

MICHEL
PETRUCCIANI

A FILM BY MICHAEL RADFORD

WHO IS MICHEL PETRUCCIANI?

By Alexandre Petrucciani

“People don’t understand that to be a human being it isn’t necessary to be six feet tall. What counts is what you have in your head and in your body. And particularly what you have in your soul.”

Michel Petrucciani

SYNOPSIS

Michel Petrucciani was a startling and original man, both by the nature of his physical condition and of his outstanding musical talent. This is the story of how he achieved fame and fortune through his indomitable will and force of personality. If the definition of true greatness is the realization of something that seems beyond human aspiration, then Michel Petrucciani had greatness in spades. Born with glass bone disease, and standing three feet tall as an adult, Michel Petrucciani overcame extraordinary obstacles to become an internationally acclaimed jazz artist. Giving his first professional concert at the age of 13, he rapidly ascended to the heights, playing alongside some of the world’s finest jazzmen. During his lifetime Michel Petrucciani sold over 1.5 million albums worldwide and gave hundreds of concerts, appearing in major cities across the globe.

Through a wealth of interviews and riveting archival material MICHEL PETRUCCIANI tells the remarkable story of a man driven by an insatiable and all-consuming hunger for life and all it has to offer - travel, women, art - a supremely talented force of nature who defeated devastating handicaps to become a true musical giant.

To me, he is Dad, my hero, my model, my pride and my courage, but to others? Perhaps hope, a feeling, a shared emotion, or what we call “genius”. I was too young at the time to understand who he really was. I wondered why he played by himself in front of thousands of people and why we all had to sit in our chairs for two hours. I was used to seeing him behind his piano. All I had to do was to play on the sitting room floor, the room where he composed, to hear a recital. Today I understand how lucky I was to have had such a talented father. His music isn’t confined to jazz. It’s completely open music, open to everything and to everyone. To appreciate a certain style of music you have to understand it - the phrases, the rhythm, the melody. In jazz this principle is even more vital given the coded architecture of call and response between the musicians. In my father’s playing this complexity vanishes. We’re no longer listening to jazz but to a total music. We don’t feel the years of sheer hard work it took to get there, everything seems fluid and simple. However my father didn’t consider himself an accomplished player. He was never satisfied even though some considered he had reached a level practically impossible to achieve, like a distant lighthouse. He never believed he had reached the harbour. To me this was his greatest talent: always trying to go further, to get better, always working to get closer to a goal situated in the infinite.

When I’m asked to talk about my father today, I still see him through a child’s eyes. He was joyful, very calm and always smiling. Life hadn’t dealt him the best cards with which to blossom. But thanks to his courage and his optimism, he never gave up, he managed to take from life the good humour and lulling joy we hear in most of his compositions. Music is a language, an infinity of words and nuances that allows us to share, to let the world know what is alive in our spirit and our heart. It allows us to get to know a person better because it is the expression of feelings, internal desires. When I listen to my father today I feel his happiness but also a past both melancholy and filled with hope, a battle between joy and sadness, a battle we all share. I think the message my father wanted to transmit is one of courage and hope. Everything is possible if you give yourself the means, and human beings have no limit. No matter if we are born tall, short, handsome or ugly, anything we want can be acquired through will and work; Michel is the perfect example. If it was up to me, this is the lesson I would like audiences to remember him by, more so even than the beauty and the intensity of his music. But for anybody else than me, who was Michel Petrucciani?

Alexandre Petrucciani

From "Michel Petrucciani" by Benjamin Halay.

