

DOCUMENTING A RETURN TO HISTORICAL JAZZ
THROUGH MUSICAL RESEARCH AND CREATION.

by

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Abstract

In 1985, Bill Hubbard, a prolific big band jazz arranger, died and left behind a horde of musical charts, as well as musical protégés in sons Glenn and Curt Hubbard and their friend Matt Vance. Much of the music Hubbard arranged had never seen the light of day since being written, and even less was heard within the context of a jazz ensemble. In 2017, Vance and the Hubbard brothers solidified plans to assemble a team of musicians to play and record a selection of Hubbard’s music for an album. The main recording session took place in June of 2018 in Jacksonville, Florida. Using footage from this recording session and compiled from archives, I produced a documentary entitled *The Legacy Sessions*.

Production of the documentary had two purposes. Purpose No. 1 was to tell a story I believe was unique and worthy of telling, and was one I believed I could accurately convey through a video production. The history of the impact that Hubbard had on his contemporaries and successors is a powerful one, lush with family ties and memoirs of musical adventures. Through footage of the recording project and interviews with those involved, I combined visual and auditory content into a story that does justice to the Hubbard musical legacy. Two distinct themes are prevalent through the story: a subversion of the extinction of jazz music as popular music, and the importance of passing down experiences to preserve the Hubbard family’s rich musical history.

Purpose No. 2 was to hone and utilize my video production skills by challenging myself to apply new and foreign editing techniques; employ a large array of cameras in the filming stage; dig deeper than I ever have into interviews and research to gather information about the story; and utilize proper journalistic strategy in producing an accurate and captivating rendition of the story of the Bill Hubbard Orchestra. The end result, then, is not only a piece of film which documents an interesting story, but also an exercise in video production that reflects my own learnings throughout my career, and especially during this project.

Background/Procedure

From start to finish, this project was a practice in modern multimedia journalism, a format that is becoming wildly popular as a communication device in the 21st century. From pitching the idea for the film and arranging interviews to filming b-roll, editing and promoting the documentary, the project tested and allowed me to hone my abilities for digital storytelling.

In April 2018, Dr. Glenn Hubbard and I discussed the idea of filming a project he was working on with his brother Curtis Hubbard and his close friend Matt Vance. They were gathering about two dozen musicians in one building, for one weekend, to record an ambitious large-scale musical album based on the arrangements of Glenn's father Bill Hubbard and his contemporaries. The bulk of the project would take place in mid-June 2018 at the Bolles School in Jacksonville, Florida, a location central to most of the musicians participating in the project. They needed someone to film the project, both for historical and promotional purposes, and I saw the project as an opportunity to produce my first full-scale short documentary. Shortly after meeting, we agreed that I would be the sole documentarian for the project, and I was given creative freedom to tell the story how I saw fit – something that came relatively easily once I saw how rich with history and passion the events of the weekend were.

After taking on the project, I had about two months before shooting the roughly 20 hours of recording that would take place over two and a half days. I used this time to prepare logistically for the filming portion of the project. I asked myself a number of questions:

What cameras do I want to use?

How many cameras do I want to use?

What lighting and camera setups will I employ?

How will I maneuver equipment during crucial recording sessions to avoid adversely affecting the focus of the musicians or the studio audio?

Who should I interview?

How long do I want the documentary to be?

What is the story I will be telling?

Some of these questions were easier to answer than others. In the case of the last one, I really didn't know what the story would be until I sat down with my interview subjects and got to know them better. I did as much background research and info-gathering as I could ahead of time, but the story, as it often goes, didn't show itself until I was able to piece together what I learned from the subjects of the project.

In the meantime, I used the scale of the project as a frame of reference for how many cameras I should use and where I should set them up. As the sole photographer, I knew that I couldn't be in six places at once, and that in order to effectively document the recording process, I would need to film multiple instrument sections on any given song.

Additionally, with no budget, I needed to use what equipment I had available and purchase new equipment as necessary. I was lucky enough to be able to use multiple lighting rigs and one camera

from the School of Communication at ECU to complement my setup. In all, I decided on six cameras:

- 1 Canon 5D Mark IV used to shoot roving and mobile live shots and b-roll
- 2 Sony FDR- AX100s used to statically shoot the trumpets, trombones and woodwinds
- 1 Panasonic AG-HMC150 loaned from the ECU School of Communication used to shoot b-roll during location scouting and to statically shoot the rhythm section
- 1 DJI Spark used to shoot aerial b-roll
- 1 GoPro Hero 3 used for archived footage and off-scene vocal and rhythm recording sessions

In addition to these preparation questions and more, I took notes on what I knew I planned on doing during the shoot. This included b-roll shots that would be necessary, techniques I wished to employ in my filming and some questions I wanted to ask my interviewees. After preparing, it was simply a matter of performing the shoot, and after that, producing the documentary.

