

# **Part One of Mal Waldron Interview Conducted by ©Stuart Nicholson on 26th February 1994**

We begin informal small talk as I set up tape...

MW: ....when I started playing at the Five Spot

Q: Who was that with?

MW: I did that with Steve Lacy, we did duets, we played for poetry and jazz

Q: When did you start moving into Charles Mingus' orbit?

MW: 1954. 1954, at the Jazz Composers Workshop, everything came about through the snowball effect, you know? For example, you play with one guy and he adds the people he plays with and you play with those guys, and other guys have other guys who you play with and it's like a snowball, getting bigger and bigger and bigger through word of mouth and through association, that's the way we extend ourselves

Q: And it was three years with Mingus?

MW: Let's see. 1954 to about 1957, so three years yes.

Q: And did that have any influence on your musical direction?

MW: Oh, definitely. Everything I did at that time, my direction, I was learning. Every day I learned something and it changed me and it affected me, every day I had a new musical experience

Q: What are your recollections of working with Charles Mingus?

MW: He got me to approach the piano in a good way because he told me not to worry about changes, but worry about *sounds*, clusters, use clusters on the piano — elbows and stuff like that! But the sound was more important than the actual change. He made up chords of notes that consisted of notes that were outside the change too. You hit a note, you hit a chord, and then you added notes to it that pleased you, and when you got all this together that was your ‘sound’, you know?

Q: Coltrane you worked with — what are your recollections of that experience?

MW: It was like going to school, everything was like going to school

Q: At that time, in his own development he was not quite the giant he would be become

MW: Yeah, but he was ahead of us [laughs] — to real people he looked like a giant!

Q: What can you remember of those days, and your involvement with Coltrane

MW: Well, he lived around the corner from me. So I would go visit him at his home, our families were very close, his wife and my wife, so I made records with him, in fact I was on his first record, the first record he made under his own name I was on one side and Red Garland was on the other side. He made this record right after he left Miles Davis and before he joined Thelonious Monk

Q: And what do you recall of those albums with Eric Dolphy and Booker Little — a trumpeter who has perhaps not got the kind of recognition he deserves — can you talk a little about that?

MW: You mean Booker Little?

Q: Yes, Booker Little, and those Five Spot recordings with Eric Dolphy, which were like landmark recordings — for me anyway

MW: Right, right. They were very energetic and it was if they knew they wouldn't be around for a long time so they were hurrying, they were really rushing it — in fact, those musicians who weren't going to be around for a long time were rushing, you could spot the one's that were really intense, and you had the feeling they weren't going to be here for a long time, they were rushing to get it done, while the others of us, who were going to be around for a long time, like me, we were just laying around [laughs]

Q: Was that a regular band, for the Five Spot?

MW: No, that just lasted for one week, no, no, no two weeks, we had this job at the Five Spot, and we rehearsed for one week before that. And when we started we didn't know each other, but we started and we got together and rehearsed for one week and then played for one week and then it was over, and we went our separate ways.

Q: When you say Booker Little was an intense kind of guy

MW: Yes

Q: Could you bring me a bit closer to him, describe him

MW: He never took the horn out of his mouth, he was always practising changes, working this out, working that out, talking about music all the time, and trying to stretch the boundaries of music all the time, always very intense, very dedicated musician

Q: Let's back up a little, so when you left Mingus where did you go then?

MW: Well, from Mingus I went to Billie Holiday in 1957

Q: How did that introduction come about?

MW: Again through the snowball effect — she found herself needing a pianist on short notice, when her pianist Carl Drinkard fell out with her, I don't really know about that! Anyway, she needed a pianist on short notice so she asked Bill Dufty, who had written a book with her called *Lady Sings the Blues*, he was her ghost writer, and she asked him if he knew a piano player, and he asked his wife Maely Dufty if she knew a piano player and she asked Julian Euell, who was a good friend of hers, if he knew

Q: Julian who?

MW: Julian Euell, a bass player, if he knew a good piano player and Julian Euell asked me, and the buck stops here [laughs]. I said I'll take it!

Q: So it started with just one gig, and it just kind of went on?

MW: Right, right right. It started in Philadelphia, Pep's Musical Bar, Pep's one week — I didn't join her for one week, it was forever — as far as she was concerned [laughs]. Singers, when they got musicians, they kept them forever, you know? If they got along with them, sure. They are a different breed to musicians. Musicians are always changing up their combinations, singers don't change their combinations that much.

