

## INTERVIEW WITH PHIL GURLIK -- NOVEMBER, 1994

*The son of a high school band director, Phil was born in September, 1958 in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. He studied performance and composition at UW Green Bay before dropping out to go on the road with a series of bands. Phil later began repairing and tuning pianos, and after relocating to Houston and opening his own business became Dave's piano tuner of choice. Dave was a frequent patron too at Phil's former 16-track recording studio. A man of numerous talents, Phil is also an accomplished painter.*

I kind of fell into working on pianos and ended up in Houston, where I'd been hired down by a music store to do piano tuning work for them. I quit very soon after that and opened my own business and I'm still doing the same today. Along the way I acquired some studio equipment and gradually built it up to a 16-track studio where I did a fair amount of recording for the local jazz players mostly. The studio I just kind of winged on the side because it really wasn't a money making proposition, so I had the luxury of recording the things I wanted to do without trying to make money doing it. That's how I came to know a lot of the musicians in town, aside from the fact that I job around here and there with a dance band occasionally on trumpet.

I can't recall if I first met Dave through my piano tuning or through my studio. I think probably the very first time I met Dave, I just happened to see him at a club. Back in about '84 Warren Sneed was one of my very first customers; he was one of my first recording clients when I had a little 8-track setup. It was probably through him perhaps that Dave learned that I had some recording gear and first came over and did some solo piano things. He always wanted to practice and record and then be able to hear it back later, and pick it apart and that sort of thing. That's the recording I would do for him. I've had dozens of sessions with Dave over the years, mostly small things. Years ago he would try and do semi-commercial tapes to try and drum up gig work, which is what I did for a lot of the other jazz musicians in town. They'd come in and do a demo tape of pop and pop-jazz kinds of things to try to shop around to get some work basically. So it was that, and then experimental recordings I'd do for people when they wanted to work up new material, and then the occasional thing for album release. I did a few of those. Actually the only thing I did for Dave like that was released by Justice Records when they did a compilation thing of tunes that their artists had written that they were shopping around rights to re-record. A tune I recorded with Dave was on that, and I think that came out just in this last year. I believe that's the only thing I recorded of Dave that was released on anything. I can't even remember what the tune was because we'd recorded it several years ago. But it's on this sampler or whatever it is.

If I'm not mistaken I first saw Dave perform at a place called Las Brisas here in town. Las Brisas was like THE jazz club in town when I came to town in around '82. I think I saw him there. The place was apparently somewhat mismanaged and it went under, much to everyone's chagrin. And then the Blue

Moon became the next real jazz after that. Dave worked there quite a bit by himself and with Kellye Gray and with his quartet, which was basically Joe Lo Cascio's quartet too. For a long time they would essentially share the same sidemen really.

What always struck me about Dave was that he worked so hard. He'd get up in the morning and he'd be on the phone, talking to people, doing things. Nonstop! It was generally geared towards writing music or practicing or getting rehearsals together or preparing something for a club thing for, a concert or ... Dave was absolutely tireless, and that's what he worked toward.

He very much made big leaps musically between times I would hear him. In Houston there have been several almost world-class pianists kind of in and out of the area, so there's always been some really good players, but in addition to being one of the really good players Dave would make things happen a lot. Get gigs going, get people out; it was amazing how many people would come out and support him, where they wouldn't for most other people. I don't know how he did it, other than everybody liked Dave. People supported him and supported what he did.

Dave did far more to contribute to the jazz scene around here than anybody else. That's easy enough to say. And if he'd had more time I'm sure he'd have made more of an impact on a bigger scale too. Musically he was coming along slowly and steadily. He didn't peak at twenty and then never go anywhere. He was always trying to get better and he did, right up to the end.

As a tuner I was able to tune some pianos for him that he never thought sounded very good, and he got it in his mind that I was like the best piano tuner in town, which really wasn't true. There are other people who can do at least as good a job as I do. But I think maybe I accommodated him and went out of my way to do some tunings and things that were less convenient to help him out, and that may have stuck in his mind I think too. I'd do some tunings for him gratis when something was going on and there wasn't any money there. If I had the time I would occasionally do that. For years I tuned his own piano at home and I would just help him out as I do for some of my other friends; you know, tune their piano for free and try to keep it working. I did some work on his piano so it would play better than it did, so he could practice it effectively.

