

A Measure of Life

Composer Jon Sutton lives on in memories, art and music.

By Melissa Bearn

Eugene Concert Choir Director Diane Retallack first met Jon Sutton when he came to sing for her years ago. Last August she sat at his bedside two days before he died, and told him she had decided to have the choir perform one of his compositions, *The Family of Man*.

In her living room under December's gray, afternoon light, her long dark hair fell across her shoulders as she looked out the window, immersed in the memory of the first time they discussed performing his music. It was sometime in the spring, and Sutton was already very ill with a disease that causes scar tissue to form in the lungs. "Even though he had been bed-ridden, he was up for our meeting," Retallack said in a voice barely louder than a whisper, but filled with emotion. "He was vibrant, talking about his music, walking around with his tether of an oxygen tube," she said. "Then in August, I called Ella [Jon's widow] and told her I just wanted to see him, just wanted to be with him. I sat with him and told him everything was OK, that we had the music, and that we were going to do a great job, and he could relax. He was so happy. He smiled. His whole face lit up, and his eyes ... they just shined."

People who knew Jon Sutton remember that about him: the way his face glowed when he was excited about something, the way his eyes sparkled and danced when he talked about a subject he was passionate about. "Jon's eyes were the windows to his soul," said painter Michael Gibbons, who met Jon in 1986. Jon and Ella visited Gibbons to look at and buy one of his paintings. "There's a communication that goes on at a different level when you meet a soul like that," Gibbons said.

Perhaps it was Sutton's childlike innocence that drew children to him. David White taught at Washington Elementary, and occasionally Jon visited his class and talked to the students about poetry, writing, drama and art. "I don't think I ever met a child who responded negatively to him or his suggestions," White said. "He was just a bundle of enthusiasm, and continually asked children where they were coming from, where they were going with things."

In photographs, Sutton has an ethereal quality and almost looks as though he's radiating light. "You know

how a little kid has friends down the block that he likes to go play with?" Gibbons asked. "Well Jon's [play-mates] were angels. When you talked to him, he was like a kid in a candy store, especially if you talked to him about his universal language, music. Music goes into other

universes and Jon was comfortable there."

That translated into what Sutton's friends describe as a refreshing naïveté. "He was a truly beautiful soul who seemed to never totally assimilate the fact that the world can be a rotten place," Gibbons added. "God bless him for showing us that there's another side to things."

Yet the innocence people so loved about Sutton created his life's biggest challenge. He didn't work a regular 9-to-5 job. He lived in the realm of the creative process all the time — the world of the muse, the world of inspiration, not the "real world" of hard edges and cold realities.

"Sometimes the bumps in the road can look like walls," Gibbons said. "Jon ran into that a lot. He didn't flow in the circles that could have afforded him a public voice. Jon never made that connection, and it was tragic in that respect. He was honest, straightforward and talked in a creative language that the people who could have funded him didn't understand."

Ella shielded the calm bay of Jon's creative world from the crashing and pounding of the everyday. Sitting in the house they shared for 29 years, sipping mint tea, she laughed remembering how Jon told her that he wouldn't have had the nerve to ask her to marry him if he hadn't owned more than 80 acres in California. He told her that having that land made him feel like he had something to offer.

Their meeting was magical and lucky in the first place. Ella was born in Holland and was living in the U.S. with her husband who was here on business. They had one son, David, and she was pregnant with their daughter, Fleur, when her husband was killed in a hit-and-run. She stayed in Oregon for a little more than a year after the accident, but had decided to return home. Her things were already in the shipping yard bound for Holland when she met Jon. "He knew he had no time," she said. "I was ready to go."

Jon fell in love with Ella and her children, raising them as his own. "He felt right away that he needed to be the father," Ella said. "We were a really good team. He did the cooking. I did the cleaning. He did the shopping, and I took care of the finance. I'm the creative one financially. And I took care of that side of things."

Jon and Ella loved to entertain, and frequently invited friends and neighbors including Janice and David White to share breakfast with them. "It was always a treat to go to their house," Janice White said. "Jon would have the table set in some lovely way. He had a real eye for color and combinations ... the place mats, the dishes, the decorations." Together Jon and Ella cooked elaborate omelets or crêpes with fresh fruits and toppings such as an appetizing apricot

reduction. "It was always something new and interesting," White said. The breakfast conversations lasted for hours as they debated politics, religion, concepts and ideas.

Rupert (Bo) Harris, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church from 1986-1999, sang in the choir with Jon and often drove him to practice. Sutton was a talker and Harris waited for Jon after rehearsal, while he made the rounds, chatting with people, inquiring about their health, family and affairs. Harris said Jon Sutton was one of the few people in the choir of nearly 100 who knew almost everyone.

Harris still keeps the "artsy cards and notes" Jon sent him: thank you notes, random little hellos, invitations to come for pancakes, or quotes from Martin Luther King Jr., whom Sutton greatly admired. "He heard me preach on a regular basis and he'd be the one who would walk out with you talking about the ideas that were in the message," Harris said.

