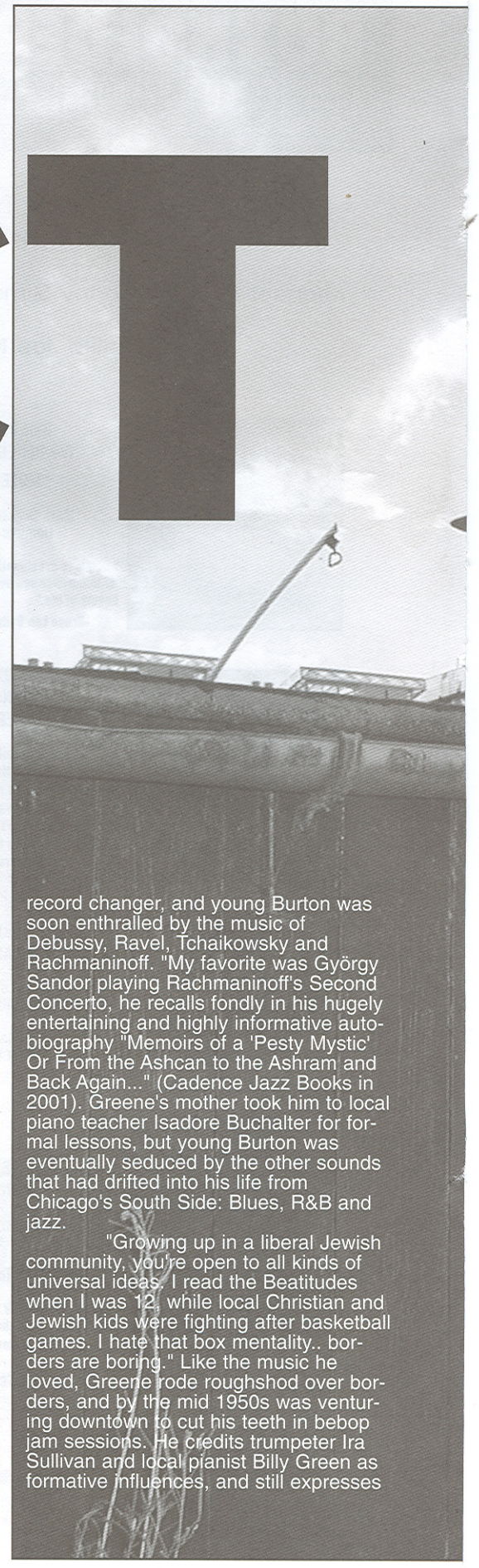
expatriate ACT

Pianist Burton Greene was a key figure at the birth of New York's free jazz underground. Since then, he's enjoyed one of the new music's most colorful careers, from pioneering the Moog synthesizer to his Eastern awakening and his rediscovery of the music of his Romanian roots.

