

Chick Corea: Hello, hello, hello. This is Chick. Welcome to another very special installment from — Oh, let's call it "Podcastlandia." Yeah, this is a conversation that I had just a few days ago with the great guitarist, singer-songwriter, John Mayer. And you're about to hear a chat that we had in Electric Lady Studios in New York City. Yeah, John and I met a couple of months ago in December. We were both guests at Stevie Wonder's "House Full of Toys" concert where Stevie did the complete set from Songs in the Key of Life. It was an amazing night, and my first time to meet John. We started talking about maybe jamming together and sure enough, setting it all together, we ended up at Electric Lady Studios in New York, which is a place with a lot of memory for me, great memory, from 1975, where I made a solo album called The Leprechaun with Gayle, with my wife Gayle. And, you know, I hadn't stepped into Electric Lady Studios since that day. It was very exciting. John and I had a blast the days that we were there, really going out on several different limbs; improvising and coming up with this and that. Actually, none of it is really evaluated right now, but it sure was a blast. Anyway, John was nice enough to sit down and have a chat and get it recorded and here it is! Myself, John Mayer, Electric Lady Studios. Boom.

CC: John, hey, thanks for sitting in. I didn't mean to interrupt the session.

John Mayer: There's nothing to interrupt, it's all free flowing.

CC: It is, it is! So this is John, John Mayer. This is Chick.

JM: Hello.

CC: We're at Electric Lady. And, how much should we reveal about what we're doing?

JM: Everything but playing for them. I actually thought about putting some stuff up on Twitter the other night. And I thought it's such a reveal when you hear this stuff. A lot of the power, I think, is going to be in the reveal, because it's not what people are expecting. And if you put a 15 second video clip — of your favorite part — up, you kind of take away the unveiling of it. Because it is sort of a shocking thing to hear it.

CC: Well the general subject, that I was going in on, which totally fits what we're doing, is the concept of improvisation. Which everyone wants to — musicians, and young musicians — they want to know what's that all about, and how do you do that. This thing that we've been doing is like a perfect example of starting from practically nowhere. Well, not completely nowhere. We are ourselves, we're wanting to jam, that's a "somewhere." But practically a nowhere, like a song or a tempo or a lick, or a this or a that. And then just coming in the room together and starting to play. Which is some of my favorite way to make music.

JM: It's definitely treacherous. It's not for the faint of heart. If you're looking for a sense of comfort, at all times, it's not going to happen. It's very uncomfortable. I don't know if this for everybody, but for me personally, I wear the last thing we played, until we play another thing. I wear it. It's this little micro-scoreboard. "How's this going?" I think that's just my nature when I get into

the studio. It's funny you mentioning "from nowhere." We do start from nowhere, but I think the real kind of instrument that I'm playing, on this particular session, is sort of like being the in-band producer. In the sense that, like, everybody can play so well, but there's really – of the whole unit of what everybody can play, there's only about .4% of it at any given time that can create something that I feel like personally is beyond a jam. It's something quote-unquote "lasting." Not that any of our stuff that we played is not lasting, in one way or another. But, it's that way when I write music with lyrics, and pop music and stuff. It's like here's all these words, here's all these chords, only a very, very, very, refined, slight percentage of what it is you could play can create something vital. So for me, those moments where you create something vital, they send me through the roof. It's like gambling with your ego; it's like gambling with your emotions. 'Cause when you nail it – we nailed it yesterday. And when, four hours later, it's like "Where are we now?" You know what I'm saying?

CC: Yeah. You know what is interesting to me about that? What you're saying, that I think about? Is that there's this 4% you're talking about. I understand what you meant by that, but the thing that's interesting to me, is that in order to recognize when that happens, somehow I feel that there has to be a pre-knowledge of it. Otherwise you can't recognize the moment that it occurs. Otherwise how would you know? Because it's all going by like a movie reel. And then how are you going to isolate that 4%?

JM: That's right. That's like having an eye for if you're –

CC: So you already know.

JM: Well it comes from –

CC: In a sense.

