



AN INTERVIEW WITH GROVER MITCHELL: PART 1

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Maturity, professionalism, seriousness of purpose - Grover Mitchell personifies all of these qualities, and he expects them from his colleagues and sidemen. Still, he is by no means dour or grim. Opinionated, but good natured, Mitchell delivers his strongly felt views with a twinkle in his eyes and a sly grin on his full-moon face.



Grover Mitchell
Photograph by Lesley Peacock

Born in 1930 in Whatley, Alabama, Mitchell, at the age of eight, moved with his family to Pittsburgh, an under-appreciated hotbed of jazz talent. He served his musical apprenticeship in territory and military bands before settling down in the San Francisco area in the early '50s. There he received his first big-time experience, subbing with Lionel Hampton and Duke Ellington. Then, in 1962, Mitchell got the call of a lifetime - he was summoned to join Count Basie's jazz powerhouse.

He soon slid into Basie's lead trombone chair, which he held until 1970. For the next ten years, Mitchell worked in the Hollywood film and TV studios under the batons of such notables as Nelson Riddle, Quincy Jones, Henry Mancini, Billy May, Paul Weston, Johnny Greene, and Frank DeVol. He rejoined Basie in 1980, and stayed until the Chief's death four years later.

At the time this interview was conducted (1993), Mitchell was leading a big band of his own. Formed back in the 1980s during the Basie band's occasional hiatuses, Mitchell's 12-piece unit produced five recordings, the most recent of which is 1990's *Hip Shakin'* (Ken Music 005). These albums are mostly out of print, but a little persistent searching of used record stores and Internet auction sites could pay big dividends.

How did you get you start in music?

The late '30s and early '40s was the Depression time - never could afford an instrument, nothin' like that. But when I was about 13 years old - in the second half of the seventh grade - I applied to get into the free-instruction, free-instrument music class in school.

See, that's how I happened to get the trombone, 'cause I really wanted to play trumpet, but it had to do with availability. It was not what you wanted to do, but what they needed in the band. And they measured you - if you were big enough to carry a tuba, or if your arms were long enough to play a trombone. I was tall with long arms.

Luckily, I seemed to have an aptitude for the trombone once I got into it, 'cause I was already a pretty good bugler - that's why I wanted to play trumpet. Somebody had given me a bugle and I had worn out my welcome all over my neighborhood by that time.



Grover Mitchell
Photograph by Lesley Peacock

Many people may not realize it, but Pittsburgh has produced a lot of fine jazz musicians.

Oh yeah, Dakota Staton, Ahmad Jamal - we were in the orchestra together in school - the Turrentine brothers [Stanley and Tommy]. [Trombonist] Jerry Elliott, who played with Lester Young and Gene Ammons and a few other people - excellent musician, but he didn't follow it up. And another kid became pretty prominent as a singer, his name is Adam

Wade. He practically grew up in my house. In fact, we have the same birthday, March 17.

There was a lot of them that went ahead of me, you know. Mary Lou Williams and Billy Eckstine were from our neighborhood, and Billy Strayhorn. The Garner brothers - Erroll and Linton - lived right around the corner. And I guess the original two that had really made it big in jazz before anybody were Earl Hines and Roy Eldridge. And there was Maxine Sullivan, Kenny Clarke, Art Blakey, Ray Brown.

They had a great pianist that never quite made it. His name was Sam Johnston - a monster, a great piano player. He never gained any fame, but everybody from Pittsburgh knows him. Ray Crawford, the guitarist - he's from there. On and on and on. By the time you leave here, I'll think of another dozen.

Competition was stout - you had to play pretty well in Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh was a mean town - a work town - so we had pretty good training from each other. And you were always doing something to "one-up" everybody else. You're so busy dealing with the competitive thing it either makes you or breaks you - in those days it did.

When did you leave Pittsburgh?

I went into the Marine Corps in 1951. The first 11 months I was in the southern states, and in those days they had their segregation policy and I couldn't be in the band. But when I was transferred to the West Coast, Camp Pendleton, some lieutenant was looking through the records and he saw whatever my credits were at that time. He asked me why I wasn't in the band, and I spoke up. "Please tell me why I'm not in the band." The next thing I knew I was being transferred from the infantry, and I spent the rest of my time in the Marine band.

In those days, a lot of players got valuable experience playing in military bands.

