

Bill Rooney: Welcome to Episode 5 of Music Magic with Chick Corea. We have a very special program for you today, as Chick talks with his duet partner, banjo player extraordinaire, Béla Fleck. This podcast was recorded recently while they were out on tour in Boulder, Colorado. Just one quick plug: if you're a musician, you're going to want to check out the live, online and interactive Chick Corea Music Workshop, on Saturday and Sunday, March 29 & 30. You can check out all the details at ChickCoreaMusicWorkshops.com. And now, over to Chick and Béla.

Chick Corea: What do you think, Béla? Do you think we're ready for a chat? Would you like an apple or orange?

Bela Fleck: I'm good. I'm even going to put my phone on stun so nothing distracts me.

CC: Cool, this is, I don't know what to call this. We haven't fully named this yet. It's going to be a podcast. Obviously there's no camera here. It's internet radio.

BF: "Hotel Room Chats, Volume One."

CC: Yeah exactly. Didn't we do a chat?

BF: We did a video chat. In fact I have some footage I have to give you to you.

CC: That would be nice. I remember that now. We're getting ready to do this Chick Corea workshop. It's an experiment. I've done a few master classes. I'm trying to figure out how to be friendly with the musicians of the planet and share what we have.

BF: I'd like to be your first pupil. I'm willing to pay big money.

CC: Well, the thing is, I think a lot of musicians and fans and people would be just interested in hearing a chat. We're out on the road now for – by the way, ladies and gentleman, this is Béla Fleck. I'm Chick. That's Béla over there. Just to identify. We're in Boulder, Colorado. We played in Denver last night.

BF: Fort Collins the night before.

CC: Tonight, Boulder, Colorado. Tomorrow we're going to Berkeley, California. We're on a little tour.

BF: Five days, five shows. Finishing up in Austin, Texas.

CC: I think for a lot of people, some musicians who are familiar with being on the road and doing – more than a couple of gigs, but being really on tour – kind of know and get to experience moving around and playing a lot. I think a lot don't know that

experience. There's so many different ways that you could tell about it. Maybe we could talk about that just a little bit. How do you think about it? You've been touring for your whole life.

BF: Yeah, it's the way I get to play the music. It's the way I get to play enough to really feel like a complete musician. Play the songs everyday. Day after day. Get inside of them in a different way. And pacing yourself during those days is a really important part of the trip because you can't show up tired. The whole day is geared to getting you onto the stage, feeling at your best. Any other time it doesn't matter if you feel — where you're at. But when it's time to be on stage, it's time to be at your best. Sometimes I spend too much time tripping on how I can be at my best. Sometimes, practicing is the worst thing I can do and sometimes it's the best thing. It's like a moving target. Some days it's like, "Wow. If I had played that a bunch more, I would have done that better at the show." And other days it's like, "Well I've played all my good stuff in the practice room or in my hotel room or backstage, and when I got on stage I didn't have anything left to offer to the songs."

CC: There's no way to judge that.

BF: It's a moving target. So I think, in the end, you have to figure out what feels good to you; what's a nice way to have your day. Keep assessing and making adjustments based on what you experience, which of course is subjective. Unless you're willing to study the shows everyday and try and assess yourself, I think that's actually going to make you a worse musician.

CC: Depends. When I was touring with the Electric Band, Dave Weckl used to do that and used to swear by, that's the way to improve. He used to put a tape recorder by his drums and record the whole band every night and listen religiously on the bus and correct things. It's interesting. I used to do that a little bit. I haven't done that in a while.

BF: I think everyone needs to spend sometime doing that. There has to be some period you do that. But at some point, the older I get, I think the time away from the music gives me energy and more ideas than spending part of that — like there's the four hours of the gig, where you're really in the music, even though it ends up being 2 ½ getting there and getting back to your hotel, and traveling and everything. For me, I'm finding now it's really good to have a break and come back fresh. Especially if it's music I've played a lot. That freshness is worth more than the studying, 'cause that studying brings an anxiety and worry sometimes that isn't helpful. It might even lock me into something great I did the night before. "Oh wow, what a great solo I played on whatever." The next day instead of playing freshly and freely, I try and play whatever I played the other day. And then I get stuck. Where if I just stay relaxed and open sometimes with a lot of improvising, music like we're doing, that's the game.