JM: You know, because you've heard so many things that you can tell what's special and what's not. A good analogy is like a photo editor, who pours over hundreds of contact sheets and has a grease pencil, and very quickly can just go, "That's the shot, here's the ones that are starred." Where you and I, as sort of amateur photographers, would have to pour over it all day, and go, "This is good, and this is good, and this is good." And we'd basically go through a grease pencil, because everything was good, because our eyes aren't attuned to it. So for me, that pre-knowledge is really kind of the unspoken question that I was thinking about this morning, which is, "Is this anything?" You know? Like David Letterman has this bit where he's like "Is this anything?" And somebody comes out and does something completely bizarre and esoteric and, of course, it's a rhetorical question. Is this anything or is this something?

CC: It's a good question.

JM: But it's really the question. Constantly I have a filter in my mind. So I'm half the player, half the listener. Going, "Is this anything?" And if it is anything, then you have the scent on the trail.

CC: Because I'm always looking for a receipt point, see. When you say, "Is this anything?" The first one to know about that, or to answer the question, is yourself, of course. You're looking at life going by, you're doing what you're doing, and you do that or not that. Something strikes you or doesn't strike you. I can think immediately about two other places that I think, if I may assume, that you're probably evaluating, I know I do, which is number one, the other musicians in the band that you're playing with. Whoa – they're a receipt point of it too, you know what I mean? But then finally, since music is, to me, is a little incomplete without an audience, there's that too. So when you're evaluating, that's it. Is it, for you, for the band, for the audience?

JM: For me, it's always been for the blueprint. So the blueprint – and the blueprint can change as you go – but for me, the blueprint, it's also always been a thing for me. How do you create something that falls somewhere perfectly in between 4, 5 different styles, that sounds new, but sounds comfortable and new at the same time? So for me, I kind of hole up in my mind

and one part of my peripheral vision of what the blueprint is. And you have to keep checking back with the blueprint. I think so much about the session I'm about to go into, so that when I get in there I'm not swept away. So I can sort of still keep a little bit of longitude in terms of what's going on. And also you have to throw it out the window so you have something come through, because if you come in with the blueprint too much, then you don't allow anything to happen, you know. So it's really like knowing when to strike and when to just pull back and relax. And I'm getting better at that as I get older. When I was younger I was incredibly, sort of nervous. And if somebody played one sound I didn't like, I'd sort of get in, and go "Hey, not that, try that." And then, every time you make a recommendation or a correction like that, somebody, if most people want to comply, they'll comply and then change their instinct a little bit.

CC: Change their what?

JM: Their instinct, to try to suit you. Or kind of go, "Okay, he doesn't want that."

CC: So now you don't have that instinct to work with.

JM: So yeah, now that person shuttered a little bit of their freedom. 'Cause they want to please. For me, it's a very subtle sort of delineation between, "Do I step in right now and say 'Hey, lets do that.' Or do we just let things happen?" The older I get, the more I can trust the flow. But it is really – I don't know why I continue to put myself in these stupidly uncomfortable situations. Because I don't sleep right, I don't eat right, I don't even dream right when I sleep.

CC: You got a blueprint that you want to realize.

JM: I don't need to be happy, I just need to come out of this with a record, you know what I mean? I'll be happy later.

CC: You got a blueprint that you want to realize, and then it's hard to judge other musicians of how, you might say, "thick their skin is," in terms of receiving an opinion. I know what you mean by that, because you want all that openness and creativity from guys. You don't want to quell it. But the whole thing needs some kind of a direction. Some kind of thing to go to. I personally think you're doing a good job on that order.

JM: Thanks man. I'm always sort of the captain in the sense that, you know, I want to come out with product that feels like me, that has my sensibilities, you know. But also don't want to – and I see this in co-writing too – you get a sense pretty quickly sometimes whether or not something's worth it or not. If something is worth the chase. You've got to decide when we are going to hunt for four hours on something and when we're not. 'Cause if you hunt down every idea, then you get lost. And your bearings, when you improvise, are very sensitive. I always found that jams, for me, like I was saying before, you just wear every note you play. You sort of make this thing out in the air, and it floats around you. If you have a great experience, then you walk around on a high. If you have an unclear experience jamming – it goes on too long, you know. I never liked jamming when I was growing up. I liked getting in and getting out. Even if it was instrumental and improvised. It's hard to explain, it's like you get this emotional residue from not getting in and getting out on an idea. You know what I mean?

