

MUSICIAN



GARY BURTON

The jazz legend continues to innovate with a host of new projects

By Jeff Tamarkin

GARY BURTON COULD EASILY REST ON HIS LAURELS, secure in the knowledge that he's made his mark as one of the greatest vibraphonists in jazz history. At 71, he has more than five decades of innovation and a pile of awards behind him, including seven Grammys, most for his stunning collaborations with keyboardist Chick Corea.

But Burton is an ever-restless artist, and slowing down is a foreign concept. In the past year alone, he's released *Guided Tour*, the sophomore album by the New Gary Burton Quartet—a stellar group featuring guitarist Julian Lage, bassist Scott Colley and drummer Antonio Sanchez. Plus, he published his autobiography, *Learning to Listen: The Jazz Journey of Gary Burton*, and hosted a 13-part radio series for the Toronto jazz station CJRT-FM.

He also continues to tour regularly in various configurations—and recently played a series of duo gigs at New York's Blue Note with the Japanese-born pianist Makoto Ozone. They met while Burton

was an instructor at Boston's Berklee College of Music, a position he held for more than three decades—though his association with the school began in 1960 when he arrived as a student. "When I started instructing in 1971," Burton says, "it was unheard of for a currently working jazz musician to teach college. The only ones who did it were people who were retired from touring. But I liked it because it keeps you in touch with younger musicians, which is healthy mentally."

Born and raised in Indiana, Burton was attracted to the vibes as a child, and by the time he was in his late teens he'd turned pro, working with greats Stan Getz and George Shearing and releasing his debut album as a bandleader in 1961. Always the innovator, Burton was a pioneer of the jazz-rock-fusion movement and one of the first vibraphonists to play with four mallets—and he has constantly sought out new collaborators including Corea and a then-up-and-coming teenage guitarist Pat Metheny.



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Why the vibes?

I was 6 when my sister started piano lessons and I watched while she practiced. My father thought, "Maybe Gary should start taking some lessons, too." There was a woman in the neighborhood who played the marimba and the vibraphone. That's where they took me. It was pure coincidence.

What attracted you to jazz?

We became a little family band, so we each had some money, and my brother and sister and I got our own record players. I got my hands on a Benny Goodman record and the music was killer. I instantly loved the rhythmic excitement. I realized that I'd been sort of improvising in my own way. So then I was on a quest to find more jazz records. My father would drive me every Saturday to the one record store in Evansville, an hour away, and I'd see what they had. I found

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Art Blakey, Dave Brubeck, Charles Mingus, Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis. My high school years were filled with discovering jazz.

What vibes players influenced you?

Milt Jackson. The Modern Jazz Quartet was a new band at that time, and I loved his playing. He's always been my favorite player of the historic figures. Milt was my hero, although I never played anything like him. But there wasn't much on record by other vibes players.

You gravitate toward collaborating with guitarists. Why?

The blend of the vibes and the guitar is interesting. Each instrument has its own sound, but when you play together, it blends into a different super-sound—but it doesn't sound like two different instruments. It offers you more orchestration possibilities. It can sound pretty full and large, and yet we still have our individual instruments.

Pat Metheny is one of your favorites.

Pat was 19 when he joined my band. I've watched Pat evolve from a young talented player into a very mature musician and producer of music. He's very original and

extremely capable. In fact, he's the best jazz musician in recording studios I've ever known. Many with his success would sit back and do their thing, but he is determined to turn over every rock and see what's under it and then use it. He plays with every major player to see what it's like. He's constantly reaching and pushing himself. He reminds me of Miles in that sense. He has a restless spirit. Pat and I don't play together every year, but every few years we do another little tour, another project or something.

You helped create fusion in the '60s.

Until about three or four years ago, I almost never saw any reference to my role in the birth of fusion music. I was looking for some way to make the music sound like rock. Guitar was key, and I found Larry Coryell. Larry played this weird mix of rock and jazz licks and I thought, "Perfect. This is just what I've been thinking about." It makes me feel good that it's recognized. I figure I've only done a few things that are really innovative in my career. Another is introducing four-mallet playing. I wasn't the first to do that, but I was the first to establish it as a way of playing the vibes.

Why did you write an autobiography?

I started on it 10 or 15 years ago. I began to think maybe I had something to say—I'd been in the business for decades and had quite a lot of experiences. I've always enjoyed telling stories—jazz stories, on-the-road stories. I'm fascinated by musicians I've known—their personal quirks and how they function creatively.

