

# Arts & Entertainment

## Mann fights Hollywood with music, poetry

By Steve Abariotes

Ron Mann had just arrived in Lincoln following six sleepless nights in Hawaii where he was finishing a script for a film that he would begin shooting in three weeks.

He will be working with Martin Sheen and Emile D'Antonio. D'Antonio, of whom Mann speaks with a fierce loyalty and respect, has influenced him with all of the filmic choices he has had to make in his short career. D'Antonio suggested that Mann, 25, come to Lincoln with his films. It was Friday and *Poetry In Motion* had just started in the Sheldon Film Theatre. Mann told me to stick around for a bit while he and Dan Ladely made sure the volume was OK.

*Imagine The Sound* showed here the day before. In that film, Mann faithfully and respectfully captured the thoughts and music of Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor, Bill Dixon and Paul Bley, all vanguard jazz improvisationalists from the 1960s. Mann's camera takes in its subjects and embraces them in a "laid back" fashion, and is content to simply let the visual information overwhelm the frame.

"I try to make films that don't exploit women, sex or violence. That's already being done in commercials and in Hollywood," Mann says as we walk over to the lounge for some coffee. "I want to show the people something different, open them up to some new alternatives. That doesn't exist right now."

### L.A. 'demonic'

Mann was wearing a red corduroy shirt, wrinkled corduroy trousers and some worn but comfortable-looking timberline boots. Looking somewhat frazzled from all of the sleepless nights, he flopped his brown coat down on the slick, black couch, and fired

up a smoke, while I fired up my tape recorder.

"I started at the top and worked my way down," Mann said with a smile. "I went to L.A. when I was 16 and discovered that it was not the place for me. I didn't want to make other peoples' films. I didn't

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-Ron Mann

want to be told what to do." More disillusionment was to follow.

"I lost faith in film at the Cannes Film Festival. I went there when I was 17. I saw film as a business, and the economics of film: That, to me was shocking. The pigs who watch the stock go up, the distributors who are all crooks, liars and thieves, the critics who get drunk and beat up their wives and then write a lousy review of a film you spent a year on. I saw that in the Babylonesque-crystal ball vision of horror, it was demonic and I lost a sense of film as art. I really do consider film as art. Not many people do.

### Not a snob

"I'm not a cultural snob. I liked *Flashdance*. I liked it because it was a pop phenomenon, a reworking of..." Mann's voice trailed off.

He flicked an ash into the glass ashtray and continued. His voice sounds smooth and is pleasant to listen to. He has been very open thus far, but part of his mind is concerned with how the audience is reacting to *Poetry In Motion* over in the theater across the gallery. The film is half over now and Mann will answer questions afterwards.

Mann does not consider himself a poet, but he is a mediocre musician. He plays the piano, saxophone, harmonica and guitar. He once played in a jazz band called Earl Fruchtman And The Roka Sam Sara Orchestra. I told him that I thought Cecil Taylor's compositions were difficult to listen to because of the atonal quality of the music.

"The question isn't the difficulty of the music though, the question is being able to choose whether you like the music or don't like the music. Right now there is no way of choosing," he said.

### MTV 'crap'

"I think MTV is a racist, offensive, exploitive piece of crap. Those... who run it started out distributing and exploiting Neil Young and all of those rock n' roll films like *The Great Cocaine Cowboys* and if that's the direction music is going in then it's a big pain in the ass. It's all designed for profits...I don't know what the alternative is. There has to be new aesthetics for a new world for new music."

Mann's advice to up-and-coming filmmakers is simple: Go about making a film with nothing but a fanatical devotion, whether that means selling your car, mortgaging your house or whatever. Mann takes the same fresh, aesthetically pure approach to film that the musicians do in *Imagine The Sound*.

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## Bar band beats back blue Mondays

By Tish Mockler and Donna Sisson

Most people go through life hating Mondays; most people have never discovered the blues.

