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GARY BURTON
NEA Jazz Master (2016)

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John Murph: My name is John Murph, and it is May 6, 2016. I'm here with Gary Burton.

Gary Burton: Hi. I'm Gary Burton, full name James Gary Burton, and... Was I supposed to say something else? I guess not. And I'm here being interviewed by John.

John Murph: Ok. I saw you two or three weeks ago. You had just been honored NEA Jazz Master. What was that feeling... Tell me your reaction when you first learned you became an NEA Jazz Master.

Gary Burton: Well, it was not a total surprise, because I've watched quite a few of my friends and co-performers, collaborators—Carla Bley, Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett and so on—be given this honor in recent years. So I've said to myself, "Well, there's probably a chance that I might get called one of these days." So it didn't totally come out of the blue, but nonetheless felt great to hear that I had been chosen for my career, for my life, to be honored in this way. Other people have asked me about what it means. One thing I can say is how it compares a little bit to winning the Grammy awards, which I've been lucky to do sometimes. You get a lot of recognition over the course of your career, awards from poll-winning and all that sort of thing. But when it's your peers, or experts in the field who declare you a winner, then it means a lot more, and you feel, "Ok, now, this is a real verified accomplishment." And it felt that way with the Jazz Masters.

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John Murph: In the performance at the Kennedy Center, Chick Corea, who has been one of your long-time musical partners...

Gary Burton: 44 years. We play every year. All those years.

John Murph: Now, what was it like seeing Stefon Harris and Chick Corea perform “Crystal Silence”? Was it a feeling of wanting to jump in?

Gary Burton: [LAUGHS]

John Murph: Did you flinch?

Gary Burton: It was fascinating. Because I’m never on the other side of the stage when that song is being played. I’m always next to Chick, sharing that with him. So it was fascinating to watch...not that Stefon was sort of imitating me or anything, but just to hear that song and see it being performed by the two of them... Every minute was interesting. And then to see how Stefon handled the part. He did things differently than I would have, and so on. So I was curious to see how he would play the tune.

Mostly I was impressed with Chick’s playing. There’s an interesting dynamic. When you’re playing with someone on stage, you hear them much differently than when you’re out front listening. In fact, one of the oddities of this phenomenon is, maybe 4 or 5 times in my career Chick has been in the audience and listening to band play, and it totally freaks me out. I can’t stop thinking about what he thought about that. “Oh, he probably didn’t like that solo” or “he’s probably hated that tune,” and so on. So all through the evening, I’m imagining all sorts of things. And of course, he comes up at the end and raves about how wonderful it was, and all that. But this is a common thing with performers. If it’s somebody you’re that close to, and they’re listening to you differently instead of standing beside you, you get all mentally shaken up by it. And I have to say, it felt different listening to Chick from out front. I thought his playing was amazing, the harmonies, the things he was doing. And if I had been playing with him, I would have said, “it’s just another night with Chick,” but it hit me much harder out front.

John Murph: Talk a bit about how you began your partnership with Chick Corea.

Gary Burton: Well, we met through, actually, Steve Swallow, who was playing bass with me at that point. We ran into Chick at LaGuardia Airport, going to different things. He was playing with Art Blakey I think at the time, and we were playing with Stan Getz, and we were headed to different cities for gigs. But Steve introduced me. He knew Chick, and had actually been on a record with him early.

A few years later, I had my own band, and started with Larry Coryell playing guitar. After a couple of years, Larry was leaving, and Steve and I and Roy Haynes, we talked over what to do next. I had considered several guitar players, and then we started thinking about Chick—about a pianist. They knew Chick, had already recorded with him and knew him very well, and I admired his playing, so we thought this could be perfect. So I got in touch with Chick. He was then working for Sarah Vaughan, accompanying her. And he said that, yes, he was interested in doing

this because as great as it was playing with Sarah, he didn't get to be featured much and didn't get to play his own tunes, and so on.

So the plan was, when Larry left, we had about a 3- or 4-week break before the next round of touring that Chick and I would get together and work up some tunes and be ready. So he did. We joined together as a quartet. We played maybe 6 or 8 concerts, and a week at the Village Gate. It didn't gel well. It didn't click. This is an odd thing for both of us, when we look back on it. It seemed like if we kind of held back and didn't try to do too much playing, we could blend together ok, but as soon as we kind of relaxed and really just played, we were constantly in each other's way. So it never felt settled and comfortable. And yet, to me, it looked like the dream band—Steve and Roy and Chick.

So we sat down backstage at the Village Gate after the last night, and had a heart-to-heart talk. "Do you think it's working?" "No." "I don't either." "What do you think?" "Yeah, we should move on." So I went back to my guitar list, and picked Jerry Hahn, who I had been considering, and Chick went back home to wait for work, and about a week later he called to tell me that he'd just heard from Miles, and he was all excited. So that was his next step.

I never expected to play with Chick again, because it didn't seem to click. But we were in Munich for the Munich Jazz Festival in 1972. That was the one connected to the Olympics, where there was the big shootout with the terrorists and so on. This was fortunately a day or two before that happened. They had held a jazz festival to go along with it, since there would be a huge number of people in the city for the occasion.

I had just started a new trend around that time of playing solo concerts on the vibes. I had put out a record called *Alone At Last*, and had started doing this unaccompanied playing, which was rare up to that point. Occasional piano players had done it, but nobody on unlikely instruments. So the director of the Munich Festival got this idea to do an Art of the Solo concert, hired five musicians to come in and each play a solo segment. It was me and Chick, John McLaughlin, Albert Mangelsdorff on trombone (a German musician), and Jean-Luc Ponty, the violinist. So we did this. We each did a soundcheck, and got ready to play our 20-minute set and so on.

So then, Joachim Berendt (he was the festival promoter at the time) came around to us all, and said, "Great idea—why don't you all play something together as a jam session at the end, as a finale." Everybody said no except for me and Chick. It would have been an odd thing anyway, because there was no rhythm section, and it would have been a funny combination of instruments in an attempt to do something. But since Chick and I had actually played together a little bit four years before, we said, "Well, fuck it; we can play a tune." So at the soundcheck, we rehearsed one of his new songs, "La Fiesta," which we still play to this day.

Come the end of this concert, we came out and played this song. The crowd went wild, because, after all, they had sat through five solo sets, and now something different finally appeared on the scene, and it was kind of exciting. Fortunately, Manfred Eicher, who was

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Chick's new label manager... ECM Records was just getting started, and he lived there, so he came to the concert. He came up to us, introduced himself to me, and said, "You guys have got to record this." We all went, "What? Are you kidding? Vibes and piano for a whole hour? Who would want to listen to that?" So we kind of dismissed it. We still also thought, "did we even play well together?" from our previous experience.

Manfred kept up the persuasion, calling us, sending us letters, and arranging for us to come back in November to play at the Berlin Jazz Festival, and then go into the studio after that to record. So we finally said, "Ok, we'll do it; no one will pay attention to it; it will pass under the radar—but what the heck? Why not give it a try?" So he came to Boston for a day, and we rehearsed in my office to choose some tunes and to get a sense of what we might do on this Berlin concert, and then later try to record.

We flew on to Berlin, played; flew on to Oslo, where the studio was. We'd booked three days in the studio. We hadn't really rehearsed a lot, so we thought we'd need the time to get perfected performances. We started recording. We'd take one of the tunes, we'd run it through a time or two to agree on the arrangement, then we'd say, "Ok, roll the tape and let's see what happens," then we'd do it and say, "Wow, that went pretty well. I guess that one's done. What's next?" We did the entire record in about three hours. Every tune was a first take except for "Senor Mouse," which we did twice. We sat around for another couple of hours, listening to the playbacks, decided "We're done," and changed our plane tickets and flew home.

The record came out in 1973, the next year. It wasn't even released in the U.S. They didn't have distribution yet, so you had to order it by mail, or through a handful of record stores that actually imported it. We again figured that nothing much would happen with this. We started getting calls, wanting to book a concert of the two of us. "Wow, that's interesting." The first one was the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Pat Metheny was in my band at that time, and he said, "Oh, if you guys are going to go play, I'm going, because this is my favorite record I've heard in years, and I'll probably never get a chance to hear you guys again. So I'm coming along. I'll help carry the vibes. Whatever. I'm going." And he did.

We got to Ann Arbor. I walked into the concert hall, and was astounding. It held like 4,000 people. It was huge. I said, "Oh my goodness, there's going to be like 200 people down front, and it's going to be like playing in a bowling alley—this is going to be a disaster." I looked out from behind the curtains when it was almost time to start, and to my amazement, it was full. Then I was panicked about how do the two of us, puny little players on the stage, hold the audience's attention in this big a crowd. But we went out and played. It was a big success.

Then we kept getting more calls, and the rest is sort of history. We tour every year. We've put out I think eight records together, and we've won five Grammys so far for those records. We're booked already this fall for gigs. So we're still going.

John Murph: Oh, wow. That's a great story. Tapping into what you just said when you first started playing, the rapport wasn't as ideal as it is now. Talk a bit about how you'all's chemistry has evolved over the years.

Gary Burton: We talked about this occasionally, at the beginning especially. It was hard for us to understand why it didn't work at first. Chick kept saying he felt it was his fault, because he wasn't that tuned in to what I was doing. 1968 was still a new beginning in jazz styles. I was pioneering what later became Fusion Jazz and so on, and Chick was still in the postbop kind of area. So he said he felt that he hadn't fully looked into what was coming. And a few years later, he had progressed a lot as a stylist in that regard.

Also we wondered if maybe it worked better for us as a duet without the group, to kind of bond with each other. For years, we never played with a rhythm section, partly because we were worried it would somehow ruin the magic. We finally did it in 1999. We made this record with Pat Metheny and Roy Haynes and Dave Holland called *Like Minds*, which was actually Pat's idea. He said he'd always wanted to play with Chick, and he decided that if he was going to do it, he wanted it to be the both of us, because we work so well together. So I called Chick up to see if he would be open to this, and he kind of hesitated for a second, and then said, "Eh, it's time we tried it; let's do it." So we all immediately picked Roy. I asked Roy who he thought would be the best bass player for this, and he immediately said Dave Holland, which was fine because Dave had worked a lot with Chick early on, and seemed like a likely choice—and there we were.

John Murph: Ok, cool. You mentioned Roy Haynes, and he's also been a long associate of yours, from almost the RCA days. Talk about how you'all met, and why he's so significant in terms of your musical evolution.