Yeah, that's the first time I had a chance to play in a studio band. I was in the field band, actually, when I first got transferred. But you start getting a reputation as being a pretty good player, so then I started to play in the radio band at Camp Pendleton. And that was good experience - that's where I got my first picture of what would probably be required if I went in that direction.

When I left the Marines in 1953 I went back to Pittsburgh and worked at odd jobs, both music and day. Then I got married and had a couple kids and I could see that Pittsburgh was gonna be a ghost town, especially for a trombone player. There was no constant source of work. When the shows would come to town they would put together a pit band and I'd usually get called for that, but it wasn't enough.

And I wanted to play. I wasn't going to stay in Pittsburgh and work in the mill and be a part-time musician, so I moved to San Francisco. I had become familiar with San Francisco because I had been stationed there at Treasure Island - that's where I got discharged.

You know, when I got back there I realized there wasn't really anything happening in San Francisco either, but at least it was a much more professional-type scene than Pittsburgh. The bands started coming through town and I started subbing with Lionel Hampton. And then Duke came through town. He would always have somebody out and I'd always get the call.

You actually subbed in the Ellington saxophone section, didn't you? How did that come about?

The first time it was for Johnny Hodges. Johnny was sick in the hospital - he had ulcer problems - and they had just left either the first or second Monterey Jazz Festival. Instead of getting a saxophone player, [bassist] Aaron Bell told Duke to get me. I didn't attempt to play Johnny's solos, nothin' like that! I played alto parts, which is an easy transposition. All you do is change the clef from treble to bass, and the key signature. It's a major sixth or a minor third away, so as long as you know what key you're in, you're OK.

The next time I played in Duke's band, they couldn't find Paul Gonsalves. Duke remembered me playing in Johnny's place, so he asked me if I could play the tenor book. If you want to know the truth, I can actually play the tenor parts easier than I can play the alto parts. You just change the clef from treble to

tenor, read the part as if it's in tenor clef, and get the key signature right. And the timbre of the two instruments is similar, so it was much easier.

But you know, Duke and them, they were really fascinated by this type of thing - I was a big deal. So I didn't tell them that it was simple for me. I took advantage of playing the hero.

How did you manage to blend with the saxophones?

Trombone, if you will listen, is a very good blend in a saxophone section. And that's another thing about Duke. He was probably more curious about it than anything else. Rather than solving any kind of personnel problem, it was just an opportunity for him to hear what that sounded like. And later on, in Basie's band, Thad Jones wrote a lot of things with bucket-mute trombone playing lead over the saxophones, and it was beautiful.

You see, the trombone, it's a big-looking instrument and everybody thinks you're gonna come up with some kind of big brassy sound. But when it's in the reed section, especially when you've got a bucket on it, it's a very mellow instrument. It's very much like the French horn - it blends with reeds very, very, very well.

Even in small groups the trombone-alto or trombone-tenor front-line is a good sounding thing. If anything gets hairy technically you can get into trouble, but there's a lot of - nowadays anyway, man - real machine-gun players. I always had pretty good technique, but I never tried to out-trumpet the trumpets or out-saxophone the saxophones. I like the characteristics of the trombone.

The trombone has its own character and nature and that's what needs to be explored more.

Exactly. Exactly. After I got more aware of what you just said, thinking more about what is the trombone, then I quit trying to make it sound like it had valves on it. Then I started trying to take advantage of the natural sound of the instrument - and I still do.

I admire those guys that can play those 200 beats per minute tempos and all that kind of stuff - it's admirable. And one time, I was pretty good at it, too. But I was of the opinion that I was giving up too much sound-wise for the sake of speed. My own thrust has always been just to be a real good instrumentalist. If anything else came out of it, that was great.

During that time in San Francisco you also worked in Lionel Hampton's band. How was that experience?

Well, I was kind of a quasi-regular with Hampton, but that just didn't work out. I had a young family, and he didn't pay much money.

His wife, Gladys, kept a pretty tight hold on the purse strings.

Oh yeah, they used to always say, even in those days, "Oh my, if it were up to Hamp, you'd be taken care of really well. It's all Gladys' fault." Then Gladys

died and nothing changed! But I love him - he's a nice old man, you know. And if I am to indeed say I developed, that band was a positive experience - one of my first chances to play a big-time book. It was a learning situation.