Story by Dan Warburton
Photo by Pete Gershon



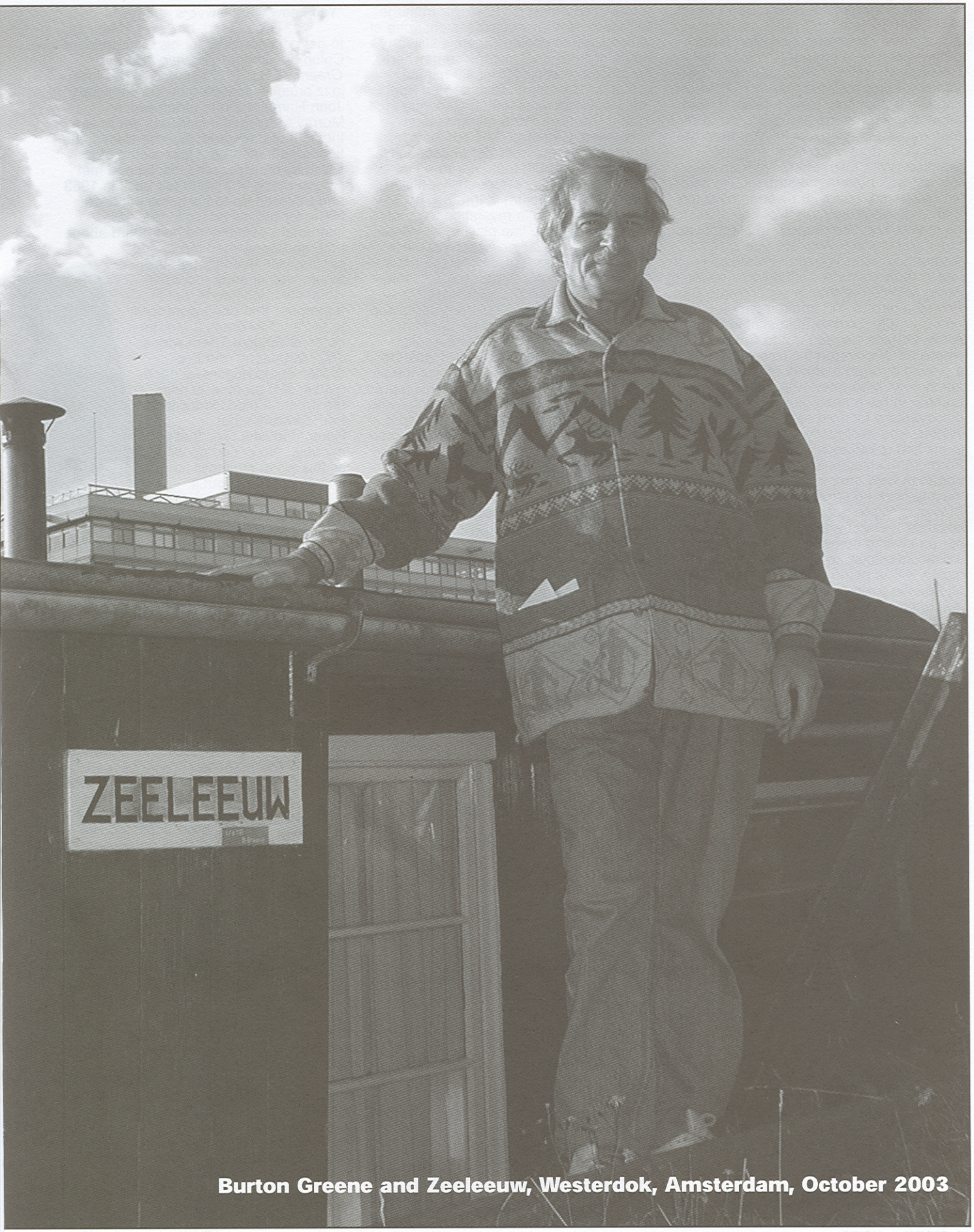
On a cold December afternoon, snow falls steadily and silently into the black waters of the Westerdok, ten minutes walk from Amsterdam's Central Station. "We get sea weather here," says 66 year old pianist Burton Greene, brushing his teeth in the kitchen of *Zeeleeuw* ("sea lion"), the converted houseboat which has been his home for the past seventeen years. "They say God created the universe but the Dutch created Holland. Half this country used to be underwater."

While the pianist finishes his ablutions I'm invited to choose from a huge selection of herbal teas, and his girlfriend, jazz vocalist Syl / Adim Ker, plies me with organic brownies. "We're all macro freaks around here," explains Greene, settling into a chair opposite the oil stove. "I was one of the first patrons of the first macrobiotic restaurants in New York. I was always into that. When I was a kid we ate cow brains in my family, man. I only have to think about that and I retch!"

Burton Greene first came to Holland at the beginning of the 1970s, after a brief sojourn in Paris where he appeared on several mythic outings for the BYG Actuel label (Greene's *Aquariana*, BYG Actuel 8, Archie Shepp's *Poem for Malcolm*, BYG Actuel 11, Jacques Coursil's *Black Suite*, BYG Actuel 49). "A whole bunch of us went over there in 1969, when the landlords jacked up the rents in New York. We played the Amougies festival, and there was some work but no money. I was in a 15-franc hotel room and my back was going out all the time, and I couldn't order a baguette because my French was terrible. Then I discovered that flower power was still happening in Holland, and within three days I was here in a houseboat having a sauna with a lot of beautiful girls! I hung around until I heard about a little garden house for rent. I jumped on it. $50 a month, until the day some yuppies took over the building and decided to get rid of the crazy free jazz guy in the garden. I got 14,000 guilders to get out of there, and that was the down payment on the houseboat."

