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# JazzTimes

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## GRANT GREEN!

The Life & Legacy  
of King Funk

### EMILY REMLER

The meteoric rise and  
tragic demise of a  
forgotten guitar giant

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# THE INCREDIBLE JAZZ GUITAR OF GRANT GREEN

As two newly released archival albums prove, his striking if still overlooked musicianship was at once refined and raw, intellectual and instinctive. Where and how do we hear his influence today?

By David R. Adler

**O**dd as it seems, Grant Green (1935-1979) is simultaneously one of the most and least celebrated guitarists in jazz history. He was certainly one of the most prolific. The writer and radio personality Bob Porter, in his *Soul Jazz: Jazz in the Black Community, 1945-1975*, notes that the St. Louis native played on 15 sessions for Blue Note Records in 1961, 18 more in 1962 and another 18 in 1963. He made 22 albums as a leader between 1960 and 1965, according to veteran producer Michael Cuscuna. Only 14 were released at the time, but soon after Green's tragic death at age 43, the shelved material began to surface. More and more has emerged from the vaults over the decades, the latest additions being two live albums from Resonance Records, *Funk in France: From Paris to Antibes (1969-1970)* and *Slick! Live at Oil Can Harry's (from Vancouver, 1975)*.

However, despite Green's level of exposure, this swinging, bluesy, lyrical musician remains an underdog in the guitar pantheon. Wes Montgomery and Jim Hall are more commonly mentioned as influences. In soul-jazz and organ jazz, Green's protégé George Benson became the dominant force, followed by Pat Martino. Though Green worked regularly and had staunch admirers, he chafed at the fact that "the premier black jazz guitarist slot was never opened up to him, even after Wes Montgomery's death [in 1968]," as Sharony Andrews-Green wrote in her 1999 biography *Grant Green: Rediscovering the Forgotten Genius of Jazz Guitar*.

Nearly 20 years since that book's publication, "forgotten" seems too strong. Green isn't a household name, but his playing is widely known and respected among musicians, even if it isn't constantly cited. He attained a new relevance in the '90s, when his funk-oriented mid-'70s records (often with Idris Muhammad on drums) were spun obsessively by rare-groove and acid-jazz DJs and sampled by A Tribe Called Quest, Wu-Tang Clan,



Cypress Hill and Us3—not to mention Kendrick Lamar's more recent use of his work. And yet, when we consider Green today, we still confront what the late musician and producer Bob Fiddlen once referred to as an "unresolved legacy." Why hasn't he received his full due? It's a question worth unpacking.

## FROM BIRD TO THE O'JAYS

Together, *Funk in France* and *Slick!* at *Oil Can Harry's* allow us to reexamine Green's evolution and long-term impact. There's a certain before-and-after aspect to the recordings: By 1969, the organ trios and hard-bop lineups of Green's first Blue Note phase had given way to the R&B and proto-fusion concepts that marked his return to the label, following a gap of several years and a move with his family from New York to Detroit. In the midst of this second Blue Note period, which saw the release of *Carryin' On*, *Green Is Beautiful*, *Visions, Alive!* and other titles, it makes sense that Green opens *Funk in France* with a James Brown tune.

But the Paris date that makes up the first six of the album's 10 tracks is still steeped in bebop and acoustic jazz. The occasion was a three-guitar summit spearheaded by France's ORTF, featuring Kenny Burrell, Barney Kessel and Green, in the tough position of substituting for a sick Pat Farlow. Bassist Larry Ridley and drummer Don Lamond were the house rhythm section, playing trio with each guest star. When Green takes on "Oleo" and "Sonnymoon for Two," the aesthetic isn't far from the 1961 Blue Note dates *Green Street* and *Standards* (a.k.a. *Remembering*), which found him in a highly exposed role, playing taut single-note lines, and chords very selectively or not at all, making his unadorned, straight-into-the-amp tone the main focus.

