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“the” guy in Portland for jazz piano. I loved him. He’d sit there and write out a chart for you as fast as you and I were writing a letter — melody, chords, the whole thing.

RM: Your dad, Al Grant, owned Madrona’s, a very famous record store in Portland.

TG: His record store was heavily into R&B and jazz. It was “the place.” For the time it was in existence, from 1950 to 1964, it was the main place to get jazz and R&B in Oregon and beyond. It was a scene. People danced in the store.

When I was 12 years old, I took the bus downtown from northeast Portland. I’d go to a sci-fi movie, always knowing I’d go to my dad’s store and get a ride home.

RM: When did you start playing jazz?

TG: I went to Grant High School in Portland. No relation (laughs). As I recall, we didn’t have a jazz band, so everything I did was outside the high school thing.

My brother Michael and (saxophonist) Jim Pepper were friends. That’s how I got to know Pepper. My first gig was at a place called Cafe Espresso.

RM: Did your brother pursue music?

TG: My brother was one of the original Hare Krishnas. He wasn’t just a follower. In the summer of love, 1967, he brought the Hare Krishna movement out to San Francisco, then to L.A., and then to London, where he befriended the Beatles with this spiritual message. George Harrison was the only one that stayed with it. He was always considered a Hare Krishna devotee.

RM: Were you interested in the Hare Krishna movement?

TG: I was ambivalent, but I wasn’t really into it.



Addie Mannan

Jazz legend Tom Grant and singer Shelly Rudolph.

There were a lot of things about it I didn’t like.

RM: Did you go to college?

TG: I studied political science at the University of Oregon. I left Portland in 1969 for L.A. to be in a pop band called “Mercy.” Then there was another band called Mercy that had a big hit, so we had to forget that name. Then I came back, finished school, finished college, got my degree, got a masters. I taught political science and social studies.

RM: You taught school?

TG: I did a lot of teaching in the ’70s. I had my own classes in a small town in Oregon, Mill City, then I came up to Portland, and substituted in the days, and then at night I was playing with Jim Pepper, and then with my own band.

RM: You played with the great jazz drummer Tony Williams. How did that experience influence you?

TG: I was very much

influenced by the Tony Williams Experience. He could rock with the best of them. Everything was possible and nothing was impossible. He taught me you didn’t need to be locked in a style. “Don’t box yourself in.” When I got the call to play with him, I nearly died.

RM: What was your first breakthrough as a leader?

TG: In the ’70s, I established my band in Portland, “Tom Grant and Friends.” We played fusion

music. I had a record in 1983, “Tom Grant,” that got a bunch of airplay. It charted. I was playing electric (piano), then synthesizer, but the acoustic piano was my sound. Ironically, when I toured with Tony, he hated me playing acoustic piano. His complaint was he couldn’t hear it.

This was before there was an expression “smooth jazz.” My subsequent records did pretty well.

RM: Did you continue to teach social studies?

TG: (Portland drummer) Ron Steen was a big influence on my whole career. He talked me into leaving teaching high school and coming up to Portland to play. He nurtures young players like crazy. (Bassist) Esperanza Spaulding — I give him all the credit for nurturing her career. (Trumpeter) Chris Botti is another Ron Steen protege. Chris is originally from Corvallis. He did all his growing up playing jam sessions under the tutelage of Ron Steen.

RM: When did your music begin to be associated with the “smooth jazz” genre?

TG: Toward the late ’80s, early ’90s, they started using the expression smooth jazz. I was “Mr. Smooth Jazz” for a while. I hated that. I never like to be boxed in. So I’ve been fighting it — to my detriment.

The 2000s were when I was trying to regain my status in the smooth jazz world. I think I was regretting the fact that I had thumbed my nose at the smooth jazz world.

RM: You won an award in 2017 for your album “Sipping Beauty.” Zone Music Reporter, a website tracking New Age, world, and instrumental music gave it best album for the “chill-groove” genre.

TG: My last two records were New Age-y relaxation

records. They did pretty well.

RM: Do you have a family?

TG: I have one child, 49, with two grandkids. We’re close. I also have a step-daughter from my second marriage. I’m not married, but I may as well be. Her name is Mary.

RM: Do you continue to tour?

TG: I was just in Indonesia. One of my records, a bootleg, was a big hit in Indonesia.

RM: Have you played locally?

TG: I’ve played at the Coaster Theatre twice, with Shelly Rudolph. We play standards, some of my original stuff. She’s cool and great to look at. We’re playing at the Astoria Country Club on Feb. 2.

RM: What do you like to do for fun?

TG: I do conditioning. Hot yoga, bickram — I’ve done that for 20 years.

RM: How do you see Oregon as a place to nurture jazz talent?

TG: For years we’ve had some good big jazz festivals. There’s a good program at Portland State University. Several of the community colleges have good established jazz players. Jazz is very respectable around here.

I do a gig every Sunday night in Vancouver (Washington) at a little club there. We’re celebrating our 10th year. Tommy O’s, it’s kind of a Hawaiian-themed place, Tommy is a Hawaiian native. We do a concert, then we do a jam session. Jam sessions are big in Portland.

RM: What’s coming up for you?

TG: Dinner, pretty soon.

RM: What is your advice to younger musicians?

TG: Get a complete education. Go into law or medicine (laughs). Follow your heart, follow your dream. 