Neighbor David White thinks of Sutton as a seeker and a questioner, someone who didn't care so much about being right as about learning everything he could about something that interested him. "Even when he was talking with someone who disagreed with him, he was searching for answers," White said.

That search extended far beyond the plane of music.

Before he started composing, Sutton made tapestries so big he had to work on them using 15-foot ladders or spread them out on supports underneath the carport. At their house, Ella pulled out a notebook and started flipping through page after page of photographs, each showing the rich, multi-layered colors and swirling, abstract shapes of dozens of tapestries. Now they decorate the walls of churches, hospitals and even museums.

He also built elaborate sets for some of the Concert Choir productions. For a fund raiser, an English madrigal dinner, Sutton designed and painted a multi-paneled backdrop and crafted a huge papier-mâché boar's head for the table. It looked so real, Retallack said, "you felt like you could bite into it." He wrote all composi-

tions by hand and the calligraphy itself has a feeling of movement and art.

He leaves all that behind: the compositions, the paintings, the tapestries, things which will live on longer than the people who remember Jon Sutton. But what they remember most is how he made them feel.

Gibbons summed it up the best: "Have you ever been in a situation in your life where you couldn't explain it but you felt like everything was right with the world? Well, that's what it was like when you were around Jon."

The Eugene Concert Choir performs Jon Sutton's *Family of Man* and other works by Sutton at 7:30 pm Jan. 22 in the Soreng Theater. Order tickets online at www.eugeneconcertchoir.org or call 687-6865. **ew**

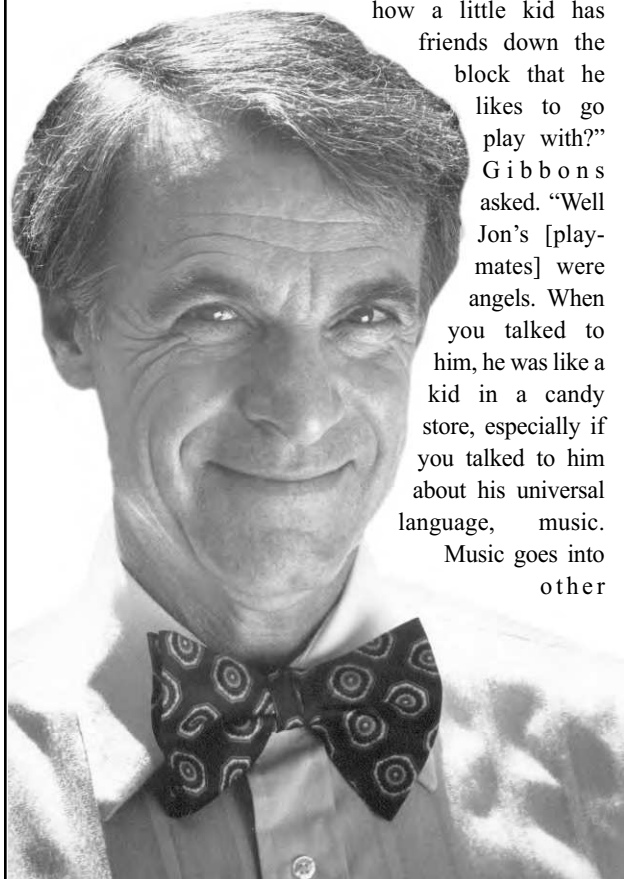
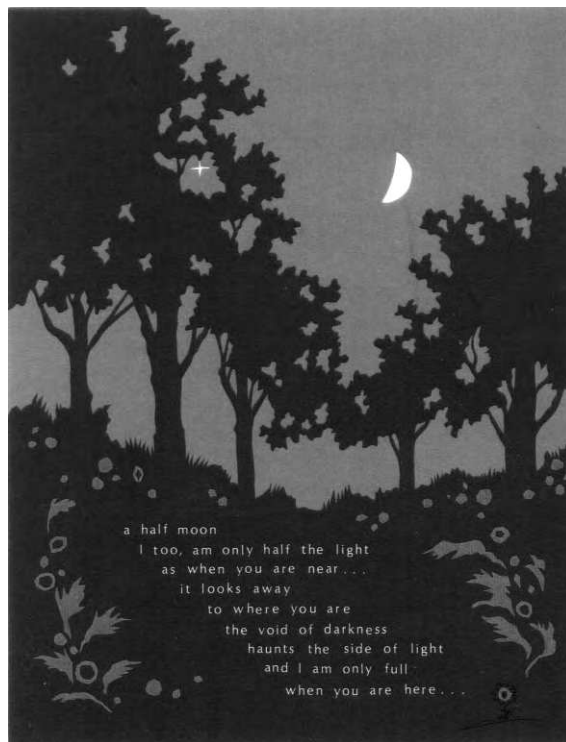


Photo: Jon Sutton • Artwork caption: When Ella traveled, Jon always had a little piece of artwork for her when she returned home. Here he made a three-layer cutout with a poem he wrote.

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