Gary Burton: Roy is my all-time favorite drummer—and I'll eventually get to why that's the case. But we met through Stan. I was playing with Stan Getz, and the drummer at the time was Joe Hunt, not a well-known drummer, but he was doing fine in the band. We had changed bass players a couple of times, and Steve Swallow was now the bass player (who I had recommended to Stan).

Stan one day said, "I ran into Roy Haynes on the street today, and talked him into joining the band." I said, "Wow. Ok." I knew Roy from going to see him play at a little neighborhood club in Boston called Connolly's. Now, Roy grew up in Boston, so he was a local hero, and he got booked once or twice a year at this little local club. I was a student at the time, and going to see him play, I thought what a wonderful player and the great band he had and all that. I never imagined that three or four years later I would be playing with him.

But we met at a rehearsal studio in New York to rehearse with Roy, to get ready for the gigs, and Steve and I came out of that rehearsal looking at each other, saying, "wow, wasn't that amazing." Suddenly, from my standpoint, now I knew what the drummer was supposed to do in a band. It never had been clear to me, this role, the special role that the drummer provides, other than keeping time and being part of the band. Roy made it so easy to play. It felt so comfortable that you just let him be in charge of a lot of the feel of the music. And he plays very unconventionally. He's self-taught, and he does everything incorrect in terms of drum technique. But it is the most comfortable groove to play with. It's amazing, he can play with a lot of

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different stylists, and everybody says, “He really understands my music,” whether it’s... He’s played with Pat, he’s played with Chick, with me, with Charlie Parker, with Lester Young, with John Coltrane, all kinds of people, all through the years, and he plays kind of the same way with everybody, and yet it seems to fit wonderfully well with lots of different settings. And we all think the world of him, and love playing with him.

So I played with him with Stan for about two years, and then I left the band. A year later, I felt I had established my own band enough to see if I could talk him into joining the band. We had had a couple of different drummers in my early band, and the one who worked out best was a young Bob Moses, who was a friend of Coryell’s, but Bob wanted to leave and go more into avant-garde jazz. So I said, “Ok, I’ve got to find a new drummer.”

So here I am, back at the Village Gate again—another big moment at the Village Gate backstage. I went to see Stan’s band, with the intention of talking to Roy afterward. So, great to see each other again, “How you doing?” and everything. By this time, Steve had already left Stan and joined my band as well. So now there was Roy. I said, “I’m just going to put it out there. Steve and I would love for you to become a part of the band. Any possibility? What do you think?”

He looked at me for a minute and said, “Well, I do feel like I’ve gone about as far as I can go this time around with Stan,” who was a handful to work with. Roy knew this from earlier experiences, and also from the several years he’d now been touring with Stan. Since he said he was ready to move on, he said, “It’s a deal if I don’t have to carry the drums.” In those days, people didn’t have roadies, and everybody was responsible for bringing their own instruments. Also, you didn’t show up at gigs and have a drumset already provided for you. You brought your own. You brought everything. This was in the ’60s. Guitarists even brought their own amps and things.

I immediately said, “No problem.” So for the next few years, Steve and I carried the drums. We would meet Roy at Kennedy Airport. We’d be waiting at curbside. He would drive up in the car, and we’d take the drums out and carry them in, and check them in the baggage and all this sort of thing. It was easy and well worth it, because he was a great addition to the band on two levels. One was musical, of course. We couldn’t have asked for anybody better. But secondly, the credibility he brought. We were a bunch of young upstart kids with long hair and beads and fringe jackets and pretty weird jazz at that point in time. This new movement that I had been part of starting was only two years old at that point in time, and we were doing pretty well with it, frankly, but Roy brought a real strong vote of approval.

In fact, I often wondered. I never asked him... I often wondered if he ever got any grief from other jazz people that he knew, older jazz musicians, or hipper jazz musicians, who would say, “What are you doing, playing with those white kids?” It never came up. He seemed to be having a great time, and we certainly were, and it did wonders for our reputation and our image out in the jazz world, I’m sure. So I’ve always felt a great indebtedness to Roy’s willingness to join up with us and try this new thing.

John Murph: That’s interesting. That taps into a question that I guess I can now. Throughout your recordings, particularly as you matured musically, it seems like there’s always been an

inter-generational thing with a lot of your bands.

Gary Burton: Yes.

John Murph: As a mentor. Could you talk a bit about the benefits of having an inter-racial...not inter-racial... Inter...

Gary Burton: ...generational.

John Murph: ...intergenerational band.

Gary Burton: “Raish” [PHONETIC] is in there somewhere. Absolutely. When I started out, I was always the youngest guy in the band. I was 17 years old when I made my first records. I was 19 when I joined my first name band, George Shearing; 20 when I joined Stan Getz. So at some point, instead of everybody else being 40 and me being 20, it shifted the other way. I became the older guy, and the band kept staying younger.

I thought about this a lot, and I realized I was influenced by Stan, who also had a history of finding and discovering young players throughout his career. It began long before me and Chick came along. He was inspired by the presence of young, enthusiastic, still not yet jaded younger musicians. So I discovered that you sort of fall into one of two categories. You’re either a musician, as a mature one, who prefers playing with other settled, polished, mature players, and that’s where you feel most comfortable, or you like the unsettled situation of younger players full of surprises and constant shifting and changing and experimenting that goes on. That’s me. I provided that role for Stan when I was young, and I thrived on it all through my adult career, let’s say, by finding young players that just made it great to go to work. Because they’re excited about going to work every night at that age. Older players often aren’t. “Oh, it’s a gig now; it’s a good gig, nothing else I’d rather do, but this is my, you know, 20th time to play Carnegie Hall—it’s no big deal.” A new musician, a young musician says, “Wow, this is fantastic. Can’t wait to get started,” and so on. That rubs off on you if you’re the older musician in the band. I’ve always been drawn to that.

John Murph: Since we’re talking about your earlier years, how did you start playing with George Shearing, I think in 1963?

Gary Burton: Yes. Marian McPartland is the answer to that. A fellow British emigre to America, a jazz pianist—old friends. I met Marian through Joe Morello, who was on the first record I made, down in Nashville, with Hank Garland, the guitarist. Joe was an old friend of his, so he came down and was on this record. Joe said, “Whenever you come to New York, look me up. We’ll go out together, I’ll introduce you to people, and so on.”

When I was a student in Boston, I started coming down to New York two or three times a year for visits to hit the clubs and see what was going on, and get together with Joe, and so on. So when I moved there in the summer of ’62, of course, Joe was the one musician I knew. He took me around, introducing me to people, including Marian at the Hickory House, the club she

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played regularly. Although she had never heard me, Joe was singing my praises: “Great new vibraphone player. Wow, you won’t believe how great he plays,” and so on.

So she told George that she’d heard about this new vibes player, and I got a call to audition for George. I wasn’t excited about it as much as I should have been, because George by that time was considered a fairly commercial jazz artist. He played standards, and had best-selling records of kind of commercial...not too exciting... I mean, I had been discovering Coltrane and Miles and Bill Evans and so on. But it was a job. And I’d just moved to New York and, you know, looking for work, so this was great news in that respect.

I met George at his manager’s office on Labor Day. It was broiling hot, everything was closed, and I’m standing out front of this building which was locked up, waiting for George Shearing to show up. He was late, of course, and I’m beginning to wonder: Is this a joke, or is somebody pulling my leg, or whatever? Finally a car pulls up, and out comes George and his road manager, and somebody opens the building, and we go to an office, and there’s a vibraphone there they’ve rented. We played two or three tunes together, and he had me sight-read a piece. In those days especially I was a demon sight-reader. I was fresh out of Berklee. That was the best reading skill level I ever had, frankly!

So he was blown away. “Oh, man, that’s great; I want you to join the band. The only problem is, I’m not working for the next six months. I’m going to guide dog school, and I won’t return to working until January. But if you’re still available come January, please join the band.” I said, “Sounds good to me; let’s talk again when it gets closer.”

I hoped that something else might come along. It almost did. Herbie Mann called me, said he’d heard about me, and was thinking about changing vibes players. There were only two bands in those days that regularly had vibraphone—George Shearing and Herbie Mann. Herbie’s player was Dave Pike at the time. So he asked me to come by Basin Street East and listen to the band, and then chat. So I found a table in the back, out of the way. I’d never met Dave Pike, but I wanted to kind of stay, you know, anonymous.

The only other person sitting anywhere near was a woman who was sitting by herself. The set finished, and wouldn’t you know it, it was Dave’s wife. So he literally sat down next to me at that point, and I’m thinking, “Oh, ok.” Within a minute or two, he said, “Excuse me, but are you Tommy Vig?” (Who is a vibes player.) I said, “No, I’m not.” He said, “But you’re a vibes player, right?” I said, “Yeah, Gary Burton.” He said, “Herbie asked you to come, didn’t he.” I said, “Yeah, he did.” He said, “I knew it.” So he went over and had a big screaming fight with Herbie on the other side of the room, and I said to myself, “Well, that’s the end of this,” and, just being sociable, would wait for Herbie to come over and tell me to move on. But he came over and said, “I definitely want you to join the band.” I said, “Oh. Well, great.” He said, “We’re touring again starting in a few weeks; someone will give you a call with details.”

So I went home, you know, on a cloud. Man, not only did George Shearing try to hire me, but now even a better band—more chance to be featured with Herbie. Waited, waited for the phone to ring. Nothing. I didn’t want to seem anxious, so I kept waiting. But finally, two weeks had gone by, and I said, “God, something is not right here.” So I called up his manager, who

knew nothing about any of this. A few days later, I got a call from Herbie himself, saying, “Gosh, I’m sorry, I should have called you, but after talking it over with Dave, we decided to hang in there and keep on going. Sorry, I didn’t handle this well.”

I hated Herbie for years after that! It had meant so much to me, and I felt...new in town, desperate for work, and the fact that he’d been so casual about it, and... It really upset me. So it was many years before I finally let it go.

But I ended up with George finally, come January. Nothing else came along. One wedding reception that I played in Queens, subbing for Mike Mainieri, who couldn’t make the gig. Otherwise, unemployed, borrowing money from my father to pay the rent until I could start working. But the year with George was a terrific education. The musicians were wonderful. Vernell Fournier on drums, one of my heroes. And I learned so much from George musically, that I look back on it... I always said that I learned about harmony from George and I learned about melody from Stan. Playing with both of these seasoned players turned out to be the perfect next educational experience after my years as a student.

John Murph: How did you start playing with Stan?