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BIOGRAPHY

Michel Petrucciani

Michel Petrucciani was born in Orange, in the South of France, on December 28th 1962 into a family of semi-professional musicians obsessed by the classics of modern jazz. He grew up bathed in the music of Wes Montgomery, Miles Davis, Django Reinhardt, Art Tatum... and by the age of three he could sing most of their tunes. Fate had dealt him an extraordinary hand. He was born with osteogenesis imperfecta, or glass bone disease, a crippling genetic disorder, which meant that his bones fractured at the slightest pressure (he was born with every bone in his body broken). He never grew beyond 3 feet tall and was subject to terrible pain all his life. As if to compensate for this curse, he was given two gifts: an extraordinary and rare genius for music and a charismatic personality that charmed everyone and had women falling in love with him all his life. Petrucciani's disability never stopped him from anything and although he knew that he would probably not live much beyond forty, he was determined to cram in as much as possible. He had no time for anyone who complained. "What are you complaining about?" he would say. "Look at me! I'm okay! I'm having fun!" And he did. At the age of four he saw Duke Ellington on TV and immediately demanded a piano. His parents bought him a toy which he proceeded to demolish with a hammer, leaving them in no doubt that he wanted a real one. By the age of seven it was clear that he was a prodigy. He was schooled in classical music, but like the rest of his family, his first love was jazz and by the age of thirteen he was a formidable improviser. His first break came at a local jazz festival where it was arranged that he play with the American trumpeter Clark Terry, who took one look at him and refused to believe that this strange little creature could play the blues. Then Michel played a couple of licks for him and Terry was thunderstruck. As someone said later: "At thirteen he sounded like a world-weary black man lost in a piano bar somewhere in Mexico..." Three years later, he met the drummer Aldo Romano and they immediately became very close. At this time Petrucciani could not walk, so Aldo carried him everywhere. He eventually took him to Paris to see Jean-Jacques Pussiau, the owner of Owl Records. Between 1981 and 1985 Michel Petrucciani recorded five albums, including the classic "Toot Sweet" with saxophonist Lee Konitz. Up until then he had been performing in local jazz festivals around the south of France, but in 1981 he played at the Theatre de la Ville at the Paris Jazz Festival and instantly caused a sensation. A new star was born. But France was not enough for him. He dreamt of going to America. As soon as he was 18 he flew to the West Coast and Big Sur where a friend of his, an American hippie drummer named Tox Drohar, was working on the property of Charles Lloyd. He persuaded another friend to carry him (Petrucciani did not actually learn to walk with crutches until he was twenty-five, and loved being carried about, especially by women). Charles Lloyd, the legendary West Coast sax player who had discovered Keith Jarrett, had given up jazz to study mysticism. But he had been reading

about a Hindu saint with a broken body who had crossed the ocean to perform miracles, and when he heard Michel play he picked up his horn for the first time in fifteen years and the two of them started on the road together. This was Michel's introduction to the real world of jazz and he and Lloyd were soon touring the world to rapturous response. After five years in Big Sur however, Michel hankered to go to New York. It was the eighties, and New York was 'Jazz Heaven'. There he could play at the Village Vanguard, at Bradley's, and jam with the greats. He signed to Blue Note Records, the first non-American ever to do so, and recorded and played with a host of legendary jazz musicians - Roy Haynes, Jim Hall, John Abercrombie, Wayne Shorter, Joe Henderson, Joe Lovano and Dizzy Gillespie. Finally tiring of the excesses of his life in New York, which was doing his health no good at all, he returned to France, found love and fathered a son. When he discovered that his son had inherited his condition he was both devastated and fatalistic. "To refuse to accept this would be like refusing myself. Why should I do that?" His return to France coincided with the greatest musical period of his life. Not only did he sign with Dreyfus Records, who were determined to make him an international star, but his music reached stratospheric new heights. He was soon not only recording discs that sold in their hundreds of thousands (notably with Stéphane Grappelli, Eddy Louiss and his trio with Steve Gadd and Anthony Jackson) but also playing to audiences of tens of thousands, all over Europe. His disease, however was taking its toll - as was his love of fast living. When told to take it easy, his response was: "Hey, I've outlived Charlie Parker, and that's not bad." It wasn't to be by much. Exhausted by his punishing schedule (220 concerts in 1998) and by his failing health, he caught pneumonia in winter 1998 in New York, and died on January 6th the following year. He was 36 years old. His funeral in Paris was attended by tens of thousands of mourners. He is buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery, next to the grave of Frédéric Chopin: such is the respect in which this extraordinary man was held. It is in the words of Wayne Shorter that Michel Petrucciani's legacy and genius are best expressed: "There's a lot of people walking around, full-grown and so-called normal - they have everything that they were born with at the right length, arm length, and stuff like that. They're symmetrical in every way but they live their lives like they are armless, legless, brainless, and they live their lives with blame. I never heard Michel complain about anything. Michel didn't look in the mirror and complain about what he saw. Michel was a great musician - a great musician - and great, ultimately, because he was a great human being, and he was a great human being because he had the ability to feel and give to others of that feeling, and he gave to others through his music. Anything else you can say about him is a formality. It's a technicality and it doesn't mean anything to me." Michel Petrucciani's life demonstrates to all of us that nothing can stop a person from fulfilling his life. And he did it with humour and fun and great, great music.

