

“His name is Mudd but documentaries use his music with clarity”

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August 24, 2007

Birmingham News

Lawyer. Tree hugger. Activist. Musician. Eccentric.

You won't get a rise from Ned Mudd by calling him any of those names.

Mudd, 55, makes his home in an unincorporated piece of Shelby County near the Cahaba River—“it's the woods,” he says—and he knows exactly what he wants to do with his life.

In the 1990s, he was a fierce and outspoken environmental advocate, working on legal cases to slow the clear-cutting of forests, preserve wildlife, clean up rivers and eliminate toxic waste.

Today, he records quirky indie discs and composes music for movie soundtracks, mostly documentaries by High Plains Films of Montana.

Filmmaker Doug Hawes-Davis chose music by Birmingham's Ned Mudd for “Libby, Montana.” “I grew up with a guitar in my hand,” Mudd says. “Music is just part of my nature. I have to do it to be a human being.”

You might not be familiar with Mudd's long list of CDs, released on his own label, Cave Art Records. The tracks streaming on his MySpace page (<http://www.myspace.com/nedmudd>) have drawn a mere 166 friends.

On Tuesday, however, Mudd has the opportunity to increase his audience by millions. A High Plains documentary, “Libby, Montana,” will be aired on PBS as part of the highly acclaimed series “P.O.V.” It airs on Alabama Public Television at 11:30 p.m.

Mudd created most of the score for the film in his Alabama studio, which he describes as a wild tangle of wires and computers, set up near a bunch of instruments. Through “spacey piano music,” electric guitar solos and ambient electronica, Mudd helped to establish a grave tone for the movie and give a serious topic even greater emotional impact.

“Libby, Montana” examines a rural town that's been damaged by widespread and continual exposure to asbestos. Folks in Libby are sick and many have died, all because of a mining industry that unearthed vermiculite ore and failed to tell citizens its dust was toxic.

For decades, community members worked for the W.R. Grace Co., which produced Zonolite, a substance used in insulation and soil conditioners. As the documentary shows, Grace executives knew the vermiculite in Zonolite was dangerous, but never warned the company's employees or gave them adequate physical protection.

“It's a really sad story,” Mudd says. “It's brutal, maybe the worst case of toxic exposure in U.S. history.”

Filmmakers Doug Hawes-Davis and Drury Gunn Carr, who are based in Missoula, recruited Mudd for the project for several reasons, among them his versatility as a composer and his firebrand stance on the environment.

“Ned seems to enjoy and create just about every kind of music,” Hawes-Davis says. “We know him well, and we're interested in the same issues. He's very smart, and that comes through in the music.”

The High Plains team has worked with Mudd on about a dozen shorts and full-length features, from 1995's "Southbound," a critical look at the timber industry, to "Facing the Storm: Story of the American Bison!," set for release in 2008.

Mudd met the High Plains team in the early '90s, when they were interviewing subjects for "Southbound" and "Green Rolling Hills," a companion piece about clear-cutting. At the time, Mudd and another lawyer, Ray Vaughan, were aggressively battling environmental cases that dovetailed with the filmmakers' themes.

"We went out to Oak Mountain and ran our mouths," Mudd says. "At that point, I'd already been doing music for 15 years, and I gave them some tapes for the ride home."

Hawes-Davis says the homemade cassettes Mudd pressed into his hand were the start of a collection that now encompasses more than 150 albums.

"We were on the road for six weeks and basically we wore out those cassettes," Hawes-Davis says. "They became the road music for the rest of our trip."

It took only a small leap of faith to put Mudd's music on the soundtracks of "Southbound" and "Green Rolling Hills." A partnership was founded that day, and it has continued to grow over time.

"I think they have about 400 songs of mine on their computer," Mudd says. "When they want to use something, they call me up. Or maybe they call me up because they like something, but think it needs more banjo. We've had a good dialogue about all the films."

Digital technology makes the job easier; Mudd often sends his colleagues MP3s via e-mail or burns discs for them to sample alternate versions of several tunes.

Hawes-Davis and Carr returned the favor by deciding to bundle an official CD soundtrack into the package when the DVD of "Libby, Montana" is released on Tuesday. Mudd's contributions dominate the disc, Hawes-Davis says, although it will contain some material by other artists.

Mudd says he's pleased by the compliment, but don't expect him to start looking for a major label deal or book tour dates on the Southern nightclub circuit.

"I don't want to play live and I don't want to play in bars," he says. "I made a conscious decision years ago that I wasn't going to be a professional musician. I don't have the fan base, and I don't promote myself much. I'm not 20 years old, and I don't have tight jeans."

Mudd, who keeps his hand in legal affairs as a private consultant, says he's happy living on "various investments" and collaborating with High Plains. The bottom line, Mudd says, is having the freedom to make music, his way.

"I'm self-trained," he says, "and I don't care how you're supposed to do it. I've been doing it for so long, I can't hardly stop."