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George Gruntz: To Be Funky and Swiss

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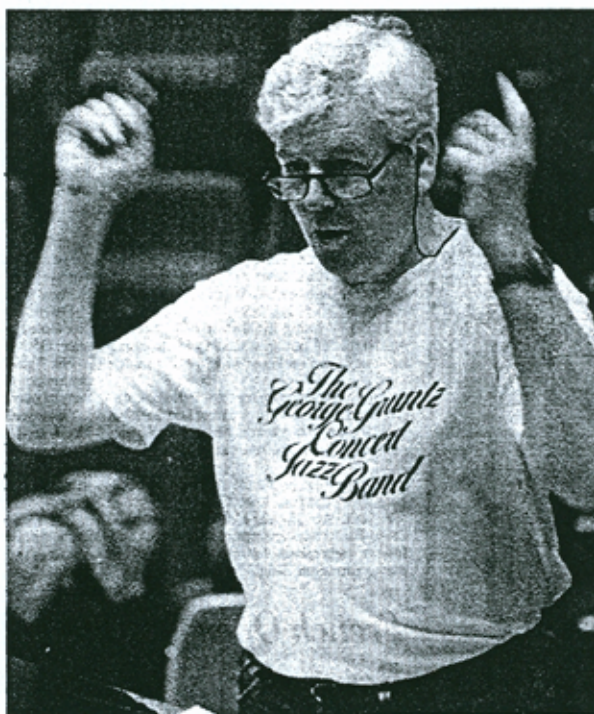
PARIS — Funky means earthy, a sort of healthy dirt. It comes out of African American argot. "You sure are a funky drummer," can be considered a compliment. It may also mean just plain dirty, as in "my tailor is funky." But even then, a certain amount of esteem is involved. Like, it takes talent to be *that* dirty. You might call it a social statement. Funky is the antithesis of bourgeois.

There are few less funky people on earth than the Swiss. The Swiss pianist, arranger, composer and bandleader George Gruntz admits to having "the most unfunky youth you can imagine. I grew up in Basel playing Swiss pop tunes with a Boy Scout band. When I was 14, I heard jazz for the first time and after that there was never any doubt about what I wanted to do with my life. My experience is very different from a black American, no denying that, but I think I can play as dirty as anyone."

That may sound a bit defensive, but the fact remains that the George Gruntz Concert Jazz Band, a formidable big band staffed by some of the best and best-known (mostly American) players since it was founded in 1972, is grotesquely underrated. It has never been a full-time occupation for anybody, which is one secret of its musical success (familiarity breeds the same old licks). Every year the band goes out for short, prestigious, subsidized tours and records an album or two.

The three-week Swiss and German tour I made with the band in 1978 combined the best of both worlds. Hotels, travel arrangements, sound and light engineering and the salaries were Swiss level. The music was flat-out American. The band was integrated and included European musicians nurtured by Americans. The impressive selection of section-men-cum-improvisers included Elvin Jones, John Scofield, Palle Mikkelborg, Howard Johnson, Woody Shaw, Jimmy Knepper and Franco Ambrosetti. Gruntz's friend Ambrosetti is a world-class trumpeter and an industrialist in the Ticino in his spare time. The two of them teamed-up look like a Swiss ad for service to the Land of Oobla-Dee. Gruntz is a great casting director. He hired the young Scofield before Miles Davis "discovered" him. It was the only band I ever played with in which there was absolutely nobody I wanted to avoid on the bus.

The GGCJB is now earning the recognition it has long deserved but been denied, at least in part, because its leader is white and Swiss. In the late 1980s, the GGCJB began to place in the critics polls of such magazines as *Down Beat* and the *Japanese*



After a most unfunky youth, Gruntz says, "I can play as dirty as anyone."

Swing Journal. In 1988, Gruntz received the best performance award from the Japanese Music and Audio Critics Association (the Rolling Stones placed second). In 1991 the band was hired by the Montreux Jazz Festival to accompany Miles Davis performing 1950s Gil Evans arrangements conducted by Quincy Jones.

Gruntz has subsidized his band by numerous more "serious" musical activities. For many years he was director of the Berlin Jazz Festival, which, under his reign, became one of the most adventurous of them all. He writes film music, "Stepenwolf" for one. For 16 years, he was chief musical director of the Zurich Schauspielhaus, one of the best German-language theaters performing an international repertoire. His oratorio "The Holy Grail of Jazz and Joy" was performed as part of the Styrian Autumn Festival in Graz, Austria — he also wrote the libretto, based on a work by Alfred Lord Tennyson. When

Rolf Lieberman was administrator of the Paris Opera he commissioned Gruntz to write an opera, and "Cosmopolitan Greetings," directed by Robert Wilson with a libretto by Allen Ginsberg, was performed in Hamburg in 1988.

His current band will play jazz festivals in New York City, Saratoga, New York, and elsewhere this summer. Along with recognition has come more free-market viability but most of the financing still comes from hustling grants and subsidies, a category in which Gruntz merits an Oscar. He describes the business of jazz with some bitterness: "A Swiss banker I know was already experienced in jazz sponsoring. All of a sudden his bank was criticized by jazz-faction B for giving money to jazz-faction A. It was just stupid jealousy, but the media picked it up. I couldn't blame that banker for changing his bank's policy and beginning to sponsor other contemporary arts where, he said, 'They all love us

and we get great media coverage for doing good things.'

"Except for a very small almost masochistic minority of true lovers, jazz is in the hands of a mediocre group of impresarios and promoters who are unable to sift the chaff from the wheat. Because it is 'safer,' promoters push poor talent while the real thing goes undiscovered. The granting of money is decided upon mostly by inept committees often made up of professionals who are losers, otherwise they wouldn't have the time to sit through all those endless meetings. And so the jazz business is to a large extent monkey business."

The \$200,000 budget for the GGCJB's 1992 tour of China was paid by Gruntz's management company Euromusic, the Chinese and Swiss governments and 36 private sponsors. During the band's first concert, in Beijing, blues harpist Billy Branch quoted a phrase from the French children's song "Frère Jacques." The audience cheered, and audiences continued to cheer every time he played it. It seems that students on Tiananmen Square set politically oriented texts to the melody of "Frère Jacques." Gruntz says no government official made any attempt to stop Branch's quotations.

In fact, Gruntz is hard-pressed to come up with anything negative to say about the Chinese people or their government, although he admits that after only three weeks in the country he is no expert. Of course he may have been brainwashed, or bribed by Chinese subsidies, but I hope we have established by now that to be funky and Swiss adds up to something hipper than that.

"China Blues," a German television documentary, will be broadcast this year. The track "Farewell to China," on which the saxophone section accompanies Larry Schneider's solo on Chinese flute, concludes the GGCJB's soon-to-be-released CD "Beyond Another Wall" (TCB Records). "The band sounded soooooo good," Gruntz says. "It just got better and better. It became a love tour in all respects." He calls the GGCJB a "love machine." Remember, however, this is someone who knows how to put his best foot forward, although they are both very good feet indeed. His musicians often work for less than their normal fees.

Flashback. 1978. Seven A. M. one crisp autumn morning in Basel. The sleepy "love machine" is having a subdued breakfast in the functional dining room of a tidy Swiss hotel before boarding the bus. The British saxophonist Alan Skidmore walks up to the larger-than-life Coltrane alumnus Elvin Jones, leans over the table and, with in-your-face eye-contact, breaks the silence: "Elvin, it sure is a pleasure to wake up in the morning and see you."