Burton Greene grew up in the bustle of 1940's Chicago, where the family, of Romanian and Russian origin, had settled in 1933. His mother Yvette played 78 rpm records on the family Columbia record changer, and young Burton was soon enthralled by the music of Debussy, Ravel, Tchaikowsky and Rachmaninoff. "My favorite was György Sandor playing Rachmaninoff's Second Concerto, he recalls fondly in his hugely entertaining and highly informative autobiography "Memoirs of a 'Pesty Mystic' Or From the Ashcan to the Ashram and Back Again..." (Cadence Jazz Books in 2001). Greene's mother took him to local piano teacher Isadore Buchalter for formal lessons, but young Burton was eventually seduced by the other sounds that had drifted into his life from Chicago's South Side: Blues, R&B and jazz.

"Growing up in a liberal Jewish community, you're open to all kinds of universal ideas. I read the Beatitudes when I was 12, while local Christian and Jewish kids were fighting after basketball games. I hate that box mentality.. borders are boring." Like the music he loved, Greene rode roughshod over borders, and by the mid 1950s was venturing downtown to cut his teeth in bebop jam sessions. He credits trumpeter Ira Sullivan and local pianist Billy Green as formative influences, and still expresses



Burton Greene and Zeeleeuw, Westerdok, Amsterdam, October 2003

admiration for Horace Silver, Bud Powell and Lennie Tristano. "I must have known about three hundred bebop standards before I played a note of free jazz. In Chicago what they cared about was personality. I came off the stand once, strutting like a peacock, wow, I nailed it, and a cat came up to me and said: 'What's that shit you playing, Jack? You from the North side, right? You go home and practice.' With love, right? No hatred – this cat was putting me straight. He said 'Horace is my buddy. If I wanna hear the man, I go hear the man. Not only that, he makes fine cornbread and black-eyed peas and chitlins. Who are you kid? I wanna hear who *you* are!' I realized I hadn't found my voice, that I was never going to be more than a second-rate Bud Powell. I had to find another way."

After a miserable stint in the Army, Greene headed out to California, where he discovered his true vocation as a pianist through a series of intense epiphanies recounted with candour and humour in his autobiography. He also discovered a kindred spirit in flutist Jon Winter, who eventually joined the pianist in his first great adventure, The Free Form Improvisation Ensemble. This began in New York in 1962, where, after moving from one apartment to another ("I was trying to get as far Downtown as possible"), Greene answered a newspaper ad inviting someone "preferably with artistic interests", to rent a room in a house with a piano at 419 Cumberland, off Atlantic avenue in Brooklyn. The ad had been placed by bassist Alan Silva. "That was the Leaning Tower of Brooklyn," Greene laughs. "The building was condemned! The glass was gone from the window of my room, and I stuffed newspaper in to keep from freezing to death! Alan had two other bass players and two drummers. We rehearsed and we looked at each other and said 'I guess we don't need a script, do we?' We didn't write a note of music for two and a half years – it was just about spontaneous combustion. Nobody was the leader. It was a communal band."

As well as Winter, Greene also invited alto saxophonist Gary Friedman to rehearse in the Leaning Tower, and the Free Form Improvisation Ensemble eventually became a quintet, with Silva on bass and Clarence Walker on drums. One of their relatively infrequent gigs ("five people including the waitress in a coffeeshop up in Harlem," Greene chuckles) was enthusiastically reviewed by *Village Voice* critic Leighton Kerner, and the FFIE eventually joined the loose confederation of groups in the Jazz Composers Guild.

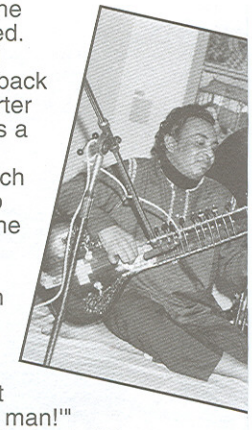
"I knew it wouldn't last," he sighs. "Gary was into heavy composing, studying with Vladimir Ussachevsky, and so it was 'Why don't we use this little theme..?' and that may have been the beginning of the end. When we started working with compositions we weren't a free form improvisation ensemble anymore." The group did however manage to record several studio sessions, one of which Greene copied ("there's still forty hours of FFIE stuff in cans somewhere," he muses, wistfully). This 29-minute group improvisation, recorded on April 3rd 1964 was released on Cadence in 1999 (*The Free Form Improvisation Ensemble*, Cadence CJR 1094) with three pieces recorded live at Judson Hall on December 30th that year (the first track on the CD is erroneously entitled "Eat eat", which is track three). The album is a veritable revelation, not only on account of the fine playing by Winter, Friedman and Walker, who have since been all but forgotten, but for the extraordinary maturity of Silva's bass and the diversity of Greene's piano work.

