

'Tis Autumn  
2005

Veteran filmmaker Raymond De Felitta's first feature documentary film "'Tis Autumn – The Search for Jackie Paris" captures the essence of a sweeping jazz tone poem. Entered in this year's Sundance Film Festival Documentary competition, the art of this highly poignant and very human tale involves questions of overtones and undertones and the mystery of whether or not true genius responds to rational analysis.

Why did the late, great, and legendary jazz vocalist Jackie Paris, long referred to as a "singers singer," a "shoe-in," and a "sure shot," never bust out? Why did the man publicly hailed by Ella Fitzgerald, Peggy Lee, and Anita O'Day as their all-time favorite vocal artist never gain acceptance among record buying and club-hopping jazz fans.

Why did the celebrated be-bop crooner, the first to record a vocal to Thelonious Monk's classic "'Round Midnight" and a member of Charlie Parker's famed combo of the mid-1940s, fail to gel with the in-crowd? Why did a kid who won a "Downbeat" award, packed clubs on 52d Street, and headlined with Lionel Hampton never make the grade?

To this day, those-in-the-know point to his immortal recording of the Hoagy Carmichael–Johnny Mercer standard "Skylark" as the last word in jazz voice. The problem is that those-in-the-know could still hold their annual reunion in a phone booth.

Most jazz buffs have never heard of the cat. And that included me, until, that is, I sat in wonder as De Felitta's brilliantly moving and touching documentary unfolded before me.

The art of the film never wavers, either in pace or moving parts. Quite interesting cameo interviews with the likes of longtime Lighthouse icon Howard Rumsey, Dr. Billy Taylor, Terry Gibbs, James Moody, Hank Jones, George Wein, and Phil Schaap are interspersed with new and archival performance footage, recently discovered film, still photos, and incomparable never-released recordings.

The heart of the film, however, resides in lingering camera close-ups of Paris himself as he stares across the room at the lens, confronts his emotions during his first visit back to his old neighborhood, or closes his eyes while succumbing to what very well might be an ice-cream flashback. There are a thousand of them. And they are all to die for.

Even as one comes to grip with the seeming unfairness and shimmering darkness that somehow shrouds the life of Jackie Paris, the fact that you are finally witness to his overpowering musical genius makes the time invested all the more valuable. And it gives added meaning to the fact that the filmmaker had the vision, energy, and insight to reconfigure such an important artistic landscape.

And that is what this film is all about -- the perfect pairing of artist and subject and the blurring of the line separating their individual need to continually seek until they arrive at artistic truth. Is

there a final knowing? And, if there is, does searching get you there? Can you truly get your arms around flair and ingenuity?

Once again, it's all about the journey... and with Raymond De Felitta at the helm, what a long, strange, haunting, and wonderful trip the search for Jackie Paris turned out to be.