There were a lot of things that I probably would have been able to have done at that stage in my life if I hadn't had a family. But I had to always be in a situation where I could pay the rent and take care of two little girls. I never let that out of my mind.

Were you ever able to make a full-time living in San Francisco as a musician?

At one stage, yes. But playing music was always kind of a feast-or-famine proposition. I worked in the post office. I quit that and I worked at the General Motors plant, but my whole stress was to play music full-time.

But a trombone player is not exactly like a piano player or a bass player or a drummer, where you can always get some kind of lounge job or something like that. When different acts would come to town, they would put together a band and I'd always get the call, so the biggest part of my living came from playing. But I was always on the edge of poverty and I always had to be prepared to do something else.

Finally I got called to go with Basie. You know, Basie was the hottest thing out there then, and when they did call me, I thought somebody around town was kidding with me.

This was mid-summer 1962, and he asked me if I could join the band in January of '63. I was prepared for the worst, but all I could say was, "Yeah, OK, fine. You want me, I'll be there." A couple of days later they called back and said, "We don't want you to join in January. We want you to join now." So that's how I got into Basie's band.

Did you join the band as the lead trombonist?

No, I didn't. When I came in, it was actually Butter Jackson's chair, but there had been one guy between Butter and me. His name was Rufus Wagner. Somehow or another, I guess, Basie wasn't happy with Rufus, so they called me and asked if I could join then. I met them in New York in late October. I never will forget it - it was the Cuban Missile Crisis and I was scared to fly. I took the train all the way from San Francisco and what do you think? The second job we had, I had to get on an airplane.

Henry Coker was the lead trombone. You know, Coker was a funny guy. A lot of times he would give me the lead parts to play and he thought it was funny. He was easing the lead off on me and kind of laughing out of the corner of his eyes, "Look what I'm doing to this guy." But little by little they liked what I was doing. In fact, Frank Wess told me, "He's laughin' at you, but you just keep playing lead." Marshal Royal said that, too.

As a kid, I had always admired Tommy Dorsey and I had a similar kind of tone.

Basie had heard this and - you know, he didn't talk much - he'd say, "Oh yeah, you have a sound something like Tommy." So I said, "Yeah, I like him." I mean, there's a lot of greater jazz players, but I had never - and I don't think anybody else has - heard a better trombonist than Tommy Dorsey.

We made an album, *On My Way and Shoutin' Again*. I guess it was the last big album that Neal Hefti made with the band. I played about half the lead on there and Thad Jones was very complimentary. Then we made a Sesac transcription and I had a solo on "Danny Boy." That was my first solo with the band.

Marshal kept telling me, "He's putting the lead off on you, but just keep playing lead and it'll pay off for you in the long run." Pretty soon the Old Man told me himself he liked the way I played lead, and the guys were telling him how nice I sounded playing lead, so he thought that would be a nice way for me to go.

He wasn't too crazy about my jazz anyway, 'cause he thought it was too pretty. He liked those real raucous players, those plunger players like Al Grey. When I would argue with him about playing jazz solos he would say, "You're a trom-bon-ist." So pretty soon Coker, he just said, "Oh, you might as well play the whole book!" He just gave me his book.

From that point, when anything was passed out I played first trombone, until I quit the band in '70. I went to California and did a lot of studio work, and when I came back in '80 I went right back on the lead chair again.

Basie was getting pretty old and was not well. I got into a situation where I spent as much time helping him get around as I did playing the trombone, so it was a real difficult four years, from '80 to '84, 'til he died.

When did you form your own big band?

For years I had been formulating in my mind what I wanted in terms of a sound. Then I got a break when the Basie band was off for a couple of long stints in the early '80s and I was able to take my own 12-piece band into the Rainbow Room.

In the band I use French horn and bass trombone doubling tuba to take advantage of those colors. And it's smaller than most big bands - I've got a four-man reed section. When you need the five-part sound, you can still do it with trumpet or trombone, and especially with the French horn - there's a lot of ways to fill it. I felt it was more important to add different colors than numbers. All that seemed to add was volume, anyway.



Grover Mitchell
Photograph by Lesley Peacock

What are some of the problems that you encounter leading a big band?

They are innumerable. The most difficult things can happen to you at the last minute.