This was a Yamaha studio piano, a 45 inch, a P2 if I'm not mistaken. Barry Dean owned the piano and gave it to Dave to use indefinitely years ago. Dave had in a garage apartment, and I think they'd had to lower it down by ropes and block and tackle or something to get it out. But it was a standard, not a bad piano, and it had obviously gotten a lot of play because Dave played on it a lot. There were a couple of times where I took the action and replaced certain parts on the whole thing that were getting worn out so it would work better. He would complain about not being able to play certain things that he could play on a

good piano, so I tried to make it respond adequately by replacing some springs in the action and filing down the hammers so they'd have fresh felt on them again. In fact on one job I replaced his "bridal tapes", which involved sticking them on, and then he sat there with a tweezers putting them in position, doing some of the grunt work once I got them in place. It was not a bad little home piano but it was really stretching it for a serious practice piano, and Dave made the best use of it that he could. I know he played it a lot; I tuned that thing at least two+ times a year. But he was fairly happy with it because it held a tuning pretty well. When it started going out of tune he would call and say, "The piano needs help..." Sometimes he'd just leave a key somewhere and I'd get in there and tune it up and leave, but usually he'd try and be there because he liked to visit a bit too.

Wherever he worked he would get the owner of the club or the hotel or whatever to call me up to tune the piano for him, which was great for me because I've picked up some of the large hotels here in downtown Houston and I've had them ever since. In fact in a couple of cases I've made a lot of money through doing major work on a piano or helping them buy a piano and that kind of thing. So the few jobs I did for Dave gratis just to help him out in no way came close to offsetting the amount of work he got for me, but he never seemed to quite understand that. When I'd do a job for him without charging him I think he felt a little guilty, and I tried to tell him that he'd really helped me out in this or that instance.

When you're talking about jazz, especially in a town like Houston which doesn't really have a thriving scene in most people's opinion, doing a few tunings here and there over the years to help the guys out a little bit isn't any big deal really. Nobody has a ton of resources in the business except some of the fans and hangers-on, but for the everyday run of the mill playing in a club thing there's not much monetary reward or notoriety or anything. I kind of wanted to be a jazz musician but I never got good enough to be a real performer as such so I just tried to help out some of the guys who I felt were worth the time to be involved with really.

Dave really did have a way of making everyone feel like one of his best friends. I saw Dave fairly regularly in that I would be helping him with a piano or helping him with something in the studio. We didn't go out and have lunch and hang out. If I ever went to a club and he was working there he'd always come and sit at the table on breaktime, unless there were like six million other people he had to say hello to, which was often the case. I like to think of him as a friend. I wouldn't say that I was one of his close pals that he would just drop in on for no reason and watch TV or listen to music with. It was a little more like a musical camaraderie let's say, as opposed to being a "bud." Yet people who were close to him would always surprise me by telling me that he considered me such a great friend, and I'm not really sure why, other than that I just tried to help him out a little bit here and there.

He said on a number of occasions he considered me his friend, and I certainly always tried to help him out or do something if he needed it and I respected his abilities and respected him as a person certainly. There are a few people in town that I feel honored if I can do them a favor frankly, without expecting anything in return. Just to kind of help them out and be a little part of whatever it is they're doing, and Dave was one of those guys. He had far more value to the musical community than anybody else; he was number one as far as I'm concerned.

Dave's sister Connie has the old family piano Dave played on as a kid, and both Dave and his sister had a curiosity to find out--once and for all--just how far gone the piano really was. As I look back now I was probably the first tuner to ever look at it in the pianos' life, at least with that family. So I think they just had a curiosity about it, and Dave was probably starting to feel sentimental about the old box. His sister lives pretty far outside of town. So it was a little bit of a haul to get out there, and it took a little while to get it organized where I could do it while I was near somewhere else, because I wasn't going to charge anybody to look at it.

Dave would mention the piano from time to time and he would get into these long involved conversations. Dave was really legendary for long phone conversations. He'd seem to have all the time in the world. I really do think that his social life to a great extent was conducted on the phone, when he wasn't playing piano. But we'd talk about a bunch of things, and the old piano came up more than once, and he just asked me if it would be possible someday to check it out for them. They really wanted to know where it was at.

I went out there one day in Spring of '94 and I could see immediately that it was just totally a wreck. But I took it apart anyway, took the boards off and just inspected it. The idea was that if it was at all tunable I was going to tune it or make it sound better, but I just had to give up on that pretty quick. I started trying to fix some of the broken parts and it was just ridiculous to even make the attempt. A couple of the large bottom boards were missing. A bunch of the strings were broken or rusted. The piano was a couple steps low in pitch, what pitch you could discern on it. A lot of the glue joints had come loose and most of the key tops were missing. I can't imagine anyone had touched it in years and years, so it was probably similar to the condition it was in when Dave quit playing it, whenever that was. So it was truly a wreck. I see some bad pianos but I rarely go out and look at a piano that bad.

