

Chick Corea Interview 14th March 2001

Q: Could we take *Past Present Future* as a cue to look at your various trios perhaps if we could start with *Now He Sings Now He Sobs* and then work through them all up to *Past Present and Future*?

CC: I see, OK. Well let's see, around '68, maybe more like '67, does it say '68 on the album? [it says March 1968 on the CD] I don't remember, it was right around there. I had just begun a very happy association with Roy Haynes, because I had been playing – I might have still been playing with Stan Getz's group at the time – and Roy was the drummer and Steve Swallow was the bassist, and I had already made a couple of records, I made *Tones for Jones Bones*, I made another recording for Solid State called *Is* out of which came a bunch of minced together releases through the years and all of that stuff. At that time I had a brand new association with Miroslav Vitous, I was playing with Miroslav and Jack DeJohnette and really liked Miroslav's playing a lot, I remember when I was approached to do a trio record for Solid State, and it was – actually I can't remember now whether it was the producer's idea – I remember a man named Manny Albam was on the scene at that time and he was kind of producer and A&R guy of the project, I really wanted to record with Roy, I had the idea it could be an interesting mix if I put Miroslav in there, so I put together some material for the studio and I think we spent about two days in the recording studio recording, maybe six hours maybe more of recording

Q: So much more material came out when the CD was released, I was quite surprised how much there was

CC: Er, well, yea. When the first recording came out, an LP at that time was like 40 to 45 minutes capacity, 20 on a side, remember? And there were additional tracks there

that we recorded that couldn't fit on the LP, but later when they put the CD out they added a few more things, and yes, that was how it came down, it was very quick. I remember taking the recorded tapes and listening to them and doing a bit of editing on one of the tracks in order to get a longer Roy Haynes drum solo, I forget which track it was he played an open drum solo and I liked it so much I wanted it to be longer and I took another take that we did and I spliced the two drum solos together, and then I sent the tape to Roy and asked him what he thought and he couldn't tell the difference himself!

Q: To me, the whole concept of that album was something new and fresh that synthesised a lot of elements that were in the air from Bill Evans to a more freer approach to playing

CC: Well, it was where I was at that particular moment, and that's what came out. I don't remember thinking too much at the time what all the influences were that went into making the record, it was my first time with a trio and first time with such an open format because my first albums were group music, quintet and a grouping of 8 or 9 guys for the second record I did

Q: Going forward now to Circle, which followed your time with Miles Davis and that was a completely different approach, more freer

CC: A lot of life and playing and searching and experimenting went on between '68 and '70, and Circle came after my two year tenure with Miles, and it was – actually the formation of that trio was Dave Holland and Barry Altschul, the trio record we did there was called *ARC*, the one that's on ECM. That trio was actually a lot more thought out how we put that whole sound together, because Dave and I – Dave Holland and I – had been playing together, jamming together in between gigs with Miles. We shared

a building, we had a loft in this building, he was upstairs and I had my piano downstairs, and he came down and we'd play a lot and we'd invite musicians over, and we were actually looking for a simpatico drummer to fit into the trio and when Barry came along things started to click real nicely, but I remember we worked on the sonics of that trio a lot. We wanted to keep an intimate sound, no amplification, I remember spending a lot of time talking to Barry about the timbre and sound and pitch and tuning of his drums — in fact, I even handed Barry the cymbal that Roy Haynes gave me that Roy Haynes had played on *Now He Sings Now He Sobs*, so if you listen to *ARC* you'll hear that same flat ride cymbal that Barry is using that Roy used!

Q: Then came *Paris Concert* with Anthony Braxton, which made it a quartet. Would it be correct to say the direction you took with *Circle* on those Blue Note recordings, *ARC* and *Circle* — and then *Paris Concert* — grew out of what you and Dave Holland had been working on while with Miles?

CC: Well, it was a continuing evolution of what Dave and I had going which we started when we were playing with Miles that we continued in the loft experimentation that we had at home in the trio with Barry, and finally Dave brought in Anthony Braxton that made it a quartet

Q: With *Return to Forever* you did a trio thing on *Live*, I don't know whether that counts in your trios?