"Cage wrote his prepared piano pieces in the 1940s, and before him there was Henry Cowell, 'The Aeolian Harp' and 'The Banshee', but I was the first one in free jazz to play inside the instrument," Greene insists. "I would put golf balls in there, scrape the strings with the tuning hammer, anything to keep it spontaneous." His most notorious accessory was a garbage can lid recovered from an alley behind a delicatessen on Houston Street.

It was only a matter of time before the iconoclastic pianist hooked up with ESP-Disk's Bernard Stollman. "The first thing I did for ESP was *Patty Waters Sings* (ESP 1025, 1965). I pushed her over the edge, man," he chortles. "'Black is the color of my true love's hair'.. I dropped the garbage can cover on the piano on that one!" For his own ESP debut (*Burton Greene Quartet*, ESP 1024, 1966) he proposed a line-up that included saxophonist Marion Brown, bassist Henry Grimes and drummer Rashied Ali. "Rashied couldn't commit himself to the recording because he was with 'Trane, so Dave Grant and Tom Price each did two tracks, and Frank Smith played tenor on 'Taking it Out of the Ground'."

Mention of the ESP label inevitably raises the sensitive subject of royalties, and the smile on Greene's face turns to a grimace. "Bernard was a New York lawyer so everybody thought he was smart, but he was a foolish idealist like the rest of us. The only reason ESP survived at all was because of his parents' money. On the internet you can find 14 pages of listings of my ESP shit reissued from here to Timbuktu and nobody's getting a dime. A whole bunch of hustlers and gangsters are ripping us off, ZYX, Get Back, Base and now Abraxas. They say 'you want money, go see Bernard...' But Bernard put the company in his ex-wife's name. All the flak goes that way, and Bernard keeps the masters and keeps reissuing them. He's got to wake up sometime, and if people are up for it I'm ready to instigate a class action lawsuit." He pauses, and gazes out of the window at the steadily falling snow. "But even if I did there may no money in the coffers anyway," he sighs. "You know what lawyers charge."

Greene did, however, manage to get paid correctly for his extraordinary Columbia album *Presenting Burton Greene* (CBS S63719), one of two free jazz projects accepted by the legendary John Hammond (the other, Sunny Murray's *Spiritual Infinity* has yet to see the light of day), and, Greene claims, the first appearance on a jazz album of a Moog synthesizer. The pianist had met Robert Moog at a trade fair back in 1963 and travelled up to his home in Ithaca, NY to try out his revolutionary new instrument. "Hammond had heard about that, and he wanted me to add synthesizer, even though the album was already recorded. Normally I don't drink, but I remember that day I went back to the studio I drank a quarter bottle of Scotch! There was a $300,000 Moog and five Walter Sears engineers each getting $80 an hour to help me create. I didn't know sine from sawtooth, but Hammond was like, 'that's my boy!' We ended up with all this weird stuff and had to find a place to put it. [Drummer] Shelly [Rusten] said 'don't you put that shit on top of my solo, man!'"



After the creative hotbed of the BYG Actuel sessions in Paris in the summer of 1969, and a trip to Denmark where he performed with saxophonist John Tchicai, Greene settled in Holland, where he played his first gigs as part of a quartet with bassist Arjen Gorter, drummer Han Bennink and saxophonist Willem Breuker, for whose BV Haast label he still records today.

