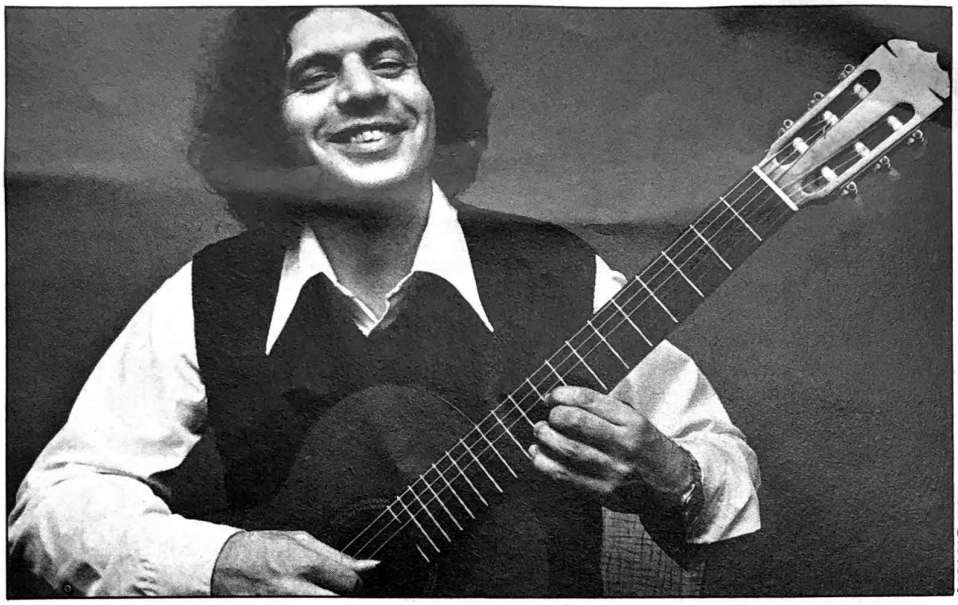

Jon Sievert

# Ralph Towner

## Oregon's Classical/Jazz Master

By Len Lyons

It is easy to think of playing an instrument as an end in itself, but the case of Ralph Towner is a reminder that a musical "instrument" is just that – a device for expressing music. Towner, known primarily as the guitarist in the contemporary music ensemble, Oregon (an artistic offspring of the Paul Winter Consort), is a musician first and a guitarist second. He readily uses the acoustic piano, trumpet, and percussives to transform his musical ideas into physical reality. Still, it is the acoustic guitar (both classical and 12-string) through which the music *inside* is most completely and sensitively brought out.

"I didn't even know what a guitar was until I was 22," Towner says. Now, at a still boyish 35, his relationship to the instrument has been serious, single-minded, and intense. It has produced a body of recorded work which includes an appearance on Weather Report's *I Sing the Body Electric* [Columbia, KC-31352], Oregon's three albums on Vanguard (*Music of Another Present Era* [79326], *Distant Hills* [79341], and *Winter Light* [79350]), and two Towner albums on Germany's ECM, *Trios/Solos,* on which he is backed by the other members of Oregon, and a solo album, *Diary*. He is also a prolific composer, writing nearly 80% of Oregon's music, and a seasoned performer, since the group is currently on the road ten months of the year.

His music is essentially unclassifiable, though it is often associated with jazz because of its 'free,' improvisational nature. But its serious (in the sense of "classical") dimension cannot be ignored, given his meticulous attention to meter, voicing, and written charts for the multitude of instruments the quartet uses. Using his solo album as a frame of reference, Towner's music can be delicate and sensitive (as in "Entry in a Diary"), pleasingly lyrical ("Icarus"), or a jarring, nearly surrealistic collage of painful alienation ("Images Unseen"). Although he is happy to have his music become a "catalyst for personal reactions," he considers his compositions to be an *expression,* not an objective *statement* translatable into descriptions such as those above. He says that he writes "on the level of sound."

