

*The Anatomy of Vince Guaraldi.*

By Andrew Thomas and Toby Gleason.

Jazz Casual Productions/Thomas & Friends Productions, Inc., 2010.

116 minutes. DVD format, color.

Vince Guaraldi (1928–1976) wrote and performed a few of the late twentieth century's most popular jazz songs, yet his name remains unrecognized, and his personal story is a complete mystery. A recent documentary, *The Anatomy of Vince Guaraldi*, attempts to correct these oversights and honor this San Francisco-based musician's career, which spanned two decades from 1956 until his early death in 1976 at age forty-three. To do so, the filmmakers restored and presented excerpts from a 1963 short film about Guaraldi, made use of archival performance footage and recordings, and conducted interviews with musicians, record company executives, jazz historians, comedians, and Anglican ministers. Despite this effort, *The Anatomy of Vince Guaraldi* does little to expand upon the premise of the short film on which it is based, focusing—almost to the point of annoyance—on one song in particular, “Cast Your Fate to the Wind,” while simultaneously wandering far afield into discussions that do not shed much light on Guaraldi.

The initial basis for *The Anatomy of Vince Guaraldi* apparently grew from the rediscovery of a short film made about Guaraldi in 1963 by Ralph J. Gleason, then a music critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Titled *The Anatomy of a Hit*, Gleason's film explored what it took to write a hit song. It aired as a three-part special on National Educational Television. The film then went into the vaults, where it remained for over forty years until Gleason's son Toby Gleason and filmmaker Andrew Thomas brought it back to light.

Although the elder Gleason's film was shot in 1963, it focused on the success that Guaraldi achieved a year earlier, in 1962, with the release of his album *Jazz Impressions of Black Orpheus* and its major hit single, “Cast Your Fate to the Wind.” The song—on which Guaraldi was actually accompanied by Colin Bailey on drums and Monty Budwig on bass (not Jerry Granelli and Fred Marshall, respectively, as shown in the film)—received massive airplay on pop radio stations, reached number twenty-two on the Top Forty chart, earned a gold record, and eventually won the award for Best Instrumental Jazz Composition at the 1963 Grammy Awards.

Perhaps most importantly, as *The Anatomy of Vince Guaraldi* reveals, the song's popularity opened the door to a number of opportunities for Guaraldi, the most significant of which was his subsequent musical contribution to the television program *A Charlie Brown Christmas* in 1965, including his song “Linus and Lucy,” which became one of the most recognizable jazz compositions of all time. He would write the music for sixteen *Peanuts* holiday specials.

Unfortunately, the film fails to provide a clear understanding of who Guaraldi was and what shaped him. Indeed, though the title is *The Anatomy of Vince Guaraldi*, the film offers an extremely limited medical chart. The film does not mention the first two decades of his life and never manages to offer any substantive analysis of his career or his inner life. As a result, many basic facts of his biography remain obscured, and one is left wondering where he grew up, when and why he began playing piano, who his musical influences were, etc. In addition, music historians will want to know how he gravitated toward jazz and where he fits in the framework of the West Coast music scene.

Similarly, students and scholars of Italian American studies might ask: What role, if any, did Italian-American culture and community play in shaping Vince Guaraldi? For example, though it is never mentioned in the film, several biographical sources reveal that Guaraldi, a third-generation Italian American, came from a musical family: His uncles were early jazz singer Muzzy Marcellino and bandleader Joe Marcellino.

In fact, the two weakest moments in the film deal with pivotal times in his life: his formative years and his death. For the former, we receive a one-minute photo montage, titled "Early Vince," which is presented to some background music. Images from his childhood pass across the screen without any explanation. Similarly, the film addresses his death with only a brief silence. We are never told that he suffered a fatal heart attack in a motel while resting in between performances at a small club in Menlo Park, California; certainly, such an early death warrants at least some discussion.

Even worse, the film veers off course numerous times, most glaringly during the discussion of Lenny Bruce. For some ten minutes, none of those interviewed mention Guaraldi, and while the aim of this portion was ostensibly to establish some of the nightclub context in which Guaraldi played, it is presented in such a tangential manner that it seems like an unnecessary detour.

Likewise, the filmmakers offer superficial and disappointing accounts of Guaraldi's presence at civil rights rallies, student protests, and religious settings. Aside from being present to perform, what was the level of his commitment to those movements? It is not clear.

Some of those interviewed also lend little to the film, and I wonder why they are even included. Jazz legend Dave Brubeck, for example, speaks several times, but never mentions Guaraldi. Pianist George Winston, who talks extensively, offered very little aside from reinforcing his own admiration of Guaraldi. Several others offer nothing but platitudes.

Often, the most effective interviewees are the musicians who played with him: Drummer Granelli is insightful, though I wish guitarist Eddie Duran and bassist Dean Reilly, who were both interviewed while standing in a record store, could have elaborated more upon their memories of Guaraldi. And while they do not offer much about Guaraldi, singer Jon Hendricks and comedian Dick Gregory are thoughtful and interesting commentators who reveal a great deal about music and the San Francisco jazz club scene, in particular at the hungry i, where Guaraldi was the house pianist for a number of years.

In sum, *The Anatomy of Vince Guaraldi* often informs more about the music and spoken word scenes in San Francisco's small clubs during the early 1960s than it does about the man. It focuses primarily on the impact "Cast Your Fate to the Wind" had on Guaraldi's career, how others have been influenced by this song, and some aspects of the performance and protest cultures that surrounded him. The archival footage added value and was well integrated into the film, and some of the interviews were both engaging and thought-provoking. Despite these positive characteristics, the film ultimately failed to deliver what its title promises: an in-depth exploration and analysis of the life and music of Vince Guaraldi.

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