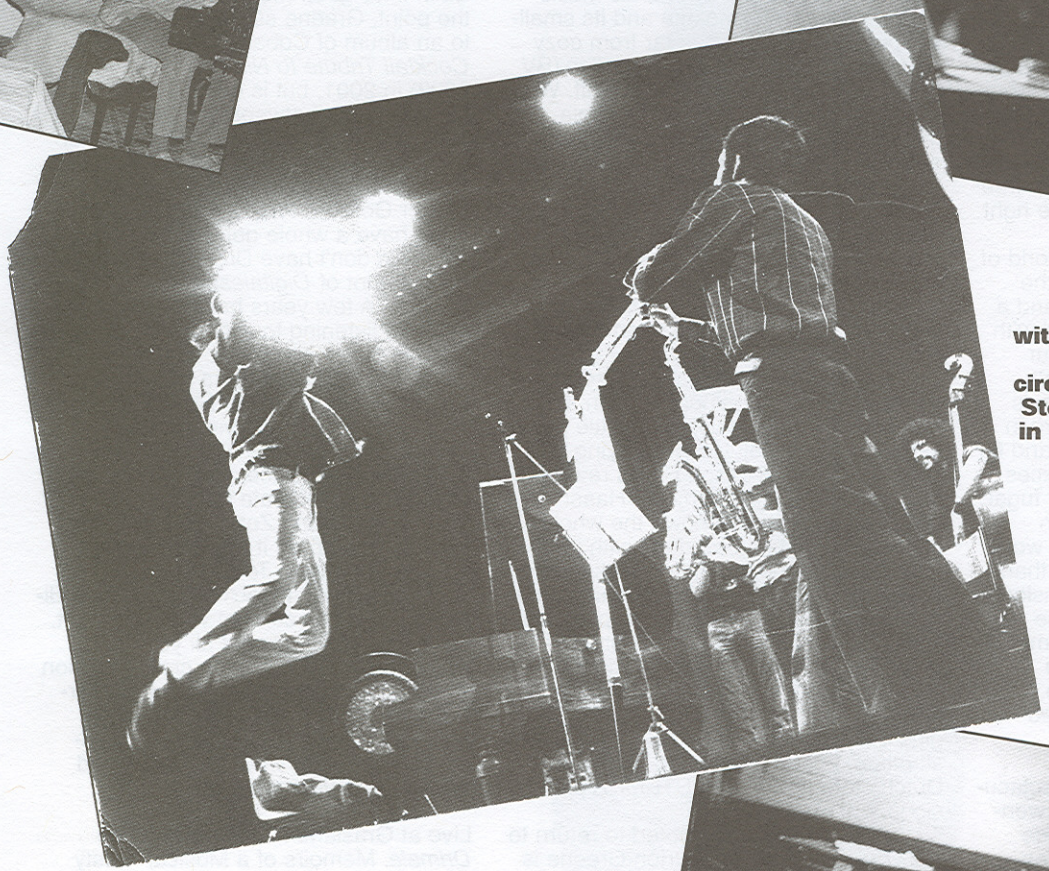
"I still did a few crazy things, a theatre piece with Willem and a session for French radio with Han that was so heavy they wouldn't broadcast it, but although I liked the energy of the Europeans it was a kind of replay for me. I'd already played with a lot of masters. We played atomic energy music twenty-four hours a day, and we exploded like the Fourth of July – a lot of people couldn't put the pieces back. Archie lost his chops: for a long time, he couldn't bite the reed; Marion Brown ended up in a nursing home, a lot of people died on the street, or disappeared like Henry [Grimes], Giuseppi [Logan]. There was a heavy mortality rate in that music."

Greene himself ended up having what he jokingly refers to as a "Turtle Nervous Breakdown". "It came on slowly! I had a solo gig in Nijmegen and I fell off the piano bench. I couldn't move. My girlfriend took me home and put me in bed and I stayed there for about ten days. When I finally got up I sat at the piano and a voice inside said: "You really wanna do the same thing or something else?" So I started just.. noodling.. playing some Eastern European or Indian raga kind of stuff.. searching for something else. A short time later I met

