A conversation with Emma Franz, director of *Bill Frisell: A Portrait*

Richard Phillips
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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: As a musician, Bill's music resonates with me and encapsulates some of the more elusive elements of music I'm trying to elucidate through my filmmaking. 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. Some people refer to him as a jazz musician because he's an improviser, though not necessarily in the tradition of African-American jazz, some call him Americana, but he's completely open as a musician and has a unique style. So I wanted to explore aspects which help make that happen, and make a film about music and the creative process, rather than one about celebrity or career.

RP: 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. The *World Socialist Web Site* has been commenting on and polemicising against those who argue for racial particularism in art, and the claim that only African-Americans can properly interpret blues or jazz, etc, etc. Could you comment on this and Bill Frisell's attitude to it?

EF: A lot of people I know, and particularly jazz musicians, try to stay out of that argument and prefer to define themselves as improvising musicians. One of the incredible attributes of music is its ability to transcend borders, and although that sounds clichéd, I've often found it to be true. This is the theme of my last film [*Intangible Asset Number 82*].

Music helps bridge gaps between language, culture, lifestyles, or age groups. This is what people mean when they say music is a universal language, because it allows people, whether playing or listening, to connect on another level. It's a great equaliser, which reaches into our humanity and emotions, instead of trying to interpret through racial presumption and other awful barriers.

RP: Were you filming in the US during the lead up to the presidential elections? What was Bill Frisell's attitude to those events?

EF: No, we'd finished filming by that stage, but I obviously spoke with him later and he, like all sensitive musicians and artists, was very concerned about Trump's victory and what it would mean.

Also at home, I'm very concerned about the direction Australia is heading and the attitudes being promoted towards the arts. This is very dangerous for the overall cultural health of the community and society. If people do not have the opportunity to create, think, interact and have experiences to open their minds, they are more vulnerable to lies and divisive ideas.

This is why I produce films that try and encourage people to make music. Obviously Bill is brilliant and talented, but I'm also attempting to show that he works at it every day. He thinks deeply about it, and that enhances his life and the people he interacts with.

I want my films to say, 'Just play music, you don't have to be a genius.' Many people are put off playing because of the widespread notion one needs to be a genius to achieve anything great. I find films that propagate that idea counterproductive. Music should be inclusive and accessible to all people, no matter what level they perform at or the time they can allocate to it.

RP: The assault on the arts, from Liberal and Labor governments alike, is accelerating. It is aimed at desensitising the population. Artists desperately require state funding and other financial support in order to survive.

EF: Yes. My last film was seen by millions of people around the world, but I was left with huge debts because of the proliferation of torrents on pirate sites. If the government is not

prepared to step in to protect filmmakers' and artists' copyright and their ability to earn, then they should 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, often full time plus, and then whenever I could find the time to do it whilst I was topping up income through other means.

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.

Many publishers 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 film reviewers, even those who like the documentary, comment that it's full of talking heads praising Bill. But they aren't able to recognise the 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. Sometimes it's hard to define what you've learned, because it's gradual and perhaps hard to pinpoint. I try to make this point towards the start of the film, where Bill states "sometimes putting words to something can limit what it is."

At one point in the documentary he says [paraphrasing], "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 the inside of his brain, something he also said to Mike Gibbs 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.