CC: Yeah, totally.

JM: It just wears on you funnily. Your chest starts to itch a little bit.

CC: You found a good point the other day saying, "Well okay, we've explored about 9 thousand ideas, now let's go for that." I thought that was the correct thing.

JM: It was, and it – the great thing about you is, like, even though we knew what the form was at that point, it was still wide open.

CC: Pretty much.

JM: It was still completely wide open. We did this song yesterday that was one of the greatest, if not the greatest, feeling experiences. That's what I'm saying it's like for me, it's very – it's a physical thing for me. If you get into something, and everybody moves in as a unit and moves through as a unit and comes out as a unit and the statement is concise, it's like a clean feeling. It's like a clean-burning feeling in your body. You feel happy, you feel joyous, you feel economical, you feel proud. And sometimes you need to. You have to go into the forest. And it can be really thankless; you can get really down on your playing, and you can go, "Oh, none of this is making any sense." But you have to stay calm. And know you can pull yourself out if you find the right idea. Move that right idea over onto another reel of tape, there you go. And then have your clean experiences off of that. But it's very easy to go into the flat spin and think, "None of this is working, I'm wasting all these people's time. It's all a waste."

CC: I think we're getting some place. You know, I've always had a sky high goal that I keep for myself, talking about, "Well, who am I trying to do this for? Me, my band or the audience?"

JM: That's cool. What's the answer?

CC: There's one other element too. There's one other element. There's me, the band there's the audience. But you know what there is? There's the support team, there's these guys. There's management, there's the promoters, there's the guys who organize all this for us. And that's the complete package.

JM: That's right.

CC: So for me, the real high, walking away, is you play a show and everybody is on that cloud. Like all those points. Yourself, the band, the audience, the organizers and the audience is glowing. Everybody is glowing. So then that's like, I can go home, I can go back to the hotel and sleep on a night like that.

JM: It's funny you say the show. Because the show – assuming – exists after the record. It's sort of the final stage of getting everybody to believe that what you're doing is the right thing. So for me, there are moments in my career where I have to sort of alienate people's way of thinking. Just to be able to get to the next level. But what I found is that even if you alienate someone's comfort zone for a minute, to get where you need to get to, if the music is great and it moves them, they're right back with you. So there are moments that I have to separate from the pack. That's why there is so much pressure on me. So it all dovetails into what I was saying about going into the session as the captain of this idea, because my ego wants me to return with pelts. I want to return with pelts from the trip. Not come back from a frosty winter with a couple teeth and a paw or something. I owe it to the idea itself to really make sure that when I come out of this experience, I'm holding something real that I can then play for the crew. The manager. When it's right, doesn't matter what kind of music it is. If it's effective, it moves people. You know, we did this 15-minute-long improvisational jam the first night that we got into the studio. I was so excited about it, I started playing it for people off of the iPhone, like in a wine glass. And they weren't giving me lip service. They were absolutely moved by it. Because there was some – that's the thing about Steve and Pino. There's all ... they can't ... It's really interesting. A lot of people use the word "commercial," but that's not really the right word. They can't leave this sort of – and it's a good thing – they can't leave this ... we all like accessible things. Accessible doesn't mean easy. There's just, you might call it groove music. You might call it – everyone sort of has a different word for it. But like, you listen back to these records and they're incredibly effective in the sense that people can drop right into it and start going "Wow."

CC: Absolutely.

JM: But you tell people, "I want to go make a jazz record with Chick Corea and Wallace Roney. They go, "I don't –" The only way to prove the concept in art is to make the art.

CC: Put it out and see what happens. And have it be communicated.

JM: You don't see painters start having conversations with people, going, 'I'm thinking about doing this painting, let me describe it to you. And tell me if you want to buy it.'

