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Love Story: Keep On Keepin' On

A new Clark Terry documentary tells a sweet, inspiring tale

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Justin Kauflin (L) and Clark Terry (photo courtesy of Radius-TWC)

When Alan Hicks, a drummer and surfer from Wollongong, Australia, came to New Jersey's William Paterson University to study jazz in 2002, he couldn't have predicted he'd be starting the friendship of a lifetime with nonagenarian trumpet legend Clark Terry. He also never would have thought that one day he'd be making the rounds to promote *Keep On Keepin' On*, his superb feature-length documentary on Terry, co-produced by Quincy Jones. "I didn't want to make a movie just about jazz," says Hicks, 31, just before a weekend of high-profile screenings in New York in late September. "I wanted it to be a broader story."

Aided by his friend and cinematographer Adam Hart, Hicks chose to make the story about Terry's relationship with pianist Justin Kauflin, a fellow William Paterson student. The ailing Terry, or C.T. as Kauflin often refers to him, was losing his sight; Kauflin, now 28, had lost his at age 11. Their shared experience of blindness proved a powerful bond, but music even more so.

In the course of filming, Terry's health spiraled downward until he lost both his legs to diabetes. Yet he continued to teach Kauflin in any way he could—singing phrases, exploring rhythms, sharing a lifetime of wisdom. "To me, the famous words [from Terry] are 'You know, I've been thinking about this tune,' and that means we're going to be busy for the next four hours," Kauflin says, seated in a restaurant booth in Manhattan across from Quincy Jones. "That's how it's been for the last eight years."

Hicks got the broader story he was after. "It's about humanity," Jones says of the film. "People cried. I've never seen so much truth on the screen in my life, and I've done 40 movies. All truth." The sight of Terry so deeply debilitated, yet still so full of music and life, could hardly be more moving. "I've never seen anybody be so positive and selfless," Hicks says. "[Clark] is struggling with his mortality and he's thinking about his students and their development the whole time."

For Hicks, Terry's insights into practice and creativity extend well beyond music. "I was able to use Clark's lessons to help me make the movie," he says. "It's about focused repetition, getting in that headspace. Another thing that Clark instilled in me is pacing, being critical of yourself without being dark on yourself. That works in the editing room because you're doing 15-hour days for over a year, and you have to be critical because it's not going to get better, but you can't be dark or it's going to turn out dark."

Quincy Jones' involvement came through happenstance, but it made perfect sense: Terry mentored the teenage Jones in the late '40s, and just a decade later left Duke Ellington to become straw boss in Jones' great but short-lived big band. In the film, when Jones turns up at the Terry home in Pine Bluff, Ark., there's no mistaking the depth of their 60-plus years of friendship. Terry inquires of Jones, "How's your ass?" Jones asks Terry, "Have you been playing?" When Terry says, "I don't even know where that motherfucker is," Jones responds, "You played enough on it, Sac"—a statement at once heartbreaking and beautiful. ("We call each other Sac," Jones says of the nickname, short for "sack-a-doo-doo.")

Hicks plans to release a *Keep On Keepin' On* soundtrack, which he describes as "essentially a mixtape of Clark's favorite music. Whenever we show the movie to him he's singing along and having a ball, asking me to stop the movie so that he can finish singing the songs." There are moments in the film when the muse carries Terry away, and he begins singing old favorites a cappella in bed. In these marvelous sequences, Kauflin fades in with subtle piano accompaniment as teacher and student join in a technologically enabled duet. "What blows my mind," says Kauflin, "is that when I'd get the

track, he'd be singing in E-flat, straight up, the key that it's always in. No moving around, no nothing. He's singing it in the key. He remembers."

Kauflin is slated to release his second recording, produced by Jones, in January, with Matthew Stevens on guitar, Christopher Smith on bass and Billy Williams on drums. Terry's lessons will no doubt inform his music for a long time, though he's also pursuing the principal jazz goal of being himself. What *Keep on Keepin' On* depicts so vividly is how that torch gets passed, as one storied career draws to a close while another finds its promising beginning. "When I see it I just relive everything," Kauflin says. "It transports me. It sounds corny but there really is so much love in the film, and it comes from C.T."

"That's not corny," Jones interjects. "Love ain't corny, man." (For information on screenings, visit keeponkeepinon.com.)

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David R. Adler writes about jazz and assorted topics. His work has appeared in *JazzTimes*, *NPR Music*, *WBGO.org*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Village Voice*, *DownBeat*, *Time Out New York*, and many other publications. From 2010-2017 he taught jazz history at the Aaron Copland School of Music (Queens College-CUNY). In summer 2017, after 30 years in New York (apart from two in Philadelphia), David relocated with his family to Athens, Georgia. There he continues to write about music and perform solo as a guitarist/vocalist.

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