You see, this is not the kind of band that you call up the union and say, "Look, I need a trumpet player," and next thing you know you look up and say, "Well, which guy did the union send?" You really have to have people who are suited to this thing. It's a small band - "small" in terms of big bands - so everybody has to carry his note. You've got to know who you've got there.

And then when you're on the job, especially if it's not a concert-type thing, it's hard to make them understand that they're not out for the evening. They are working. This is the hardest part, to keep them focused. "This is your job. Look, I can't be responsible for what happens to your wife. No, you don't have 45 minutes so that you can run down the street somewhere to visit so-and-so."

Or, "Why are you late?" "Well, I had to - . Well, I just went down the street - ." I really try to be on time. I want this thing to come off, I want it right, because people are paying money for this thing. And then a guy'll come in 15 minutes late and he'll look at you and say, "Well, I'm only 15 minutes late." Why weren't you only 15 minutes early, if 15 minutes is an "only?"

Musicians can be very difficult people to deal with on this level. You're thinking in terms of a group and you can be dealing with a guy who's just thinking of how things affect him, not about how the whole group is affected by his singular behavior.

Have you had trouble finding ensemble-oriented players?

Oh, yes. When we came up in my time we were usually members of bands - and I'm not talking necessarily jazz bands. We were in high school bands and football marching bands, and then the various military bands and territory bands, and your role was that of a member of the band. Then, if a kid got so that he played well, he might start looking like a soloist. He grew into being a soloist. A lot of the other guys grew into being really good ensemble players. They might be fair soloists, they might not be soloists at all, but they grew into being good players.

There used to be an old saying that you had so much trouble with string sections in symphony orchestras because violinists are trained to be soloists. And that's what's happening now in jazz. The few kids that do get into jazz, they don't really have an ensemble mentality. They start out trying to be soloists from the beginning. They don't grow into the role. They don't really know where the soloist comes from - the best soloists in the world were guys who came through bands.

So these kids come out and they swear they're capable soloists, but in terms of the ensemble they can be very, very selfish people. When you put them into the band you can see they've got as much talent as anybody else - maybe more - but they don't necessarily listen. They're way off on some other tangent. You can't sit over there and play by yourself. You gotta listen to what's going on.

So that's another one of the problems. With the exception of the old veterans - and it's a pretty veteran band that we've got - with the younger guys that can be a very big problem.

Does it bother you when critics compare your band to the Basie band?

Yeah, because the thing is, I've been out here a long time - you know that. I'm not exactly a baby. But they have a mental pigeonhole and they can't even talk about you. I don't mind certain comparisons, because I learned what I'm trying to do from Basie. Let's not kid ourselves.

But we play some things that are probably a good deal more modern than Basie would have played, 'cause a lot of what I do is what I used to wish Basie would do. There were a lot of things that Basie did, yes, that I'm very happy to try, because they were so well done. But why can't you look at me and say, "Well, this man is really trying to play some quality music?"

You have no great liking for the so-called "ghost bands," then?

No, no, no. I've seen people, when they are hiring a band, take a very poor ghost band instead of a very good organization that's not a ghost band.

Some people, especially people who are responsible for hiring and that kind of stuff - it's scary, some of them couldn't care less what the band sounds like, just as long as it bears some recognizable name. They'll hear my band, and they know it's a good band and they see the size of the book and everything, but then they'll sit there and say, "But we gotta have a name."

And I say, "What about the quality of the music? Don't you need any music played that night?" "Yeah, I know where you're coming from, but we gotta have that name." And the next thing you know, man, they pay a whole lot of money and hire some rotten band bearing some big name. (I'm not talking about the "Basie" band - at least they are trying to keep a quality thing going.) I just can't believe it, it's depressing.

So, Grover, with all the hassles and the headaches that go into leading a band, why do you bother?

Guess I have to. You know, I've been at this so long, mentally. Even when I wasn't functioning as a bandleader I was formulating things in my mind, how I wanted to do this. It's like a suit of clothes that you just gotta have. By the time you can afford for the tailor to cut this thing out and make it, it might be out of style, but it's what you really wanted. And even if it is out of style, it's still probably a good suit.

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Bob Bernotas is a freelance jazz journalist and jazz historian living in New York City. His work has appeared in many music publications, he has written numerous CD liner notes, and he is the author of nine books, notably Branford Marsalis: Jazz Musician, a biography for young readers. He also is a student of master jazz trombonist Benny Powell.

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