CC: Not really because they weren't the same concept, that was more chamber music style and programmed into fitting into the musical programme I was putting together on stage

Q: In '81 you decided to bring back together Miroslav Vitous and Roy Haynes on *Trio Music*, which was very interesting album exploring Monk and freer concepts than the original *Now He Sings Now He Sobs*

CC: Yes, right. You know, when I did *Now He Sings Now He Sobs* in the 1960s, we did the recording, but that trio at that time, we didn't do any performances at all, there were no gigs, it was purely a recording. But we liked the record so much that we kept our associations, it wasn't until – I don't know the date on that *Trio Music* – '80 something like that?

Q: '81

CC: It wasn't until the late Seventies, like '77, '78 that Roy and Miroslav and I started to accept trio engagements, actually perform and do gigs as a trio, and that culminated in that double album

Q: Ahh. But what prompted the duality of the approach on the album, a double album, like two separate groups?

CC: Well there — you mean in *Trio Music*? Well there were two areas of music I particularly wanted to explore on that record. In live concert we would play a mixture of a lot of different kind of things — play standards, we'd improvise, I wrote some music, Miroslav wrote some tunes, and in the studio I had the idea to concentrate on two areas, one of which was completely free playing — spontaneous creation — which was the first side, the first LP, and the other one was the music of Monk, how interesting it was to approach the music of Monk with Roy, who played with Monk, and me and Miroslav who came around to Monk's music through recordings — actually I saw Monk play a lot in concert, I saw Monk play a lot live

Q: That's interesting because his style is not an influence on your playing that seems obvious

CC: Thelonious? I see what you mean. Thelonious's playing — he's a totally unique character on the music scene, I mean he expressed himself in a mode that is very much akin to the mode that I like and have chosen as well, which is pianist, composer, bandleader, small group jazz. He led his life in that mode and the music he wrote he performed himself with his own group, but his songwriting and his way of approaching it is totally unique, that's what I love about the area of creative music and music in general is that the uniqueness of artist's personality can be shown through what they create and what they do and that kind of uniqueness is an inspiration to me, every great artist that I get attracted to has that quality one way or another

Q: You just did one album live with that group

CC: That was *Live In Europe*, and *Live In Europe* was the last recording I did for ECM, it was a few years later

Q: Yes. In there there's a piece by Scriabin, whose influence surfaces from time to time in your music

CC: Yes, I like Scriabin's music, I spent quite a bit of time through the years at home at the piano with scores of great composers and Scriabin is one of the composers whose music attracted me. I began to try to perform some of his early preludes, as a kind of contrasting element to put into the performance

Q: Now that's interesting, I hadn't realised you'd studied him so deeply. Then in '89 a new trio with John Patitucci and Dave Weckl, and it had as its alter ego — the Electric band.

CC: Well, we were progressing with the Electric Band and in the first three or four years I was concentrating so hard with working with the Electric Band, I had let go any of any other forms of performance, but I kept getting requests to do trio and every time my manager would tell me so-and-so requests a trio specifically here and there, it would remind me of the trio, so I thought one way to go back and experience some of the joys of playing trio without breaking up the Electric Band would be to take the guys in the band and see what comes out and we took the opportunity of a couple of gigs we were offered in the south of Italy. One was in Sicily, Catania, and we went down there with John and Dave and took a day and half, couple of days, to rehearse a little bit, and put a repertoire together and that is how the trio began

Q: Really. From almost casual beginnings

CC: Yes, very casual beginnings

Q: I think what amazed people was the extraordinary level of virtuosity

CC: Well that's an acknowledgement of the great playing of John and Dave who are fantastic musicians

Q: And the pianist too! Now coming up to date with *Past, Present and Future*, a different rhythmic climate, I'm tempted to say a straight-ahead climate