CC: It's incomplete until it goes to some listeners, and then you see if that is how far you want to reach. I mean, you've reached very far in terms of people enjoying being able to enjoy your art, which is something I admire very much.

JM: Thank you.

CC: Because I come from a completely different background, of where for the first 20 years of my life, I didn't care about that, at all. I had blinders on. I was telling you about that last night. And Stevie Wonder was the first guy that I saw communicated with larger audiences, with a very, very high quality of communication that inspired me to do that myself. But by then I didn't know how to do it. I better learn how to sing.

JM: You don't need to learn how to do another thing. You're just fine.

CC: [Laughs] Sing or play the guitar or whatever. But I'm always inspired by that, you know. But you do have to come in, like you were saying, with someone who has to lay the direction now. I don't think it's always a group thing. That initial thing. It can become a group thing. But individual ideas don't come from a group. They come from individuals. Even when you're jamming, someone has an idea, which other people take and formulate. It's a give and take process.

JM: Also, as the session goes on, you learn more about what the session is. So, we get certain tracks we listen back to and I go, "Oh man, that's what this record is." It helps focus you to that. You sort of calibrate to what yesterday was. You can't do that if you're scared. You have to look at every minute you still have as a possible minute you can spend making something great. If you consider this a lost cause in any way in your mind, you'll sort of choke, lose your inspiration, and want to put your instrument down, and want to say, "I think we're good." So for me, I think it's a spirit that everybody who really drives their own career has. It's a fighting spirit that doesn't give up till they start packing up the instruments. You know what I mean? You only need 8 minutes to do something life-changing. It could be the next 8 minutes, it could be an hour and 8 minutes from now. It could be tomorrow night. But you have to hold steady in between those moments. and trust everyone's playing, trust your playing, trust the vibe, trust the moment. I'm not worried that we're not making music right now.

CC: You have to keep going. I think all that's great, man. I want to take this down to a nerd level for a second.

JM: Okay, I'll come as deep as I can into this.

CC: Just for a second. Tell me what is your concept of this word that get's used a lot in art and in music. And we use the word and people are always – you know when I do workshops, the musicians are always asking about this concept. So I want to get your opinion right now. What's "improvisation" and what's not "improvisation." Or is that too nerd?

JM: Well I can answer the first one. I think that improvisation for me is self-production. Self-musical-production. You are your own music producer. You're not an artist. You're half artist, half music producer. So you're constantly producing the track just on your instrument. And you're producing with a lot of other producers who are producing their track. And what ever that is, you know, whoever you are in that sense, it's like, it's really about listening. It's really about listening. And what improvisation isn't, is group practice. Meaning like, for instance, where I am now in my playing, is I try to really not use a song to practice. Like to get something right. Like, there's this one thing that I did yesterday, I did it for a minute and a half to get it right. And that just wasn't the time to do that. That moment should have been over in 6-8 seconds. And what I did was, I got selfish – or misguided, if not selfish – into using everyone's playing that track or that take, as an opportunity for me to get that guitar part

right, or explore that guitar part. And I listened back to it [hums guitar part], where I'm doing that synth thing, and it's me going, "Oh, this is neat!" But leaving the song completely, going, "This is neat, let me work this out till I get it." And I listen back to it and I cringe, because it's me developing an idea. So what improvisation isn't, is developing an idea on someone else's time. You know what I mean? You can develop an idea with somebody as a unit. But using that, so you go [hums music], "That was cool. Oh, but I messed that up. Let me try that again and get it right."

CC: Everyone else is playing and you're practicing.

JM: You're practicing for a second. I did that yesterday, and I heard it back and I went, "Oh, I hate this."

CC: I started practicing with you. [Both laugh] I started going [hums music].

JM: [Laughs.] I'm yelling, in my head, at the speakers: "Stop! I hope this is the last time I do that." [Hums music.] If you didn't get it right, like, go home and practice it. Don't practice it on the record with Chick Corea. But for me, improvisation is, and you can not go wrong with this word, you can't say "Well I don't do that," is lyrical. Everything should be based on being lyrical. If it's not lyrical, it doesn't catch my ear, it doesn't catch other people's ears. It doesn't have to sound like song lyrics. Some people use the word "motif." But it doesn't even have to have a motif.

