

THE U.S. POP MUSIC SCENE

A Conversation with Gary Burton

Popular music in the United States today is a multifaceted mosaic that challenges simple description. In the following interview with Michael J. Bandler, jazz musician-composer-educator Gary Burton, the world's leading vibraphonist, analyzes the current scene and the forces at work. Burton, who has performed around the globe and recorded extensively, is executive vice president of the Berklee College of Music in Boston, an institution whose curriculum is devoted to all forms of contemporary music.

Q: *You came along about a generation ago. How would you compare the young musicians of that era with the talent you see these days at Berklee and elsewhere?*

A: The biggest difference is education, in that the jazz and pop musicians of the Sixties, when I was starting my career, were the very first ones to have a chance to go to music college and learn more about music. The majority of the players were still self-taught, or intuitive, and learned from their experiences on the job more than in an organized academic setting. That began to change by the Seventies, and into the Eighties. Now it's far more common for young up-and-coming musicians to go to school somewhere and learn a lot more about music of different types, and music history, and the nuts and bolts of music, which makes them capable of more versatility and more sophistication in their work.

Q: *Paula Cole [a leading U.S. pop artist] is an example.*

A: She was actually one of our music production and engineering students. So she's quite at home in the studio from a technical standpoint, producing her own records.

Q: *How has Berklee responded to the pop evolution, or revolution?*

A: The original concept of the school, when it was founded in the late Forties, was to provide practical real-life experience and training for musicians who were likely to work in the commercial music industry, which at that time meant mostly jazz-based music that was used in television and in [advertising] jingles, as well as in concerts. That broadened over the years as other kinds of popular music got a foothold. Starting in the late Sixties and into the Seventies, we started adding courses with rock music styles and increased the offerings as the years went by, and added a major program for recording and for synthesizers, because that also was becoming

more popular. We saw our enrollment for vocalists mushroom greatly because there was more emphasis on singers. So we've essentially followed, and tried to offer the best of what we could in each of these areas that have become more prominent as the music business has evolved.

Q: *In the past, jazz, blues and country all came out of the roots of black society and Appalachia.*

A: But in addition, there are influences from farther away. We've become much more globally aware of other kinds of music. We even have a whole genre called "world music" that's sort of a mix of ethnic music adapted to our modern western styles.

Q: *World music takes in a lot. I don't think it even includes the Latin sound.*

A: No -- that's its own category. But it includes African, Indian, Asian, Greek -- any ethnic music that isn't big enough to have its own category. Klezmer (a pop contemporary sound of East European derivation), for example, is about to get its own category. Latin music started working its way in even as early as the Forties and Fifties in jazz. Tito Puente and Dizzy Gillespie and George Shearing started adding Latin players, and gradually, more and more Latin music was available. Also, the Latin population of the United States increased, and that provided support. There was an audience for it. So now, given a higher level of communication among cultures, and a greater number of Latin citizens in the country, there's an expanded base of popular support for various kinds of Latin music. It even has its own genres within it.

Q: *Arguably, jazz has been the most popular form of American music overseas.*

A: That's right.

Q: *Does it have any rivals for that audience today?*

A: American pop music is steadily gaining fans overseas.

Q: *How do you define "pop music"?*

A: Music made by American artists in the popular field. It doesn't matter whether it's hip-hop or rap or whatever -- rap less so because it depends so much on words. It's partly to do with celebrity -- the teenager in another country hears the news, and reads about Michael Jackson or Madonna and the others who are on MTV [a television cable channel devoted to popular music] regularly, and have a pretty substantial following around the world. It's as much an American cultural interest as it is a specific music style. I think that's part of why jazz has been interesting worldwide. It's perceived as a very American kind of thing. People who are curious about the United States feel that jazz somehow tells them something about us.

Q: *Is jazz on the decline?*

A: No.

