



# ED BICKERT

*In A Mellow Tone*

BY MARK MILLER

**A**n hour before he would play a rare jingle date, a day before he would fly to California for appearances at the Concord Jazz Festival with Canadian tenor saxist Fraser MacPherson and Rob McConnell's Boss Brass, and a day *after* he had heard the latest on the local hotspot Bourbon Street's apparent slide into obscurity, Ed Bickert sat back on a bench

on the lobby of Toronto's McClear Place recording studios, talking calmly and smoking cigarettes.

As he recounted a 30-year career as Canada's premier jazz guitarist, the other musicians on the date arrived one by one. It began to have the look of a Boss Brass call. Nine of that band's members filed in—Jerry Toth, Ron Hughes, Bob Leonard, Rick Wilkins, Ian McDougall, Bob Livingston, Guido Basso, Steve Wallace, and Rob McConnell himself—along with three ringers, Vern Dorge, Ralph Bowen, and Bob McLaren.

Wilkins was the leader this time. The chart was in a Glenn Miller-ish vein that sent McConnell back to the car for his mutes. Bickert, meanwhile, had left his Telecaster at home—yes, the rock guitarist's instrument, from which Bickert draws some of the mellowest sounds in jazz—and instead had his hollow-body Gibson L5 out of the closet to play a little four-to-the-bar rhythm guitar.

It has been a quiet time for jazzmen and studio musicians alike in Toronto. Some of the other players at McClear Place were fairly bitter about the situation—about the economy, about the rise of the synthesizer and the demise of the working musician—but Bickert is not one to raise his voice on any subject. He speaks quietly and generally keeps his confidences; when he opens up, his comments are moderated by a dry, self-effacing sense of humor that softens any sharpness. He too feels the walls closing in, but Bickert, at 51, has had doors open internationally even as they seem to have been shutting at home.

It might not have worked out any better if he had planned it this way. But Bickert is no careerist. Other Toronto musicians would have made much more of any one of his accomplishments over the last dozen years—the association with Paul Desmond during the altoist's last years, the work with vibist Milt Jackson at home and abroad, the accumulation of good impressions that he has made backing other visiting jazzmen in Toronto, the unique harmonic concept that has inspired reverent talk among fellow guitarists the world around, the leading role that he has played in the Boss Brass' emergence of late, the various recordings that have culminated in a contract with the California label Concord Jazz. . . .

Instead, the guitarist has moved at his own pace. There's still something in Bickert of the young man who arrived in Toronto at the age of 19 fresh from the farming community of Vernon, British Columbia. It's not just the light drawl in a resonant voice; it's this more leisurely sense of the passing day, and these relatively modest horizons. Were it not for the greater haste of other musicians in Toronto with grander ambitions and lesser talent, and were it not for the probing questions of those who would

have wished much more for him by now, he should be quite comfortable.

"Left to my own devices," he said, leaning back with legs crossed, "I like to relax. I do need some sort of push to get going."

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When Edward Isaac Bickert, a country lad of 12, picked up his older brother's dobro for the first time, The Guitar, historically, was just coming out of a period of transition. The year was 1945. The electric guitar was an established fact, thanks to recordings a half-dozen years before by Charlie Christian, as was—incontrovertably—the instrument's potential was a solo voice in jazz. There was much for a young guitarist to absorb.

Life for a young guitarist in Vernon, however, was much simpler. The Bickert family had moved west from the province of Manitoba, where their youngest son was born in Hochfeld, near the U.S. border, on November 29, 1932. They established a small chicken ranch in the soil-rich Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, worked the orchards, and ran an old-time dance band for Saturday night functions up in the hills. His mother played piano, and his father was a fiddler. "We'd take up a collection," Bickert remembered of his first country gigs, "so we'd get \$3, \$4, \$5 in change, each."

Whatever they played in the hills, there was a certain amount of jazz in the family's record collection at home. "A lot of it was big band music," Bickert recalled, "Duke Ellington, Woody Herman, Gene Krupa, Benny Goodman. . . . And there were a few small groups, like Les Paul, who had a neat little group with a couple of guitars, piano, and bass, and the King Cole Trio, with Oscar Moore and then Irving Ashby—I was really taken with the way the guitar sounded in that group. As far as any *hard* jazz was concerned, there wasn't a lot available, certainly not on record, in my hometown."

His introduction to jazz, then, was to its most popular manifestations. Charlie Christian was one man whose influence did not extend to Vernon, or anywhere else in Canada for that matter. Django Reinhardt was another. A list of the guitarists whose styles did come to bear on his playing in the next 10 or 15 years would include Tal Farlow, Jimmy Raney, Johnny Smith, Kenny Burrell, Jim Hall, Herb Ellis, and Barney Kessel—the Christian line more or less, but without Christian.

