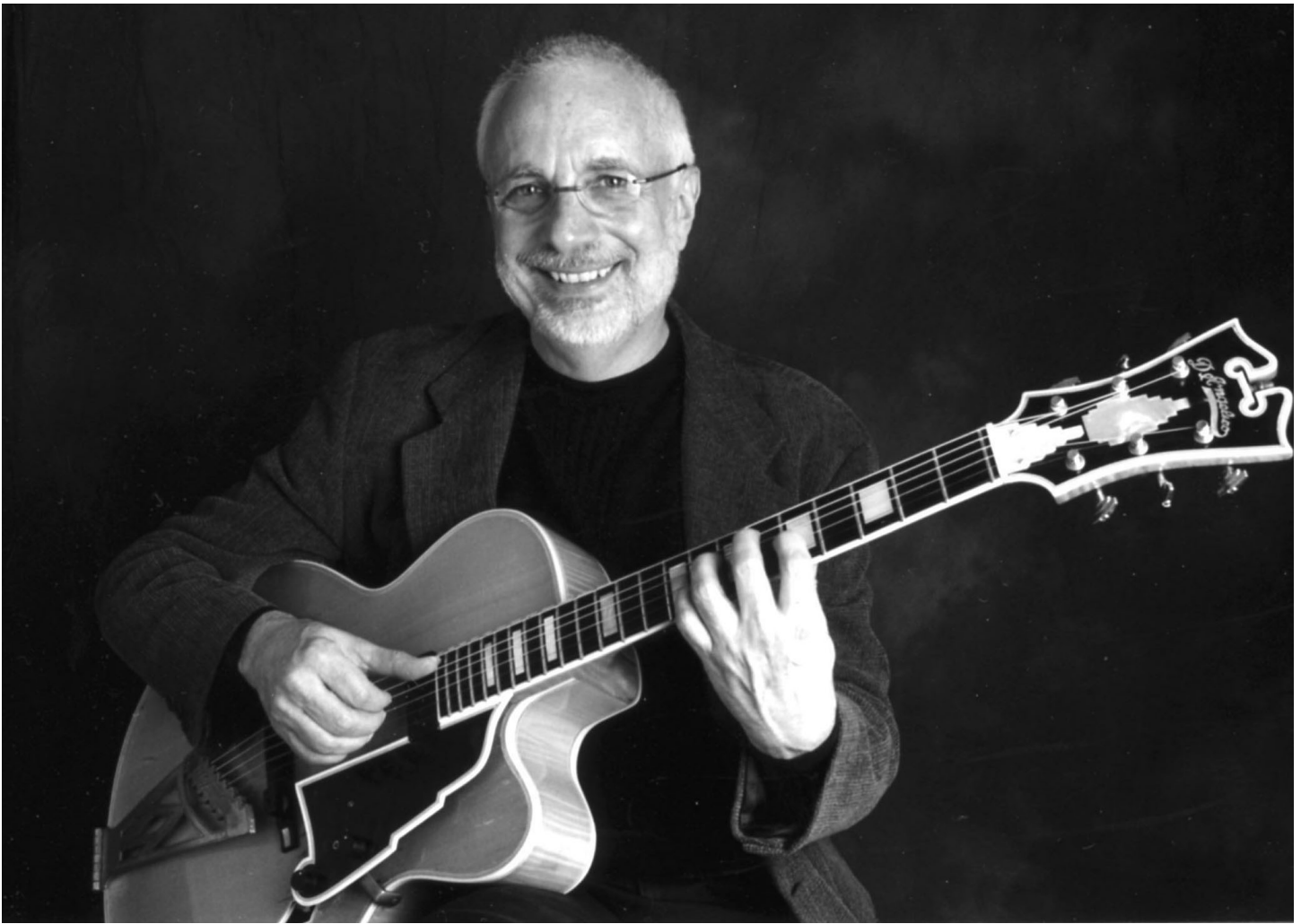


BILL WURTZEL by Ed Benson



Bill Wurtzel has had a long career as a guitarist on the New York jazz scene. He was a member of the Count Basie alumnae band “The Countsmen” for 15 years, guitarist with Bill “Mr. Honky Tonk Doggett” for 7 years, the Haywood Henry Quartet for 5 years, and now is a member of the Harlem Jazz & Blues All Star band following Al Casey, who is ill. Bill has been a board member of the Jazz Foundation of America since its founding in 1989. JFA helps older jazz musicians who are in need of financial assistance and health care. (pledge@jazzfoundation.org) I met Bill prior to a gig in Long Island.