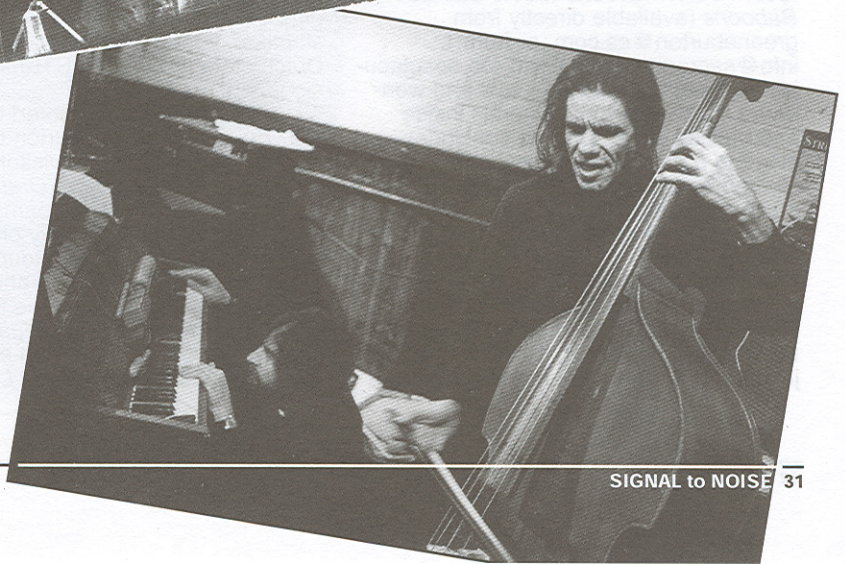








clockwise from far left: with sitarist Jamaluddin Bhartiya; the Burton Greene Quartet, circa 1968, with Byard Lancaster, Steve Tintweiss & Shelly Rusten; in Eindhoven, Netherlands, 1970; with bassist Alan Silva; conducting in Annecy, France.



"We played atomic energy music 24 hours a day, and we exploded like the Fourth of July... a lot of people couldn't put the pieces back"

Jamaluddin Bhartiya, a great Indian sitarist who taught me about Indian music. By '73 that's where I was at: I wanted to find a way to balance things out, make it a balm instead of a bomb. I needed yoga to do that. Satchidananda was the way to go."

Greene glances affectionately over to the other side of the boat to a photograph of himself and the guru whom he first met in 1967. "That's Satchidananda. He's out of the body now, he went out last year at 87, but he's still a big force in my life, maybe even more now than ever before. *Sat* is truth, *chid* is primal substance, the earth. If you can bring down the light into the prism, you get bliss, ananda. Swamiji embodied ecumenism; his Lotus temple in Virginia welcomes all religions: inside you have altars for all the known religions. Buddhists, rabbis, Catholic priests, agnostics and atheists too – we all have something to share. Truth is one and paths are many."

Among the paths Burton Greene started exploring in the 1970s was Turkish music, after meeting percussionist Okay Temiz in Baden Baden in 1971. "He was walking around saying: 'What are you guys doing playing in three and four time? Why don't you play in seven?' That's how I got back to Monk – he wrote things in seven bar units, like dropping the last bar out of 'Brilliant Corners'. By the end of the 1970s I'd gone full cycle and I could now do a free jazz solo, go far out and then come right back in."

He also returned to the world of synthesizers with a vengeance in the late 1980s, buying a Roland D50 and a U110 module which he customized with 400 original programs. "I'd have four detunings on each key, and with the aftertouch function even more sounds would come out, so an 8 note chord in both hands could get between 32 and 64 voices! And in chase mode, the voices pile up in random canon, stretto or fugal combinations. It's dense stuff! I can understand why Alan Silva prefers working with a synth these days rather than with his bass. For me, it's an extension of my earlier experiments inside the piano, but more interesting and complex." *Solo Orchestra in Real Time* (Nimbus NS5504C, 1990), and the recent *Burton Greene Meets Sacred Baboons* (available directly from greeneburton@cs.com, or from info@sacredbaboons.com) are spectacular examples of Greene's wild and wonderful keyboard work. "There's inside and outside stuff," Greene concludes, clearing a space to sit between Romanian wooden spoons, organic vegetables and stuffed toy tigers. "Free for me means being free to play a classical cadenza too."

Accordingly, when an opportunity arose to record European music for Rudolf Kreiss' Circle imprint (*European Heritage* Circle RK 16, 1978), Greene jumped at it, arranging medieval troubadour music by Jaufré Rudel and Raimbaut de Vaquerias and even tackling Bartók's "Romanian Folk Dances." "I was always fascinated by Bartók's music. In my pad in New York I had a picture of Van Gogh's 'Starry Night' and an angel suspended from the ceiling and I used to put 'Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta' on and the angel started rocking back and forth. It was like being on LSD."