Gary Burton: Stan, I owe that to Lou Levy, the piano player who was the accompanist for Peggy Lee at the time. Old friend of Stan’s. Jimmy Raney, the guitarist in his band for five or six years, had decided to leave. He was having alcohol problems, and needed to get off the road and clean up, and so on. So Stan was looking for someone to take over, and he felt like he wanted a piano player. But he had tried all kinds of piano players, and no one was available or interested. He called Lou out in Los Angeles. “Any suggestions?” Lou said, “Well, I just saw this guy who plays the vibraphone with four mallets, and that might work—he could play chords. It might be something different; it might work. Gary Burton.” So on.

It turned out Chuck Israels, Stan’s bass player at the time, was a friend of mine. So he knew me, and said, “Oh, yeah, Gary, good player—want me to call him?” So again, I find myself at Basin Street East. Amazing how these things keep happening. The idea is that I am supposed to sit in for a set. I borrowed a set of vibes. But first mistake I made, it wasn’t one I was used to playing. It was a little smaller keyboard, which didn’t help, having to adjust to that. So here I am on the stage with this quartet. Stan wants to hear how would the vibes work with his playing.

So we start playing, and Jimmy Raney comps constantly throughout everything. So there’s really no chance for me to show off my chord playing. And I didn’t have a whole lot of experience at being the only accompanist anyway, but I could do it some. But every time Stan would start soloing, Jimmy would fill it all in. And meanwhile, they’re playing tunes, many of which I didn’t know, and even the ones I knew, they had different arrangements that I didn’t know. So I’m kind of having to just sort of jump in and out, depending on what I could hear and follow.

About the third or fourth tune, I had soloed, I guess, and now it’s Stan’s solo, and Jimmy

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keeps on playing heavily, and I drop out, and at this point, Stan turns to me with his face red, saying, “How come you never comp for me? What’s wrong with my playing?!” I’m like, “Whoa, what’s going on here?” This guy just exploded at me, angry, and I didn’t know what to do.

We finished the set, I kind of nervously went up to Stan in the dressing room, and he said, “Well, don’t call us, we’ll call you,” kind of a dismissal—dismissing me. I said to myself, “Well, that didn’t go well at all. Not entirely my own fault, but I wasn’t as prepared for this as I should have been, and probably missed an opportunity here. On the other hand, I didn’t really know much about Stan. He had just come back from exile in Europe. He lived in Europe for 10-15 years after being busted here for never paying income taxes, and the IRS had discovered him and was closing in, and he escaped to Europe with his family, and they lived in Denmark for many years. But he had decided to come back and try to rebuild his American career, and get straight with the IRS and all this sort of thing. So he’d been back in the country already a year at that point, and all I knew was that he had made a bossa nova record with Charlie Byrd which was getting a lot of record sales, but not music I much related to, so I didn’t think much about it. I didn’t know much about Stan.

A couple of weeks later I get a call from Chuck, saying, “Well, we’re desperate. We haven’t found anyone else. The tour stars Monday in Canada. And Stan asked me to call you and see if you’d be willing to do these three weeks in Canada while he looks for someone else.” Not much of a vote of confidence. But I didn’t have anything else going on. Shearing had decided to take a year off from touring, and disbanded, and started doing a radio show from his home in L.A. So I was back in New York, kind of looking around, “what do I do next?”—and here came this call from Chuck, to play with Stan Getz. I said, “Well, what’s the worst that could happen?” I know Chuck. I knew Joe Hunt, who was just out of the Army, who was going to be the drummer. I didn’t know him personally, but I knew who he was—another Hoosier from Indiana. So I said, “Sure, I’ll do it.”

So we went out to Stan’s house the day before the trip to rehearse some tunes. Stan had no music. What he had were records. He said, “I want to do this song, and that song and that song.” Stan didn’t read music much, and played by ear primarily. So he wasn’t good at keeping tabs on lead sheets and parts and so on. So I spent the afternoon sort of copying off records tunes that we could play, and we put together about a set-and-a-half of music, and said, “We’ll do the rest when we get up to Montreal; we’ll get through the first night” and so on.

We started playing... He wasn’t happy with what I was doing. He found it unfamiliar and awkward, and I was still learning the tunes, and so on.” So we played the first set, and he got totally drunk during the intermission and didn’t play the second set. There was almost nobody in the club anyway, and so we played as a trio the second set. This happened almost every night for the six nights we were in Montreal. The club owner didn’t seem to care. There wasn’t much business. It was the dead of winter. Stan got through the first set, which is when most of the people came. But he obviously wasn’t pleased with my playing.

We got to Toronto for two weeks. Big crowds now showing up, so Stan had to be more on top of things. Joao Gilberto, by the way, is touring with us for these three weeks, to promote the new record that they had made but was not yet out, which was going to be “The Girl From

Ipanema,” the big one. The two weeks in Toronto did the trick. I got more used to how to play for Stan, and he got used to how I played. By the end of the two weeks, the group had kind of jelled into a sound and a comfort level. So he said, “I got some more concerts coming up in the next few weeks; why don’t you stay on and do those.” I said, “Ok.”

So that became three years finally. It was a great experience. It changed my life. Business-wise, it introduced me to such a large audience that I was able start my own band when I left Stan. Stan was the number-one jazz performer during those years in terms of record sales. He actually won the Grammy for Record of the Year for that record in 1964. We played to sold-out concerts all over during the years. And he was very generous about featuring the guys in the band. He constantly introduced us. He had me play solo pieces by myself while he could go smoke a cigarette mid-set. But it was great. It gave me a lot of exposure to the audiences.

And, because I served as the band manager... because he was too messed up with his drinking to be responsible for collecting the money, signing papers, doing this sort of thing, I volunteered to kind of help with this sort of thing because it was so poorly managed. I said, “Just for all our sakes, let me take care of some of these details,” like booking a hotel, so when we show up in town we’ve got a place to stay—that sort of thing. I got to know all of the concert promoters and club owners that way. So when I started my own band, I knew who to call. I had a year’s worth of bookings after two days of phone calls, just calling in favors from guys who remembered that I had saved their ass back with Stan when he was threatening to walk out on the full house audience because he was upset over some imagined insult thing, and I was the one that calmed him down and got the gig happening.

John Murph: It’s interesting that... You mentioned that after Stan, you started your band. But you made your debut recording before George and Stan, and you recorded your debut when you were like 19 years old?

Gary Burton: Well, I actually started at 17. But this is due to Chet Atkins. I’ve had somehow this thing with guitar players all through my career.

John Murph: Yes, you do.

Gary Burton: Sometimes they work for me. Sometimes I’m working for them. Hank Garland kind of discovered me, because he was looking for a vibraphone player to be on a jazz record. He was a Country player, but he was going to make a jazz record, and he imagined the sound of vibes and guitar would be really cool. So there were no vibists in Nashville, but he had heard about me from Boots Randolph, another Nashville musician, who was from Indiana, near where I grew up, and had heard me play and recommended me. So one day I rode in Boots’ Cadillac down to Nashville to meet Hank Garland, with the vibes in the back, and before our record session started we played a couple of tunes together. He immediately said, “Ok, what are your plans?” I said, “Well, I’m going to finish high school in another month or two, and then I’m going to go to school in Boston in September.” He said, “How about moving to Nashville in the summer, and we’ll play this local club on weekends, and we’ll make this record.”

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It sounded fantastic to me, so I announced this to my parents. Phase two is...or phase one maybe...I don't know what... Now, when it happened... The day I finished school, I loaded up my Volkswagen and drove to Nashville, and Hank helped me go around and find an apartment for the summer, and we started playing together.

One of our fans was Chet Atkins, who would come into the club every week or two and hear a set of our little trio that we had. At the end of the summer, Chet showed up and said, "I talked to the guys in New York..." Chet was the head of RCA Victor's Nashville office. He said, "I talked to the guys in New York, and talked them into asking you to join the RCA family. We'd like to offer you a contract." So they did, and I headed off to Berklee at age 17 with my first record contract already in place.

So I tried making a record when I was 18, the next year. It didn't go too well. The company and I both agreed maybe that's not the best first record. So let's try another one in the year ahead. Meanwhile, I'm still in school, guesting on an occasional record, coming down to New York to play on somebody's sessions or something, but still early in the career. So the next year I made a record, playing it safe this time, with just a trio, with Gene Chirico on bass, who I knew well, and Joe Morello, my old friend, on drums.

That was *New Vibe Man In Town*. Which I didn't title, by the way. In those days, you didn't have much say at record labels about anything, including the music even, to a great extent. You worked closely with an A&R guy, and they chose things like the title, the artwork for the cover—everything. They didn't really believe musicians knew, you know, what was best for them. A very platonic...was that the word...no, very patronizing kind of...paternal is the word I'm looking for...kind of approach.

So for the next few records, until I threw a fit, finally, after one of them and said, "I can't take it any more," and they agreed. "Ok, from now on, don't tell anyone else on the label, but we'll let you have a say in titles and what goes on the cover." And very nicely, the next cover I did was nominated for a Grammy. So I felt vindicated because I got to pick it and it went over well.

John Murph: Let's go back to Indiana and talk about just how you become attracted to the vibraphone. We said this before the interview: The vibraphone was only 19 years old when you...

Gary Burton: Yes.

John Murph: So it wasn't like you had this vast array of mentors or people to...

Gary Burton: No. I didn't know, of course, that it was a new instrument. I didn't even know it was an instrument. I was 6 years old, for goodness sake, and living in Anderson, Indiana. Three kids in the family. I'm in the middle. My sister had started playing piano lessons. She was two years older. And my younger brother.

I vaguely remember this, but my father reminded me of it. I started hanging around when

my sister would practice, watching her read the music and play the piano and so on. Then I started becoming annoying. I would yell in from the kitchen, “No, that’s supposed to be an E-flat, not an E-natural,” which she’d be in there playing, and my father would say, “wow, that’s interesting.” So he decided maybe we should start getting music lessons for Gary now. What are the choices? I remember then being taken to a few concerts or recitals, to see somebody playing the violin, and some high school band with trumpets and trombones and things. I didn’t know what was going on.

It turns out there was a lady not far away in the town who played the marimba and the vibraphone, and gave lessons. She also was a dealer for selling them. It was often the case in those days that people who were active teachers could get a discount and make a little profit by selling the instruments to the students that they taught. So this is where my parents took me, my mother took me, to try a lesson with Evelyn. Evelyn Tucker was her name.

I didn’t remember this, but my mother told me recently that the first lesson I refused to get off the chair or do anything. I was petrified. And after half-an-hour of trying to coax me to, you know, “just try hitting a little, see what it does,” she said to my mother, “He’s too young; give him some time, and maybe he’ll be interested later.” I got home, and apparently I did nothing but talk about this to my mother, day after day. I wanted to go back, wanted to try this, I know I could do this. That was sure interesting.” So finally she said, “Ok.” took me back, now two weeks later.