In that same vein, Green achieves a forceful, jewel-like clarity in his solo intro to "Untitled Blues," a moment on *Funk in France* that might be without parallel in his catalog. The solo intro and outro on "I Wish You Love" almost rises to that level, though the tune itself, with Kessel comping, is a muddle—Green and the others can't seem to agree on the form.

The last four cuts on *Funk in France* are of lesser sound quality. They capture Green at the Antibes festival a year later, on two different days, playing vamp-based material with tenor saxophonist Claude Barte, organist Clarence Palmer and drummer Billy Wilson. Green is by far the most compelling presence in this somewhat unsteady quartet. They play "Upshot" and "Hurt So Bad" (the latter a Little Anthony and the Imperials cover), both from *Carryin' On*. They also play, for nearly half an hour, a furious rendition of the Tommy Tucker blues-rock vehicle "Hi-Heel Sneakers," which Green dispatched in six minutes on one of the few non-Blue Note albums in his discography, the 1967 organ-trio date *Iron City!*

For Green to play crossover material at this time was nothing shocking; Wes Montgomery had also tipped his hat to Little Anthony with "Goin' Out of My Head," among other then-current pop songs. But what's clear on the Antibes tracks, as well as on *Slick!*, from five years later, is the consistency and integrity of Green's attack, his boppish yet blues-rooted vocabulary, his soul. They remain the same regardless of genre or instrumentation.

Though *Slick!* finds Green using Fender Rhodes (Emmanuel Riggins, drummer/producer Karriem's father) and electric bass (Ronnie Ware), the set opens with "Now's the Time," reflecting Green's longtime love of Charlie Parker. Jobim's "How Insensitive," played fairly straightforwardly in Paris, resurfaces on *Slick!* as a half-hour odyssey with the deep-funk detours of Greg "Vibrations" Williams on drums and Gerald Izzard on percussion (and whistle). The closing medley, another half-hour, melds material from Stanley Clarke and Stevie Wonder, Bobby Womack, the Ohio Players and the O'Jays. Green was bringing Detroit to western Canada, no passport necessary.

Whatever the setting, Green's playing had a uniquely communicative quality, though by today's standards it's not especially complex or technically ambitious. His bop lines took a handful of familiar routes. His blues licks could be unabashedly repetitive; at the peak of excitement he might play one riff and ride it for an entire chorus or more. But he always fully commits to these mo-

ments and puts them across with clean, and unflagging articulation. It might be simple from a theoretical standpoint, but it is not at all easy to play. (Cue up 2:27-2:54 of "Jan Jan," from *Live at the Lighthouse*, and try to copy it.)

For guitarist Eddie Roberts of the New Mastersounds, a jazz-funk revivalist group, Green's most enduring trait was his way with melody, his ability to sing on the instrument. "If a jazz singer has a beautiful voice and tone, they're going to be celebrated," Roberts argues. "But for some reason, if you're a guitar player you've got to play hundreds of notes and be really complicated. Grant's voice was beautiful, and it does seem that he was overlooked perhaps because of that more lyrical approach." (Roberts has been playing Green tribute concerts of late, and "Green Was Beautiful," from the Mastersounds' latest release, *Renewable Energy*, is an explicit homage.)

"He was such a funky player," remarks Grant's son Greg Green, a guitarist who performs (with his father's blessing) under the name Grant Green Jr. "He had that New Orleans grease behind him. It was all about feel and phrasing."

"Groove and pocket, patience and restraint—those are things you learn from Grant," says guitarist Miles Okazaki, a solo artist and Steve Coleman collaborator who puts Green in his personal top three. "Those topics are a little advanced. They're not the first things you learn. Sometimes you don't appreciate them until you're a little older, when you're not as impressed by information."