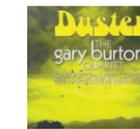
You wrote just one song on the album.

I'm not nearly as aggressive at writing as many are. On records, I often contribute one or two songs at the most. But everybody else writes, and I've always had a vision that the ideal small jazz combo would be this kind of balance—not all the music of just one guy. It's hard to be broadly diverse in your composing. I can count on one hand the people who do it stunningly well—Chick and Pat, for instance. They've written a thousand songs in their career and cover a huge range of styles and compositions. Most jazzers are lucky to come up with the occasional gem. Miles didn't write much of his own music even though he was the No. 1 bandleader of his day.

Best and worst gigs?

Worst gigs are the ones where nothing works: The place is a dump, the sound breaks down and the audience is rioting. Everybody has these things in their memory

ESSENTIAL BURTON



THE GARY BURTON QUARTET
Duster, 1967

After apprenticing with saxophonist Stan Getz and others, Burton experimented with rock—even opening for Cream. This quartet featuring guitarist Larry Coryell, bassist Steve Swallow and drummer Roy Haynes was electrifying, but Burton still manages to bring nuance to the mix.



GARY BURTON
Astor Piazzolla Reunion: A Tango Excursion, 1998

Burton was right at home within the dynamic rhythms of the tango, and this tribute to the late Argentinean master is imbued with drama, color and an appreciation for the genre's cultural significance. Burton's melodies dance merrily, creating a warm, enveloping sound.



GARY BURTON, PAT METHENY, STEVE SWALLOW, ANTONIO SANCHEZ
Quartet Live, 2009

Of all of Burton's quartets, the one featuring Metheny, Swallow and drummer Sanchez may be his most celebrated. The kinship among them is kinetic in this live set—with the vibist and guitarist syncing so seamlessly at times they feel like a two-headed musician.



GARY BURTON, CHICK COREA
Crystal Silence: The ECM Recordings 1972-79, 2009

The 1972 collaboration that launched an innovative partnership is one of jazz's best albums of all time. ECM has repackaged that gem along with its two other Corea-Burton meetings, 1978's *Duets* and the live 1979 *In Concert*, into a terrific box set.



THE NEW GARY BURTON QUARTET
Common Ground, 2011

Joining Burton and drummer Sanchez in this new outfit are bassist Scott Colley and wunderkind guitarist Julian Lage. While bringing an entirely different flavor to the music than Metheny and Burton's other guitarists, Lage offers a contemporary vision to this sublime set.

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At Berklee College of Music, Boston, 2007

Bill Gellery/Jimmy Katz/Inez



The New Gary Burton Quartet

'Concerts are generally more meaningful than clubs, where you're always competing for an audience's attention.'

where you say, "That was a total waste of time and I got out of there with my life." As far as favorite gigs, there are certain places I love to play—like Carnegie Hall, one of the best-sounding rooms. If you stand on that stage and play, you sound like a million dollars. I don't know what the audience is hearing but to the musician onstage it's inspiring. There are a number of halls in that league in Japan and Europe, and the Sydney Opera House. Concerts are generally more meaningful than clubs, where you're always competing for an audience's attention—people eating, drinking. You can often be more relaxed in a club setting, but if I had to choose one or the other, it would be concerts.

What is the future of the vibes?

I don't think the instrument is in danger of fading away. On the other hand—and I

don't want it to be taken the wrong way—I haven't found someone coming along to challenge me, someone doing something new that makes me think, "My gosh, I never would have thought of that." Normally, if you look at the history of an instrument, each generation ups the game a bit. There was tenor sax and then Coltrane came along, then Michael Brecker came along, and so on. I came along at a great time to be a vibraphone innovator because the instrument was only 20 years old when I started. I got to pioneer four-mallet playing and use the vibraphone in new contexts. There are many fine players today, like Warren Wolf, but I keep wondering if there's a kid in Idaho we haven't heard yet who's going to burst on the scene and blow everybody away. Before I die I'd like to see somebody who's knocking it out of the park.