CC: Has to flow.

JM: Has to flow, like certain words that just sound good. Certain lyrics just sound good. Where you wouldn't put certain phonetic sounds in a lyric because they don't flow off the lips right. Imagine if you were an instrumentalist, what that might sound like if you were a singer. All of your consonants and vowels would be these really disjointed, hard to get to, unsatisfying things to sing. And then you listen to Frank Sinatra go, "Look at yourself if you had a sense of humor." Then you go, "Ooh, look at yourself if you had a sen—" There's a natural flow to that, and you have to think about that on the instrument too. It doesn't have to be repetitive or motif-based, but a certain natural lyric that has nothing to do about the shape of the scale as it exists geometrically on your instrument. That's what people say when they mean "breaking out of scales."

CC: There's no glitches. It's all in present time. It's all now. It's all without thinking. It all just flows along, I get it.

JM: I still have those moments, you know. There are now moments – well, I'm 36; I've been playing for 21, 22 years, you know. 23 years, 23 years. I'm just now getting to where I can just breathe through a track and really contribute, and never have the guitar puncture the top of the sort of skin of everyone's playing. I still do it and I learn from it. One of those moments where the guitar kind of like photo-bombs the track, you know?

CC: Go ahead and puncture it. Puncture away [laughs].

JM: Yeah, I try. I really like being the glue here. Yeah photo-bombing the track. All of a sudden you're like, it's like breaking in as a 6 year kid in a home movie, out in front of the family. And I still do it and I go, "Ooh right."

CC: That's cool with me, man. Hey, thank you, man. I think it's an incredibly individual... I've never heard a viewpoint like that before.

JM: Thanks, man.

CC: I think it's interesting, interesting to people and to me, to see one thing that we, everyone of us, really thinks differently about what we're doing and I think if that thing is acknowledged, you got your blueprint. I got a blueprint. We got different ways to do it and that's a good starting point anyway. It's just a starting point. It's a truth, and it's a starting point. We have our

own ways of operating. You know when it's like that for you.

JM: I know also when there's a certain rope I can't jump. And I don't get down on myself about it anymore. If there's a certain rope I can't jump, it's not meant for me to be on that track. That came from like, people sending me songs to play on. Huge artists would send me songs to play on, and I don't play on them, 'cause I don't hear where I can play on it, you know? Guitars are a very tricky instrument for jazz. It's a really tricky instrument. You know, like my first kind-of jazz session was with Herbie Hancock. And Steve was on that session. And I think I even said it on his documentary they were shooting. I started freaking out when Herbie said, "Come on and play on a session with me." 'Cause I was like "I don't know how to do these licks." Then I realized, he probably knows I don't know these licks, because he's never heard me do those licks. So, what he wants me to do is my thing.

CC: Exactly.

JM: You gotta do your thing. Then it becomes really interesting. I tried to manage the feeling of being out classed or outmoded by the other people around me. That goes for anyone listening. You develop your thing. You know? I was just watching some John McLaughlin stuff this morning. He's playing a 12 string. He's almost playing, like, Led Zeppelin kind of stuff. He's a jazz guy, and then you realize there's a whole world of people learning jazz guitar as popularized by four to six people. You know what I mean?

CC: That's an interesting view. Who are they?

JM: Well they're Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass, Grant Green.

CC: Right, right, right, I see what you mean.

JM: You know —

CC: You gotta put John in there.

JM: Oh yeah, John McLaughlin.

CC: Benson.

JM: George Benson. These sort of — Tal Farlow. You know, Tal Farlow is sort of, you know, you can make a jazzbox sound like a lot of different things. The same thing happens with blues guitar. Most people pick up a Stratocaster, they play Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Eric Clapton. Something like that. And those are just four to six people on that instrument. And so what I'm trying to do, is see the guitar as a guitar. As a thing that will do whatever you want it to do. So what do you want it to do? Sort of like, always order off the menu when you pick up your instrument.

