

CHICK

COREA'S

Early last October, Chick Corea performed a recital at the 92nd Street Y, the cultural mecca of New York City's Upper East Side. This was a rare opportunity to hear Corea play solo piano. For most of his long career, the pianist has performed in great—exemplary, enviable—musical company, with the likes of Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, Gary Burton, Dave Holland, Roy Haynes, Fred Sherry, the London Philharmonic, and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. Corea thrives on interaction with other musicians, the conversation, the *play*.

But, on this night it was just Corea, in a conversation with himself and, he pointed out, Mr. Yamaha, a 9-foot grand. Corea wore one of his trademark guayabera shirts, and black Rebocks. No tux, no fancy airs. He quickly engaged his audience—many of whom were the Y's series subscribers of a certain age: "I am so happy to be back in a city where I can get a great bowl of matzo ball soup on my way here."

The Y's 900-seat Kaufmann Concert Hall has the perfect ambiance and acoustics for soloists and chamber groups. That night, a mixed audience filled the house. In addition to the subscribers, there were excited young jazz students and bebop-boomers. The elderly couple behind me immediately started bickering: "Well, he can't really be a jazz musician. Don't jazz musicians always have drums with them, or a saxophone?" "We saw a jazz concert here last summer with that other piano guy, you liked it!"

Corea's generous performance, which lasted over two hours, was a condensed solo version of his vast musical world. His well-known composition *Spain* melded into a medley of pieces by

Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell. During the second half, he played sonatas by Scarlatti and then Scriabin. The concert concluded with several of Corea's *Children's Songs*, composed in the 1970s. These pieces, the first that Corea wrote for solo piano, bring to mind Bartók's *Microcosmos* or Debussy's *Children's Album*. "I began writing piano music with the *Children's Songs*," he explains. "At the time, I was unaware of other writers of songs for children. It was just something I began doing because I like to compose music that are portraits of different personalities."

Now in his late 60s, Corea has maintained a high level of creativity and artistry in all his work—as pianist, composer, performer, bandleader, and in electronic music. He tours actively, with a resurgent *Return to Forever*, his groundbreaking fusion group of the 1970s, his newly formed Five Peace Band with guitarist John McLaughlin, and his Elektric Band. His many chamber works have been performed by Ida Kavafian and Fred Sherry of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Gary Burton, the Orion String Quartet, and Corea's own ensembles. Corea's musical largesse and his prolific work as a no-boundaries composer and performer have garnered him well-deserved recognition. In 2006 he was named a Jazz Master by the National Endowment for the Arts; he has received 14 Grammys, almost yearly Grammy nominations, other awards and many commissions. This year, Corea has been named the recipient of Chamber Music America's Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award, for his many contributions in virtually every style of ensemble music.

The eminent jazz pianist and educator Dr. Billy Taylor

WORLD OF MUSIC

The renowned pianist, keyboardist and composer is also a collaborator who pays no attention to genre boundaries.

BY STEPHANIE STEIN CREASE

congratulates Corea for his CMA honor and the organization itself for recognizing that chamber music and jazz are “two things that should always be thought of together.” Taylor adds, “Corea uses elements of music that we all use one way or another—from ’30s and ’40s jazz, bebop, from contemporary music, Latin music, European classical music. Whether we are talking about Art Tatum, or Scarlatti, or Mozart—all these aspects and styles and techniques are important elements that he used to create his own way of playing and writing.”

A stylistic fence-hopper who doesn’t even perceive a fence, Corea has appeared with international orchestras to perform Mozart and his own two piano concerti, and in 2005 he was the first jazz pianist to receive the Klavier Festival Ruhr Award in Germany. Says Ted Rosenthal, a versatile pianist himself, “For Chick, there is no divide in music. That’s really how he sees it, he doesn’t want to be limited in any way—and, really, he has got no limitations. So, he would never feel that he can’t play Mozart, or write a piano concerto, or play Latin music—these are all part of his creative expressions.”