Q: *What about the jazz radio stations?*

A: Those are on the decline. The jazz clubs went through their period of decline about a decade ago and now have been sort of steady since then. But as radio stations have become increasingly valuable commercially, no station can afford to do alternative kinds of music, such as classical or jazz. So, there are also very few classical stations.

Radio, unfortunately, is becoming all the same -- with various kinds of rock and popular music that doesn't offer the range or variety radio used to. But you still find jazz recordings, and sales have been steady. And new young artists seem to be discovered all the time. In fact, the complaint in the jazz field is often that the new young artists get more attention than the more established artists, who may be seen as not getting as much attention and time in the spotlight as they would deserve. Record companies are all hoping to find the next big star, the next Miles Davis, the next jazz artist who's going to be more than just a modest seller of records. There is certainly a substantial audience for jazz. Ironically, the percentage of the entire record business for jazz and classical is about equal -- about four percent for each. But it's more evenly distributed in the jazz field among a wider number of artists.

Q: *What about blues -- a legendary form of music?*

A: It's the root of a lot of music -- jazz, different kinds of popular music certainly can trace influences back to more traditional blues, from the time blues started being available to, say, the Bob Dylan growing up in Minneapolis [Minnesota]. He was able to hear it on records, and have it as an influence on his own music. I think it was the rock musicians of the Sixties -- other than Elvis Presley -- who were the first to really be influenced by blues. The Sixties was, in a sense, rock's first golden decade of acceptance. It had always been primarily teenager's music. It was not given any attention by the adult population until the Sixties, and then suddenly you had artists like the Beatles and Bob Dylan and the Grateful Dead who were redefining the audience for rock music.

Q: *If rock in the Fifties was mostly embraced by teenagers, what can you tell me about the types of music being embraced by teens today?*

A: I have two teenagers myself. I watch what they listen to out of curiosity. I will say that I don't understand it. It may be because I'm getting older. I think the brand of rock music loosely termed "alternative" is the hot phenomenon at the moment. I'm not sure exactly what defines it. My son has mentioned "ska." He played me a record with a ska band. It's an interesting mixture of rock with some jazz influences, of all things.

Q: *What about grunge, punk, and so on?*

A: Punk was around even in the Seventies. It was the first installment of alternative rock. It was more rebellious. The lyrics were more edgy. Little did anyone know that the lyrics of rap music were going to go to another level. Grunge came from Seattle. The musicians there needed a name for the emerging group of players there. Somehow, grunge became the term.

Q: *Austin [Texas] has a role to play in music nowadays.*

A: Oh, yes -- some rock, some jazz, but mostly blues. That was very much a result of the music festivals put on by public radio and public television down there, and broadcasting from there.

Q: *Talk for a moment about the development of the urban sound -- which might include rap and hip-hop and Motown, but also Austin and Seattle.*

A: I think you named the styles I would identify as urban. Certainly Motown was the first urban music. Blues was before that, but it wasn't considered urban. It was country. Motown had that city sophistication to it, style to it, that under the general umbrella of R&B [rhythm and blues], went on to eventually turn into what is now hip-hop and rap. I think most so-called urban music is identified with a black influence and style.

Q: *While we're on the subject of urban music, have lyrics always had the significance, the prominence, the contentiousness that they have today in pop music?*

A: No. There was always somebody who was being the "bad boy" on the rock scene -- Elvis in his day, shaking his hips and using suggestive lyrics, versus the music for the bubble gummers, talking about typical love stories in their lyrics. That persisted through the Sixties. In the Seventies, there were always some artists who were singing very nice, pretty songs, and then there were always some others who were hard-edged, with more than a hint of violence or sexuality. The question has always been, how obvious do you want to be with it? The whole essence of rock 'n' roll, of course, is that there's a strong sexual undertone to it from the beginning -- and of course there was jazz as well. There was the equivalent in earlier generations. Cole Porter's song, "Love For Sale," was banned for years. There was Josephine Baker in the Twenties, who was considered far too risqué for audiences of her time, and she had to move to Paris in order to have a career. Today, though, as with everything, it always seems to be taken to another level. Each generation needs to somehow increase the shock value in order to express itself and stand out from the crowd. So we look at what goes on today and are appalled by the language, but in fact it's a trend that's been going on throughout the century. It's an evolutionary phenomenon.