I told Dave's sister that the piano is worthless. If you wanted to restore the piano out of sentimentality you'd have to spend five or six thousand to totally rebuild it, otherwise you'd just be throwing money away. And in fact you'd be throwing it away if you put in five or six thousand, for which you could get a new piano. So I told her that in my opinion it would never be playable and that frankly, having lived a long and useful life it was ready for the junkyard. If somebody wants to just park it in the corner of their house and

look at it every now and then and think of Dave they could. But it really, truly was a wreck. When I told Dave as much, he laughed. He didn't necessarily have any particularly deep love for it or anything. I think he was resigned to the fact that it was worthless and that the best thing to do would just be to relieve the family of the burden of owning it further. So when I gave him the verdict I think he was expecting it. It didn't seem to break his heart.

The Blue Moon was at the height of its popularity at the same time my recording studio was really happening. I was doing quite a bit of things at the time with a lot of the same people who would work there. I also tuned the piano there which was a horrible little crappy. Packard grand, I think. The owner, Dave Mancini, always seemed to be on the verge of bankruptcy, so he never did get a better piano in there. I think it was he who first came up with the idea of doing a "Live at the Blue Moon" album, and what did I think and could it be done? I said basically, "Sure, why not." I think it could have sold a fair number of copies because a lot of people came there.

The recording process made for an interesting couple of nights because it was recorded over a weekend; this would have been in '88 or '89. We just set it up on a Friday or Saturday, and I brought equipment out. They kind of made a deal about it: "Please refrain from making noise during taping", and they packed people in. It was kind of a big deal. And then nothing ever happened with the tapes, which was a slow and disappointing process.

What I did is I brought out an eight track portable reel-to-reel and recorded Dave Catney and his quartet and Kelly Gray and her quartet, which was basically Dave's quartet with Kellye Gray. A couple of other people played on a couple of things, but mostly it was Kellye Gray and Dave Catney's thing. Warren Sneed played sax.

I made an arrangement with Dave Mancini that I would borrow the necessary equipment and since I didn't have a portable studio, Keith Karnaky from the Drum and Keyboard Shop lent me the unit. I told Dave Mancini that I would do it for a basic set fee but that I wouldn't get paid until the cassettes were produced and they'd sold enough of them to make a profit. So in effect I wasn't expecting to get paid for it. It was just kind of a fun thing. I came out and recorded both nights -- probably six or seven hours worth of material-- and then made a very, very rough mix of everything and gave the cassettes to Dave and Kellye. and they listened to them and decided what worked the best. Those are the tunes we ultimately mixed.

So there's an album's worth of material, about forty to forty five minutes, mostly Dave and Kellye. And on that crappy Packard piano. That's the only disappointing thing. It's really a shitty piano but it sounded OK. It sounded like an old Blue Note recording or something. You could hear all the parts and then you could hear glasses clinking in the background. and I think it sounded OK. But the upshot was that the owner of

the Blue Moon never did come up with the bucks to actually press the copies like he was supposed to. He kept putting it off and putting it off...

I actually did remix the thing again for Kellye when she wanted to make a demo tape of her own, and we remixed some of the same tunes and maybe a couple of things that hadn't been in the original version. I gave the tape to her so there's two versions of it I have, but the main once-and-for-all version is sitting in my closet. The guy never came up with the money to do it, and basically I just let it drop. It eventually dragged on so long I knew nothing was going to happen, and then the club finally closed down. It was a little disappointing. Nothing happened, but that's the way it goes with this sort of thing.

The most recent recording I did with Dave was with Joe LoCascio. That was actually in the house I'm living in now which I moved into just under three years ago and set up a studio here and then just slowly shut it down. That was the last actual recording I did with Dave. At that point I had two good grand pianos here at one time. One was the one that Joe LoCascio recorded all his albums on, and then there was this Beckstein that I had rebuilt over a period of time. And that's how Joe and I basically got the idea for him and Dave to come over one night and play and I'd run the tapes, because it's not easy to find a place with two good pianos where you can do that. So they played for an hour or two and cracked jokes basically. It was something of a crude session. It wasn't recorded for album posterity but it sounds pretty good. It was a fun thing really, more than anything. That would have been right about two years ago, in '92 sometime.

I also did some things for Dave just prior to that. It's getting to be almost three years now since he recorded some music for a tribute to somebody else who had died from AIDS here in town. Dave would go to these things and help supply music and that sort of thing; he did a few things like that. And I recorded some vocal tunes to do as demos for Justice Records, so he could practice what he wanted to try and sing when he would be working on his next album.

