

# ARMEN DONELIAN



As a child, Armen Donelian absorbed the sound of Armenian, Turkish, Greek and Middle Eastern music at social gatherings and from the records his father played at home. His early years as a student of Michael Pollon for 12 years at the Westchester Conservatory of Music in White Plains, NY trained him for a career as a concert pianist. His studies included regular solo piano performances and several concertos with local symphonies, and culminated in a 1968 solo piano graduation recital including works by Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy and Prokofiev. Around the age of 15, Donelian joined a Jazz group led by guitarist Arthur Ryerson, Sr., and things were never quite the same after that. He was immediately captivated by the Jazz feeling and began listening to all the Jazz masters, including Louis Armstrong, Art Tatum, Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and John Coltrane.

After graduating from Columbia University in 1972, Donelian apprenticed for two years with Richie Beirach, one of the strongest pianistic voices on the New York scene. He learned how to combine his Classical training with his instinct for Jazz improvisation and advanced composition.

Armen Donelian broke into the Jazz world in 1975 with Mongo Santamaria's vibrant Afro-Cuban Jazz octet. Several tours and recordings ensued, including *Sofrito* which includes three of Donelian's compositions and was nominated for a 1976 Grammy Award in the Best Latin Jazz Album category. In the following years, he acquired a strong foundation

## BIOGRAPHY

**Over the last quarter century,** pianist/composer and Fulbright Scholar Armen Donelian has distinguished himself in 21 countries as a performer, recording artist, master class leader, and with his published writings.

Donelian's music is a distinctive blend of influences including his Armenian origin, his Classical technique, and his association with some of the biggest names in Jazz. And, according to *Metronom*, he achieves this fusion "in such a natural way that one can tell it's a master's work."

(Bilsak Jazz Festival, Turkey, 1987)

in the Jazz arts through engagements and recordings with Sonny Rollins (1977-8), Chet Baker (1977 and 1983-5), Billy Harper (1979-83), Paquito D'Rivera (1984-5), Anne-Marie Moss (1979-84) and many others.

Donelian's album debut came in 1981, with the release of *Stargazer* (Atlas) in Japan. A trio recording with bassist Eddie Gomez and Billy Hart on drums, the LP received critical praise from *Swing Journal* for its "wonderful tension" and Donelian's "uncommon talent as a composer."

In 1984, he embarked on serious composition studies with Harold Seletsky, a master composer in the tradition of Arnold Schoenberg. Several fugues and motets resulted, and these lessons also had a marked influence on Donelian's Jazz writing.

Over the next ten years, Donelian released four critically acclaimed CDs: *A Reverie* for solo piano, called "A masterpiece" by *Swing Jazz Journal* (1984); *Trio '87*, "One of the great unsung piano recordings of the 80's" according to *Cadence* magazine; *Secrets*, chosen #3 Jazz Album of the Year in the 1988 *Jazz Hot Critics' Poll*, with special mention for its "Epic musicality;" and *The Wayfarer*, praised as "Downright haunting" by *Downbeat* magazine (1990).

A poetic composer of over 90 original works, Donelian is the recipient of a 2000 Fellowship in Music Composition from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. His pieces have been published by Advance Music and Sher Music, and recorded by artists including Mongo Santamaria and Rory Stuart.

In addition to performing and composing, Donelian has been active as a teacher since his teens. In 1986, Donelian joined the faculty of the New School University Jazz and Contemporary Music Program, and in 1993 of William Paterson University in New Jersey. With the help of four Jazz Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Donelian earned praise for his leadership of the Rhythm Section Plus One master class series. From 1990 to 1996, the series presented over 55 prominent Jazz masters including Dewey Redman, Jim Hall and David Liebman with Donelian as host and pianist.

Donelian's book, *Training the Ear* [Advance Music (in English), 1992; ATN, Inc. (in Japanese), 2001], grew out of his classroom work and has been called "the most clearly organized and comprehensive package of its type" by the *Rutgers Annual Review of Jazz Studies* (1994-5). Donelian's articles on ear training and chord voicings have appeared in *Downbeat* and *Keyboard* magazines and the *Rutgers Annual Review of Jazz Studies*.

Always proud of his Armenian heritage, Donelian has performed in the Middle Eastern Jazz group Night Ark in several countries and on recordings for RCA/Novus, Polygram and Universal Records. As an arranger and pianist, Donelian has accompanied Armenian Jazz vocalist Datevik Hovanesian in performances here and abroad.

In 1998, Donelian traveled for the first time to Yerevan, Armenia to perform in the first Yerevan International Jazz Festival, and to present several first-ever Jazz master classes at the Yerevan State Conservatory. With support from an Artslink Collaborative grant from CEC International Partners and private support from the Hovnanian Armenian School in New Jersey, Donelian initiated the Jazz in Armenia Project, an artistic, educational and intercultural initiative. As a Visiting Professor of Jazz at the Yerevan Conservatory, Donelian leads this lively exchange which includes a once-a-year musical program of master classes, impromptu workshops, solo piano concerts, appearances at local venues with resident musicians and concerts honoring humanitarian efforts in rural areas of Armenia.

In 2002, Donelian was named a Fulbright Senior Scholar in recognition and support of his ongoing work in Armenia. A resident Professor of Jazz at the Yerevan Conservatory for 3 months, he also traveled to Russia, Georgia, Romania and France to present master classes at major conservatories in St. Petersburg, Tblisi, Iasi, Cluj and Paris. As a participant in Jazz Appreciation Month (a State Department-sponsored program hosted by the American embassy in Armenia), Donelian performed in major venues including Yerevan Philharmonic Hall, Yerevan Chamber Music Hall, Khatchaturyan Museum Hall and the Vanadzor Music College. With additional grants from the US State Department and the Romanian Fulbright Commission, Donelian appeared as a featured solo pianist in the Kannon Jazz and Modern Dance Festival (Russia), the Richard Oshantzsky Jazz Festival (Romania) and in a command performance for the American Ambassador to Georgia.

In August, 2000, Sunnyside Records released the first in a three volume set of solo piano CDs called **Grand Ideas**, Armen Donelian's most ambitious recording effort to date.

**Grand Ideas** represents Armen Donelian's lifetime devotion to the piano, composition and improvisation. Volume 1 - *Wave*, which features a repertoire of selected standards and popular songs, and Volume 2 - *Mystic Heights* which focuses on Donelian's own compositions, are now available. Volume 3 - *Full Moon Music* featuring Donelian's spontaneous improvisations, is scheduled for release on Sunnyside Records in 2003.