EB: Are you from a musical family?

BW: My parents didn’t play instruments, but my father and sister sang. My dad had a great ear. He used to tell me: “Make the guitar talk”.

EB: What got you interested to begin with?

BW: When I was 8 years old my folks bought a roadhouse in the boonies in upstate New York. There was hillbilly music day and night on the juke box, and live music on the weekend. I fiddled around with the piano. Then my dad hired this singing cowboy from Texas to entertain. His name was Jack Reynolds...fancy outfits, killer boots... and he played the hell out of a jumbo Gibson flat-top. I was an awe-struck nine year old. Jack showed me G and C chords on my \$8. Stella. After he left some drunk taught me D7 and I was on my way. I used to trip the juke box and copy Hank Williams, Ernest Tubb, ...that music is in my blood. Before long, I was singing and playing in the Forest Tavern., and in resort hotels in the summertime. I auditioned for a local radio station, and was on 15 minutes, three days a week... the “Pecos Bill Show.” I still have fan mail.

EB: You still do it all by ear?

BW: When I’m improvising, but I also read.

EB: What were you, about 12 or 13?

BW: 12. At 13 I became a regular on kids TV shows like “Star Time Kids” in NYC. Connie Francis was on, too. She played a white accordion and sang. You know, Gene Bertoncini was on kid shows too. I still have the custom-made cowboy outfits, which my grandsons wear now.



Bill at 10 with his Stella guitar.

EB: Did you study formally?

BW: When I was 14 I had a couple of lessons with a violinist who played a little guitar. After two visits, he told my parents I was unteachable, but asked if I could make a duo gig on the weekend. I accompanied whatever he played, and got 50 bucks. They still pay that on some gigs today. Can you believe it? I played with dance bands in high school...read the chord symbols for standards in “Combo Ork” books. And of course I learned the new Bill Haley’s “Rock Around the Clock” and the Bill Doggett “Honky Tonk” solos. At that time we lived in Springfield, Mass. and there were very few pickers in town...pretty cool for a teenager. Then I picked up this record by Mundell Lowe “A Grand Night for Swinging,” and it turned my head around. We became friends several years ago. Last year

I accumulated airline miles to go anywhere, so I flew to San Diego to hang with Mundy.

EB: Were you playing any single-line solos in those days?

BW: Yes. But learning to play in all keys on sophisticated tunes took a while.

EB: Don’t tell me until this day you didn’t have lessons?

BW: I started studying in my 20s.

EB: With whom?

BW: Kenny Burrell referred me to Skeeter Best.

EB: What kind of things did he teach you?

BW: Reading...scales... hearing... what he did on gigs. Skeeter used to say, “See, that’s a door, that’s a table..everything you play has to be something.” Eventually I subbed for him. I learn best by listening. I was lucky to be on the bandstand with lots of great jazz musicians from the Count Basie and Ellington bands. You learn things, like counting off the right tempo, phrasing, time feel. Can’t put that in a book; you have to be there. I also studied for years with Remo Palmier, who was a great influence and a close friend. Bird used to call Remo for musical advice. Howard Morgen helped me a lot. You can’t BS Howie. He can pinpoint your strengths and weaknesses. And he knows how to get you on the right track. Check out his arrangements...wow!

Another friend who helped me was bassist Russell George, who played with everybody...great jazz violinist, too. He doesn’t pull punches. He got me into studying classical guitar.

EB: Let’s just talk about rhythm guitar. Is it a dying art these days?

BW: I played rhythm guitar with Papa Joe Jones. Today I get occasional calls for it with swing bands like Felix & the Cats. I use my D’Angelico. But I think you’re right in calling this style a dying art.

EB: How did you get involved with Howard Morgen?