In 1980 Greene toured for three months with director Jenn ben Yakov's play "Nagalm", improvising on Bartókian gypsy scales five or six nights a week with violinist Ies Jacobs. His music was drawing him inexorably back to his Jewish roots in Romania. "I felt it was time to pay back my ancestors. Guys like Randy Weston put his money where his mouth was and moved to Africa in the '60s. This was my way of dealing with it. In 1993 I went back to Romania, right up to the little village in the north where my grandparents came from. I sat in there in the old synagogue and I could hear their voices: 'Good boy, he came home...'"

Home it might be, but Greene's take on klezmer and Sephardic music with his group Klezmokum and its smaller spin-off Klez-thetics is far from cozy and kitsch. 1998's *ReJew-Venation* (BV Haast 0802) is "full of strange stuff. We took a radical left turn on that whole thing." (Greene was joined by vocalist and fluegelhorn player Patricia Beysens, clarinettists Perry Robinson and Hans Mekel, tuba virtuoso Larry Fishkind and percussionist Roberto Haliffi). "One of the tracks on that CD is 'Nevalah' from John Zorn's Masada *Vav* album. When they recorded it, they didn't blow: even Dave Douglas played the chart. We stretched on it."

With Tzadik in mind, Greene sent a demo of the album to Zorn, but received "a polite refusal on a little postcard. Maybe he felt we were trying to compete. [STN's] Jason Bivins reviewed [Klez-thetics'] *Calistrophy* (BVHaast 0802) and said we'd shown the whole NY bunch what can be done with jazz and klezmer, and I want to thank him for saying we deserve more recognition. It's like it's not politically correct to play this kind of music, as if being Jewish now means we have something to do with Sharon, who I totally dissociate myself from. It's funny, in the past I always had gigs but no bread – now it's the opposite situation, I got a little bread with my Dutch state and BUMA STEMRA pensions, but no gigs!"

Though not tempted to return to the USA permanently, Burton Greene is an increasingly frequent visitor. A new solo piano album, *Live at Grasland* ("one of my strongest yet!" he beams – and he's right) is due out shortly on Drimala, and later this year he'll be touring with Roy Campbell, Adam Lane and Lou Grassi, culminating in a June recording date for CIMP. He's also preparing a series of compositions as an extension of 2000's Klezmokum outing *Le Dor Va Dor* ("From Generation to Generation", BVHaast CD 0700), "centered around the works of Jewish composers active around World War II. Very poignant stuff and still with a potent musical message for our times." Last year he worked again with his old friend Patty Waters, playing the Vision Festival in New York with bassist Mark Dresser and Le Weekend in Scotland, and is "waiting for the right moment to hook up with Henry Grimes. Best pizzicato player in history. We had a big hug at the Vision Festival. It's great to see him back. He's coming here in March. I'd love to get a trio together with Rashied and Henry."