There were a few other musicians in Vernon, Bickert acknowledged, "ex-professionals who'd come from somewhere else and had been involved in some jazz playing, or maybe dance bands of one sort or another—which is getting close, I suppose. The ones I met opened up my ears to new sounds and new ways of doing things." There were also other guitarists around, older men who trav-

eled through the Okanagan Valley with dance bands out of Vancouver to the west and the Alberta resorts to the east. And there was the radio, specifically Jimmy Lyons' show from San Francisco.

Under these influences Bickert had matured as a musician by 1952 to the point where he could make the unusually bold step to Toronto. It took him a week in a '35 Chevy; at that, he might never move so quickly again.

Of the new kid in town, just 20, Bickert recalled, "I knew quite a few tunes"—the pop songs of the '30s and '40s that still constitute his repertoire today—"and I think I had quite a good 'time' feeling. Maybe better than I do now: playing the kind of music I'd been playing, my main function was to be a timekeeper—I didn't have that many hot licks down. And I didn't have that much experience, so it was just through meeting other musicians at jam sessions and such, that one thing led to another."

It didn't take very long. Initially he took a job in radio, as he had during his last year in Vernon, but by the end of the decade he was working for many of Toronto's most prominent jazz figures: trombonist Ron Collier and reedmen Norm Symonds, Moe Koffman, and Phil Nimmons. In the following years, though, the best of his generation went into the studios, playing first for radio and tv, and then for the fledgling Canadian recording industry. Bickert went with them, becoming the city's first-call guitarist. But the music began to change and his interest waned.

"I've very few connections with this kind of thing now," he observed from the McClear Place lobby. "If it happens that the people I work with in the jazz world have something in the studios, I might get in on it."

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The news, now a day old, about Bourbon Street, was not good. Another policy change, the second over the summer months, had reduced Canada's most famous jazz room to just another Toronto cabaret. In its heyday, Bourbon Street had been Bickert's avenue to the international scene.

Through his years in the studios, he had kept his hand in with various Toronto jazz groups, flutist Moe Koffman's popular band foremost among them. He still plays in this group, one of two standing commitments on the Toronto scene, along with the Boss Brass. His own groups are highly informal, especially since his partner through the 1970s, bassist/pianist Don Thompson, took up with George Shearing in 1982.

Again, Bickert might not have planned this better: as the studio calls decreased in the mid-'70s, the invitations to play behind visiting soloists at Bourbon Street increased. The list over the years has been varied but formidable: altoists Paul Desmond and Lee Konitz,





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## ED BICKERT'S EQUIPMENT

Though he occasionally hefts a hollow-body Gibson L5, Ed Bickert's main instrument is a worn but durable Fender Telecaster, about 20 years old and modified with a humbucking pickup. He uses a Roland Cube 60 amplifier, citing portability as its basic attraction. His string sets mix Dean Markley, Ernie Ball, and other stock—light gauge on top, heavy gauge on the bottom. His picks are Fender medium.

As for the mellow sound he draws from the Fender Telecaster, "It's just a matter of cutting out some of the highs. And it's partly the way you play, too. I'm starting to think that's the case—that people who've been playing awhile seem to manage to get their own sound no matter what they're playing."

## ED BICKERT SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

### as a leader

BYE BYE BABY—Concord Jazz 232  
THE ED BICKERT 5 AT BOURBON STREET—Concord Jazz 216  
I LIKE TO RECOGNIZE THE TUNE—United Artists 747G  
ED BICKERT—PM Records 010

### with the Boss Brass

THE JAZZ ALBUM—Pausa 7031  
BIG BAND JAZZ VOL. 1—Pausa 7140  
BIG BAND JAZZ VOL. 2—Pausa 7141  
PRESENT PERFECT—MPS 0068.249  
TRIBUTE—Pausa 7106  
LIVE IN DIGITAL—Dark Orchid 602-12018  
ALL IN GOOD TIME—Palo Alto 8074

### with Rob McConnell

MUTUAL STREET—Innovation 0009

### with Don Thompson

DANCE TO THE LADY—Sackville 4010  
ED BICKERT/DON THOMPSON—Sackville 4005

### with Ruby Braff

RUBY BRAFF WITH THE ED BICKERT TRIO—Sackville 3022

### with Frank Rosolino

THINKING ABOUT YOU—Sackville 2014

### with Paul Desmond

PAUL DESMOND—Artists House 2  
THE PAUL DESMOND QUARTET LIVE!—A&M Horizon 850  
PURE DESMOND—CTI 6059

trumpeter Kenny Wheeler, cornetist Ruby Braff, flugel Art Farmer, the late trombonist Frank Rosolino, the tenor/trumpet team of Scott Hamilton and Warren Vaché, vibists Milt Jackson and Red Norvo, and several others.