He really got a lot better as a singer over time. Dave was not a real strong singer but if he had enough times to work on a piece, you'd get a good version. He'd eventually get a take of a recording that he was happy with. I think Dave would be the first to say that he couldn't depend on doing something live and have it come off as well as he'd like. He had a pleasant voice. The tune that he sings on the Jade Visions album--*Lost in the Stars*--we worked on that thing like dozens of takes before he tried to do the real recording of it for the album. Before he did his albums he would do some pre-production in my studio just to work up some things, and that was one of them. In fact that was one of the tapes he made *sure* was erased. There were some things he thought were pretty embarrassing on there while he was working on it, trying things.

I did a lot of recordings for him in the early to mid and then toward the late '80's, before he got his deal with Justice. We did quite a few sessions, many, many hours of things scattered over the years. A lot of solo piano stuff mainly. There were many times where I'd do sessions for other people, and they would bring him in as their pianist. That was very common. He was one of the guys who was always willing to come in and play on somebody's thing for them to help them out, so I saw him a lot.

My images of Dave are: a great sense of humor. He cracked jokes, and the sessions in the studio would be a lot of fun with his engaging manner. Once he wore wool pants to a session on a summer day and ended up sweating a lot and he'd have to keep jumping up and running around the room and leaving the room and coming back and these pants were killing him, and it was breaking everybody up. I don't think that session really came off too well. Somebody had given him these wool pants, and he was determined to wear them and yet he was like dying in them. I think he was almost going to take them off in the session.

None of the things I did for him was ultimately anything serious as far as being archival. It was more like practicing and learning and working up things. The majority of stuff we worked on doesn't exist anymore because he would use the tapes over and over. Although we made mixes of everything he ever did and I gave them to him, I didn't always keep copies of them myself.

And a lot of the stuff that I may have had copies of, I have no idea what happened to them.

I'd occasionally see Dave at Cezanne although I saw him a lot more during the Blue Moon days. He called me when he got out of the hospital the last time before he died. I was really surprised. I don't think anybody expected him to go home because he was very sick in the hospital and everybody thought that that was it. Apparently he got strong enough for a brief period of time that he was allowed home.

He had all his IV's and his medications and everything set up in his room basically like his own little hospital ward up in his bedroom. And he called me up. He'd gotten in the mood to go play on his piano a little bit and he wondered if I'd come over and give it a tune up in case he got in the mood to play again. Dave was always a stickler for it sounding as good as possible, and of course I was more than happy to come out because I was quite sure I probably wouldn't see him otherwise. So I went out there. When I got there Linda was there, as was Scott Greathouse. They said Dave was up in his room and I should just go ahead and work on the piano and that he was going to make it a point to get dressed and cleaned up so he could come down and see me. I kind of felt bad; I hoped he wasn't putting himself out. Anyway I tuned the piano, and he made it downstairs and he had his cane and he did not look good at all. He wasn't seeing any visitors or anything, and I don't think he did up until the end. I think he was just taking it easy there. So I kind of felt lucky actually to be able to get over there to see him because I had an excuse to be there really.

I tuned the piano for him, and of course he thanked me. He invited me upstairs, so we went up there and he was going to show me his setup in the bedroom, his IV pumps and all that stuff. And he just sat down, and we talked a bit. He basically talked about working on getting over the hump, so to speak. He never talked in a way that he was expecting it was the end. It was always kind of like getting over this next hump so he could get back to work.

I almost left the place thinking it was possible that he was going to get over the hump again. That really would have been amazing because he was very weak; he barely made it back up the stairs. In fact I was feeling bad, thinking that I should be gone so that he could just lay there and rest, but I don't think it really makes that much difference when you're that far along I guess.

He was at peace with himself certainly. He didn't have any regrets. I think it was just on his mind that the only thing to do would be to devote all his energies towards getting to feel better because there wasn't really any point in doing anything else. He expressed reservations about the medication he had for pain relief, because if you have a little bit too much you don't have your wits about you and that was the last thing he wanted--to not be aware of what was going on and to just be in a fog--so he tried to use it as sparingly as possible. Also it was his understanding and experience that if you had more than you should, it would cease to work as well, so he strove to find a balance between tolerable pain and being able to think as clearly as possible. But obviously his faculties were slowing down considerably. He was just very, very ill and working very hard to just maintain and pull out of it again.

He did talk about a spiritual thing that had happened to him the last night in the hospital that made him feel very much better about everything that was going on. At that point he was really working on conserving his energy and getting better so he could continue to do what he wanted to do. Dave was still very much planning on getting better and continuing on. He never felt sorry for himself or gave up; that's for sure.