This time I went right to it, and learned my first song, which was “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” I do remember it. I could still picture that lesson, standing at this little marimba with Evelyn there helping me find the notes, and so on. So I started on marimba, taking lessons.

A year or so into this, we added the vibraphone, which is very similar, of course. I could play more light classical type pieces on the marimba and more popular-style songs on the vibes.

So this lasted until I was about 8-8½. I’d been studying with Evelyn two years, a couple of years. I’m pretty sure I was a pretty quick learner, because I was already getting requests to play at churches and things there in Anderson when I was 8. Evelyn would come along and accompany me on the piano.

Then it turned out we needed to move to the southern end of the state, to Princeton, a little town, which is still a little town. So no more vibes teachers. No more vibes. Wow, nobody had heard of the thing down there. So I was on my own. But fortunately, she had given me a really good start. She taught me how to read. Started me holding and playing with four mallets, because some written music she would send away for and have me learn required some four-mallet playing.

She also started teaching me a little bit about harmony and improvising. She didn’t realize that. She was just learning about chord symbols herself, and so she would explain to me when we would work from a piano sheet music, how to translate it to a vibes player... “Well,

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that's a C-chord, so the notes we can use are these." Then she would say to me, "Well, now, we need an introduction or something here; make up something. And this part right here, fill in something there." So I would have to make up something. Which was starting me to improvise. I didn't realize it at the time. Nor did she, I'm sure.

So here I am in Princeton, continuing to play the vibes and the marimba, and playing more and more gigs with a pianist-accompanist traveling with us around local schools, churches, Lions Clubs, company parties—this sort of thing. My family gradually got into this as well—my sister and my brother and my father. So we had the Burton Family Band for about 4 or 5 years, during these years, until I was about 13-14, and discovered jazz. We played about 100 gigs a year, close to what I do now, or have done my whole life. I often have joked that the schedule is the same, just the music has changed. Again, we would book... From Thanksgiving to Christmas we played almost every day. Christmas parties. We were a big hit. Family entertainment and so on; for company parties and so on.

So I kept playing and gradually growing as a musician, learning more and more on my own. And I somehow... I'm amazed I don't remember exactly how it happened. I discovered jazz. And I know it began with a Benny Goodman record. My brother and sister and I, because we were making money doing all these gigs... My parents never took any of the money that we got paid, which in those days would be \$20 or something for a gig, and we'd split it between the three of us. So we ended up spending money that most kids our age didn't have. We bought ourselves cars when we became teenagers. We bought our own clothes. And we bought ourselves each a little record player. Little portable record players that played 45s and things had come out by that time, and so, for a small amount of money, you could buy one of these little players, and we thought it would be cool to each have our own record player and collect our own records.

Somehow, among the records I picked up was this Benny Goodman record. It wasn't even an LP. It was one of those 10" records. So it wasn't a famous Benny Goodman record from the '30s or '40s. It was a more recent record of his with some kind of 6-7-piece swing band. But I was amazed. It was so exciting. The rhythm feel. The hot instrumental skills of the players. The song I remembered especially was "After You've Gone," a Benny Goodman staple in his repertoire.

I'm 13 or 14 now. Then I started looking for jazz records. The only record store was an hour away, in Evansville, and it became a weekly routine with my father. We would drive down to Evansville, go to the music store that sold the records, and look for any new jazz records that had arrived that week. So I quickly was discovering the Modern Jazz Quartet. The first vibes player I got to hear on record was Milt Jackson. Art Blakey's band was big at the time. We're talking 1955-56, perhaps 1954, somewhere around in there. Charlie Mingus was coming out with good records at the time—*Mingus Ah Um* and *Blues and Roots*. Dave Brubeck, of course, was big, so I had his records. And so on. No real method to it. Just whatever I could find in this store, and say, "Oh, I'll try that one, see what that sounds like." Meanwhile, I'm copying anything I can hear on the record. I'm trying to figure out how to play it on the piano or play it on the vibes, and teaching myself more and more about jazz.

Gradually finding people in Evansville that are into jazz, other kids my age in high school down there. A saxophone player and a piano player. I discovered them, that we could get together and have a jam session on a Sunday afternoon sort of thing. And I found a piano teacher. A sign suddenly outside the music store where I bought the records, saying, "Lessons In Modern Harmony." My dad saw it first and said, "Hey, wouldn't that be interesting for you?" So we met the guy, told him, "I'm not a piano player; I'm a vibes player, but I play a little piano." He said, "Well, I'll give it a try." So the plan was, he said, "I'll teach you how to play the piano correctly, and I'll teach you about songs, about harmony."

It turned out to be the perfect next step in my education. We worked on standards, how to voice chords, how to reharmonize these tunes. He was very good at this. And his big influence was George Shearing, who had put out a lot of piano solo books of reharmonized standards, and I remember reading through these and learning them. Meanwhile, I'm straightening out my piano technique as well.

So by the time I left to go to Boston, I had studied for two years with Loren. Loren Blake was his name. He was a local pianist at the main piano bar-lounge at the McCurdy Hotel in Evansville. He was probably the best musician in town. So I was lucky to connect with him. That prepared me quite well for launching into my college experience at Berklee. I had a good start on understanding jazz harmony, and I had discovered a lot of what records to listen to, and that sort of thing.

[END OF DISK 1]

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John Murph: I guess we need to go back and talk about how George Wein came into your life, and his important role in terms of your becoming a successful musician.

Gary Burton: Right. At several points along the way, George Wein came forward and was a key player, and things... I met him the first time (which I'm sure he wouldn't have remembered if I hadn't reminded him of it later on) at a jazz festival he produced in French Lick, Indiana, an old fading resort site, a big, lavish hotel that had fallen on hard times, and someone got the idea to host a big jazz festival there. Bear in mind, this was '58...'59, and this was the first time, in fact, that black people had ever been allowed to stay at this hotel. It was that far back in time. But here we are, two hours from my hometown, so my dad drove me over and so on.

I had been at a band camp that summer, and the lead band was invited to play an opening set one night on this festival, and I was the piano player in this band. So we drove down to French Lick, an hour away from where we were, and we were backstage, all excited. We're going to be sharing the evening with Dakota Staton, a singer who I'd heard on record, and Miles Davis with the Kind of Blue band, which had just made that record actually. I hardly knew who Miles Davis was. Didn't have any of his records that I knew of. I had, for some reason, heard Dakota Staton.

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Anyway, backstage I walk up to Miles and flash my camera in his face, taking his picture, and he goes, “Thanks, kid,” walks off... But I’m watching... This is amazing. Backstage at this big outdoor thing. So we played, and then Dakota Staton’s band came on, and George is standing at the side of the stage. I could tell he was in charge of things. The band was playing a tune or two, and then the pianist starts the introduction to a ballad, and George yells to him, “No-no, play something up; don’t do a ballad now.” The guy immediately shifted to something. I said, “wow, check...this guy’s really got some power.” Plus, he was right. With this big a crowd, you needed to get some energy going up there.

Then here came Miles’ band with Coltrane and Cannonball and Wynton Kelly and so on. I found that mysterious. I couldn’t quite figure out what they were supposed to be doing. It didn’t sound like any music I’d ever heard before. Because they were playing stuff from *Kind of Blue*, this modal thing, which was a brand-new style and sound. It was another year or so before I connected with Miles’ level of musicianship. Then I said: How did I miss this? How did I not see it immediately? But I just wasn’t, you know, there yet.

But that was my first encounter with George. Next thing was how I decided to launch my own band. I was on a tour with Stan. George had booked it. It was around Europe. It was Stan’s triumphant return to Europe after having left five years to reestablish himself in the States, and now he is returning to Europe to reacquaint himself with his audiences in Europe.

Astrud Gilberto figures into this story a little bit. Stan and Astrud had a huge falling-out. She toured with the band in 1964 for six months, during which they had a torrid affair. It fell apart over money. Astrud was actually not getting any cut of “The Girl From Ipanema,” because that was a record deal between Stan and her husband, and Astrud just sang on that one song as a sort of afterthought at the session. And it became a huge hit, and it launched her career as a singer, but royalties were piling in and she wasn’t seeing any of it. And Stan meanwhile was paying her like a token \$150 a week or something to tour with us.

So at some point, she started demanding more money, and eventually sued Stan and Verve Records to get more pay. This infuriated Stan. You know, she was an ingrate, and so on. So they hadn’t spoken to each other in two or three years. But the European promoters wanted in the worst way to have Stan come with Astrud to recapture the glory of his big hit record, which was already past history in the States but was still sort of fresh in Europe.

So against all advice, and certainly from me, “Stan, don’t do this; you and Astrud can hardly look at each other; this is a prescription for disaster; don’t do it, don’t do it”... But the money was too good to turn down, and he said yes.

So we start this tour. About the fourth night, the big blowup happened. Stan couldn’t resist making a mockery of Astrud. Bear in mind that Astrud was not a trained musician. She sort of was a musician who played by ear, so to speak, and she only knew a limited number of songs anyway. So she comes out at the end of our set to do two tunes – “Girl From Ipanema” and something else. The routine is always that she sings the melody, Stan plays a chorus or two of jazz on the tune, and then she sings the melody again and ends the tune.

First thing that happens, she's singing, and Stan does this thing of noodling behind her, little background lines and so on. She's at the mike, singing, and he kind of sneaks up behind her, and he puts the bell of his saxophone right up into her butt and blows a low B-flat. It's like a ship's horn going off. So she's singing, and she jumps, and her voices goes, AHRHIAA, and so on. So now she's embarrassed, and getting angry.

We started to the next song. She finishes her melody chorus, and he's ready to solo, and he turns to me and Steve and says, "Key of A-flat." Ok. So we shift to a whole different key. But now the obvious thing that's going to happen is that at the end of Stan's solo, we have to go back to Astrud's key for her to sing. So I try as best I can to make this obvious resolution back to her key, which of course, she's now looking for "The girl from..."—trying to find the right note. It takes her about four measures to find where she is in the song. And she's so flustered, she breaks down crying and leaves the stage. Refuses to play with Stan ever again. Her husband, sort of a gangster type, a nightclub owner from Philadelphia, is starting to look very threatening and angry.

So for the rest of the tour, we played separately. We would play the Stan Getz set, and George flew in a rhythm section from New York to play for Astrud, and she would do her two tunes. But no playing together. I don't know what the audiences thought about that. Probably curious that they were performing separately, but there it was. They were both there anyway, so that's what I paid my money to see.

