

## Vibraphonist Burton full of energy still at 70

He's on tour with a new band that clicks, and has an autobiography out.

By Shaun Brady  
FOR THE INQUIRER

**O**n vibraphonist Gary Burton's 40th birthday, a friend asked: "What do you plan to do for the second half of your life?" The answer, Burton decided, was to "fix anything that I didn't get right in the first half. And that brought me face-to-face with my confusion over sexuality, and I realized I had to figure it out once and for all and decide whether to continue ignoring it or embrace it."

Born in a small town in Indiana in 1943, Burton hid his homosexuality from everyone, including himself, into middle age.

"I grew up in a little farm town in southern In-



**Vibraphonist Gary Burton** and his band will play at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts at 7 p.m. Sunday.

JIMMY KATZ

diana, so there were no other visible gay people and no one to talk to," Burton recalled from his hotel room in Rhode Island. "I quickly connected the dots and saw that the jazz world was a very masculine environment, so any thought of being gay — the word didn't even exist

then — was a nonstarter." Burton, who recently married his partner of nine years, Jonathan Chong, in Massachusetts, insists that although he can't pinpoint any differences, his playing must inevitably have been affected: "The experience of coming out is very liberat-



ing. When you're hiding it, you constantly monitor and control everything you say and do because you're terrified of slipping up and giving away the secret. Now I feel much more relaxed as a person and more focused about who I am and what my mission is."

Now on tour celebrating his 70th birthday, Burton has enjoyed a long career out of the closet for nearly as long as he spent in it. He recounts his struggle and life in music in his compelling new autobiography, *Learning To Listen: The Jazz Journey of Gary Burton*. Its release coincides with one of the finest recordings of his career. *Guided Tour* (Mack Avenue) is the second release by the New Gary Burton Quartet featuring guitarist Julian Lage, bassist Scott Colley, and drummer Antonio Sanchez, who will perform at the Annenberg

Center on Sunday.

"I've only had a band with this kind of chemistry four times," Burton said. "The first time was the band I was in with Stan Getz. Later on with my own bands, my very first quartet I had, another one in the mid-'70s when Pat Metheny was in my band, and then now."

Lage, a 12-year-old prodigy when Burton met him, joins Burton's guitarist discoveries, including Metheny, Larry Coryell, John Scofield, and Kurt Rosenwinkel. "As a jazz player, you fall into one of two camps," he explained. "You either like seasoned players who are pretty predictable, whose playing is mature, developed, and polished; or you like younger players who are full of surprises. ... I've always preferred younger musicians."

That preference may help explain why Burton is still playing with such energy and drive as he enters his eighth decade. "There's a big transition when you start seeing yourself as beginning your retirement," said Burton, who maintains a busy tour-

ing schedule but who left his educational role at Berklee College of Music at 60. "Once I got into this new phase in my life and found that I'm still working a lot and still having great musical experiences, I have a sense now of what the whole picture is. I don't know exactly what's going to happen between now and 80, but hitting the 70 landmark makes me feel like I've managed to get all the way across the high wire without falling off."

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7 p.m. Sunday at the [Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts](#), 3680 Walnut St. Tickets: \$20-\$55.  
☎ 215-898-3900 or [www.AnnenbergCenter.org](http://www.AnnenbergCenter.org).