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL RADFORD

HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE IDEA OF MAKING A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT MICHEL PETRUCCIANI?

I didn't. I was approached about four years ago by Bruce Marks and then by Les Films d'ici in the person of Serge Lalou who thought of me for a documentary about Michel Petrucciani. Although I never met him in person and I'd never heard of him before, when I started to do my research into him, I found him quite remarkable. Not just because he was 3 feet tall and talented, although that is I think very interesting for people, but because in a very exaggerated way he represents the human struggle: to make the absolute best of what you have been given, without regret, without remorse. And to live your life to the full.

WHAT KIND OF RESEARCH DID YOU DO?

I did a lot of research because I am not interested in information. I am interested in humanity. It was difficult to find material that was natural rather than informational. So I did an enormous amount of research. I asked everybody who was in the film if they had any archive footage, home movies or anything. The footage, largely speaking, came from them. I also researched on the internet. The process continued all through the shooting and editing period – that's to say for about six or seven months.

HOW DID YOU PICK THE INTERVIEWEES WE SEE IN THE FILM?

As I've said, I'm interested in humanity. This is a film which is as much about the people interviewed as it is about Michel. I didn't have the opportunity to film him while he was alive, otherwise it would have been a completely different film. There were many people who didn't want to talk about him, or couldn't for one reason or another. But it's not important. I have thirty-five people in the film willing to express themselves. I don't name them, because in the end it's irrelevant.

YOU'RE NEVER JUDGMENTAL, BUT SYMPATHETIC WITHOUT CONCEALING PETRUCCIANI'S DARKER SIDES. WHAT WAS YOUR PERSPECTIVE ON THE MATERIAL?

Michel was born with a huge handicap, but he was also born with two wonderful talents: for music and for life. I had no real perspective on the material when I started. I didn't want to have any preconceptions. In a person's failings you find his real human qualities. And Michel had failings for sure.

AT THE VERY BEGINNING, PETRUCCIANI'S CLOSEST RELATIVES SAY THAT THEY "NEVER NOTICED MICHEL'S HANDICAP." THIS SEEMS TO SET THE TONE OF THE FILM, DOESN'T IT?

I never knew him, but everyone said he cast a spell over them. He cast a spell over me too, although I am sure it would have been much stronger in real life.

ANOTHER KEY STATEMENT OF MICHEL'S SEEMS TO BE "I DON'T WANT TO WASTE ANY TIME" AS IF HE WERE CONSTANTLY AWARE THAT HE HAD TO LIVE HIS LIFE TO THE FULL – MORE SO THAN ANYBODY ELSE. HOW MUCH DID THIS INFORM THE FILM?

It's right at the centre. It accounts for the speed of the editing as well. I believe that everyone has an internal clock which subconsciously tells them how long they will live, and regulates their energy accordingly.

WHAT IS MOST STRIKING ABOUT HIM IS HIS LUST FOR LIFE AND HIS INFECTIOUS ENTHUSIASM. IS THIS WHAT GUIDED YOU?

What guided me was keeping an open mind. If he had lived by himself in Montelimar all his life he would have been just as interesting, but in a different way. But it certainly took the film in a direction which is very inspiring for people when they look at themselves.

PETRUCCIANI SEEMS LIKE A VIBRANT, RADIATING PERSONALITY AND THERE'S A STRONG SENSE OF CAMARADERIE AND APPRECIATION ON THE PART OF PEOPLE WHO GOT TO KNOW HIM. DID YOU FEEL IT WHEN INTERVIEWING THOSE WHO WERE AROUND HIM?

I think it's basically true. There were people who didn't like him, of course, but I don't think he had many enemies. He fell out with people badly (I show this in the film) but they still loved him. Often they felt they owned him and then when they met someone else who felt the same thing they didn't like it.

PETRUCCIANI HAD TO FIGHT CONSTANTLY AGAINST HIS DISEASE: DO YOU THINK HIS MESSAGE WAS THAT YOU CAN SOMETIMES OVERCOME FATE?

Yes. Although people do not have the same talents, they can make life work for them. Those who are handicapped are inspired by someone like this, and those who are not are forced to ask themselves: "What am I complaining about?"