The blues, a music which can purge the depression of a day like Monday, can be found at the Zoo Bar, 136 N. 14th St.

Currently the Backbeats play Blue Mondays at the Zoo Bar and will continue every Monday through March. They frequently play in Omaha and have plans to play at Bill's Saloon in Lincoln.

"One of the things that makes our band unique is that we play a traditional (blues) style and not very many people do," Marc Wilson, drummer for the Backbeats said in an interview last Monday.

Other members of the band include Sean Benjamin on guitar, piano and vocals; Joe Cabral on tenor and baritone saxophone and vocals; Jon Lawton on vocals and guitar; and John Sheppard on bass guitar.

Cabral and Lawton, formerly of Risky Shift, started the Backbeats in March of 1983.

Marc Wilson started by playing Baptist gospel music for a church choir. Sean Benjamin has done solo work and recorded a single called "Tribute to Collins," of which Albert Collins bought 50 copies, Benjamin said. John Sheppard, the band's newest member, has played in primarily rock and roll bands.

As the Backbeats, they are still trying to understand each other's styles, said Lawton. With the blues it is important to feel comfortable with the other musicians and their styles, he said.

### Open mind

They mentioned having some problems getting together to practice because two of the members, Benjamin and Wilson, live in Lincoln and the others live in Omaha. Perhaps it is this distance, forcing them to improvise, which allows them to play the blues with a freshness that lets the audience know the blues are still alive.

When they play, their shows are very relaxed. Often times they have

musicians from the audience come on stage and play with them, and at times the music seems to just play itself. The music is presented in an easy and natural manner that puts the listener at ease allowing him to do what he wants with the music. It can be cried to, laughed with, danced to, or just used as a background rhythm for the evening.

The best way to listen to the blues is with an open mind, Wilson said. "It's a give-and-take thing. All through the history of music there has always been the players and the audience and the two work together for the ultimate experience," he said.

Recent artists such as Stevie Ray Vaughn have helped to increase the number of blues fans at a time when some people thought the blues to be dead, Wilson said.

### Room for creativity

"There is a huge creative space within the blues," Lawton said. Even if a band plays the same song and tries to copy it, it is impossible to exactly replicate it, unlike other forms of music. The blues is an intimate expression with a large element of style, he said.

Most of the original music they play is written by Benjamin and Lawton. Other songs consist of traditional numbers done in the Backbeats' unpretentious style. It is a sound which seems to have grown around their knowledge of and love for the blues. Each time they recreate an old song, it is their own. The Backbeats' unique style of improvisation makes them the band they are.

"We're sitting there playing and all of a sudden I look over and Joe is (looking) at me to start the next solo and I'm not even there and I have to start a solo right then—that's where it starts. It's a very existential kind of art form: Here it is. It's now; the notes, the vibrations, the strings. It only lasts for a few seconds; it's there and it's gone," Lawton said.

### Feeling music

They agree their goal is to keep blues alive as a tradition. "Much of



Donna Sisson/Daily Nebraskan

The Backbeats performed at last week's edition of Blue Mondays. From left to right, band members are Sean Benjamin, Joe Cabral, John Sheppard and Jon Lawton. Marc Wilson, the group's drummer, is not pictured.

the younger blues music is not traditional," Wilson said. "It tends to have an uptown modern style that ends up sounding more like rock." Sometimes original work deviates from the blues form, Lawton said, which is one reason they stick to older songs.

It is one musical form unique to America, Wilson said. The blues are important because all American music forms have their roots in the blues, which started as gospel music in the late 1800s and early 1900s, he said.

We spent almost an hour talking

about the blues, seeking a definition and understanding of it. It is almost more like a concept than a musical classification. "It's a natural expression and that is its beauty; it's feeling music," Wilson said. "The more you listen to it the more you understand it."

As we played back the tape from the interview and searched for the vocabulary to explain the blues and the band, we noticed that often the music in the background drowned out their words. That is just the way it is with the blues; the music speaks for itself.