So fast forward to the last night of this tour. We're in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the first jazz concert they've had in about 15 years, since Louis Armstrong had come once, and they had sold out two concerts, the 7 o'clock and a 10 o'clock or something... They'd booked a second concert because they had sold so many tickets. Hundreds of people drove up from Dublin, 8 hours, to catch this concert.

We arrive. Stan is in a weird mood, very kind of negative and so on. We're doing the soundcheck, and he's being very difficult and so on, but it's still ok. We get back to the hotel, and he informs me that he thinks Astrud is trying to pull some kind of a fast one on him with George Wein, and get more money, or steal his money or something. I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "I know something is going down, and they are taking advantage of me. I am leaving. I'm going back to London." I said, "Stan, come on; you've sold out two concerts, people are expecting you; you can't just up and disappear." He said, "No, I'm going." I said, "Well, if you go, then I quit."

Twenty minutes later, I see him coming down the stairs to the hotel lobby, carrying his saxophone and his bag, getting into a cab and leaving, and the last thing I'm yelling is, "That's it; I'm done." And he goes.

The promoter shows up to pick us up. Traveling with us was Charlie Bourgeois, who was George's long-time right-hand man at his company, and a long-time friend of mine. So I

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explained to both Charlie and the promoter (it was his first concert, by the way, this guy, who was scared to death of what was happening) that Stan had disappeared and gone. There was no even talking him into coming back. He had already left. So they said, "Well, then, you've got to play." I said, "No, come on; the people are going to tear down the hall, and I don't want to be the poster child up there." But they begged and begged, and said, "You and Roy and Steve, you've got to play." We'll tell them that Stan was taken ill, and offer to refund their money and so on.

So with great fear, we go back to the hall to play, and they make the announcement. Not a single person gets up to get their money back. Everyone sits there and waits. So out we come. The kid vibraphone player (I was maybe 23-24 at this time), and Roy and Steve. We played our set. First tune or two, the applause was respectful. By the end, it was standing ovation time. People loved it. Partly because, you know, we were a surprise; we had saved the day, and everybody likes that kind of a story. We did two big, successful concerts.

Charlie said to me afterwards, "That's it. You don't need Stan. When we get back to New York, come and talk to George." Which is exactly what I did. George said, "I'll help you any way I can. Find yourself a group, start looking for gigs," and so on. So the first club gig that I played in New York, which was after I had played in Boston for a week, George came to see us. Loved it. Said in particular, "I love seeing people do something new and different," which my group was starting out to do. That's when he told that he wanted to book me for all his tours and festivals for that year.

He became my unofficial manager for the next couple of years. He loaned me money. He signed a loan for me to buy my first van, to drive the band around in. He was just fantastic about everything. He helped me get a new record contract with Atlantic. I had been with RCA for 8 years, and everybody at the company had left and changed, and I didn't know anyone, and I felt unwelcome. He immediately called up Neshui Ertegun, his friend at Atlantic, and introduced us, and *voila*, I had a new record contract with a very hip company. Just lots of crucial things through the years.

John Murph: How did Larry Coryell get into the group, that first quartet?

Gary Burton: I left Stan and wanted to start a new band. My idea was to somehow combine rock music with jazz. I got that idea in sort of a calculated business way, which is... Normally you don't get great ideas that way. But I was trying to be very practical, and I said: Ok, all my audiences up to now have been with Stan Getz and George Shearing, and these are all people in their forties and fifties, and I'm 23-24. So by the time I'm 40 and 50, they're going to be dead. So I need to somehow connect with people my own age. So what are they listening to? And I asked myself, "What am I listening to?" Well, I had become a huge Beatles fan, and Bob Dylan and so on, around that time. In fact, I even took the entire Stan Getz family and the entire Stan Getz band to see the Beatles at Shea Stadium, on their final New York-American concert. I talked everybody into going. We got a box seat for the whole gang of us, and the Getz family and the kids and everything, and it was an amazing experience. We actually even were invited to go meet them. Because the promoter was the same promoter that Stan often played dates at Carnegie Hall for and so on—Sid Bernstein. But we said, "oh, it will be really crowded and everything; we'll have a chance to meet them some other time." Missed my chance!

Anyway, I booked my first gig for a trio. I found that Bill Evans' rhythm section was available because he was doing one of his regular periods of time off to try to kick his heroin habit, and was visiting his parents in Florida. So Eddie Gomez and Joe Hunt were open at the time. So I called them up and hired them to play a week at a club in Boston, Lennie's On The Turnpike, a club that I'd played before with Stan, and I knew Lennie well, and so on.

But I knew if I was going to get this new thing going, I needed another instrument, and it pretty much had to be guitar. My best friend was a tenor player—Steve Marcus. But I couldn't go with tenor because I'd just left Stan, and my God, it would look like Stan Getz Quartet being recreated, and that was a non-starter.

But it was thanks to Marcus... I ended up at a jam session somewhere in midtown, and there was this guitar player, a new guy in town, who was a jazz guy, but he was sort of making a living by playing rock gigs. So his style of playing was this weird mix of jazz and rock licks, almost 50-50—a strange blend of things, but perfect for me. So after that one afternoon, I immediately said to him, "Would you like to play a week in Boston?" He said, "Oh, ok—yeah, why not?" So we drove up there, quickly put together some tunes, playing with Eddie and Joe still at this point.

So I told Lennie, "I'm bringing a guitar player as well, no extra cost to you, but it will be a better band, I think." That was our first week. Came back to New York and did a week at the Café Au Go-Go (maybe two weeks even) as our next gig. That's when things started clicking and taking off. Pretty soon, Bill Evans returned to go back to work, and so Eddie and Joe left, and I scrambled around to get Steve Swallow to join me, and we ended up with Bob Moses, who was a friend of Larry's—so he ended up in the band.

So Larry and I were this perfect front for the new Gary Burton Quartet identity. A rockish guitar player. We very soon started taking on the Look. We let our hair... Larry already had long hair from his rock gigs that he was doing, and I let mine grow out, and we started wearing Rock style clothes. Now, most people wouldn't realize this, but at that point in jazz history, all jazz musicians were required to wear a suit and tie on all gigs. Many name bands, in fact, had a policy that if it was the weekend you wore a tux, and if it was a weekday you wore a suit. If it was a concert, you wore a tux. That was kind of the rule. I had already been used to that with Shearing's band, with Stan's band and so on. All the bands of the day dressed in suits and ties.

We started breaking that rule. First we did it with suits and ties, except the suits were gold lamé and purple and different things. But they couldn't say we were under-dressed or anything. It became obvious after a while that the costume was part of our image and so on. But it was interesting—within a few more years, everybody was wearing colorful clothes. To this day, now people play concerts in their jeans and t-shirts even, which... I don't go that far. I feel like the band on stage should be at least dressed slightly nicer than the audience, whatever that is. If the audiences are in jeans and t-shirts, you should be in slacks and an open shirt maybe, but a collared shirt sort of thing. But it's certainly much more liberal now, and I can't even imagine that we all were slaves to this tradition. Some groups, like Oscar Peterson's Trio, he remained

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tux-only to the end. Just the tradition, that's how they always performed, and so on.

Back to you, John.

John Murph: What did your father play? He was part of the group.

Gary Burton: he was an inspiring non-musician. He was the reason we all had music lessons. He grew up during the Depression. His father was an itinerant preacher. They never had money for instruments or that sort of thing, although he did manage to...somewhere around high school he managed to get a trumpet and try to play it. In fact, I'll come back to that. It was an interesting anecdote which still mystifies me to this day about my father and mother and music. But he sang in the church choir. He had always wanted to play. And he could play a little bit on the piano. What he couldn't do was combine chords and melody, doing two separate things. He hadn't figured out how to do that yet. So I first started performing with my sister accompanying me, but she could only play written music, the more classical pieces. When it came to doing popular songs, she didn't know how to comp. But I could teach my father how to do that. Here are the chords, and you go, BOMP-BOO-DJING-JINK, just play the chord, the bass note and the voicing here, and then switch to this chord, and so on. So I taught him the 6 or 8 tunes of our little family show that we would put on, and he never played the melody or anything, but he could comp.

And we all played multiple instruments. I played marimba and vibes and tap-danced. My brother played bass and clarinet. My sister played trombone as well as piano. My mother even played drums, and I played drums sometimes, too. My mom also played drums on the last two or three tunes of the show. It started out me as a solo marimba player, and gradually added more and more family members until we became a band. It was like an hour-long, almost vaudeville show, with bits of comedy, costume numbers... Every change of season. We would have Christmas numbers with mallets that lit up. I had a puppet on a hanger around my neck that glowed in the dark with black lights, with mallets on its feet, that played—that was a big hit with the audiences, and so on. The kids came up with these ideas, and my mother would make costumes, and my father would build whatever we needed. It was a big family project that went on for those years.

But about music: My parents never once said that they played music or do anything about music... My father had always said he'd wished he'd had the opportunity.

So years later, I'm visiting my parents in their house in Indiana. We were playing a college concert not far away, so I drove over to spend the afternoon with them. They're walking me through the house, as parents would do at a certain age, and telling me: "Now, you tell us anything that you want when we're gone, and I'll put your name on it. We're doing that with your brother and your sister as well." Furniture, antiques or whatever.

So they're showing me different things as we walk through the house, and I notice a photo on the wall that's an old black-and-white photo, and it looks like a college or high school kind of band. I said, "What's that picture of?" "Oh, that's your father's band." "What? What are you talking about?" "Yeah, that's him there with the trumpet." I said, "What? You're not serious.

He played in a band? You never told us?"

Then I walk into the next room, and there's a trombone on an instrument stand in the corner. My folks always were buying and selling antiques. I thought, well, at some yard sale they've picked up an old trombone or something. I said, "Where did you get the trombone?" My dad said, "Oh, that was your mother's." "What?" I said, "Yes, she played trombone in the high school band." "No, how could... And you still have it?" This is like 50 years later. "You still have the trombone? How would we ever know this?" I called my brother and I said, "Did you know...?" He had no clue. Didn't believe me. He thought I was making it up.

All I could get either of them to say at the time was, "Well, we just didn't think it was that important. You guys were what was important at the time." But never once mentioned that they had each played in their high school years. Mystery to me.

John Murph: Now, growing up in this musical environment and taking up music as a kid: When did the moment of truth come to you when you knew that you were going to pursue music as a career and a life?