Q: Did you have a regular bass and drums you liked

MW: The bass and drums they change, they change, because she'd just hire them separately. She hired the piano player separately, the piano player had to rehearse the group, she didn't make rehearsals, we'd warm up and she's come out and do the show, the piano player was her intermediary to the musicians

Q: And the albums

MW: I did many albums with Billie Holiday, I did the Newport thing and I did *Sound of Jazz*, I did *Lady in Satin*

Q: There's obviously a big difference in her voice with the young Billie Holiday and when you were with her

MW: Definitely. The young Billie had more energy and the old Billie had more experience, it was really equal in the end, what she did with energy she'd do with experience later on

Q: Did she have relative pitch?

MW: She had a remarkable ear, but I wouldn't say relative pitch, no, but it might have been perfect pitch she had, might have been perfect pitch

Q: Really?

MW: We didn't talk perfect pitch in those days — you gotta a good ear, kid! A good ear [laughs] perfect pitch, what's that, no, she has a good ear! [laughs]

Q: Abbey Lincoln, that's a contrast in styles

MW: Yeah! Abbey was much more a musician than Billie was, 'cos Abbey could write music, I think Abbey could play the piano, I think she could play voicings and some chords, Billie couldn't play the piano at all. Billie could not read music, no. She knew by notes, she's go by sound, she'd learn a tune by listening to the way the piano player played it for her, or she'd heard someone singing the tune, she was always right, she had this inner ability to distinguish the way the changes should go without knowing what they were, yeah, yeah.

Q: In those days things were catching up with her, what sort of person did you find her to be

MW: Very, very beautiful. Very warm, and very giving — if she liked you. If she didn't she called you Motherfucker! Piss off, get out of my sight!!! There were no two faces about Billie, very, very direct, and she either liked you or she didn't, and if she liked you she gave you the world, and if she didn't like you she gave you the back of her hand [laughs]. Yeah.

Q: And how long were you with her, three ears

Q: Two and a half years, two and a half years — here's my sandwich [Food arrives, pause]

Q: So Abbey Lincoln, was that just a recording?

MW: No, that was a working group, we worked with a trio, me and Julian Euell and her — bass, piano and voice, we played together for maybe a year, two years, various clubs in Harlem and some in Philly, I met her through her husband, Max Roach, and that's how that worked out. I made many recordings with her, Walter Denton on saxophone, Julian Priester on trombone — one of the groups consisted of Booker Little, let's see, Eddie Khan was on bass, those are the musicians I can remember...

Q: And during all this, how did your own playing develop

MW: Well, I didn't think of my own playing at that time, I was just going along every day, working with material,

Q: Playing with all these different people, how did it affect your own musical outlook

MW: Well, I figured I was working from a large base so I could build a higher structure later on

Q: With Billie Holiday, doing the same arrangements every night, did you feel that helped...

MW: In my phrasing, she phrased behind the beat, you know, and that helped my conception of phrasing, and the use of words was very important to me at that time, I became very aware of words as a possible basis for improvisation, you didn't solo on changes, you soloed on words too

Q: Really

MW: Yeah, which is still my concept, when I play a ballad I think about the words and if they felt like death at one point I get very neurotic! And if it's happy [laughs] so the way of the words influence the song,

Q: So you cease to be dealing with a set of changes but

MW: Yeah. Right. A mood. Moods.

Q: And Jackie McLean

MW: Well, Jackie McLean also had the same feelings I had about the words too, we got together through Charlie Mingus, he worked with the *Pithecanthropus Erectus* group, and we got together, we liked each other and hung out and made some scenes together, which we won't discuss [laughs], and then he got a call from Prestige and he called me for Prestige Records, and I became house piano for Prestige and I made about two years of records there, every other day we'd have a record session, maybe two record sessions, different musicians coming in, and they used the same rhythm section me, Arthur Taylor and — who was the bass player? Doug Watkins. We were the house rhythm section — we made lots of money! We went down to the Union, we take the cheques in date order — April 1st, April 3rd, April 9th — leave the other 19 cheques in there! [laughs]

Q: So a comfortable living by then?