BW: We worked opposite each other in 1989. Love at first hearing, which led to our performing as a duo for 12 years until Howie moved to Chapel Hill. I miss him.

EB: Did you guys do mostly weddings and bar mitzvahs?

BW: Some club dates, but mostly jazz clubs, concerts, clinics, cruises, 10 very special parties for Paul Simon.

EB: Do you still do that?

BW: I visit Howard in Chapel Hill. We run some tunes down and he lays some new ideas on me. He's writing another masterpiece.

EB: Are most of your gigs with trios and quartets, or do you do solo?

BW: All kinds of groups...guitar & bass, singers, organ trios, solo classical guitar. I do private affairs, jazz clubs, concerts and steady restaurant gigs.

EB: Are there enough gigs out there today?

BW: Jazz is a tough way to make a living. In fact, after 9/11, some clubs ask bands to play for tips. DJs are replacing bands. I made a decision about how I would make a living when I graduated from high school. I was a good artist, so I enrolled in art school and became an advertising art director.

EB: Were you still playing at this time?

BW: Absolutely. I think it's important for young players to know that it's possible to burn both ends of the candle-day gig and jazz at night. It's not an easy

road...no sleep. But it depends what you want out of life. After all these years, I'm still happily married, with kids and grandchildren. You'd be surprised how many successful musicians took this route.

EB: Did you study classical music as well?

BW: I studied classical with Yasha Kofman at the American Institute of Guitar.

EB: Do you still study?

BW: Every week. Yasha is a passionate teacher and player who teaches to your individual learning style. I recommend him for anyone in NYC who's serious about classical guitar.

EB: Tell me some of the other people you played with.

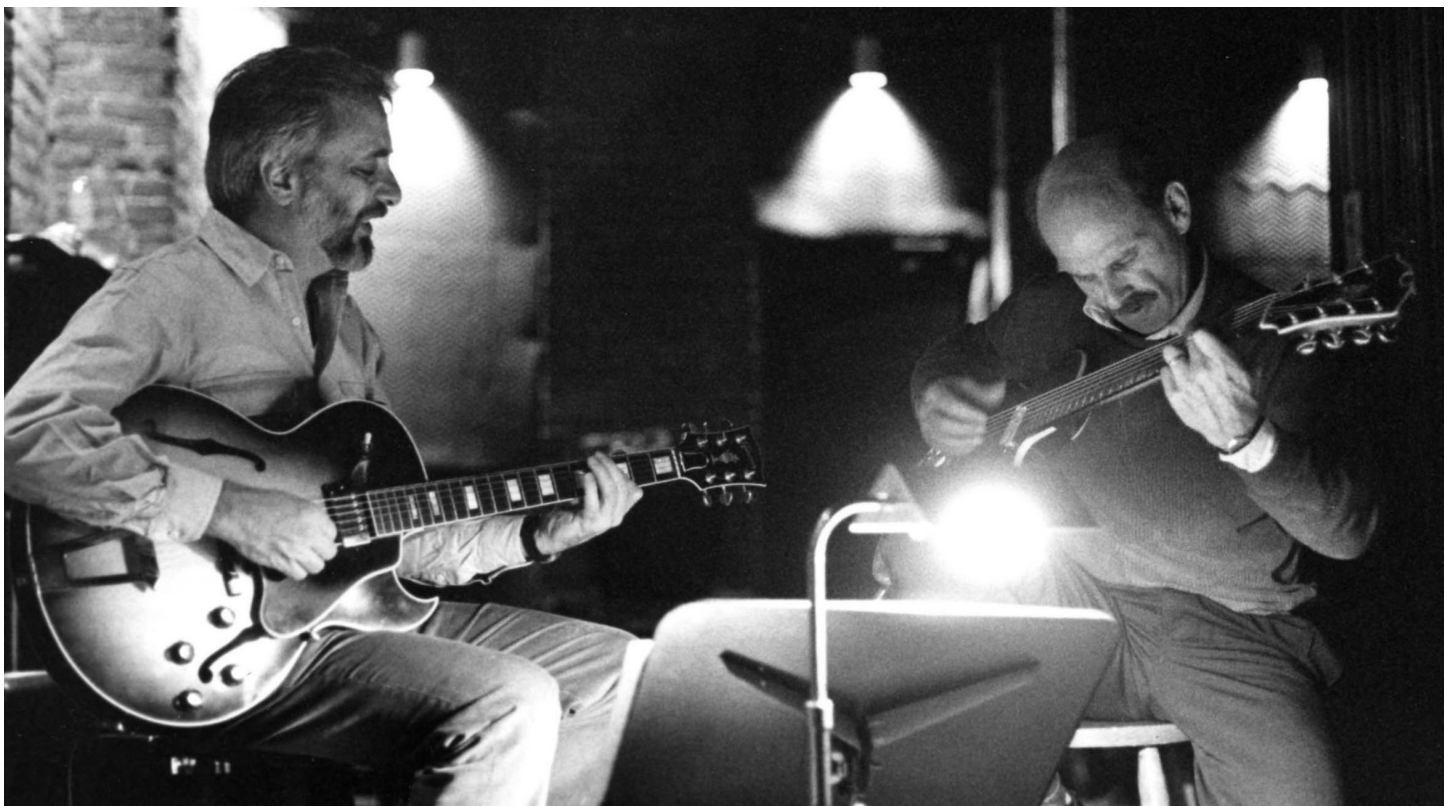
BW: Clark Terry, Benny Powell, Wild Bill Davis, Eddie Durham, Dicky Wells, Earl Warren, Buddy Tate, Jimmy Witherspoon, Jimmy McGriff, Gloria Lynne, Ruth Brown, David Fathead Newman...many legends.