CC: Well, as we review these trios I tend to think that the form and the sound and the way the music comes out sounding has so much to do with the personality of the musicians who are playing, rather than the simply the concept I bring to the band because the concept I bring to the band is mostly a human one, rather than a musical one, its one where I strive for intimacy and contact and communication and a gamefullness between the trio. And then I fix compositions and ways of approach into that so the sound of the group is very much a result of the players that come in. The New Trio has a particular personality because of the approach Avishai [Cohen] and Jeff [Ballard] have to ideas that I bring along, although there was one specific idea that I started this trio up with that the trios of the past all had, and that was a basis of standard tunes for our repertoire. I would compose music and we would improvise and try different things but basically we always harkened back to the standards, jazz standards, Broadway standards, those kind of songs. With this trio, The New Trio, we started out with ten new compositions I brought to the guys, and it took a week at the Blue Note in Las Vegas to rehearse during the daytime and pull the repertoire together, as a matter of fact that was the only – we rehearsed that one week – all the new music and the following week we went into Los Angeles into the recording studio

Q: So you were nicely warmed up

CC: Yes, but not so warmed up as the trio then got when we played for the month of December, because then things really took off, very, very nicely

Q: Each trio of yours reflected the time it was recorded in. Would you say this record is reflective of the renascent times jazz is going through now

CC: Explain a little about this climate

Q: Well, a return to what many people would argue are jazz's core values, bop and hard bop, swing and blues that characterised a lot of jazz in the '50s and early '60s. A renascent vision of jazz that looks to the past for inspiration – you did the Bud Powell album, for example

CC: I see what you mean. Well the title I put on the record is an attempt to kind of summarise when I looked at the repertoire we had developed and how the trio played I thought to myself, the very sounds coming off this trio album could be coming from any time at all, could be coming from the past, it be coming from now, it could be in the future, in actual fact none of it actually really matters, all we do is bring our total selves to the music at the moment we play it and all conception of time and influences and what follows kind of disappear, so even if are playing on what might be listened to as an older form – a blues form or something – we don't play it as older form we play it from now when we have that kind of a new look at the material. Each time we play the music it remains fresh and that's what we go for

Q: How do you see the past, present and future of your trios, if I can borrow the album title for a moment, to sum up

CC: The setting of three people, and especially of piano bass and drums, has become very central to the kind of music I love and play and the kind of music that people hear in jazz – every band I have always had has had a core to it which has always been the rhythm section – keyboards, bass and drums – so when the group is just those three it's a very particular formation and has an intimacy about it, but it also has enough sound in it to create colours and orchestrate and write music just a completely atypical format, its primal, its like essential, it's the basis, you know, and also in every larger band I have had I have always concentrated on putting together a

really good rhythm section together, in all of these groups and all of the trios there's sort of an essence that's expressed. I feel it's a great format, as far as comparing how all the trios played, the only thing I can say they are all what they are, I feel fortunate to have spent so much time with such good musicians

Q: I have just one more question. That period that's not covered too well by Columbia leading up to *Bitches Brew* and just after, there's not so many recordings that document your period on the band, a couple of bootleg albums, where its electronic free jazz — like *Black Beauty*, which was originally, I think, a Japanese release, but didn't come out at the time — what can you remember about this period?

CC: I hate to let you down, very little. Those few gigs where Keith was rotating onto the band

Q: No, not when Keith was on the band, before that, you're all freely interacting sounds like you have been given your head, you were on

CC: Fender Rhodes

Q: Yes, with a flanger and all that

CC: Right. I can tell you that the band I thrived in for two years was with Dave [Holland], Wayne [Shorter], Miles and Jack [DeJohnette] and Airtio joined us occasionally. But that was a very, very engaging time, it was lived over this backdrop of Miles's life changing in front of our eyes, because we all revered him so much. He was fifteen, twenty years our senior but I think Jack and Dave and me, we were the same age. Wayne is a little older, a few years, but we all came up listening to Miles and tracking Miles and having Miles as our musical hero, so we were in his band

watching him go from a period of music that we knew very intimately, which was the rhythm sections of Philly Joe [Jones], Paul Chambers and then on to the group he had with Tony Williams, and Ron Carter and Herbie [Hancock], and now we were in a band with Wayne still there, who was in the band with Herbie and Tony, and Miles was musically making this transition – searching, it seemed like, for a direction. So that was the backdrop to the experiments we were doing and I guess Miles during those years was open to – he was reflecting and looking at life letting the band go after he played a solo he'd go off the bandstand and listen to what the rest of us got into, which was some pretty wild stuff! So, but I loved it, it was very, very exciting and spontaneous, and it was totally unpredictable night to night, that is the atmosphere that kind of sprung Dave and myself into wanting to continue that kind of free playing

Q: Right, I understand, but why not continue in Miles' band...