FILMOGRAPHY

Michael Radford

HOW DID YOU WANT TO APPROACH HIS PARTICULAR RELATIONSHIP TO WOMEN? HOW IMPORTANT WERE THEY IN HIS LIFE?

Very important. His dream was to be ordinary: and that, for a 'cacou' from the Midi, was not only to be with women, but consistently to betray them. I find that very human. But again it is important not to judge him, but to show him as he was, with affection.

WHEN HIS SON SAYS: "INSTEAD OF BEING WEIRD, I INTEND TO BECOME EXCEPTIONAL!" IT'S HEARTRENDING. HOW IMPORTANT WAS FATHERHOOD TO PETRUCCIANI?

Again, the decision to have a son - and the way he was with him - are part of his life as a star as well as a person carrying a terrible disease. His dilemma was one we could all understand: you do not wish to deny the validity of your own existence, but at the same time you are taking a terrible chance. And then all of that is negated by the existence of the person himself. I like Alexandre a lot. I have a son who is 20 and they are very similar. Alex is more oppressed by his father than by his disease. He worships him, but he never saw him, or when he did it was all great fun and then he disappeared for a couple of years.

HOW DID YOU WORK ON THE EDITING?

It was a long process. I can only say I could not have done it without Yves Deschamps. In documentary the editor is far more important than in fiction, because there is no structural blueprint - the normal relationship between an editor and a filmmaker. From the footage and from what I said, Yves saw what I was trying to express. We also share the same sense of humour.

HOW DID YOU WORK ON THE DIFFERENT MUSIC WE HEAR IN THE FILM?

By instinct, really. I chose what I thought would be appropriate to express the soul of the movie at any given moment.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR FEATURE FILMS

FLAWLESS, 2006

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE, 2004

DANCING AT THE BLUE IGUANA, 1999

B MONKEY, 1997

IL POSTINO, 1994

Five Academy Award® nominations 1995 (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Screenplay, Best Music)

Academy Award® 1995 - Winner - Best Music

BAFTA Awards 1995 - Winner - Best Director, Best Film in a Foreign Language, David Lean Award for Direction

Nominated for Best Foreign Film César, 1996

WHITE MISCHIEF, 1987

BAFTA Awards, 1988 - Nominated Best Production Design and Best Costume Design

NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR, 1984

ANOTHER TIME ANOTHER PLACE, 1983

Directors' Fortnight, Cannes 1983

BAFTA Awards, 1983 - Most Outstanding Newcomer to Film

Michael Radford has also directed numerous acclaimed television documentaries for the BBC.

A NOTE ABOUT LES FILMS D'ICI

LES FILMS D'ICI

Since 1984, Paris-based Les Films d'Ici has proved itself one of the world's leading producers of powerful, creative and radical feature films and documentaries-based cinema. The company's redoubtable 700-strong filmography includes such widely-feted, multi-awarded and internationally successful titles as Nicolas Philibert's "To Be and to Have" ("Etre et Avoir") and Ari Folman's "Waltz With Bashir".

LOOKS FILM PRODUCTION

Created in 2004 by Gunnar Dedio and Martina Haubrich and based in Berlin, Looks Film's recent co-productions include "La vie sauvage des animaux domestiques" by Dominique Garing and "Comrade Couture". Looks Film is currently co-producing "Michael Kohlhaas", Arnaud des Pallières's next feature: adapted from Heinrich Von Kleist's novel and "Holding", a political thriller directed by Michael Dreher.

LIAISON FILMS LLC

Liaison Films LLC was created to produce films that narrow the gap between typically intimate European films and large commercial American films.

PARTNER MEDIA INVESTMENT

Partner Media Investment was created in 2006 by Lucia Lo Russo Hussong and Andrea Stucovitz. Over the past two years, PMI has produced three feature-length documentaries and is currently developing two feature fictions: one by Egidio Eronico, in co-production with Focus Film (Hungary) and "Marco & Polo", a comedy by Israeli author Ishai Ravid.

