The World Socialist Web Site recently interviewed Emma Franz about Bill Frisell: A Portrait, her most recent film. This is an edited version of that discussion.

Franz has been involved in documentary film projects for more than 12 years. Prior to this, she worked professionally as a jazz musician, performing with Paul Grabowsky, Allan Brown and others. Her first feature-length documentary, Intangible Asset Number 82 (2010), is about a jazz drummer and a Korean shaman. It won Best Foreign Documentary at the Durban International Film Festival and an Australian Film Industry Award for Best Sound in Documentary.

Richard Phillips: Why a movie about Bill Frisell? What was the attraction?

Emma Franz: I’m a musician, a singer, and studied classical piano up to concert level, as well as guitar and cello. To me, Bill encapsulates some of the more elusive things that resonate when I’m listening to music. I love his phrasing, his sense of space and the soundscapes. What also appeals to me about Bill is that he shies away from celebrity. He’s a deep thinker, a humble person, and everything for him is about the music.

I also love the fact that his music is kind of genreless. People call him a jazz musician because he’s an improviser in the tradition of African-American jazz, but he’s completely open as a musician and has a unique style. So I wanted to explore how all that happens, and make a film about music and the creative process, not one about celebrity or career.

Richard Phillips: Towards the end of the film he speaks about his frustrations with the strict categorisation of music, and says that people just have to immerse themselves in the music.

Emma Franz: Yes. My last film was seen by millions of people around the world, because somebody put it on BitTorrent [filesharing]. But I didn’t get a cent; it left me broke. If the government is not prepared to step in to protect filmmakers’ and artists’ copyright and their ability to earn, then they have to provide proper funding for the arts.

It’s all well and good to call it an open market, capitalism
and so forth, but artists must have the ability to earn money. There is no protection or even political discussion about this. It’s also outrageous when you have politicians deriding artists and describing state-funding of the arts as ‘handouts.’ We’re on a downhill path in this country at the moment.

RP: This is occurring as governments everywhere are providing massive tax cuts to the corporations.

EF: Yes. I just read an article this morning about how 49 million people in the US are living in poverty and 80 percent of the total population in America are almost on the poverty line.

How can politicians keep talking about trickle-down economics when you have these sorts of figures? Years ago people like you and me knew that the trickle-down argument was bogus, but it’s glaringly obvious now.

People like Mozart only survived because they had patrons.

RP: True, but those patrons were enlightened figures compared to the cultural barbarians in charge today.

EF: The other side of the argument is that poor people and workers should have access to serious music and art. That’s another reason for it to be subsidised by the government.

RP: That’s right. Could you speak now about how you put the film together?

EF: I’d finished filming in 2012, but then it took me a long time to raise the money, edit and complete the film. The editing process was a couple of years, whenever I could get the time to do it.

I had about 300 hours of footage, which included multiple cameras shots from the various gigs, and so first I edited all the music into a rough cut, with material featuring different aspects I wanted to highlight. Then I had to negotiate the rights to the music and get the license fees.

I didn’t do very well on that count. Lots of people wouldn’t give me the rights and others would, but wanted far too much money. I’m not saying the musicians and composers didn’t deserve it, but it was unrealistic for an independent, basically self-funded film.

This restriction, in some ways, helped me narrow things down. Hans Wendl, Bill’s publisher, gave me the rights to use Bill’s compositions and new live performances, and so I recut the film to reflect that. Although I missed out on some of his country music collaborations with Buddy Miller and those guys—or that side of Bill that plays Madonna, Bob Dylan, John Lennon—in the end it worked out well, because it honours him as a composer.

RP: Your film is also an important document because of the interviews with Jim Hall, Paul Motian and John Abercrombie, who all died within a two-year period, and before the film was released.

EF: Yes, that was very sad. But I felt very honoured to have met these three musical greats, and glad that I was able to capture them and their spirit and generosity in some way.

Some of the film reviewers drive me crazy, even those who like the documentary, when they say it’s full of talking heads praising Bill. But they don’t give it any context. Every comment is there to provide insights into his character and musical approach.

RP: But those whom you interview are not just talking heads, they’re other musicians—his peers—who are sharing an experience or idea that has come out of their collaboration with him. What did you learn from the experience, as a filmmaker and musician?

EF: That’s difficult to answer. You’re always learning when you’re making a film. Regarding the music, I began the project to learn from Bill, not so I could play the guitar like him, but to understand his creative conceptions. I suppose you learn by osmosis. It’s gradual and perhaps hard to pinpoint.

At one point in the documentary he says, “We had a great gig the other night, but I’ve got to forget about that because I don’t want it to block something new from happening.” This really impacted on me.

Of course, every musician understands this on some level, but when you see it in practice, it’s a reminder that you have to be brave and not just repeat something that you’ve already done that feels creatively successful. You have to keep doing something new—not necessarily on a grand scale—and have an open mind. This is necessary if you’re trying to use music or any art form as a conduit between people. You have to approach every new collaboration and musical experience as a separate thing. That’s my biggest takeaway.

RP: What’s been the response to the film?

EF: It’s been great. One thing I’ve noticed, particularly at film festivals, is that people are coming who don’t know Bill’s work at all.

RP: What was Bill’s response?

EF: I took it to Milan, when he was on tour there, and we watched it on my laptop with headphones. He had tears rolling down his face. A big part of that was seeing Jim and Paul, who had passed away by that stage. He was very moved by it.

He also said that it was like being on the inside of his brain, something he also said to Mike Gibb during the orchestral rehearsals in London. This was the best response, because it meant that I’d got it right and hadn’t misrepresented him in any way.

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