MW: Yeah, so comfortable I got married! [laughs] And Billie Holiday, she gave me a honeymoon, she set up a honeymoon for me, yeah! She liked my wife very much, they were both singers too, Elaine Greenwich, we made a record together, it's called *Now!*

Q: Controversial I know, but a lot of drugs on the scene then, and several musicians fell by the wayside shall we say, did you avoid it [Interruption for food service]

MW: Are you from the police! [laughs] The deal was, if you wanted to make records you had to use drugs, because no musician would want to make a record date with you if you were not using drugs, because the routine was you got the record date, you get the drugs we use the drugs and we make the record

Q: Really

MW: Mmm. And if you didn't use drugs, you stand out in the parlour while everybody uses their drugs, and you were like an alien in the coop! You had to be involved with the whole social set-up, if you wanted to make records with these guys, you know?

Q: Okay. So how did you survive!

MW: [laughs] I used drugs, but let's not get into [indistinct]

Q: I'll switch off the recorder [conversation continues unrecorded]

Q: It's back on now [referring to the tape machine], it's difficult to imagine that social scene for someone like me and what went on behind the scenes making these great records — classics today, of course

MW: At that time, they had this police power in New York City where if you were ever arrested for using drugs you could not work in a place where they sold alcohol. And you had to go down and be fingerprinted like a common criminal to get these police cards, and the police would shake you



when you came out of the clubs at night, when you came out of clubs they'd be waiting outside the club for the all jazz musicians and pull you aside and shake you, embarrass you in the street, so that's why they thought if you have the name, you might as well have the game, this was the attitude of most of the musicians after a while, you know. If you are treated like a common criminal after a while you become a common criminal

Q: Did white musicians get treated the same way, or was this a prejudice thing with the police

MW: Pretty much black musicians treated that way, yeah. Some white musicians would get it, but it was mainly black musicians, you know

Q: So I guess that's one of the reasons why you came to Europe

MW: Right. I came to Europe in 1965. Marshall Carney, he asked me, he said, 'I want you to do the music for this film I'm doing, it's called *Three Rooms in Manhattan*, and would you like to do the score in Paris or New York City

Q: Let me think!!!! [laughs]

MW: [laughs] So I moved to Paris, I had been waiting for this chance for a long time because I had been here in 1958 with Billie Holiday, in Paris, and I saw the other side of the coin at that time, in America you were black and you were the lowest — if you were a black musician that's two counts against you and you were the lowest man on the totem pole. In Europe you were black and you were a musician and you were ahead of everybody else in Europe — so, the other side of the coin. So I decided to come to Europe! [laughs]

Q: Right, and how did you become established, make connections and...

MW: You didn't have to make connections, those guys came to you! You were a black musician and you knew what music was about — even if you didn't [laughs] — they would come to you and ask you to play, well, everywhere

Q: This was on the West Bank? [of Paris, a well known haunt of the artistic community at that time]?

MW: The West Bank, yeah, but I used to play on the other bank though, played the Blue Note, that's on the right bank

Q: Where's the Mars Club?

MW: The Mars Club is on the Right Bank too, we played there

Q: It had a good reputation as a jazz club, right?

MW: Yeah, yeh, the Mars Club, right. That's where I played with Billie Holiday, it was a beautiful feeling to be away from all this shit, you know? This way i was free,

Q: What were your impressions of Paris now it was going to be your home?

MW: Freedom, being let out of jail! [laughs] I had studied French in school so I was able to communicate. And it was a beautiful feeling to be away from all that shit, you know? I was free, I didn't need drugs in Europe, because you felt free, and you were respected as a man and an artist — fantastic feeling, sit an cafes, and lots of people walk by

Q: So you took the plunge, Paris, and then what?

MW: I took the plunge, stayed about a year then I went to Italy, where I spent more than six months in Bologna, and then I worked in radio, plenty of days of "molte vacanze" — lots of holidays they call it, with pay! [laughs] — I worked with a group at they called complexia, a group of five Italian musicians — I was the star [laughs], I was black, I was a musician, I was the star [laughs]. It was jazz we played, we had a whole week to work out a programme for one hour at the end of the week, so we came in, punching the clock, then we went to the movies across the

street, went to the bars [laughs], told jokes, and then we work on our music and by the time Saturday rolled up we had five tunes so we recorded that and the next week we started over again [laughs]. Very easy job!! Well paid too.

Q: But too much freedom can be limiting too as well [laughs], did you seek more challenges

MW: No, no, no didn't feel like that [laughs] I have to dispute you on that [laughs] No, too much freedom was a real ball!!!! [laughs] No problems, Stuart! [laughs] Good feeling, good feeling

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