EB: You play a little bit of everything, don't you.

BW: Mainly jazz, but my 10-year-old grandson is studying with me and wants to play in a rock band, so I'm copying his CDs.

EB: Can you teach improvisation?

BW: I have, but the student has to have a knack for it.



Roni Ben Hur does a great job using the Barry Harris method, and he's a terrific player. His new book "Talk Jazz" lays it all out.

EB: When you are playing, do you see the chord symbols flying by, and do you know the notes?

BW: You must know the changes inside out. Knowing the lyrics helps phrasing, too. All the old timers knew the lyrics.

EB: I see guys who can't read a note of music but they have an innate feeling, and they play it well.

BW: They have a gift from above.

EB: On your gig, you do a lot of solos. What kind of guitar are you playing?

BW: Mostly a Gibson L4. For classical, a Takamini.

EB: What are your plans?

BW: Musically?... to keep on learning.

EB: Are there any memorable events that stick out in your mind from over the years. Good or Bad!

BW: I'm grateful for the opportunity of being on the stand with musicians who made jazz history. Good... a quote from Eddie Durham, when he was interviewed on NPR. He said that after Charlie Christian and Wes,

I was his favorite guitarist. Even though there's a world of players much better than I am, it's still a compliment I will treasure. Bad...losing Remo.

EB: You played with so many different people, why do you think there is such a demand for your playing?

BW: It sure isn't the number of notes I play. Maybe it's where I put them. They call that a groove. Tapping your foot on 2 and 4 and popping the offbeat helps.

EB: What haven't you done so far in music that you would like to do?

BW: Ouch! There's so much I'd like to accomplish...play like Howard Morgen, for openers.

EB: Why did you quit the advertising business?

BW: I quit in 1989 to play the guitar full time.

EB: Was it worth it to walk away?

