

Documentary on musician Roger Salloom's fitful career gets first Valley showing

By LARRY PARNASS
Staff Writer

ANATOMY OF AN AMBITION



Musician Roger Salloom is the subject of a new documentary that will be shown tonight at the Academy of Music in Northampton.

NORTHAMPTON
"So Glad I Made It," a documentary about the career of Northampton musician Roger Salloom, uses the riddle of commercial success, cagily, as an organizing device.

As filmmaker Chris Sautter sifts through the affable songwriter's eventful life — so many thrills, so many setbacks — he slyly exploits our scorecard culture. It enables him to straighten the win-loss columns in one artist's legacy.

Then the auditors, as it were, arrive.

Why wasn't this son of Worcester able to cash in on his early promise? Salloom came close to breaking through in 1968, when a psychedelic rock record he made with an esteemed Chicago label was named the year's best by the Chicago Tribune. Salloom made connections and followed advice. Big names

■ See DOCUMENTARY/Page D4

Documentary seeks Salloom's musical soul

■ Continued from Page D1

bankrolled him.

But money and fame rode on by. Salloom didn't make it. At least not in the way success is usually cast — as an either-or deal, in which the victor gets celebrity, the loser anonymity.

Sautter's film, which gets its first local showing tonight, uses the genuineness and unpredictability of cinema verité to explain not just why Salloom never played *The Tonight Show* but to capture something more profound.

"So Glad I Made It" celebrates Salloom's love of music, his self-effacing humor and his disarming honesty. It is a portrait of the way creativity can both lighten and burden a soul.

In the course of the documentary, much of it filmed in Northampton in 2002, viewers come to understand that while Salloom set his dream of fame aside decades ago to raise two young sons, he could never bring himself to give up on music.

Except for his yearly free concerts at Look Park in Northampton, music might have remained the hidden heart of Salloom's life, if not for his wife, Donna, who urged him to perform more.

And now, the nudge comes from Sautter, an independent filmmaker and lawyer from Washington, D.C., who had known Salloom in the 1960s, when both were attending Indiana University.

Among those most interested in Sautter's film is Salloom himself. He said this week he's honored the filmmaker's request that he wait to see the hour-and-a-half work on the Academy's big screen at 7 p.m. tonight. The screening is a benefit for Academyarts, a non-profit entity that raises money for the Academy of Music and for the Northampton Arts



Chris Sautter, director of the new documentary "So Glad I Made It," speaks with his subject, Roger Salloom, during a recording session. The film will be shown at 7 p.m. tonight at the Academy of Music in Northampton.

Council.

Salloom and Sautter will take questions from the audience after the film is shown. Sautter's first documentary, "The King of Steeltown," the story of "hardball" politics in East Chicago, was named best political documentary at the New York Independent Film Festival in 2001.

A fan's project

About a year ago, it occurred to Salloom to ask Sautter once again why the filmmaker was so interested in telling his story, roughly two decades after the songwriter had quit performing.

Sautter had gotten in touch with Salloom after a Web search turned up the musician's Web site. He'd become curious about what had happened to Salloom,

long after the musician seemed poised to become Indiana University's most famous graduate.

When pressed to justify his interest, Sautter told Salloom this, in an e-mail message: "The reason why some people value art is that it somehow speaks to the joy and struggle that is inherent in all of life." He then stepped back a bit, saying he simply wanted to pay homage as a fan. "I'm just trying to make a good film about someone whose music I like a lot."

To be sure, this is a movie that could have been made about scores of talented musicians all over the country, people with devoted but limited followings.

In spirit, "So Glad I Made It" is a tribute to all musicians who perform because it defines who

they are. It confers a blessing on a generation for whom music was a deeply liberating force.

The film mixes scenes from Salloom's life today with trips back in time, using old photos and film, to moments when the musician seemed to be a rising star. It revisits the San Francisco music world of the late-'60s, when Salloom shared stages at the Fillmore West and Avalon Ballroom with Santana, Love and Van Morrison.

As he makes his rounds in Northampton in the film, including stops at WRSI-FM and the Daily Hampshire Gazette, Salloom comes across as a man who loves every day of his life.

With its many pans of Northampton scenes, the film inventories the ordinary places that, today, make Salloom feel at home. His is an intimate world. Sautter tries to suggest in these images how much the songwriter values — and trusts — ordinary places and experiences.

Naturally, music is everywhere in the film. Salloom performs in scenes in the Valley recording studio run by Mark Alan Miller, in the WRSI studio and in an impromptu version of a song-in-progress. "We get Roger at his house to play a song that he's working on," Sautter said. "It's an interesting song — and kind of a gem — that is essentially unrehearsed."

Sautter has been preparing a soundtrack CD to accompany the film's release. It contains examples of Salloom's current music as well as a demo record he cut in 1976 and a recording of a show by his Salloom's band — Salloom, Sinclair and the Mother Bear — at the Avalon Ballroom in San Francisco.

Salloom is not haunted by questions about what could have been, to the distress of some old friends, managers and bandmates. They tell the filmmaker of times when Salloom seemed

to hold back from closing a deal. As he got close to scoring a breakthrough, Salloom would let it elude him.

And yet the story makes clear Salloom invested many, many years in pursuit of "making it." Surely, there comes a time when a sane person lets go of a dream that doesn't seem to be his destiny.

"I found him to be extraordinarily open and honest in the course of this film, beyond what I expected," Sautter said from his office in Washington, D.C.

That honesty is searing in a scene that comes late in the film. Sautter and his crew follow Salloom to Woodstock, N.Y., for a visit with Marshall Chess, the record-industry executive who signed Salloom and his band to a contract in the 1960s. The album *Chess* produced was well-

received critically.

Both men, who haven't seen each other for three decades, pose the inevitable question. Why didn't Salloom make it?

Salloom says it might have been because he lost Chess' support soon after, when the producer went to work for the Rolling Stones. But it might also be, the musician ventures, that he just wasn't good enough.

What lingers, after the credits roll, isn't disappointment. It is the warmth of Salloom's personality, the beauty of his music and smile and the wonder of a man who always knew what made him happy.

Tickets for tonight's 7 p.m. screening of "So Glad I Made It" are \$10 at the door of the Academy of Music.