

## CHICK COREA SPEAKS!

Written by Charles Waring  
Wednesday, 02 September 2009 11:30

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Legendary jazz keyboard sorcerer, CHICK COREA, has just started the first leg of a lengthy world tour alongside former Return To Forever band mates, STANLEY CLARKE and LENNY WHITE.

The tour kicks off on September 2nd at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles, where the trio will be joined by special guests Chaka Khan, former RTF guitarist Bill Connors and violinist JEAN-LUC PONTY.

The tour moves to Europe in October, with a date scheduled at London's Barbican Hall on November 15th. What follows is a fascinating interview with Chick recently conducted by our US correspondent, John Wisniewski.

### **1) Who are some of the jazz musicians and classical composers who have influenced your work?**

The list is very long. In a general but true sense, it's every composer, musician and piece of music that in some way caught my attention to teach me or inspire me. There is a shorter but still long list of the artists that have continually inspired me through the years, but this list is also too long for an interview. Let me try the short, short list of those whose music is currently part of my active musical life: John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Henri Dutilleux, Thelonious Monk, Domenico Scarlatti and Alexander Scriabin.

### **2) Could you tell us something about your early training as a musician?**

My father, Armando, was my guide into the music world. He and the musicians in his bands

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were a relaxed and fun group and I wanted to join them and play music with them from when I was a tot. My father taught me to read music and play some tunes on the piano. He also introduced me to the recorded music of Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell and many more in the '40s by constantly playing his 78 rpm discs of these great musicians. I was enthralled and wanted to play all those notes immediately but couldn't approach the fast bebop just yet. But in the early '50s I came across Horace Silver's music and began to copy his songs and piano solos from his recordings. That was a great school for me. I also played a lot of dance and wedding gigs with my father where I learned many of the standard songs that, interestingly enough, are still popular today.

### **3) Your father was a musician. Did this inspire you to pursue music as a career?**

My father and my mother, Anna, both encouraged and helped me to pursue music because they saw that I loved it. That was the best career encouragement I ever got. My mother packed chocolates for Schrafft's Candy Company in Boston for years and saved the money to buy me a Steinway baby grand when I turned 16. They were the best parents one could imagine having.

### **4) You worked with Mongo Santamaria and Willie Bobo in your formative years. Could you tell us about your collaborations with them?**

The stint with Mongo was my first major gig after I moved to NYC in '59. Mongo, with Willie Bobo and Potato Valdes, made that band swing so hard! Talk about groove. It was an amazing ride. We played at the old Birdland several times, but the really memorable gigs were playing dances in Harlem. That experience extroverted me and made me love music that was made for people to dance and have fun with. Willie Bobo later formed his first band which I played in - more a jazz thing, but with Willie's wonderful rhythmic touch on the trap drums. Larry Gales was the bassist in that band.

### **5) When did you meet Miles Davis and could you tell us about your work with him in the early 1970s?**

I first met Miles when he came to sit in at Minton's on a 6-week stint I was on with the "Sister Sadie All Stars" - which was basically Horace Silver's quintet without Horace. Blue Mitchell was the leader with Junior Cook, Gene Taylor and Roy Brooks. Miles came and sat in one night

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playing Blue's horn. He played like the god I knew he was and then came by the piano on his way off the band stand to whisper in my ear the cryptic question "Was I playing the right changes?" Of course, he was putting me on - but it was friendly.

Then Tony Williams called me and said Miles wanted me to come and play with the band in Baltimore. I called Miles and asked him if there was going to be a rehearsal - and he said "No, just play what you hear." That set the stage for 2 years of some of the most exciting "free" music I ever played - together with Wayne Shorter, Tony Williams and Dave Holland - then, after 6 months, Jack DeJohnette came on for the rest of the time.

Miles was relentlessly experimenting the whole 2 years I was in the band - trying different approaches - always working everything out on the gig. There were never any rehearsals. After only a few months, Miles directed me towards this electric piano he had rented - and after that night, I never played the acoustic piano again with Miles. He seemed to be searching for a sound and a new way of expression and the electric piano was part of what he was envisioning. Of course, it's history now how that slowly developed into all the groove and electric-oriented music he was to make in years to come.

But at the time Miles was leaning towards rock and pop, Dave Holland and I were leaning more and more towards free improvisation and so we together left the band to form our own group, Circle. Miles was a true freedom fighter. He taught me to stay true to my own vision no matter what.

### **7) How did you get interested in composing fusion jazz? Are there any rock music artists that you admire?**

Hearing John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra in '72 was inspiring to me. I had never heard a guitar played that way. The impact of emotion was tremendous. As a composer I wanted to write for a sound like that - and shortly after that, Stanley Clarke and I found Bill Connors in San Francisco, resulting in the electric version of Return To Forever.

I wasn't listening to rock music in the 60s - I was listening to Coltrane, Miles and Monk, as well as Stravinsky and Bartok. But Stevie Wonder really caught my attention and has held it all these years. His music has always transcended any style and he was my model as a songwriter.

### **8) When did you meet John McLaughlin and could you tell us about your collaborations with him. Did both of you agree on the direction of the music?**

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I met John when he first came to work in the US with the Tony Williams band. We became instant friends and have remained so through the years. Our recent project the Five Peace Band was a great joy. Since I first heard John and played with him, I always wanted to have a band with him, and last year, this dream was realized. Both of us wrote the music and there was an easy agreement about the direction of the music, both of us sharing very similar tastes in music.

### **9) Could you tell us about your interest in the religion Scientology?**

I've been a Scientologist since 1968 when I found L. Ron Hubbard's books and lectures to be of great help to me in my effort to learn more about myself and how I could be more effective in helping my family and friends. I also enjoy participating in the efforts we make in Scientology to help improve the world around us with programs for drug rehabilitation, the forwarding of Human Rights, and help in education, to mention a few.

### **10) How did this religion aid you in composing music?**

I find that as a composer, one needs to be calm of mind and be able to express what one feels and sees without inner conflict. A composer needs to be able to be wide awake, in good health and work with concentration on his music to produce the result he wants. Studying Scientology helped me in all these things.

### **11) What lies in the future for jazz?**

Your guess is as good as mine. I think there's never a problem with the musicians - their desire, abilities and creativity. The problem is always calming and making more ethical the world around us.

### **12) Could you tell us about your latest work?**

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I'm always working towards perfecting and improving my abilities. I like to be a student and learn. I'm currently working on new composing techniques - - ways to get my thoughts down and captured in more efficient ways. I'm working on new ways to capture my flow of improvisation and make certain parts of it into compositions that will be able to be played again and again.

**13) What lies in the future for yourself and is there always a need to look for new sounds in jazz-from avant-garde and free jazz to fusion etc.?**

Creating music and touring and playing for people everywhere is the greatest joy I know. So that is and has always been my goal and future - to continue to make new music and spark imaginations wherever and whenever I can.