On June 15, 16 and 17, 2018, at the Bolles School in Jacksonville, Florida, I shot video of setup, musical rehearsal and performance, audio engineering, interviews and candid interactions for about eight hours each day throughout the recording of the 25-track record. The shoot went, more or less, without a hitch. Each day, I imported, cataloged and backed up footage from the day's events. Altogether, from six cameras used, the length of raw on-location video recorded totaled around 30 hours. In addition to this, I was granted use of archived family video and footage of additional recording sessions that brought the running total up to around 36 hours of video to work with.

Considering I was aiming for a sub-20-minute documentary, I was initially afraid I had overshot what I needed in order to produce the documentary, feeling I would get lost in the many hours of footage. On the contrary, and this is true of most documentaries, the abundance of unique shots and angles gave me greater creative freedom to pick what shots I wanted to use to tell the story of the Bill Hubbard Orchestra. *The Legacy Sessions* would not be anywhere near the caliber of quality it is with the array of selections found within the 36-some hours of footage I had at my disposal.

Concerning the editing process, the most time-consuming portion was transcribing the interviews that would serve as the voice of the project. However, this was absolutely crucial in order to develop a timeline and script for the story. I chose not to do any voiceover, and instead opt for an impartial approach that allowed Glenn, Curt and Matt to tell the story for themselves.

Once I pieced together a storyline from the interviews, I filled the documentary with relevant video and audio. I employed a variety of tools and techniques to make the production as professional and engaging as possible using my resources. I employed color correction, stabilization and cropping to my footage as necessary before incorporating it into the project. In choosing footage to use, I delicately balanced the use of natural sound video and b-roll in a variety of focal lengths, angles, and cut techniques to produce a dynamic and aesthetically appealing sequence. I incorporated graphics for lower thirds, titles and credits to provide information to the audience without detracting from the authenticity of the viewing experience. I also used historical photos as needed in order to provide insight to the background of the story.

I finished the documentary in December 2018, with its final running time at 16 minutes and 41 seconds. I believe the length of the film is the right amount of time to convey the importance and legacy of the Bill Hubbard Orchestra story, while still serving as a suitable and effective marketing tool for the culminating album. The length of the film also qualified it for entry into certain short film festivals, as well as an ideal length for educational presentations.

Publication/Reception

The first publication took place shortly after the documentary was finished, on my personal YouTube channel, in the form of a mostly-unannounced “soft premiere.” There it served, and still serves, as a way for the musicians and all involved in the project to show to their family and friends and share the story of the ambitious project.

Following the group’s acquisition of a record deal with New York based music label Jazzheads and a short promotional period, the album – entitled *Where or When* for its preeminent track – was released for listening on a variety of download and streaming services including Apple Music, Spotify, Amazon and YouTube. Coinciding with this release was a posting of *The Legacy Sessions* on the Facebook page for the Bill Hubbard Orchestra, where it has garnered over 12,000 views in just over a month. The documentary showed to be a successful visual companion to the album, garnering significant interest among those following the band’s progress and those who came across the project of their own accord.

During this time, I submitted the film to an annual film and media festival hosted by the Broadcast Education Association called the Festival of Media Arts. The Festival of Media Arts receives over 1,500 entries annually and from those recognizes around 250 entrants during the festival. To my delight, the documentary was awarded First Place for Student Short-Form Documentary. The film was screened at the festival in Las Vegas in April 2019, and I was able to attend to represent my film and meet other filmmakers and companies from around the nation and world.

I also presented the documentary, and the creative process behind it, at ECU’s annual Research and Creative Achievement Week (RCAW) in April 2019, where it received first place in Undergraduate Fine Arts.

In addition to these recognitions, I have also presented *The Legacy Sessions* at the ECU College of Fine Arts and Communication ECU Excels 2019 event, as well as part of a student panel for Greenville-Pitt County Chamber of Commerce’s Grow Local initiative, which aims to educate thousands of middle and high schoolers about industries and careers in Eastern North Carolina.

The Legacy Sessions can be seen by following this link or by searching “The Legacy Sessions” on YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x02Qg3kIWBE>