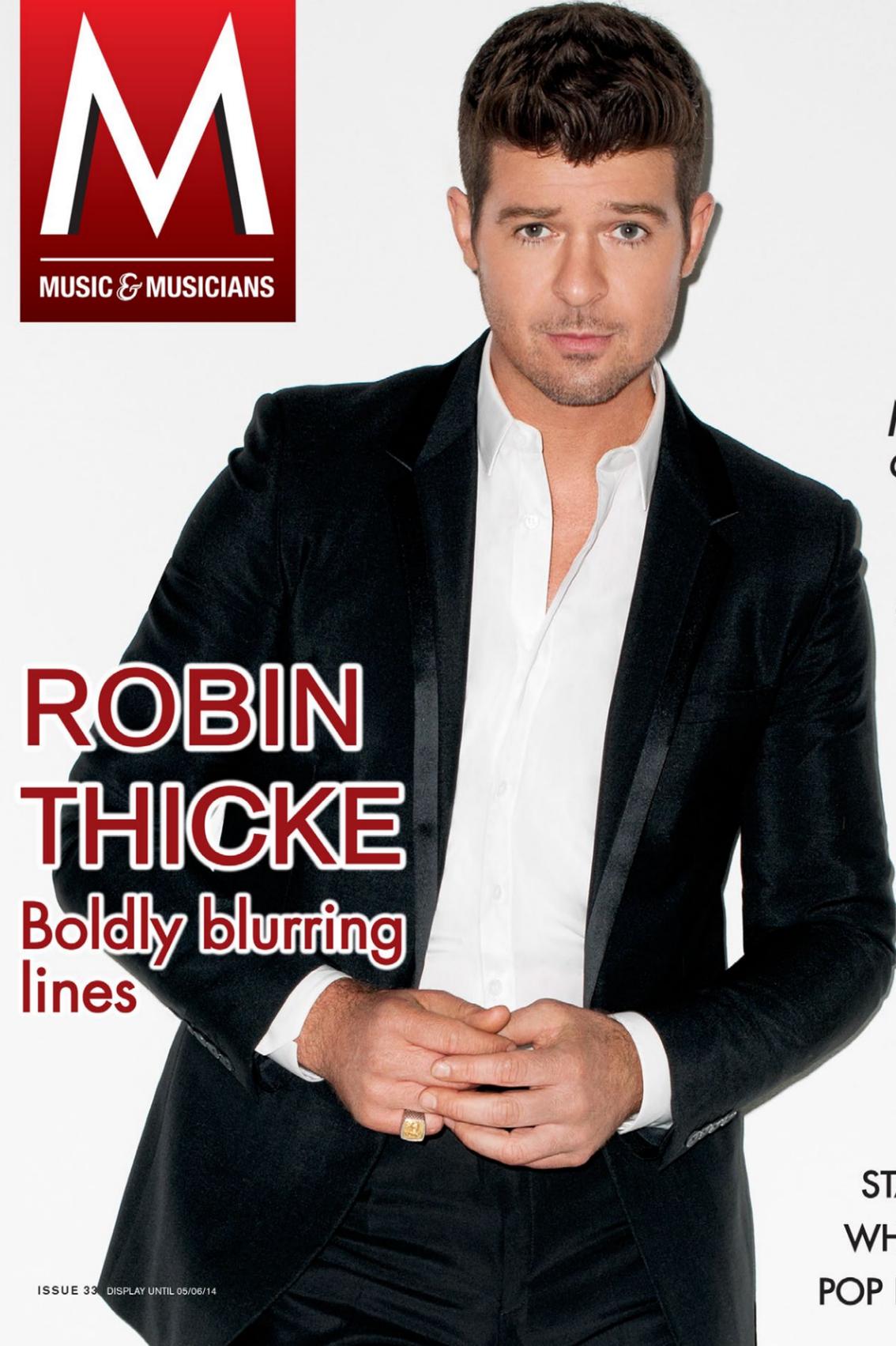
TWO OF A KIND

"The gigs I've done with Chick Corea over the years are probably the top of the game for me," says Gary Burton. "That's the standard I measure everything to." At first, however, Burton wasn't sure the pairing would even work. "The first time we tried to play together it didn't seem to click," he says. "I hired him for my band thinking it would be one of those great dream combinations, but after we'd played together about six weeks we all said, 'This doesn't seem to be going anywhere!' So we called it off and I went back to playing with guitar players. But when Chick and I played duets together—without a band—it was magical. The rapport was immediately mind-boggling. We have a knack for intuitively guessing where the other is about to go. I kept thinking eventually we would give it up or it'd get boring. But after 42 years, I realize we'll keep doing it until one of us falls over."

THE FRAY | A GREAT BIG WORLD | SHARON JONES | SKATERS



ROBIN THICKE
Boldly blurring lines



NEON TREES
Pop relief

LEA MICHELE
Gleeful solo

DAVID CROSBY
His way



STAR SHOTS
WHO'S NEXT
POP HITMAKER