

Herb Bushler : Encore  
by Anders Griffen

Herb Bushler was one of the busiest working bass players in New York from the mid-1960s into the 80s. With a classical background, he discovered jazz at the dawn of the 60s and worked with prominent artists while becoming very busy in the recording studio business. He worked with Gil Evans, Tony Williams, Bill Evans, George Russell, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Joe Farrell, Ted Curson, James Moody, David Sanborn, Paul Winter, Enrico Rava, David Amram, Burt Bacharach, David Peel & the Lower East Side, Tom Paxton, Blossom Dearie, and Warren Smith and his Composers Workshop Ensemble, among countless others.

Born in Brooklyn on March 7th, 1939, Bushler took piano lessons for a couple years before looking to join the band in junior high school. Asking what instrument he played, the band director sat him at the piano and gave him a John Philip Sousa march to play.

“So, I went to the band director and I said I’d like to join the band. He said, ‘what do you play?’ I said, ‘piano’. So, he said, ‘okay, sit down at the piano’. He put a John Philip Sousa march in front of me, he said, ‘play that’. So, I played it and he said, ‘I got just the thing for you’. He came out with a fucking tuba. (laughs) That’s what he needed, you know?”

Finding the tuba repertoire somewhat limited (and marching in the cold not much to his liking), Bushler soon switched to bass and got deeply into classical music. His brother, David, was a student at CCNY and they were doing concerts at Town Hall.

“They’d need a bass player, so, next thing I knew I was going in and doing concerts in New York when I was a sophomore in high school. Legit, you know? Taking the train in to play Beethoven’s 8th, “El Amor Brujo” by Manuel de Falla, Franck’s Symphonic Variations and Bartok’s Divertimento.”

He went to Long Beach High School in Long Island, where he played in different community orchestras, and twice a year played in the Catholic church, Handel’s Messiah at Christmas, and Bach’s B-minor mass at Easter.

He was basically self-taught, having worked through method books and gaining a ton of practical experience playing with various orchestras while still a teenager. Oxford Music Online states that Bushler “played as a soloist with several major symphony orchestras”.

“The reason that’s worded that way, it’s sort of misleading... That was the 1970s. David Amram wrote a concerto for jazz quintet and orchestra, and the jazz quintet was him, me, Jerry Dodgion, Pepper Adams, and Al Harewood. So, I was in a solo capacity in that sense. We did that with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Rochester Symphony, recorded it with the Rochester Symphony, and we did it with the Cincinnati Symphony, the Toronto Symphony, and a whole bunch of others.”

Right out of high school, Bushler went into the Navy for four years. He purposely did not want to be a musician in the Navy because he’d had enough Sousa in junior high, so he was a radioman and learned Morse Code. When he got out of the Navy, he got a job with the New York Central Railroad, but he started hearing jazz music, quit his day job, and just started practicing the new music every day.

“There was something creative going on here. I came to a bunch of realizations then. I was not being satisfied with the classical music. There really isn’t anything creative about being a classical musician. I mean, Mozart wrote the G-minor symphony 200 years ago. That’s the creative process right there. And he’s dead. If there’s anything that can be even considered slightly creative, it’s the interpretation of the work, and that’s up to whatever prima donna is standing on the podium, you know? It certainly isn’t up to the second chair bass player or the third chair violist. So, I decided I just had to get into jazz and that creativity. I quit my job at New York Central Railroad and I just started practicing and washing dishes for a living, which is a very interesting thing to do, it’s like trying to get calluses on your fingers and then [softening] your hands in hot, soapy water every night.”

At that time, around 1960, there were a lot of places where he could go sit in every night, learn to play standards and get up and blow.

“One thing that always killed me about young musicians back then, is that all the trumpet players wanted to sound like Miles Davis. And my premise was who the fuck needs another one? And all the bass players, especially the white ones, wanted to sound like Scott LaFaro. I didn’t want to do that. I mean, if you don’t have a certain sound of your own, you know, all you’re gonna do is be... just stay there, right in the middle.”

While Bushler was getting his chops together, he used to go to the Showplace and hear Mingus with Dannie Richmond, Yusef Lateef, Eric Dolphy and Ted Curson. Curson said he had work in Europe but you had to pay your way over there.

“My mentor at that point was Warren Smith. Of course, he was an excellent percussionist. He played four-mallet vibes, and he was heavy into the recording business. He used to take me to all the gigs that he was doing. So, I find myself in a band room, at Basin Street East when he was working for Peggy Lee. Or else I’d meet him at Columbia 50th Street and watch him do a recording. He opened up a lot of doors for me that way. As a matter of fact, he loaned me the money for the first gig I had with Ted Curson.”

In Europe, Bushler continued to play every day, practicing five to eight hours, and playing the gig just about every night. He got used to the lifestyle.

“Not like here, where people treat you like a second-class citizen, in Europe they really appreciate you as an artist. I got very spoiled, man. The first time I was over there, I was there for ten months. I got used to the idea of having a gig every night, and then I got back to New York and reality reared its ugly head. (laughs)”

A recording of that group, which also included tenor saxophonist Bill Barron and drummer Dick Berk, was made in Paris in August of 1964 and subsequently released as Ted Curson’s *Tears For Dolphy* (Fontana, 1965). Back in New York they recorded *The New Thing & The Blue Thing* (Atlantic, 1965) with the same group, this time augmented by French pianist, Georges Arvanitas.