CC: Right, that's nice.

JM: Like what you're saying. Like that pasta —

CC: Aglio e olio.

JM: Ask the chef every time you pick up your instrument, ask the chef to make something different that's not on the menu. Every instrument, every instrument has a geometrical rut in it. For the guitar it's the pentatonic scale. Pentatonic scale is the most satisfying, easy-to-learn, lifetime-to-master sort of scales. And it's easy to learn because it's pretty much a box. It's almost symmetrical top to bottom. Anybody can do it. Anybody can pick it up.

CC: You mean fingerwise?

JM: Yeah.

CC: Oh I see.

JM: So the way guitar players see it, it's just this moving box. Literally, it's just a moving box. The reason there's so many guitar players, is because the shapes can stay the same up and down the neck. I mean, the piano becomes recontextualized, every key. So for guitar players, there's this geometry that we get sold on where we actually play shapes first. So it's a muscle adventure. It's an adventure in geometry.

CC: It can be the same thing on the piano.

JM: Really?

CC: It can be. The same thing on the piano.

JM: Imagine it like a chef ready to make you whatever you want. But what are you hungry for? I don't know; show me a menu. What are you hungry for?

CC: You developed enough certainty of technique on the instrument. You can pretty much do whatever you want, looks like to me.

JM: Well thank you. There's certain – I don't even know how to classify what the thing that I can't do is. There's a certain complexity in harmonic movement that is like a river rushing. And the rapids are too much for me. Just in that sense. But I also think that everyone's got strengths and weaknesses. I loved Albert King growing up. Albert King played four licks and I loved him.

CC: I grew up in that stream of harmony and bebop and moving through changes and all that kind of stuff. I'm trying to learn to make melodies over a vamp. That's my favorite thing to do, actually. Especially since discovering Latin music and flamenco music. That was my inroad into vamps.

JM: Isn't that just like a musician to want to be every other musician at the same time. You're a color of paint, that you can have different shades of. But if you're red you can't be green. You just have to hang out with someone who's green.

CC: I think so!

JM: You know what I mean?

CC: Yea. I think we're trading some nice things in this get-together.

JM: It's really great. Who knows what's next. But, I'll tell you, improvisation, I'll also leave you with this thing, is about wiping your brain clean every time.

CC: Thank you. I want everyone to remember what he just said.

JM: Really? You agree?

CC: Yeah, that's one that, for me, that you can write in stone. What was it again?

JM: You have to be able to wipe your brain clean after an improvisation. Put all the ideas back in the "unused" category.

CC: Yea, you have to be right here, right now. No past.

JM: Wipe it clean. You know, maybe we'll plug in and I still run into this rut right here and go, "We kind of had something like this." Well, no we don't.

CC: Well, now you're in the past.

JM: That's right. Go for it again. I can tell you this, the allegory is so much like blackjack. New shoot, same cards, new shoot. We got chips on the table. We got three more days to play. I could be a millionaire at these blackjack chips. As long as I go easy and take my time and pay attention. Whenever the cards go back in and they reshuffle them, I haven't seen a single card again. Play with that kind of hope. Hit me.

CC: Lets go play, man.

JM: Hit me, Chick!

CC: I'm ready. Thank you man.

JM: Thank you! This is a handshake, this is an audio handshake.

Bill Rooney: Alright, I hope you enjoyed the podcast. If you want to check out some photos from Chick's recent recording session with John Mayer and friends, visit our podcast show page at ChickCoreaMusicWorkshops.com. You'll also be able to find out about a very special online music workshop at the end of this month, March 2014. Again, that's ChickCoreaMusicWorkshops.com. Alright, until next time.

About Music Magic

In conversations with his musical collaborators and friends, Chick reveals insights into his music universe. From the tour buses and airports to the recording studios and backstage. You'll get a behind-the-scenes look at the details of the creative process from the legends of jazz. For more information check out www.ChickCorea.com. "These podcasts introduce a topic that's very exciting to me: giving a helping hand to other musicians." —Chick