Q: *Rap, as you sometimes hear it through an open car window or blasting out of a boom box, seems to have value not for any music, but for the lyrics and the percussive background.*

A: You have to assume that these persons in the next car or on the street are doing this not for their own enjoyment. They're performing. They're sending out a message, an image. They want to be noticed. It's more important for us to hear them listening. I think that one of the reasons that there's so little music to rap is that the music isn't the point. It's almost like the more annoying it is, the more attention-getting, the better. But the whole phenomenon, I suppose, will be analyzed and written about from a sociological point of view for a long time. One of the real ironies of it is that the main audience for rap is suburban white teenage boys.

Q: *Two components of pop music that, to my mind, virtually didn't exist a decade or two ago are New Age and Christian Contemporary -- which is well-crafted popular music with non-secular themes. Albums have become hits on the Christian, country and pop charts. The number of albums of Christian music in 1997 was 44 million, compared to 33 million the year before. What sparked this rise?*

A: Both have to do with style, psychology and spirituality. In the case of Christian Contemporary, it came about because the Christian religion became associated with the media in this past decade or two. It went from something in church on Sunday to being on television seven days a week. Some of the most powerful religious figures who have emerged are, more and more, television celebrities. Gradually, more performers were added to the mix for audiences who were more used to hearing pop and rock music than European choral music. That opened the door to any number of artists deciding it was the right combination for them, musically and message-wise.

Q: *And New Age?*

A: In an earlier day, it would have been called mood music. Most musicians disdain it, because there's very little "there" there. That's not the same as minimalism, like Steve Reich or John Adams. New Age music tends to be much less in terms of intelligent content. In fact, the whole purpose is to not really engage you too much. It's for relaxation without necessarily thinking, something quite innocuous. Musicians are offended by this because we think music should engage you. A lot of things are on the borderline between world music and New Age, depending on how rhythmic or complex it is. If it's simple, it tends to be considered New Age. If it's busier and louder and more ethnic, then it's considered world music. But the lines are fuzzy.

Q: *Do these categories reach audiences overseas?*

A: I doubt it. New Age might, a little bit. Don't forget, many countries have their own versions of innocuous local pop music that may be playing on the national radio stations, and the more serious listeners will be listening to either classical music or jazz or major pop artists like Sting or Paul Simon.

Q: *We didn't talk about artists like these.*

A: It's funny. For the first time, there's a senior citizen rock category. Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, Paul Simon, James Taylor, Arlo Guthrie. They're still identified as making youthful music. The ones we consider icons have been around for 30 years. They're all highly developed in their craft and in their experience, and have a whole list of lifetime releases of records that define their music. They're huge influences overseas, more so, in fact, than new artists who have only one record out. Even if that one record is a big hit, it's the more established star who probably has the broader influence.

Q: *It's true in country, too -- people like George Strait and Reba McEntire.*

A: That's right.

Q: *And you could fairly include Barbra Streisand in the group. She's been around for 35 years, and has a huge following, and continues to keep going.*

A: Right. There's this thing of becoming a household name. In the jazz field, you ask the non-jazz fan whether he knows anything about jazz, and he's likely to mention Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. The name in country music that most would identify with is Hank Williams, and he's been dead for years. But he's written so many songs that have endured.

Q: *Where does the new technology play a role in pop music?*

A: In some music, a lot -- for instance, the sounds coming out of the car next to you. People who are not even musicians, have no idea how music works and what it's all about, are doing the equivalent of making a meal out of frozen entrees by putting them in the microwave. The end result is not so much how it's made, but the effect it has on the listener. If it works, then it's hard to fault how the person went about it, even if it doesn't seem to be very traditional or follow the approach that we tend to teach our music students. So technology has had a big influence in that regard. It has had a more subtle and general influence in the sense that recording is easier than it used to be. It's more affordable, effective and sophisticated.