## TONAL CENTERS

It has become commonplace for jazz guitarists to say they are not fond of the guitar. They envy the piano's richer harmony, or the greater linear possibilities of saxophone and trumpet. Accordingly, the sound of the guitar changed in the years following Green's death. The biting, natural, naked tone associated with him seemed to fall out of favor, and the use of chorus, delay and distortion effects came to predominate. Pat Metheny, John Scofield and Bill Frisell became chief role models, followed by Kurt Rosenwinkel, Adam Rogers, Ben Monder and others. The current crop of great young players, including Gilad Hekselman and Mike Moreno, has



Green and a 22-year-old Herbie Hancock cut the guitarist's *Feelin'* the *Spirit* album for Blue Note, Van Gelder Studio, December 1962

pushed the language forward, favoring a wetter, warmer, highly polished sound.

The irony is that Green, too, strove to sound like a horn, in the mold of Charlie Christian. His single-note conception, not only in solos but in the articulation of ensemble parts, was modeled on the horn players he so admired. To contemporary ears, however, his bluesy double-stops and bop patterns are inescapably guitaristic. "His playing is raw, man," says guitarist Jeff Parker, who counts Green among his primary influences. "His ideas stay in his idiom, I would say. He's not a slick player—his thing is emotional, and very idiosyncratic." Parker cites Green on Stanley Turrentine's two-volume *Up at Minton's* as some of the best jazz guitar one could hope to hear.

Rosenwinkel, who has maintained a deep connection to straight-ahead play-

ing with his Standards Trio, was effusive about Green in an email: "I got into him through the album *The Latin Bit* and the quartets with Sonny Clark. To me he's like the Roy Eldridge of guitar, existing in this relaxed, creative place next to an endless fountain of melodies. He's modern and traditional at the same time—a semi-hollowbody guitar like the ones we play today [typically a Gibson ES-330], straight into a Fender Twin like we play, with some spring reverb. His sound lets us hear up close what he's doing with his fingers—the expressiveness of every motion, the subtle nuances and dynamics. It tells a story that's easy and intriguing to follow, like your mom reading you a book in bed. There's a cozy feeling that allows your imagination to fly."

Okazaki first checked out Green at the urging of his teacher Rodney Jones. Then he got closer to the source

by gigging briefly with Turrentine, as Green himself had done back in 1961. He mentions Dave Stryker (another Turrentine apprentice), Bobby Broom and Mark Whitfield as Green's stylistic heirs, and one could extend the list. Peter Bernstein has a sonic temperament not unlike Green's, soaringly melodic but unafraid of some string noise, able to whisper and still cut through.

Ed Cherry's recent organ-trio dates for Posi-Tone also bring to mind Green in his heyday. The leadoff track from *Soul Tree*, Cherry's latest, is "Let the Music Take Your Mind," the Kool & the Gang classic that led off Green's *Alive!*, from 1970. Jeff Parker recalls playing that song, as well as "Ain't It Funky Now" and other late-period Green staples, while cutting his teeth in funk bands around Chicago.

"I always liked the sound of the

guitar," Okazaki says bluntly, and perhaps that in the end is what separates Green devotees from the pack.

"Grant was able to make use of the natural sound of the guitar to great effect," he continues, "and I've always been attracted to that."

## BEYOND INFORMATION

**B**y some wonderful alchemy, Green's less-is-more approach dovetailed with the sounds of the heaviest players in jazz, again and again. The collective personnel on Green albums like *Life Moments*, *Solid*, *Matador*, *Talkin' About* and *Street of Dreams*—McCoy Tyner, Bobby Hutcherson, Joe Henderson, Larry Young, Elvin Jones—is a who's who of the music's cutting edge in the 1960s. And even in those modern settings, Green retained all the loose, earthy expression of his organ dates with Baby Face Willette (*Ami I Blue*, *Blues for Lou*), or his theme albums *Goin' West* and *Feelin' the Spirit* (both featuring Billy Higgins and a young, on-fire Herbie Hancock).