Gary Burton: Band camp, 1958. The first-ever Jazz Band Camp happened to be held in Indiana University, a couple of hours from Princeton. I saw an ad for it in *DownBeat* magazine, which was my bible in those days. So I said, "Well, I've got to go to this." So I signed up and went. Up to that point I was a straight-A student. My father was a chemical engineer. I was headed to college for something, and I was expecting either to go to Purdue for engineering or IU (Indiana University) for medicine. I'd already sent away for brochures from IU to look at the different programs in the med school and so on. My family loved that we all played music, but it was always considered like a hobby, a fun thing to do. We all loved doing it. We're having a ball. "We're so proud of you that you're so good at this." It never crossed anybody's mind that I would actually choose to be a musician. That was a life that was not one you could depend on, and so on, not when you were smart and capable in school, and could be anything you wanted to be.

But I went to this band camp, and it was like heaven. We were playing round the clock. Jam sessions, rehearsals, learning from these teachers who were wonderful players themselves. The drum teacher was Shelly Manne, one of my heroes already on records, and years later I got to play with him and know him and so on. It was an amazing week of jazz. I came home from that week knowing that I had to at least give this a try. I told my parents. I announced, big announcement: "I am not going to Indiana University; I am going to go to jazz school somewhere, and try to be a musician. If I don't make it, I can probably become a teacher. But that's what I want to try." To their credit, they said, "Well, that sounds fine. If that's what you want to do, then we're all for it." That has to take a lot of nerve and confidence on their part, I think, to hear their 16-year-old son making this drastic change.

There were two jazz schools in existence in the late '50s—North Texas in Denton, Texas, and Berklee in Boston. My dad had a business trip down to Dallas. So he took me with him, so we could go visit the campus. It was friendly, but it was the most forlorn place—Denton, Texas.

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There were like tumbleweeds rolling down the street. The jazz school was in an old Quonset hut, something left over, an Army building, a temporary building that they were using for the jazz school. I thought this is even worse than Princeton in terms of there being a jazz scene or anything.

So without even seeing Berklee, I decided that's where I should go. At least it's in a big city, which I desperately wanted to be part of my experience. I kept fantasizing of what it must be like to grow up in New York, with this whole jazz scene all around you, what I had missed out on and so on. That's how the timeline of where to do and what to do next came. But it was that jazz camp, number-one, that changed my...

I'm sure I would have reached the decision eventually, within the next year or two. If nothing else, the Hank Garland invite to come down and play in Nashville, and getting a record contract would probably have changed my outlook as well.

John Murph: When you went to Berklee College of Music in 1960, what was jazz education like then? You're a pioneer in jazz education.

Gary Burton: Yes.

John Murph: What was it like then?

Gary Burton: Well, it was a very small school. The enrollment when I was there was 150 people. It's 4,000 now. It was in one house, in a brownstone house on a corner in Back Bay, a section of Boston. So there were about, I don't know, a dozen rooms in this house that were classrooms, rehearsal rooms. They had one grand piano and a few uprights—but that was the one good piano in the building. But there were only 100-and-some of us there. So that was the size of it, and it was a fantastic environment. The teachers were all local musicians, who were excellent musicians, excellent players, and you often ended up working gigs with them on the weekends, if you were one of the better students. So you got to play with them as well as deal with them in the classroom setting.

Berklee was always based on not being a jazz school per se, but being a school that offered the kinds of music you couldn't get in a conservatory. The guy who started the school, Larry Berk (Lawrence Berk), was himself kind of a journeyman piano player, not a jazz whiz, but he was a good commercial player. He worked in the local radio stations, in those days which often had staff musicians and so on, and he'd learned how to arrange and play. Although he was by training an engineer, and worked at Raytheon, after the War ended he really wanted to pursue his love for music, and he started teaching in a studio there in that same section of Boston that is now where Berklee is located, and he ended up with several dozen private students taking piano lessons.

He got the chance to buy a school that was run by a kind of well-known classical composer and teacher, Joseph Schillinger, who had passed away. He had a school which included this house, this building, and so on. So Larry raised the money, borrowed most of it, and bought the thing, lock, stock and barrel—bought the building, bought the name. The deal was he had to rename it, because they wouldn't be teaching the Schillinger system of classical

composition anymore, so they had to rename it something else. Although they did keep some of Schillinger's theories and things for a while—some teachers stayed on and so on. But he got the idea to name it after his infant son, whose name was Lee—Lee Berk. The story is that one of his teachers came in one day and said, "I've got it; your son is named Lee Berk; you should call it Berklee." Now, whether it came from one of his teachers or whether Larry himself thought of it eventually, I don't know. No one is for sure. But that's how it became Berklee. Then, ironically, Lee Berk, the son, eventually became the President of Berklee, inheriting it from his father, and really did a fantastic job of growing it into this huge institution that it became. He's retired now. He and I retired the same year, and he and his wife live in New Mexico now, happily retired.

Oh, I didn't finish my point. Sorry. Which was that the curriculum of Berklee was a mix of jazz and commercial music, people who would end up playing in Broadway show bands and hotel bands and pit orchestras and recording studios and so on. So it wasn't just for jazzers. It was for people headed into the commercial music world, which happened to include jazz. In fact, there wasn't such a dividing line between jazz and commercial music back then. We were all playing the same standard tunes. It was still Cole Porter and George Gershwin and so on. Just that we swung a little harder with the jazz things, and we played it a little safer with the commercial. In fact, the same musicians used to play both kinds of gigs, and you knew that on the jazz gig you could stretch out, and on the ballroom gig you just played it as written. That's no longer the case. Now a commercial gig is a whole other repertoire and way of playing than the jazz gig.

John Murph: Now, after being a student there, you became a teacher in 1971. This is while you're in high-tide with a solo career. What prompted you to continue this career as a teacher...?

Gary Burton: Well, I didn't like teaching—at first. When I was a student myself, I found it frustrating and tedious to try to help anyone else with their stuff. I was working on my own stuff, and I just couldn't care about somebody who is more at a beginning level and trying to ask my advice for this or that, and so on.

That changed. As I got to the end of my twenties, a new thing came along in the jazz world. Workshops. Clinics. You'd go into a music store, a school, a setting, and you demonstrate and talk for an hour or two and take questions about: How do you do it? How does that work? How did you get to do that? And so on. It was an extra form of income for us musicians. My instrument company was very big on this. They were always helping to arrange a workshop. As long as you're in Chicago, help out going to this school, and you'll make an extra \$500 and talk to the students for an hour, and so on.

I found that, first of all, I was pretty good at verbalizing how things worked. Not everybody is a natural at that. A lot of musicians, you say, "How did you know to do that?" "I don't know. I just hear it." That's an answer you often get, which doesn't help the student at all to try to figure out how something happens. I seem to be natural at explaining music, and jazz in particular, and playing my instrument.

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So I started doing more and more of these clinics. It became a regular part of my schedule while I was still touring. And I got an offer, an inquiry anyway, at the University of Illinois in Champaign, where I had done several very successful clinics and guest visits with their really high level jazz program. The head of that program finally said to me one day, “Why don’t you join the faculty here?” I sort of chuckled and said, “What do you mean? I have a band. I tour. I live in New York.” He said, “We have people here in the classical field who regularly tour and so on, and they schedule it with their teaching and whatever... You should consider it.”

I didn’t take it seriously, but it got me thinking, and I realized that I could possibly do this at Berklee, which is not so far away from New York, and a school that I know well. I had just gotten married the first time, and I was concerned about supporting the family and buying my first house and so on. So I ended up contacting Berklee, and they said, “Sure, we’d love to try it.”

So I moved to Boston that next year, and started teaching, thinking that maybe this will work out, maybe it won’t, I may just do it for a year or two, and maybe make some extra money to help get the house going and that sort of thing, and see what happens. Well, I fell in love with teaching, as it turned out. And after a year or two of it, I couldn’t imagine giving it up. I was having so much fun with it and learning so much about myself and my music, and loved the milieu of all the young, energetic students and teachers and so on. It was a fantastic environment.

At that point, Berklee had about 1,000 students. It was in an era of constant growth, year to year, adding buildings, adding teachers, adding programs, and so on, as it went along.

So I ended up staying at Berklee for 33 years. It divided up into three segments. The first decade, I was a teacher. The second decade, I was a dean. I still did some teaching, but less and less. I was officially the Dean of Curriculum. Berklee had at that point about 600 courses that it offered, and it was in need of somebody to keep it organized and up to date and catalogued and documented, and to deal with the accreditation that we had to pass every ten years to renew our license to function, so to speak, as a music school—and many other things. I ran the library and the archives, and things that fell that particular Dean. There was a Dean of Faculty who dealt with hiring and firing, and a Dean of Students, obviously, the dorms and student life and registration and so on.

I did that for ten years, and at that point, Lee, who was the President, decided to reorganize the leadership of the school, so that he could focus more on fundraising and working with the trustees, which is a traditional role for Presidents. Running the school he felt had become such a large thing that he couldn’t manage anything. So he asked me to be the Executive Vice President, and put me in charge of the day-to-day operations of the school. If you had asked me when I first started at Berklee if I would ever end up running the school, I would have laughed. I’d have said I have no experience at that, no background, no training—nothing. But gradually, I got more and more involved in decision-making and became a key person at creating new programs, new directions for the school.

Bringing in Rock music to the school was my first big project when I became a Dean. It’s like Nixon to China. How do you bring Rock into Berklee? Get an important jazz guy to do it. And I strongly believed in it. At the time, younger teachers were more and more fascinated with

what was going on outside of jazz. I said, “Oh, this is where our future lies; let’s figure out how to do it.”

Bringing synthesizers and computerized technology into the school was my next big one. That also was looked at skeptically at first. Again, I thought: No, this is going to be a big part of the future, and we want to be the one that helps figure it out instead of leaving it to others. That’s what we’re good at. So I championed that direction, and now, of course, Berklee is the leading school for this sort of thing.

Other such things along the way, and that kind of prepared me for becoming the Executive VP, which I did for the final ten years. My last project, I am most proud of, was starting the Berklee Online School. My last year at Berklee was 2003. In 2000... I always headed up a team that would do a five-year plan, every five years. So in year 2000, the team that I worked with, one of our big ideas was that Berklee should explore the possibility of offering courses online. No one was doing it in music at that point. There were certain areas of study that were already becoming available—business courses and science courses and so on. But music was considered too subjective, in a way, to teach. How do you do that online, on computers? But again, I figured, well, if anybody could figure it out, it would be Berklee. Then I felt that it was going to be part of the future.

So I got the trustees to give me the money, \$10 million, that would pay for setting it up, hiring 25 people, renting the space, creating the program, and marketing it. I figured...the plan was that, within five years, it would break even, and after that... You know, whether it would ever pay for itself or earn back the \$10 million, I didn’t know, but at least it would be self-sufficient after five years, was our plan.