CC: There was a crossroads there, where Miles wanted to settle the rhythm section down and play, and let the beat become more solid. And we knew that's what he wanted, and he began to frown on the longer, extended trips to outer space [laughs], so we took his wishes to heart and Dave and I said to Miles, 'Maybe its best we go and form our own band, like you told us to do!' But then he turned around and tried to convince us to stay, now we got some good gigs coming up and the record company is behind us and why don't you stay? It was very warm of him to do that, but we knew that he wanted to go in a different direction and it was conflicting with what we wanted to do, so we went off and formed our trio with Barry Altschul at that point

Q: I see.

CC: What's that album called you mentioned

Q: *Black Beauty*, it had Grossman on sax

CC: Yeah. I'm glad that finally after all those years, what is it? Thirty years, that record companies are beginning to see there's some validity to that music that we played because at the time they didn't want to hear about it! They didn't want any of that — I mean I'm surprised they issued *Bitches Brew* actually!

Q: You were given your head, presumably Miles didn't give you any direction

CC: No he didn't. We could tell by — you can tell when someone's happy or not [laughs] and whether he's pleased! We could tell whether Miles was pleased with something or not and he wouldn't talk about it too much but it was clear to everyone he wanted to settle the rhythm section down, and I think after Jack finally left — well first before Jack he brought in — what's the name of the bass player, Henderson? He brought in

Q: Yes. A Tamala guy, Michael Henderson

CC: Michael, yes, and when Jack left he brought in a rock style drummer after that — well actually he got Foster, Al Foster was actually a nice mix. I like what Al did in Miles later bands, it reminded me a lot of the way Lenny White approached playing in *Return to Forever*, which was a rock style drumming but very loose and jazz-like from a jazz home, and that's how Al Foster approached Miles's rock music, but after Al left Miles went totally into tight, unruly rhythm sections

Q: With the band leaders you worked what rubbed off on you?

CC: I'd like to think the process that seems more attractive and seems right that I liked rubbed off, I left the rest alone. The part from all the leaders I worked with that I took with me, and each one had it to some degree, which was a great respect for their quote unquote sidemen. They would just realise that we were working in a creative medium and not a slave-driven medium, and the freer that the musicians could be and still contribute to the basic direction the better the group would be and the more vibrant the group would be and Miles was really great at that, I must say, because up through the band I was in he always demonstrated that and I think that's one of the most important elements that makes Miles's music great, the way he chose and treated and allowed creativity to his sidemen

Q: Clearly that's something that's rubbed off on you

CC: I find it's totally essential to work with my musicians in an atmosphere of creativity, sometimes I'll try and make things sound a certain way if they're not sounding the way I like to hear them to sound, but only if the others like the idea, I'll say try it this way and then they go 'Oh yes that's cool,' but not as an 'enforcement' otherwise you don't get spiritually the result I'd like

Q: How do you find the return to acoustic jazz after having such a following in the 1970s for the electric Return to Forever?

CC: Well, I'm loving my trio now, and I'm loving Origin, the couple of years with Origin was incredible fun, and to do, I've already got some experiments going with electric sounds. I don't really see that - I don't see the electricity and the type of instrument is as important as it's made out to be in the elements that are necessary to reach an audience. People are always saying people don't like electric music and people like acoustic music, there may be shallow truth to that, but deeper down

people like what they like, and will go beyond the surfaces of what instruments are being used to make music. I've never really stopped my experiments at home with electric music, we'll see what the future holds. Right now the trio has a very nice touring year starting in April, and I have some solo playing I'm going to do as well, Germany and France, that's where it looks like for me now

Q: Well that's a great point to end, Chick, I know you are in the midst of a very busy day so thanks and thanks again for your time, and more to the point, such an interesting interview

CC: A pleasure, it brought back some nice memories

WIND UP

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