 40-page document of his life, in which every detail was fully itemized, almost memorized.

She interviewed Shaw over four long days, delving into every aspect of his life, both the joyful and the painful ones. Unused to being in a situation which he could not fully control, Shaw was somewhat reticent at first, but eventually he graciously answered every question put to him. Emerging from the experience, he is said to have commented: "I feel like my head has been vacuumed."

Though Berman's determination could probably surmount most obstacles, she needs and gratefully acknowledges outside support. Thus she is quick to acknowledge assistance from the Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council as well as Telefilm Canada's Festival office.

But beyond official support, Berman's own dedication and hard work seems to both inspire and motivate those to whom she turns for help; be it, in this case, in eliciting the financial contribution of a jazz aficionado, Dr. Nick Laidlaw, or the constant help and encouragement of her associate producer Don Haig, who provided both facilities and advice throughout the project.

Berman refers in glowing terms to her relationship with Haig whose keen eye and judgement she has come to trust implicitly ever since she worked with him on *Bix*.

Himself intrigued by the Shaw project from the onset, Haig wanted it to be a more commercial, more entertaining feature. He also set two conditions to his involvement: one, that Brigitte get Shaw to agree to an interview and, two, that she get one of his wives to testify.

"I knew that Artie Shaw had been approached by the likes of CBS, ABC and NBC and had turned them all down," says Haig, "so it was most fun watching Brigitte carry through those challenges. Once Shaw and Evelyn Keyes were on board so was I."

In late '84 Berman left her job at the CBC in order to devote all her time to the completion of her project. Then, feeling the need to reassess her own life and goals, she retreated, just as Artie Shaw had done so many times, and went to London where she stayed for several months, working on different feature films.

Never idle for very long, Brigitte Berman is now back in Toronto working on a feature film script. But true to her nature, she would rather not discuss it at this stage. For the moment, she is mostly preoccupied with the publicity for the Oscar-nominated *Artie Shaw: Time is All You've Got*. For, as she says, "once you've made a movie, you can't just walk away from it."