Towner's involvement with music began at age three, when he began "improvising" on the piano. Though his mother was a piano teacher, Ralph never studied the instrument formally. In fact, his musical training didn't begin until he enrolled at the University of Oregon as a composition major and part-time trumpet player. In his last year of college, he was on the road to becoming a guitarist, though seemingly by chance. "I went to a music store to buy a trumpet mute or music paper, something like that," he recalls, "and there was this salesman type there who sold me a classical guitar. I taught myself a little bit, and then wrote a composition for flute and guitar."

Just after college, Towner's seriousness about music became focused on that one instrument, and he traveled to Vienna, enrolling in the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts. He explains, "I went there to study with one man, Karl Scheit, and he turned out to be a great teacher. I feel that I made up for my 'late start' in one year because of the intensity. I lived in a small room and had no distractions. The year in Vienna was isolated; all I did was learn to play the guitar. Providing you have an excellent teacher, I don't think this technical thing is much of a mystery – as much as converting this technique into music and emotion."

After that year in Vienna, Towner returned to Oregon for a master's degree program in music theory (though he never completed his thesis) and then returned to Vienna for another year of study with Scheit. In 1968, without quite knowing why, he moved to New York City, commenting in retrospect, "I wouldn't be here doing this interview if I hadn't moved to New York. I met colleagues and influences. It's an amazingly energetic place which opened the doors to playing, recording, and touring."

In New York, however, Towner started out by earning his living as a pianist, simply because the acoustic guitar did not fare well in the lounge-trio gigs he was playing. For him, the electric guitar was not an alternative. "I never liked the electric guitar," he says. "Of course, I *enjoyed* it, like listening to some old Herb Ellis things, but I wasn't even remotely interested in playing the electric guitar. It appeals to me now, though, because of the modern players. I'm not on an anti-electric campaign or anything. It's a valid instrument. I'm just not drawn to it."

As a pianist (and musician), Towner was strongly influenced by Bill Evans, especially the Evans-Scott LaFaro collaborations, and evidence of this influence still surfaces in his recent compositions (for example, "Icarus"). Thus, most of his playing in New York was either jazz or the Brazilian-oriented jazz which was in vogue in the latter half of the Sixties. It brought him into groups

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with singer Astrud Gilberto, percussionist Airto (then on traps), and bassists Miroslav Vitous and Dave Holland. Occasionally, he did jazz guitar work, playing with Miles Davis and Keith Jarrett. However, he recalls that during this whole period he was "trying to find a place for the guitar."

The commercial opportunity finally presented itself in 1970, when he was invited to join the Paul Winter Consort. Yet, his classical training had to accommodate another variation: "When I joined Paul Winter's group, he had a 12-string and he wanted me to play it. I dragged my heels at first because of the fingernail problem and the steel strings, but then I found a way to play it" (Towner plays both strings simultaneously). "If I hit one string," he continues, "I'd be sort of digging at it by lifting up on it, which would break my fingernails right off. Those double strings form a little plateau, a plane, and you push down on those two strings as if they were a wide band, because if you lift up on a string, even in classical, you'll lose all your sound. It'll just evaporate. But this push-and-roll technique, and a very flat plane of plucking – trying to make the strings vibrate horizontally (parallel to the face of the guitar) – bring the sound out much better."

Despite his initial reluctance, the 12-string still has a place in Oregon's instrumentation. "It's a pretty fascinating instrument," explains Ralph, "so I still use the 12-string when I write something on it, though it would be easier for me not to play it as far as having consistent fingernail length is concerned." Towner now owns three Guild 12-strings, preferring one he bought in a pawn shop because the width of the neck suits him. He uses medium gauge silk and steel compound strings.

The Consort, aside from providing a steady format for his acoustic guitar work, was important to Towner in two other respects. "I was forced," he says, "to learn how to integrate all those instruments in my writing." Second, it brought him, Glen Moore, and Colin Walcott, who had known each other previously, into a working relationship with oboist Paul McCandless. After two years in the Consort, Oregon was formed and so named because Ralph and bassist Moore had a penchant for telling stories about their home state. Towner feels that it would be a "misrepresentation" to say the group *split* from Paul Winter (the groups, in fact, have since shared a stage at the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco).