Green's sideman appearances were

just as vital and definitive. He proved himself on his first St. Louis sessions with saxophonist Jimmy Forrest and organist Sam Lazar. He gained notoriety soon after moving to New York with "Funky Mama," from Lou Donaldson's *The Natural Soul* (it was Donaldson who landed him a Blue Note contract). He added a boogaloo touch to Hancock's *My Point of View* and lent an energy and elusive beauty to Lee Morgan's *Search for the New Land*. Hank Mobley's *Workout*, Hutcherson's *The Kicker*, Larry Young's *Into Somethin'* and Mary Lou Williams' *Black Christ of the Andes*, among others. He also wrote memorable originals, among them "Jean de Fleur," "Plaza de Toros," "Sunday Mornin'," "Grant's Dimensions" and "Gooden's Corner."

In his teens Okazaki was turned off by the repetition in Green's playing. But later, he recalls, "When I became more hip to African music, where the point is to create a vibe or a trance, I could hear that in his playing. He's creating a kind of motion. It challenges the expectation of what a solo is." The overall effect of a Green solo, he adds, isn't captured on the notated page. "If you transcribe some Coltrane or Bud Powell," he says,

"you're going to get a lot of information. If you transcribe Grant's solos and analyze them, you're not really going to get a lot. Because the information is not the whole story."

Grabbing his guitar and playing phrases into the phone from Green's rendition of "It Ain't Necessarily So," Okazaki also demonstrates a toggling back and forth between triple and duple feel in Green's improvisations. "You hear it on that tune very clearly because it's a shuffle. Or on the title track of *Solid*, a midtempo blues, he's also going between triple and duple feel, a real contrast. Triple is this African feel of rhythm, and with Grant it was the first time I heard it so explicitly on the guitar. It's not just that a given tune is 6/8 or whatever. He's messing with different kinds of feels to get an effect, and you don't hear it that much in guitarists of that era."

## WHAT'S LEFT BEHIND

**G**reen endured personal struggles and frustrations that didn't fully ebb during his later Detroit years. He battled drug addiction and pushed well past his limits on the road. Friends and associates began to notice



► In the '70s, Green went deep into funk and R&B, while retaining the brilliant clarity and melodicism of his early recordings.

a paranoid streak, mentioned fleetingly in Andrews' biography. Like Muhammad Ali, Green was a member of the Nation of Islam, which certainly didn't discourage conspiratorial thinking about his career being held back. Whatever the case, he worked long and hard in a music industry that couldn't be trusted to act in the best interests of black musicians.

His body began to break down, first with a stroke that left him partially paralyzed but still able to play. Told that he urgently needed to have bypass surgery, he refused, instead driving upon his return. It was only long after his death that he reached what Andrews Green termed his "lardy triumph."

Very little video of Green exists, but one delightful exception, on YouTube, is the same Paris trio set with Ridley and Lamond that starts off *Funk in France*. There's also footage of Green with Burrell and Kessel, in the full set that the three played together that late October day in 1969. It's riveting to watch Green bob his head and put his body into it, sounding rich and full and more than holding his own, letting his large fingers roam the fretboard of the blond Epiphone archtop he favored at the time.

There is also a short documentary that Andrews Green made while working on her biography, shot in the mid-'90s, but posted on YouTube and Vimeo only recently. (She declined to comment for this story.) The sadness in the black-and-white imagery, and in the fact that a number of the on-camera interviewees have since died. But their insights and memories remain, spurring deeper appreciation for Green's life and work, as well as questions about what might have been. One central truth refuses to fade: Green's playing, in its authoritative rhythm and plainspoken melodicism, is recognizable in an *instant*. And jazz guitar students ignore him at their peril. **JT**



► The new Resonance release *Slick!* documents a hard-grooving 1975 gig featuring Ronnie Ware, Gerald Izard, Green, Green, Williams and Emmanuel Riggins (from left)

PHOTOS BY GUY AROGETTI/REUTERS/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF RESONANCE RECORDS