Upon his return from Europe, after all of that constant playing, Bushler’s chops were ferocious, but he had no work. Smith brought him over to play some music at Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson’s apartment. They got along famously and “Perk”, as Bushler came to call him, started using him for all kinds of things, from vocal auditions and demos to film scores. Bushler contracted for him as well – finding session

musicians for various recording and performance dates. They established a regular rhythm section with drummer Grady Tate.

“We did lot of ballet scores and a lot of off-Broadway theater. I remember once doing a film score for Perk, and we did this one tune, and the producer said, ‘you guys keep recording, I’ve gotta run across town, I’ll be right back.’ So, he left, and we did this track and it was so beautiful, I said, ‘Perk, you can’t let him have this’. He said, ‘you think so?’ I said, ‘no, man’. And the engineer said, ‘yeah, let’s just put this in the can’. It’s too good for him, you know? And there was a tune called “Way Cross Georgia”, that was recorded by Sanborn... There’s an album of his called, *Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson, A Celebration*. Get that record, it has his classical works. He was a genius.”

By 1966, Bushler realized that, to work in the studios, he had to play the electric bass.

“A lot of bass players were furious, you know. They would refuse to deal with the electric bass. So, I just had to get my chops together on it and I realized, damn, I gotta do some different shit, because [the] positions on the bass don’t work [the same way]. On instruments [with a history], there are certain method books that have been around for years and years that you can use, or teachers will use to teach you; but a lot of people don’t understand that it was every man for himself with the electric bass. Everyone had their own technique. Nobody learned from any method. So, I just had to woodshed that thing all the sudden. And that’s some of the happiest times that I ever had, was when my chops on electric and acoustic were commensurate.”

He started getting studio work in July and August when so many of the first call musicians would take their vacations. That’s how people started to hear him, and his name spread. Bushler could read anything and play it at performance level the first time through. By 1966-67, there started to be so much work that he turned down more jobs than he accepted.

“These were the days when everybody was making records. There was no oil embargo yet. I mean, they were grabbing anyone off the street and giving them record contracts, you know? Record dates were like a dime a dozen in the studio and, I mean I made so much garbage that if you squeezed it all together and reduced it to its original petrol-chemical base and got a quart of oil out of it you’d be better off.”

Many a record buyer is unaware that “vinyl” is short for polyvinyl chloride (PVC). LPs are petroleum-based, and their industry affected by the price of oil.

“But there are certain records you make where you say, I really want the credit on that because... I did two albums with Jobim. The first album I did was called *Jobim* (MCA, 1973), and I really enjoyed working with this guy, it was fabulous. So, the album comes out, and it says, ‘bass: Ron Carter’. I said, ‘what the fuck is that? I did half the album’. Nothing I could do about it. Six months went by, and the producer, Claus Ogerman, called me up, ‘you know, we really enjoyed the way you played on that first album’. I said, ‘well, if you enjoyed it so much, motherfucker, why didn’t you put my name on it?’ And he went into his lame-ass shit, ‘Oh, I wasn’t responsible, just following orders’ or whatever. So, I did the second one too (*Urubu*; Warner Brothers, 1976) and he did it to me again.”

He also cites the self-titled album by Gil Evans and *Penny Arcade* with Joe Farrell among highlights on record. Meanwhile, one of his favorite gigs, creatively, was a duo with Tony Williams.

“It was a music shop out in Long Island. He was gonna do a drum clinic out there. So, there’s nothing but drummers in the audience, right? It’s packed, and they could give a fuck or less about me. They didn’t care who I was. They were there to see Tony. And we just started playing, you know, just sort of feeding off each other. We did this for like 45 minutes or an hour. I had so much fun. That was one of the best gigs, creatively, I can recall.”

Bushler was working with everybody, doing record dates, jingles, film scores, you name it. After Perkinson and Tate, he worked a lot with Joe Beck, Elliot Randall and Alan Schwartzberg. He performed with Blossom Dearie, continued to work with Warren Smith and his Composer’s Workshop Ensemble, and he worked on and off with Gil Evans from the 60s to the 80s, with whom he also began working as a contractor. David Horowitz was a longtime associate and dear friend. They met in 1968 and did some records with [folk singer] Tom Paxton and others. Bushler got him into bands with Gil Evans and Tony Williams. In 1979, Horowitz started David Horowitz Music Associates, Bushler did the contracting, and they were successful as a leading jingle company in New York.

From the mid-60s into the 80s there was more work for musicians than any time in history and Bushler appreciates being in the right place at the right time.

“It was a great time. I was very, very lucky to be active in the time that I had, you know? Because there was just so much going on, and there was, like, a recording studio on every block. I mean, there was God knows how many fucking night clubs you could play at. I used to go up to Bradley’s with Joe Beck and we’d go in there for like six weeks at a time. And the Blue Note or the Half Note or the Bottom Line, the Village Gate, the Village Vanguard, you know? We used to live at the Vanguard, Beck and I with Joe Farrell. That’s all gone, man. There’s no way for anybody to make a living as a freelance musician in New York City anymore. If there’s anything I miss about the old days, it was like being on the top of the pyramid. You know? Knowing that I could play anything anybody wrote for the bass. Without ever having seen it before, I could play it at performance level the first time”.

These days Herb is living with his cat, Buster (short for Filibuster), and wrestling with Beethoven at the piano. Both pictured below.