Chick’s wholly distinctive “voice” evolved from a household that revolved around music. He grew up in the working-class waterfront area of Chelsea, near downtown Boston. His father was a local bandleader, and Chick started studying classical piano at age 6 and drums at 8. As a teenager, he started playing with Latin bands. He moved to New York City in the early 1960s and started working with the Afro-Cuban bandleader Mongo

state of wonder and curiosity. The acclaimed cellist Fred Sherry, no stranger to musical border-hopping himself, recalled his first collaboration with Corea in the mid-1970s: “I was playing with Tashi, and Chick came to hear us. Musicians were really branching out in those years. Chick had this idea of using a string quartet for an entire album, and he asked me to bring a quartet to his house on Long Island. So Ida and Ani Kavfian, Louise Schulman and I went out there. We played a Haydn Quartet for him, which was the beginning of it all—literally. And just like any composer, he asked us to demonstrate how things he was thinking about would sound best. It was a great afternoon, and as we were leaving, he said he’d call us. And I thought, ‘Well...okay, sure.’” A few months later, Chick called Sherry, and said, “Okay, I’m done!” The quartet spent a few days recording *Leprechaun*, with Chick, Joe Farrell, and other A-list jazz and studio musicians.

“It was a spectacular experience,” Sherry recalled. “Also, with a musician like Chick, the idea of notation versus improvisation comes up. This is a very interesting subject, because people don’t really agree about what either one really involves. Many classical musicians think improvisation is about making things up, which is not really true; other people think that notation is very strict and precise and all about rules. Both are very complicated processes. Improvisation is very much about what your ear accepts and likes to hear, and what your hands like to play—it is a very physical experience. But, notation also comes out of playing. Being around a musician like Chick, who can do it all, is a great experience, always.”



With Gary Burton, 2003



With Michael Brecker, 2003



With John Patitucci and Roy Haynes, 2002

Santamaria and later, Mongo’s *timbalero*, Willie Bobo. “Playing dances in Spanish Harlem with Mongo Santamaria and working with flamenco musicians and dancers helped me understand and love music made for dancing. Jazz is serious music for listening. Latin music is for extroversion and fun—it’s a nice balance.”

Chick’s Latin inflections have never left him; pointed ostinato figures, rhythmic urgency and precision and flamenco flourishes are elements of his playing, not just adornments. One even hears them in his recording of Mozart’s Piano Concerto, KV 466, giving it, too, his identifiable voice. Corea’s first Piano Concerto, composed in 1999, is at once Corea’s own *Sketches of Spain* and an homage to Mozart; though classical in structure, the first movement has the flamenco romanticism of Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez*, with the entire orchestra sounding like a shimmering guitar. Corea’s six-part *Piano Concerto No. 2—The Continents*, commissioned in 2005 by the Vienna Jazz Festival in honor of the 250th anniversary of Mozart’s birth, similarly stretches musical traditions.

Corea’s chamber works reflect a musical mind in a constant

One of Corea’s most influential accomplishments is that, early in his career, he became a “sound innovator” for modern jazz piano. He was not alone in this: during the late 1960s, he and fellow jazz pianists Herbie Hancock and Keith Jarrett all became breakthrough artists. Almost simultaneously, they each extended the harmonic language of jazz and expanded the improvisers’ role at the piano. Corea’s playing differed radically from the modern jazz piano giants who preceded him: his phrasing bore little resemblance to the poetic lyricism of Bill Evans or the powerful machinations of McCoy Tyner. Chick integrated the linearity of bebop, his Spanish heart, and the sophisticated harmonic language of Bartók with the punctuation of a jazz drummer. His “voice” on the piano was and still is readily identifiable.

Now He Sings, Now He Sobs, Corea’s piano trio album from 1968, is considered a classic recording. The playing, the vitality are so fresh that it could just as easily have been recorded today. The album was released just when Corea started playing with Miles Davis in a “musician-heavy” band; both Corea and Herbie



At Jazz at Lincoln Center, 2009

A SELECTED COREA ENSEMBLE DISCOGRAPHY

Now He Sings,
Now He Sobs
(SOLID STATE, 1968)



Circle, Paris Concert
(ECM, 1971)



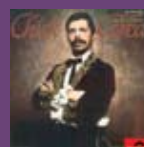
Light as a Feather
Chick Corea and
Return to Forever
(POLYDOR, 1973)



Leprechaun
(POLYDOR, 1976)



My Spanish Heart
(POLYDOR, 1976)



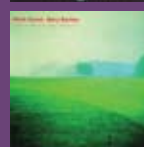
Trio Music—
Live in Europe
(ECM, 1982)



Three Quartets,
with Mike Brecker
(STRETCH, 1981)



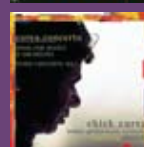
Lyric Suite for Sextet,
with Gary Burton
(ECM, 1982)