CREDITS

DIRECTED BY Michael Radford
EDITOR Yves Deschamps
DP Sophie Maintigneux
SOUND Olivier Le Vacon
SOUND EDITOR Lilio Rosato
SOUND MIXER Roberto Moroni
PRODUCTION ADMINISTRATOR Réjane Michel – Catherine Grel
POST-PRODUCTION Mathieu Cabanes – Franco Casellato
PRODUCED BY Les Films d'Ici (Serge Lalou – Annick Colomès)
Liaison Films LLC (Bruce Marks)
Looks Films (Gunnar Dedio – Martina Haubrich)
Partner Media Investment (Andrea Stucovitz)
IN COPRODUCTION WITH ARTE France Cinéma
EDEN JOY MUSIC (Alexandre Petrucciani)
NOA NOA FILM GmbH (Roger Willemsen)
WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF Orange Cinéma Séries
ARTE France
Ministry of Solidarity and Social Cohesion
Delegation for Information and Communication
(France)
MIBAC – Ministry of Cultural Heritage Italy
Department of Film
WITH THE SUPPORT OF Eurimages
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MEDIA, a programme of the European Union
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COFINOVA5 and SOFICAPITAL
WITH FUNDING FROM Italian Tax Credit
Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg GmbH
**GERMAN THEATER,
DVD AND VOD SALES** Polyband Medien GmbH
GERMAN TELEVISION SALES LOOKS Distribution
DVD & VOD PUBLISHING FRANCE Editions Montparnasse
CINEMA DISTRIBUTION FRANCE HAPPINESS DISTRIBUTION
INTERNATIONAL SALES WILD BUNCH

FEATURING

Alexandre Petrucciani
Eugenia Morrison
David Himmelstein
Dr Georges Finidori
Mme Clauzel
Philippe Petrucciani
Tox Drohar
George Wein
Pierre-Henri Ardonceau
Alain Brunet
Jacques Bonnardel
Tony Petrucciani
Lionel Belmondo
Pascal Bertonneau
Frank Cassenti
Aldo Romano
Pascal Anquetil
Jean-Jacques Pussiau
Dorothy Darr
Roger Willemsen
Barry Altschul
Erlinda Montano-Hiscock
John and Lisa Abercrombie
Lee Konitz
Mary Ann Topper
Eliot Zigmund
Bernard Benguigui
Andy McKee
Victor Jones
Serge Glissant
Marie Laure Roperch
Hélène and Francis Dreyfus
Bernard Ivain
Ron McClure
Geneviève Peyrègne
François Zalacain
Joe Lovano
Judi Silvano

A SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Michel Petrucciani

OWL RECORDS PERIOD (1980-1985)

FLASH (1980) with Mike Zwerin, Louis Petrucciani and Aldo Romano
MICHEL PETRUCCIANI (1981)
ESTATE (1982)
TOOT SWEET (1982) with Lee Konitz
ORACLE'S DESTINY (1982)
100 HEARTS (1983) (The George Wein Collection. Concord Jazz Inc.) 1st recording for US label
NOTE'N NOTES (solo) (1984)
COLD BLUES (1985) with Ron McClure
LIVE AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD (1984) with Palle Danielsson and Eliot Zigmund

BLUE NOTE PERIOD (1986-1994)

PIANISM (1986) with Palle Danielsson and Eliot Zigmund
POWER OF THREE (1986) with Jim Hall and Wayne Shorter
MICHEL PLAYS PETRUCCIANI (1987) with Gary Peacock, Roy Haynes and John Abercrombie
MUSIC (1989) with Joe Lovano, Andy McKee and Victor Jones
PLAYGROUND (1991) with Aldo Romano
LIVE (1994, recorded in 1991)
PROMENADE WITH DUKE (solo) (1993)

DREYFUS JAZZ PERIOD (1994 - 1999)

MARVELLOUS (1994) with Dave Holland
FLAMINGO (1995, released 1996) with Stéphane Grappelli
BOTH WORLDS (1997) with Steve Gadd and Antony Jackson
CONVERSATION WITH MICHEL (2000) recorded between 1988 and 1989) with Bob Malachi
PRESS CONFERENCE (1994) with Eddy Louiss
PRESS CONFERENCE VOL. 2 (1995, recorded 1994) with Eddy Louiss
AU THÉÂTRE DES CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES (1995, recorded 1994)
SOLO LIVE (1998, recorded in 1997)
LIVE CONCERTS (1999, recorded 1993-1994)

TRIO IN TOKYO (1999, recorded 1997) with Steve Gadd and Antony Jackson

CONVERSATION (2001, recorded 1992) with Tony Petrucciani

DREYFUS NIGHT (2003, recorded 1994)

PIANO SOLO - THE COMPLETE LIVE IN GERMANY (2007, recorded 1997)

INTERNATIONAL SALES

wild bunch

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