Recordings followed with Desmond, Rosolino, Braff, and Hamilton/Vaché. Desmond, who came out of semi-retirement on fellow guitarist Jim Hall's word of Bickert's harmonic sensitivity, took his entire Toronto rhythm section on the road for some of his final concert performances. Jackson, incredibly, got Bickert out as far as Japan in 1979.

By the Bourbon Street era, of course, the Bickert style was fully formed. It is not to diminish his solos, which are models of succinct melodicism, to suggest that the Bickert identity lies in the chords that he plays. They pulse with a soft glow as he *pulls* at them gently, a technique of plucking rather than strumming developed in the late '50s to meet the requirements of composer Norman Symonds, the Third Stream writer who employed Bickert in place of a pianist and then threw all sorts of odd, concert hall, keyboard harmony at him.

Bickert's note selection is impeccable, his hearing acute. (Said one Toronto musician recently, "Ed Bickert, man, he can hear the paint peel.") He has listened to pianists—to Bill Evans, he has said, and to Red Garland, early Herbie Hancock, and others—and he developed his unique harmonic approach intuitively, "just by experimenting on my own, trying to find the nice chords that you get on a piano, realizing that I don't have as many notes to work with, and picking out the important ones. I'm sure that someone who knows his theory and harmony could do this very nicely without much experimentation; they would know which notes would give you what sound. I don't know that, so I've got to do it my way, listening and trying to find a grip on the guitar. Someone who got me thinking about this was [the late] Lenny Breau, because he had that talent for finding a couple of really important notes just to suggest a chord."

Desmond was suitably amazed by his guitarist's gifts, and the two men played wonderfully literate jazz together. Looking back, Bickert most appreciated Desmond's encouragement—"just the fact that he enjoyed the way I was playing"—and his choice of tunes, those great pop songs "which were fine by me."

Jackson's funky elegance, on the other hand, brought the guitarist out of himself. Bickert apparently liked what was revealed. "If I could play the guitar the way Milt plays the vibes," he remarked, in a rare burst of enthusiasm, "I'd be pretty happy."

He caught himself. "Well, maybe not completely and forever, but for a lot of the time."

A day after his return from the West

Coast, Bickert was looking a week ahead to another concert with Vancouver tenorman Fraser MacPherson, this one at the Edmonton festival known as Jazz City. Their Concord appearance together had gone well enough to be recorded, and that release, together with duet and sextet albums with Rob McConnell, will keep Bickert represented on the international market.

It's just as well. He doesn't get out there much in person, at least not on his own, although singer Rosemary Clooney had him in her ensemble recently at San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel, and he'll be traveling with Moe Koffman's quintet early next year when it tours the West with Dizzy Gillespie.

There are always work permit problems for a Canadian musician who wishes to work in the U.S., even a musician with Bickert's reputation. Moreover, he said, sounding a familiar refrain, "I'm not a self-starter. That's the main problem. I haven't done much to drum up some business for myself. I would certainly welcome any chance to play where people would enjoy the music, to play with some other musicians, to be working somewhere other than Toronto." Without knowing quite where, or how, to begin, he seems to be aware that changes may be in order at one level or another.

"At the moment, if I were going to do more on my own, it would be more of the same. That bothers me a bit. I'd like to get something a little different going. I'm not sure what, and it's an immediate concern because I'm supposed to do another record for Concord soon, and I don't want to do another one just like the last one. I don't know whether I should try to play with some different guys, or try to find some different material, or a different way of handling it. I've talked to Don Thompson about this. He thinks I should be playing something on records a little more modern than I have been. Which I can do, up to a point. . . ."

The Bickert fan, however, need not fear. "What for me might be a bit of a departure, may not sound that much different to the listener," the guitarist suggested.

"I haven't really heard that many of the newer guitar players. Some of the few that I've heard, who are more up to date, like John Scofield, I enjoy. Ralph Towner . . . I can't name too many. Some of it I enjoy; some of it I just appreciate. At the same time I don't think that I can start trying to play anything close to that, as far as being more modern, more sophisticated, or more assertive. That's partly because I don't have the background in harmony and such that some of the younger guys do. It's partly because I'm in that age bracket, I suppose, where you get settled into something. And it's partly my nature. I'm not an aggressive kind of person; the way I play's like that, too." db