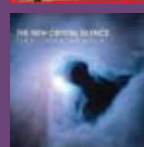
Like Minds,
with Burton, Corea,
Metheny, Haynes,
Holland
(Concord, 1998)



Corea Concerto
with the London
Philharmonic
(SONY CLASSICAL, 1999)



The New
Crystal Silence,
with Gary Burton
(ECM, 2008)





With the New York Philharmonic, 1996

Hancock played electric keyboards; drummer Jack DeJohnette had been hired, but drummer Tony Williams was still on board. This was the transition era for Davis, when he started using electronic instruments and rock rhythms, forming a nucleus of energy for free improvisation. The startling results were Davis's pioneering jazz-fusion recordings, *In a Silent Way*, and *Bitches Brew*.

Fusion is still a good word to describe the myriad musical changes of those years, which included Corea at the forefront. Soprano saxophonist Dave Liebman, who did a world tour with Corea in the late 1970s, first met the pianist in 1969. "I moved into a bare third-floor loft on West 19th Street. Soon after, I got a call from the bassist Dave Holland, who was going to start playing with Miles Davis's group. He needed a place to live, so I asked my landlord if Dave could live on the second floor. Soon after that, Chick moved into the first floor. We had the whole building—we could play music whenever we wanted to. That's how my career started, through them."

Corea was then in his late 20s. "One minute he would listen to

Identifiable is the "take-away" that aspiring jazz pianists get from Chick Corea. Says Christian Sands, an accomplished 20-year-old pianist in Manhattan School of Music's Jazz Arts Program: "The style he has created is so his own—that's what an artist strives to be. I call him the modern flamenco pianist. What I also take from him is Being the Drum! Chick can lay down a strong groove, but also gets all these jabs in there like a drummer. And, it seems like he has a different band for his different emotions, the acoustic trio, the Elektric Band—every time he needs another kind of expression, he starts another band. Personally, I hope he keeps going. It gives me something to look forward to—if he can he try that, let me try this!"

Corea completely identifies with pianists over the centuries who were—like him—composers, performers, and bandleaders: "Like Mozart and Bach," he jokes. "The music world is a culture—and the pianists are, I guess you could say, a subculture within that world. In a culture, all ideas are put into action and shared amongst all that listen. Ideas are exchanged, worked with, and

"Chick could run a corporation—he really thinks about his schedule. If he needs to write, he will shut the door and write for two weeks." —Dave Liebman



With Bobby McFerrin, 1996



With Lenny White and Stanley Clarke, 2008



With Eddie Gomez, 2001

Bartók or Charles Ives, the next minute Monk," says Liebman. Corea was composing almost constantly in those years. He wrote some chamber pieces for unusual instrumentation that sprang from his piano improvisations, such as his *Trio* for flute, piano and bassoon.

"We played a lot of music together," Liebman continues. "All three of us were on a macrobiotic diet—there we were, baking bread daily, and shopping in the East Village for bulk millet, barley and organic rice." During this period, Corea also began reading the works of L. Ron Hubbard and became a Scientologist. His fellow musicians didn't care for it, but as Liebman explains, "Many of us were into spiritual things then. And though Scientology is debatable to me, the important thing is that Chick is a kind, positive person, and a very powerful person. And musically, he is the most equipped musician I know." Corea was also, then and now, extremely well organized and efficient. "Chick could run a corporation—he really thinks about his schedule. If he needs to write, he will shut the door and write for two weeks."

changed again, continuously. This is a culture in action. I grew up—musically—when Bud Powell and Monk and Duke Ellington prevailed as the keyboard and harmony masters. I listened and experimented and listened some more and played and experimented some more. This is the process. One tries to create something better, something simpler, something that will move oneself and the people we play to."

Corea closed his program at the Y with one of his *Children's Songs*. The couple behind me had been patient, and stayed through the whole concert. They nodded to the Scarlatti, were startled by the Scriabin, and were charmed by the *Children's Songs* and their composer/performer. "See?" the man said. "I told you jazz is okay—okay, maybe it's not jazz. Anyway, next week we're going to the Met; you won't have to wonder."

Stephanie Stein Crease is coordinator of the Jazz Arts Program at the Manhattan School of Music and author of Gil Evans: Out of the Cool and Duke Ellington: His Life in Jazz.