Q: *What can you say about the crossover phenomenon, as it exists throughout contemporary music?*

A: I would point out that our cultural influences are much more readily available, and are bumping into each other a lot. We're not heading toward one big homogeneous style. What we are seeing are interesting meetings of different influences in projects here and there. The motivations are different, depending on the artist. I've done a lot of non-jazz projects. I have a tango record out at the moment. It's not because I thought there was a huge market for tango music. I happen to have a big interest in it. So people get into these projects for a variety of

reasons -- politically- or business-oriented or simply artistically-oriented.

Q: *Tell me about the whole oeuvre you've developed with the vibraphone. How did you select it? What is so enticing about its sound?*

A: The vibraphone was invented in 1929, and I started playing it at six years old in 1949. I had no idea about its history or its role. I stumbled into it because a woman who lived nearby played it and gave lessons. My older sister already played piano, so when my parents decided to find music lessons for me, they had to find something else, and came across this teacher. It wasn't until my teen years that I became aware that there was a whole world of music out there. I didn't start finding records until I was a teenager. By then, I had developed a fair amount of facility with the instrument, and had spent so much time with it that the sound of it and the way of playing it was pretty much second nature to me. So at that point, even though I experimented with other instruments for a few months at a time, I always came back to the vibraphone. It was a great opportunity, because it was a new instrument, and there were many techniques and potential uses that had not yet been exploited. Because I was the first, I was able to establish my own identity and put my own mark on the instrument. It was one of those rare, one-time-only opportunities.

Q: *How would you define the technique you employed?*

A: I treated the instrument as a keyboard. It looks like a piano. But up to that point, people had played it with two mallets, and a single line of melody, like a horn or a voice. I played alone, in my small town in Indiana, and I needed harmony. It sounded empty. So I kept playing with four mallets and adding notes and filling in chords and so on, and became fluent at playing that way. So I think like a pianist and play as a keyboard player. It allows the instrument to do a wider range of things. It can accompany other instruments. It can play unaccompanied, and still sound complete. There are a lot more opportunities for texture and color because of that capability.

Q: *In terms of the elements that mark pop music's lyrics and sound -- there are social, psychological, emotional, sensual, intellectual. It's probably all of those.*

A: Yes. Music is one of the most basic experiences for human beings. We're the only animal that reacts to music that I'm aware of. You can put on a record with a driving beat, and you're sitting in the living room, and your body is now moving with it. You look down at the family dog who's lying on the couch next to you, and it's totally unaware that there's a beat going on. It doesn't feel that rhythm. It doesn't want to move with it. There's no sense of wanting to synchronize with it. It's a uniquely human thing, a fantastic, intuitive language. To me it doesn't matter if it's classical or pop or Japanese. It has that capability, and it reaches us not only on the subliminal level, but also communicates culturally.

Q: *Is there such a thing as an American sound in music?*

A: Yes. It's no one thing, just like there's no one European sound -- there's French classical music, German, Italian, opera, string quartets. But nonetheless there are certain elements that are frequently there, and a certain kind of sensibility to it that you sort of identify as American pop -- a style that's there even though it's very hard to describe it in words. There's diversity, a freshness, and that unique influence that has been at the root of American pop and jazz -- which is blues. Even though it's highly evolved into other strains, that presence still sets American pop apart from the music of other countries.

Q: *Do you see any trends on the horizon in pop music?*

A: I don't. People ask me that about jazz all the time -- where it's headed. Now that jazz and pop music have become so diversified, there's no telling. There used to be one "hit parade," one "top ten." Now there are so many different categories and subcategories, that the name of the game these days is diversity. It's an incredible range of choice, something that suits your mood for any occasion, and any kind of influences that you want to see included. It's great for music, and great for the listener.

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