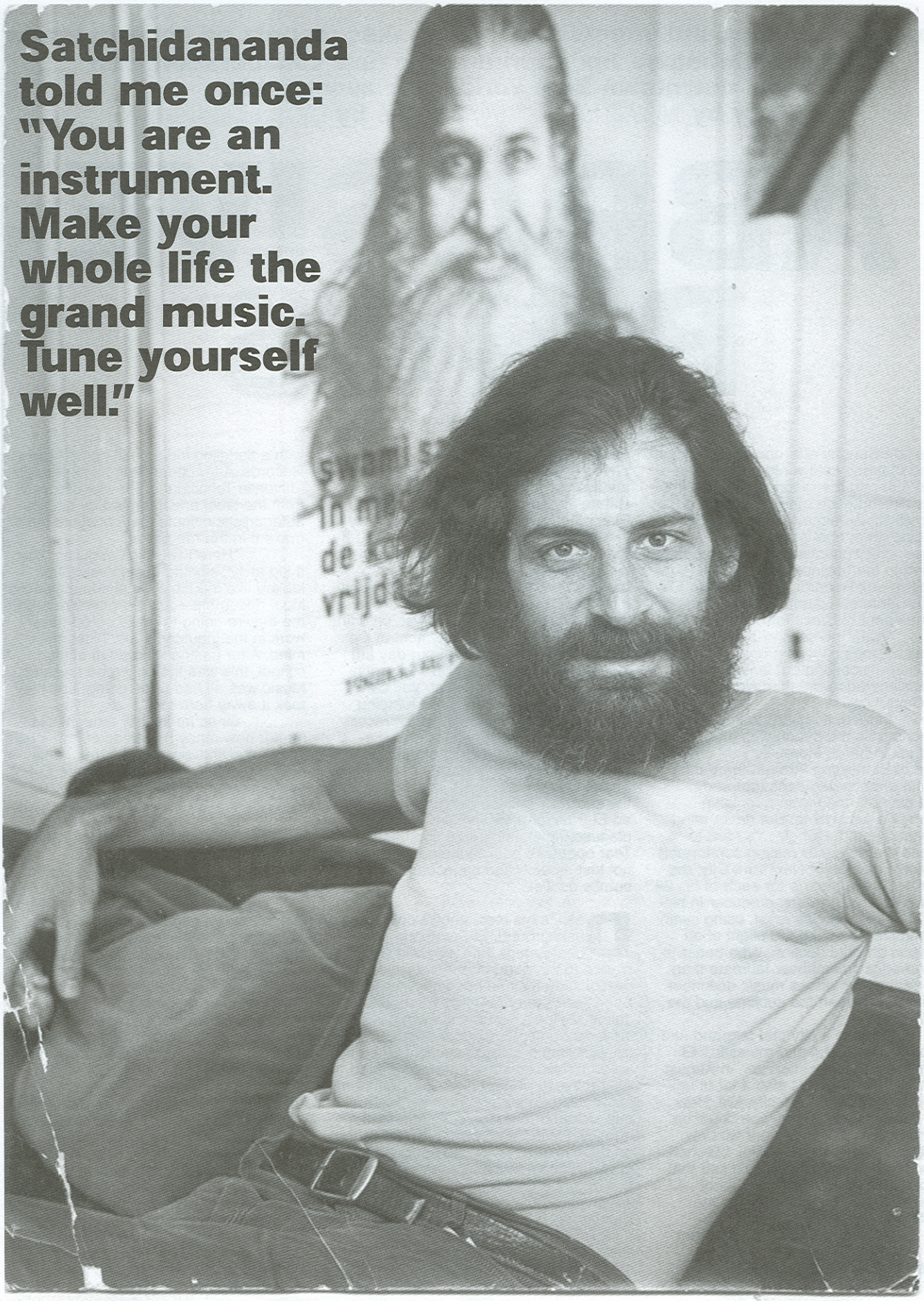
In the meantime, Burton Greene is making full use of his broadband hookup. "What I'm really into is radio streaming, there's so much stuff out there. I can't go out and buy a bunch of CDs at $15 a pop – there's no place to put them here anyway, as you can see! The Web's my grapevine; that's how I find about things. If you're into astrology, I'm a Gemini. Keep it all going. There are only two kinds of music: quality or bullshit; I don't care if it's Kurt Cobain or Bach if it's good music." As if to prove the point, Greene submitted three tracks to an album of Cobain covers (*The Cocktail Tribute to Nirvana*, Vitamin 8522) in 2001, but is quick to point out the difference between covering and copying. "In the '50s you knew immediately who was playing. No question that Sonny Rollins sounded different from Dexter Gordon. What's killing jazz today is we have a whole generation of copycats. We don't have Dizzy Gillespie but we got a lot of *Digitalespie*.

A few years back I was in the BIMhuis listening to John Zorn doing his Ornette Coleman covers, and Cecil Taylor showed up. After a while Cecil turned to me and said, "Burton, why are all these young cats trying to recreate the museum?" That's been a kind of calling card for me since, why are these cats trying to recreate the museum. I think Zorn playing Zorn is much better. Put your stamp on it and don't try to copy anyone else. To quote Satchidananda: 'If you're serious or dedicated in life you can get what you want, but be careful that's not all you get!' Which means you need a creative vision that encompasses a lot more than narrow ego gratification. Satchidananda also told me once: 'You are an instrument. Make your whole life the grand music. Tune yourself well.'"

Live at Grasland *is out in March on Drimala.* Memoirs of a Musical "Pesty Mystic" – or – From the Ashcan to the Ashram and Back Again *is available on Cadence Jazz Books.*

For further info on Burton Greene: www.burton.burtongreene.com and www.klezmokum.burtongreene.com

Dan Warburton interviewed Reynols in STN#30


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