By the time I left, we had gotten as far as getting it started. I hired great people to be in charge, so I felt real confident about it. That was now 13 years ago, and it’s a huge success, way more than we ever imagined. It earns \$10-\$15 million a year for the school in profit, and it offers 150-something courses, and students all over the world take Berklee’s courses. They now have a degree that you can even get in the online program. It’s been a gigantic success, more than I ever imagined. But I’m so proud that that was my last big idea that I helped launch at the school.

I always try to point out that no one person can take full credit for anything at Berklee. It’s the biggest collection of bright, talented people... It’s like Google or Apple. The team of people there is amazing, and anything you do is likely to become a success because of all the brainpower and talent that’s there, and that throws themselves into it and makes it work. I may have been part of each of these things, but by no means was it something I did on my own.

John Murph: Throughout your career, you’ve been a pioneer... Like, one of the first prominent vibraphonists; one of the first prominent people to go to Berklee; and you continue and become this living legend as an educator...

Gary Burton: Me and Quincy Jones. He was there before me.

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John Murph: You were also one of the first jazz musicians to come out as gay, which was a huge thing for me, me being also gay...

Gary Burton: Oh, ok.

John Murph: Talk about the process of that happening, and why it was important for you to make that decision.

Gary Burton: Some people know they're gay, 100% sure of it, early on, once they hit puberty. With other people, it's a long process of discovery and wrestling with things. I remember Truman Capote once said he felt really lucky that he knew immediately who he was, and went right for the life that he was going to have, and he felt sorry for many friends that he knew who wrestled with this well into mid-life, still trying to figure out, you know, how this was working for them. That was me. I mean, I got no help addressing these issues when I was a kid growing up in 1950s rural Indiana.

And I was looking at going into a career that there was absolutely no presence, not visibly anyway, of gay life in the jazz world. It was kind of a gritty, you know, mature, masculine life atmosphere. In fact, one of the ironies to me is that even by the time I came out, jazz still was one of the last holdouts for accepting gay identity. Classical music had bought into it long ago, and even Rock. There were more Rock stars who were out, and respected and loved, than there were in jazz. I could count the jazz people on one hand, and most of them were in the closet.

So my first marriage, I was 25. I'd left Stan's band and was starting my own band and so on. Got married. That lasted... Actually, we lived together for several years and then got married, and that only lasted another couple of years before we just sort of drifted apart and had separate goals in life, and decided we should each restart our lives.

A few years later... Again, I could have explored the gay scene at that point, but, you know, I was teaching at Berklee, I had my band, I have... This was 1972-73-74. I couldn't imagine being gay and being allowed to continue doing what I was doing. I was afraid of it, in fact terrified of anybody thinking even for a minute that I might be gay. Married a second time, very happily so. I've often felt that if my wife hadn't decided that she wanted to change her life, that we would have stayed married, and I would never have actually dealt with being gay until maybe I was in my seventies or something.

Just a little sideline. You read about, I'm sure, this Senator, Harris Wofford, who at 75, his wife died and he met a guy who was 25 at the beach in Fort Lauderdale, and now they're getting married. He's 90! Pretty amazing.

Well, that could have been me. But my second wife... We had two kids by that time. It wasn't about being gay. She wanted to have a different kind of life. She felt overwhelmed by being married to me, that everything was about my career and my life, and everybody who came to the house wanted to talk about me and my travels, and she felt she wanted her own...wanted to

strike out on her own. Eventually, after two years of kind of working on it, I agreed, and she moved on. We're still great friends, very happily so, and she's remarried and so on. They live in California, as do the kids and my grandkids.

So there I was, single again at age 42 or 43 or something like that. I dated a woman for a year or two, a classical violinist. We broke up. By that time, I decided I should maybe try therapy and see if I could figure out once and for all this confusing mix of attractions and feelings and so on. What was I really supposed to be doing? About a year into this experience, which explored all kinds of things, as therapy does, it suddenly hit me that I was gay, that my first and foremost, most basic instinct of sexual attraction before I thought about it consciously, was attraction to guys. If I worked at it, I could get the sense of attraction to an occasional woman. But the actual automatic response was to guys. And that suddenly said, "Ok, ah, that answers it; that's what I am; that's the real me, and not the manufactured one that I've been trying to make happen all these years." And a big weight lifted, as you probably recall in your own personal situation.

So the next thing was, "Well, ok, now what do I do about it?" I'm a Dean at Berklee. I'm a somewhat famous jazz person. I've got two kids and a former wife. What happens next?

I called the first I could think of, who was pianist Fred Hersch, who I knew was openly gay, and told him I was gay. He was surprised. But we started talking about issues of gay musicianship and so on. Became friends. I also connected with a young musician who was a student who was just graduating from Northwestern, and had recently come out himself, and was dealing with these coming-out issues, and we hit it off. I was there doing a workshop, and we ended up talking, and he told me, and I told him in response that he was one of the first people I actually came out to. So one by one, I started finding people to explore it with, and started going to a local gay club in Boston, and kind of watching how things look, not threatening after all, and so on. And gradually, started making friends in the gay world.

The coming out that mattered happened at Berklee and with the musicians that I knew. I was about to do a tour with an all-star kind of group, with Pat Metheny and Peter Erskine and Marc Johnson and Mitch Forman on keyboards, and had decided that it was time to let people know, particularly if the question came up. We were having dinner after two days of rehearsals at some restaurant in Nashville, which was going to be the first gig on the tour, and somehow, somebody said something about another musician...somebody who was gay, or the gay issue came up, and I said, "Well, there's my opening."

So I said, "As long as you bring it up, by the way, I happen to be gay. I only figured it out recently." Peter even said, "At first, we all went, 'Ok, is this some kind of thing he's pulling? Could this really be true?'" They'd known me for years, so it definitely came as a surprise.

Then, at Berklee, it was Lee Berk who immediately jumped in. I said to myself, "If Berklee is uncomfortable about having a high official be openly gay for fear it will send a negative message, I will step down, I will leave with no hard feelings—it's their call." I had started dating a guy, a former student. I didn't even know him when he was a student, but we had

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met there in Boston at some party event, and we had been dating for a month or two. Lee was having some kind of party at his house, which he often did, and a lot of Berklee people were coming. So I said, "Earl, come with me, and just be my guest. You'll know a lot of the people anyway." We sat together at dinner and chatted with everybody, and hung out, and so on.

I don't think anybody there guessed we were a couple, except Lee. And the next day, after some meeting ended, he said, "Oh, wait a minute; I wanted to ask you about something." I said, "Oh, ok." He said, "I just want you to know that Earl is welcome at any event, anything that we do at Berklee—he is absolutely always welcome to come." So I said, "Great, that's really nice to hear, thank you." So I knew that the school was totally supportive. If the President says he is, then everybody else will fall in line as well.

I never had a moment of problem with anybody in the music world or anybody at school, or anything. I've felt really fortunate and lucky... Fred said that he had often some issues when he was coming out, and says that because I waited I was already well-established, I was spared a lot of that. I think he's probably right; that that's true. But I nonetheless felt lucky that it happened that way.

I didn't set out to be a pioneer. I was just trying to straighten out my own life. And I felt lucky and relieved that the Chick Coreas, the Scofields, the Methenys, the people that I've played with off and on for years were still happy to collaborate with me, call me for projects and work with me and so on, and I'm happy that the school that I'd been part for 20 years at that point was happy to have me stay on and be as open as I wanted to be. So it's been an interesting journey, that's for sure.

I've been surprised that there aren't more openly gay jazz musicians by now. I'm sure you feel the same way.

John Murph: Yeah.

Gary Burton: I think it's partly because some potential gay jazz musicians have left jazz for other things because they didn't feel welcome, and others just feel more comfortable being in the background rather than being in the foreground. So that's their choice, and so on. But there's certainly less of the anti-gay, homophobic remarks and jokes and so on that used to be the standard thing in the jazz world. I've read the stories about Billy Strayhorn in Duke's band and so on, and how he was constantly mocked and ridiculed by the other guys who really despised him. And what a tribute to Duke that he stuck by Billy all the way.

It made me always wonder if Duke was, you know, himself...you know, had attractions in that regard—though he always had lots of woman friends. But he was the classic gay man otherwise. He dressed foppishly. He loved being around women. He loved his mother passionately. I mean, the things... I knew him fairly well during the '60s, because we were both on the same label, and he also worked for George Wein exclusively during those years, so we ended up on the same gigs all the time. And he was always talking to me. He had this... You know, he was famous as a flatterer. He would come up to me and say at some party, he'd walk in and come over to me and say, "Now I know this is a class affair—you're here." He'd make you

feel like a million dollars. And he did this to everybody.

But also, he would come up to me and talk about music. He'd say, "God, I just loved when you played that solo piece; I love it when somebody does something different with an instrument." Of course, his whole band was based on that, his guys playing in weird ways, and strange...he could bring out the violin on this number, and so on.

Did you know that he invited me to one of his record sessions? Have you heard about that?

John Murph: Unh-uh.

Gary Burton: That was important to me.

John Murph: Which session was this?

Gary Burton: He saw me one day and he said, "Oh, the band is going to be recording next week. Are you in town?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "come by the session, check us out." I said, "Ok." I knew the studio. I recorded there, too, at RCA Studio A. It was a night-time session; 10 o'clock I think it was supposed to start. I had pictured the band, and the control room with me and a few other people, and watching the band through the window and hearing all this go down and so on. I knew something was different when I rounded the corner of Third Avenue, and there was the RCA Building, and there were limos lined up in front of the building in the totally dark business district, nothing going on except suddenly, you know, ten limos parked there.

So I go inside, and there is maybe 100 people...maybe it was 50, but it felt like 100 to me...dressed in tuxedos, gowns, mink coats, like a Harlem ballroom event had moved downtown to the Duke Ellington record session. The booth was so full, there was no way to get in there, and they had set up folding chairs for about 40-50 people in the studio to sit as an audience, facing the band. In this brouhaha of stuff going on, this almost party atmosphere, they are recording this music. I couldn't imagine how Duke could keep track of everything. He would record a number, and he'd go into the booth, listen to the playback like this, and kind of go, "Ok, now do this; now we do that." Taking care of business.

The guys, these jaded characters who'd seen it all... In one case they start playing and something sounds wrong. He said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, something's not right here..." He says, "Oh, we're doing another tune now." "Well, nobody told me." They did another take when somebody in the sax section wasn't even there. He was in the bathroom. And they got through the whole take and realized, "Oh, wait a minute; where's Russell?"