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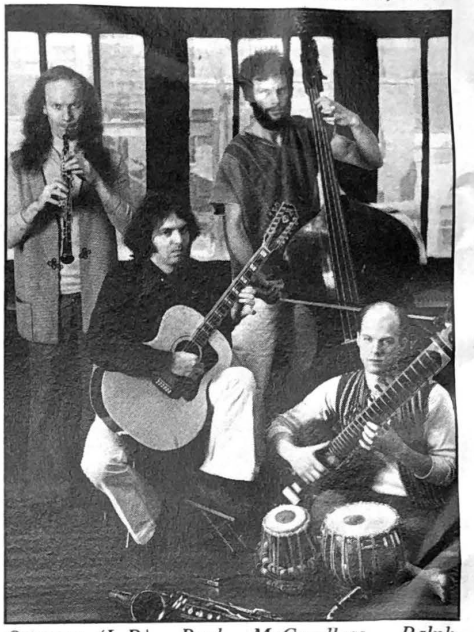
Rather, the quartet decided to pursue their own musical identities.

Though Oregon has no "leader" as such, Towner seems to have received the most notoriety, largely because of his guitar work. There is no denying that his sound is unique, and he attributes its individuality not just to his musical ideas, but to the way he plays the instrument. "It's a method," he says, "not a style." The most singular and curious aspect of this method is that he considers it *pianistic.*

"The classical guitar is really just a keyboard," he explains. "There's a very important difference between plectrum playing and, not just fingerstyle, but the whole classical approach, which is the control of the volume and identity of each voice. You approach it with a keyboard sensibility, which means a lot more control of the individual notes you're striking simultaneously. That's a very important distinction, which is usually lost on plectrum players who switch from pick to classical. I can usually identify someone who is a converted plectrum player because the left hand will be used, as on electric guitar, for note length and articulation. If you want a staccato, you just release a note on the guitar with the left hand, but that will bend the tone at the end of the note. Your note will change pitch. And I do that too, sometimes. But, generally, all the stop tones are done with the right hand. A note will sustain, and



*Oregon: (L-R) Paul McCandless, Ralph Towner, Glen Moore, Collin Walcott.*

when it stops, not by releasing the left hand, but by damping it with one of the fingers of the right hand, you stop the pitch straight, like a damper on the piano. A damper will stop the note

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without changing its pitch. You're not releasing tension; you're stopping the vibration."

Ralph's guitar tone has been the subject of much attention. He explains it this way: "If I sound unusual, it may be my classical approach. I'm controlling the sound I produce the way I would as a piano player. It requires careful control of the volume of each note, as if one note appeared in the foreground and the rest were stacked in the background, almost in a three-dimensional way. That way you can bring out any elements you want. There's a shuffling of attention that gives the music such an illusion of constant activity."

There is more to giving each note its singular quality than just volume, Towner feels. "You also give identity to each voice by where you pluck it on the string. There's a brighter part and a more mellow part away from the bridge. It's almost theatrical to me. You can do this with an electric, too, but I think in classical you can do it to a subtler degree."

The importance of picking different areas of the strings is also reflected in Towner's rationale for holding the guitar in the classical position. "The only reason for putting your left foot on a stool and balancing the guitar on your left leg," he says, "is that it frees your right arm to move around and play different tone colors. When you hold it on your right leg, the tendency is to pin the guitar to your body with your right elbow and play on the same place on the guitar all the time. Consequently, you sound monotonous."

Towner's favorite classical guitar was a '64 Ramirez, which was stolen from his car in New York. Since then, he has used a '72 Ramirez with Savarez (Red Card) strings. When he mikes his guitar, he uses two Neumanns, one placed in the upper area, and one in the lower area, but never over the sound hole. He doesn't use contact mikes. "They're handy for projection," he states, "but they don't give a true picture of what I sound like after the tone is given a chance to wallow around in the guitar."

Though Towner's influences range from Bill Evans to Baden Powell to Bartok, he now listens to music "only for pleasure" and feels that his days of studying and apprenticeship are over. Still, he admits, he listens carefully to several guitarist friends. Curiously, they are all electric players: John Abercrombie, Mick Goodrick, and Bill Connors. "That's why the guitar is so amazing," Towner concludes. "It's virtually a different instrument in everyone's hands." ■

# Ralph Towner.
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