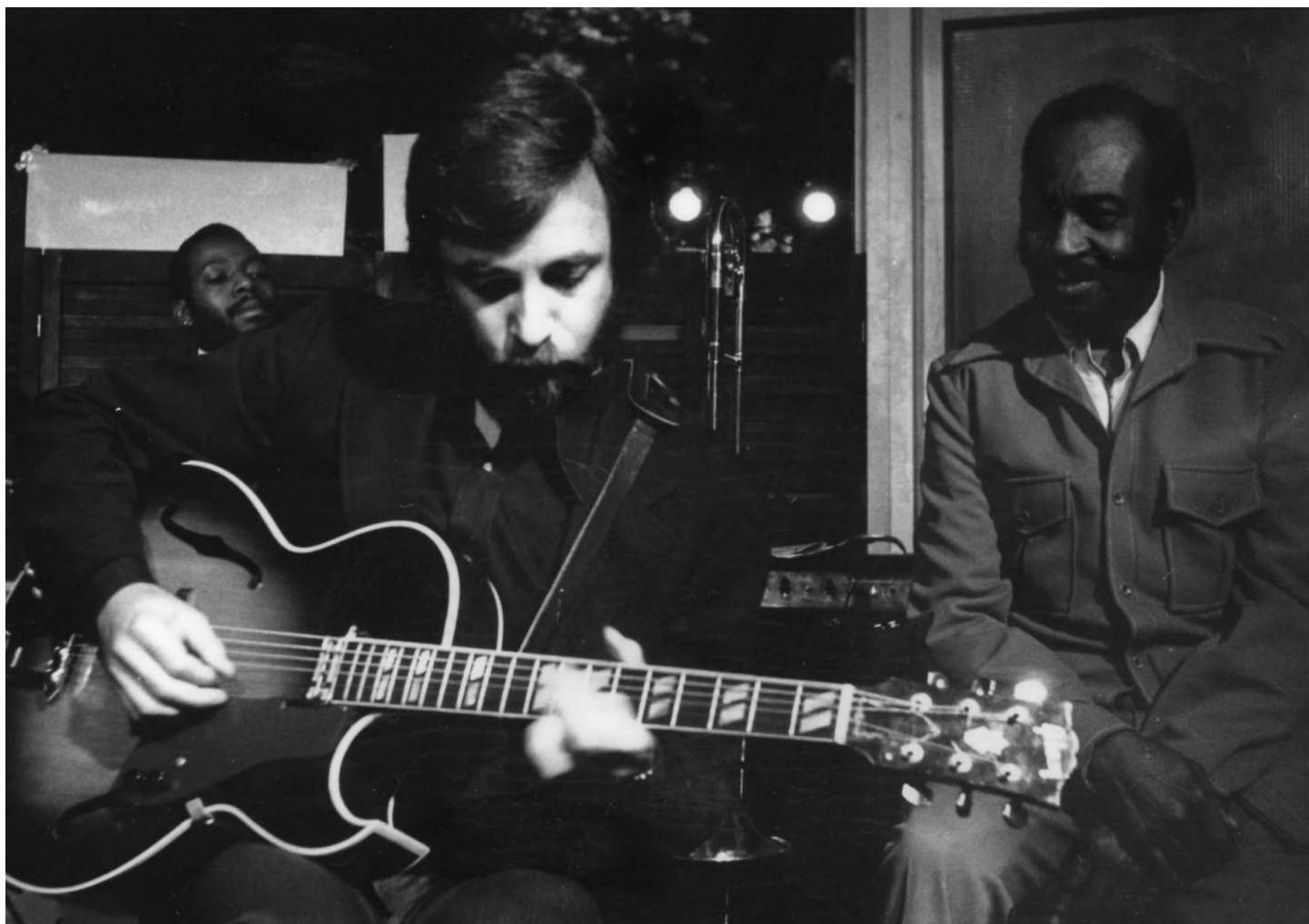
BW: For the soul, yes.

EB: Are your kids interested in music at all?

BW: My daughter Nina was a ballet dancer. Now she's interested in an advertising career, so I'm helping her get started...a labor of love.



L to R, Bross Townsend, Jimmy Witherspoon, Arvell Shaw, Harold Ashby, David Fathead Newman, Bill Wurtzel, (Kenny Washington, Drums).



Bill Wurtzel and Eddie Durham

EB: Is there no market for jazz music these days?

BW: Most jazz musicians I know about are scuffling.

EB: What do you tell kids these days who want to be full-time musicians?

BW: Keep the flame alive, but consider having an additional way to pay the rent.

EB: Any current players you enjoy?

BW: Roni Ben-Hur, Jack Wilkins, Peter Mazza, Russell Malone, Howard Alden—so many, that I feel bad not mentioning them all. And of course, the great old timers we all know and love.



Bill Wurtzel playing at the Apollo Theater in New York this past April with the Harlem Jazz and Blues All Stars. That's Fred Staton (Dakota's brother) and Clark Terry next to Bill.