So I'm watching this thing go down, listening to it, amazed at it all. It was *The Far East Suite*, one of his most iconic recordings. All I remembered of the music was washed away by the scene, because I just couldn't get over the energy and the pageantry of what was going down.

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But I saw Duke dozens of times over those years. I actually presented him his Lifetime Achievement Award at the Grammys. That year, I was there to do that. So we sat at the same table, the RCA table. In those days it wasn't televised. They had simultaneous Grammy events in New York and L.A., and would announce the winners. So they had a lot of people in New York lined up to be the presenters if the recipient happened to be at that ballroom. I was there to do the Duke Ellington award.

At the last minute, Stan Getz was supposed to be a presenter, and he hadn't shown up. So I had just come off introducing Duke, and they said, "Well, Stan never made here; here, take this one, and go back up and announce this one." So I go back up to announce, and it's the Album of the Year Award for the Beatles, for *Sergeant Pepper*. I couldn't believe it. My heroes, the Beatles, and here comes George Martin up to shake my hand and receive the Grammy. It was like one of the high points of my life to get to award the Beatles their Grammy. I saw George years later. He asked me to come and visit his studio in London. I said, "By the way, do you remember at the Grammys years ago, and..." He said, "Oh, absolutely. That was an important occasion for us. We'd never won a Grammy before, and this was something that the boys really were looking forward to." He said, "And I knew who you were; I was a Gary Burton fan long before the Beatles came along. I remember that night vividly." Which made me feel really good.

John Murph: Talk about being a mentor. Like, you've mentored so many people. It's a word that's been thrown around. But what makes...

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Gary Burton: Well, I suppose two things. One is finding the right mentee to bond with. Not every young musician is a good match for every teacher. There has to be a chemistry between the two. So part of the job is choosing the likely person to mentor. Then the second part is being the right kind of teacher. Teaching the average person or a class of people is one thing. But teaching somebody who is also extremely talented is another kind of teaching. You almost act more as a coach from the sideline, as they discover how it all works, instead of saying, "You've got to do this, and you've got to practice that, and you've got to do that," which is more like traditional teaching. So for me, it was a natural extension of just being the bandleader. I wanted the musicians to play the music the way I imagined it and envisioned this song, and so I would keep talking to them about how I see the song, and how we want to, you know, as a group bring it to life.

Then I also kept kind of finding myself with younger musicians. At first, I was mentoring people my own age. It was me and Larry Coryell; he's the same age as me. He was the first younger musician I'd ever worked with. Up to that point, everybody was 40 and I was 20. But when I started my own band, suddenly there's him and there's Moses, who was even a couple of years younger, and they were both newer than me to the thing—so I had wisdom to impart about the music, about how to work a band, and so on. A lot of it I'd learned from working with Stan and from George, and passing on my experience and knowledge.

By the time a decade or more had gone by, I was now 40, let's say...in my thirties and approaching 40, and the musicians I was hiring were still in their twenties. So there was a bigger gap. I was even more of a teacher by that time. Once again, finding the right people to mentor led me to a lot of people who are success stories today, and I am part of that story, which I am very proud of. I know that these talented players would have succeeded in any case, with or without me. But I am happy that I was the one to open some doors and let some light in, and help speed them on their way.

It's happened in a variety of ways. Sometimes the players find me. Pat, for instance, was determined to be in my band, and found out I was going to be doing a college workshop thing in Wichita, Kansas, and he knew the woman who was organizing it, and he was a first-year student in Miami. So he took the bus from Miami to Wichita, about a 2½-day trip, and with the chance that he could meet me and sit in with me, or get to play a tune with me or something. Which came to pass. He sort of talked me into it. At first I said, "Kid, come on; I'm busy here; it's not my show; I'm playing with this college band; what are you talking about?" But we ended up playing together a little bit, and he impressed me. He was obviously talented. And my advice was: Leave Miami. Move to either New York or maybe Boston, someplace where there's a real active jazz scene. He came to Boston, and within half-a-year we had become close friends, and jamming a lot at my house, and pretty soon I'd figured out a way to add him to my band. But that was his doing, in a way.

Other times I find them, in the most unlikely places. Julian, I saw him on a television show. He was 12 years old. I said, "Wow, that kid really..." He played 20 seconds of a little solo, and I said, "Man, it was so mature and so well played; who is that kid?" So I called up the Grammy organization and I said, "who was the kid on the guitar in the Music Ed segment?" They said, "Oh, let's see. Julian Lage. He's from somewhere by San Francisco or something." So I got his number, and I called him up and talked to his parents and to him. Do you know what the TED conferences are?

John Murph: Mmm-hmm.

Gary Burton: I used to do them every year, back in the '90s. Richard liked having something about music each year. So I would talk about how improvisation works, or how composers go about writing a tune, different aspects of music, and try to make it understandable to this crowd of engineers and scientists and stuff. They were featuring that year the theme of old and young. So all the presenters had to be either over 60 or under 30. I was neither. I was in my late fifties then. But Richard said, "It doesn't matter; you're close enough." I said, "I have this idea; I'm going to bring this 12-year-old guitar player with me, and I think people will get a kick out of him, and it will be an interesting topic to talk about—the talent that's in youngsters."

So we talked on the phone several times. It was like an alien, out-of-body experience, talking to a 12-year-old about tunes he's working on, and chord changes, and had I heard the latest such-and-such record, and what about...you know, in this little child voice coming at me through the phone. I've got to meet this kid!

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So we met that day. We played. He was far better than I even expected. Herbie was there, he sat in with us and played with us as well. Based on that, I started hiring Julian to play little gigs here and there. I took him on a cruise on the QE-2 from New York to London as a guest player, he and his parents. And for the next few years, we found just low-key gigs here and there that we could include Julian.

When he was 15, he sent me a tape of new things he was working on, and they were really excellent, and nice tunes, too. We were talking on the phone, and I said, "Well, by the way, who wrote the tango, that second one?" He said, "Oh, I wrote that." "Really? A tango. Man, I'm surprised." He said, "I wrote all the songs." "No kidding." I said, "I think it's time we made a record." So we made our first record at 15, and two years later we made the second record together, he was 17, and by that time touring with me. He's 28-29 now, and out on his own just doing great. His new record is a big hit apparently. Everybody... The record company sent me a note saying, "Wow, Julian's record is really taking off." I couldn't be happier. He's so talented.

John Murph: Just wrapping up: Throughout your long, extensive career as a vibraphonist, educator and composer, is there a guiding philosophy that you stick to in terms of moving through the world?

Gary Burton: I guess it's finding a balance between following my instincts, and also, at the same time, trying to be sensible and practical. Now, some people lean a lot harder on just following the instincts; crazy as it may be, risky as it may be, jump out there. I was more of a risk-taker when I was 20 than I am today. But I think I always also was able to be kind of the pragmatist and always ask myself, "How crazy is this, that thing you're about to try, and is there a Plan B?" I often say, "I always want to have a Plan B," even though it almost never gets put into action, and in fact, if I ever did have to turn to an alternative, it probably wouldn't be the Plan B I had thought of before. But I feel reassured that, if the sky falls, I can always shift to something else, or this other thing to focus on next.

I got with what also I enjoy most, what feels fun to me, which is the reason I've never done a lot of composing. I find it kind of tedious and frustrating. I write a tune every few years, and I write a tune I'm actually proud of about every ten years, maybe, it feels like. I am good as a composer at what I might call filler material. Everything is complete with this record except I need a ballad. I need one more ballad, or I need one more bluesy kind of tune. Something easy to play that we can all just do quickly. Ok, I can deliver that. Writing the next really breakthrough tune that's going to inspire people to re-record it and copy it for decades, that's never been me. Chick. Pat. Carla. They do that all the time.

I'm great at fixing half-finished tunes. My musicians bring me tunes for the next record, and I sit down with them, and we go through it, and I say, "This right here feels awkward; let's try that instead" or "this needs another section, don't you think; it seems like it's too abrupt to go from there to there"... I'm a great tune doctor, as it were. But that depends on someone else coming up with the core ideas, and then I can help refine it. Like I say, you need a quickie to fill in on a project, I can probably do it. Give me half-an-hour and I'll be back with it. But I don't consider myself a composer on the level of my playing, for instance. And I would say that about

Chick, for instance. I would say it about Pat. They are brilliant at both things, and will be remembered for both.

John Murph: My last question is: What's the next new adventure?

Gary Burton: Well, you may be surprised to hear this, but since this is for the archives and is not going out into the newspapers at the moment... I am retiring. Exactly a year from now, the month of June, next year, is the end of my work schedule. I'll be close to 75 years old. I am having cognition problems; you know, typical old person problems. In everyday life, it doesn't affect me particularly. We all have senior moments when we get to be seniors. We can't remember things, and forget what we're talking about and so on. But it happens to me more and more when I'm playing. I'm finding it very hard to read new music. I can't stay focused on the page. I am making the compromises that older musicians do when they get older. They start playing easier and easier music, and sticking with things that are familiar to them that they can still handle, and they avoid the things that are more challenging, that they could have done when they were younger, but now find too overwhelming to do.

I am in the early stages of that happening, and I don't want to be that kind of older musician. I watched Lionel Hampton playing into his mid-nineties, embarrassingly so. I watched Oscar Peterson unable to play at all, and still taking gigs, and fumbling through performances. It would be one thing if they needed the money, but that in many cases is not true with some of these people that I'm talking about. I readily forgive anybody who's doing it because they have to pay the rent, and they're struggling to play.

I don't want to be playing and feel like I am not up to standard that I have striven for throughout all these decades. So I have planned on playing a handful of gigs with Chick this fall. In fact, I have no more gigs after tonight until September, and then I've only got four gigs in the Fall with Chick. Then in the spring, I'm going to play one more tour with Makoto Ozone, my long-time Japanese collaborator, just because we love Asia, and it's one last chance for Jonathan and I to have another big trip to Asia on someone else's dime. It will be easy to play with Makoto. But then I'm officially retiring as of June 2017.

I know musicians don't do that. I've thought about this for years, actually—that I didn't want to keep on going beyond a certain point. Chick and I have often talked about it. He always said, "Yes, when things start to go, time to quit." He won't. I know him so well, that he won't be able to. He will still be scratching at it, trying to keep it going until he falls over on the stage somewhere.

But I think I'll be fine. I won't miss... Already I... I took most of last year off. I only played two gigs—to see how it would work. I did two concerts with Pat, one in January and one in September, and otherwise, just stayed home, vacationed, and so on. I didn't miss it. So I think I'm going to be ok from that standpoint. So that's a surprise ending, I'm sure, to this.

[Transcribed by Ted Panken from a .wma file of the conversation.]

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