CC: Yeah, last night — we're just jumping around, ladies and gentlemen, but it's fun. Last night, the second set especially, we did a lot of improvising. Open sections and stuff. I enjoy that. I sometimes worry that we're going to lose the audience. But I think we had their attention the whole time.

BF: Yeah, I think if we're intrigued, they're going to be intrigued. Especially if there's only two people on stage. Our interaction is very important, that we're having the experience too. Because then it translates. If we're with a bigger band, with four or five guys on stage, it's almost like — it's not as intimate. The intimacy of two people on stage really vibing into each other's trips in contagious. If we're having a great time, I think they are.

CC: I like those free, open spaces. They are a lot of fun. Rather than try and figure it out. You know, we played this set, I don't know how many times, a bunch of times, the set that we're playing — I still look forward to it. I still think — because you sort of balance the motions. The way I look at it, you balance the emotion and the motions of a set. But you try and go faster and slower. It's like telling a story. You don't want to go the same speed. [Hums music.] You gotta slow down at some point and say one thing. Then move on. The way we chose the vehicles, the songs that we're going to do, help change the mood and tell the story for the set.

BF: It kind of feels like the first set we're playing the music of the record that we've created. We're setting out "here's what our duet is." The second set we come out and we change the whole game. "No, now we're going to play a classical song, we're going to play a brand new song, here's a free improv, here's a Stevie Wonder cover." I like that the second set is almost like a workshop and it's very open. We've already presented the overarching theme of what we've created on our duet record, from

the previous tours. But second set: "Hey, here's a new tune." We tried a brand new tune of mine and we might do a new one tonight. I'm trying to learn some of your other pieces, "Children's Song," and things like that, because I think it's really important with the duo - well, anyone who's playing together a lot - to find new material. Like, what you're saying is interesting, because you do so many different things; when we play a song we've played a bunch of times, it's not the same song, it's different every time. Going on that ride is completely satisfying for me. I'm not tired of it. There's still a lot of nooks and crannies to be explored and different ways to play it.

CC: For sure. Well, there's a lot of ways to cut it. We both like to improvise. We both like to compose music. There's a satisfaction in - I see compositions sometimes as a - like a making of the game. You decide what rules, what tempo. Are we going to follow some kind of pattern or not? What kind of patterns? You kind of set up a few loose rules or tight rules. For instance, the tightest piece we played on the whole show last night was on "Andre Rieu Prelude." We played it practically note for note.

BF: The game there is to play those notes with feeling and precision and beauty. The game on that song is not how can we improvise. If we do improvise, we'll improvise the feel or the tone or the coloring. But we're not going to introduce new notes.

CC: We played the written notes pretty good last night. They're a really nice set of written notes. That's why it's enjoyable.

BF: Then the other game - one part of the game would be, what time frequency are we in? Are we in 3/4 are we in 6/8? What's the tempo? Another factor of each game, of what the song is, is what key is it in? What's the harmonic basic rules of it? That's what makes every song different from each other. It's exactly what you're talking about. I think it's a great way to look at it.

CC: In composing, you go the shows doing this, so maybe we could use a little more of that. So you go and write a little piece.

BF: Look for what's missing. What isn't happening. If that doesn't happen in the compositions then you can do it in the improvisation. If you think the music is fast, too long, you can start playing that fast song with a whole lot of space, and it fixes it.

CC: See, everyone out there. That's the answer to composing and improvising. Okay, what should we talk about now? I actually had that on my list. My list said - I said, "What should we talk about?" I wrote down four things. I wrote down dueting, which we talked about. Composing, improvising and teaching. We talked about teaching a little bit with the evaluation and criticism. Pick a subject.

BF: That's a good one. Evaluation and criticism at the same time, as you being open and free. It's like they're almost different sides of you. You need them both.

CC: You're speaking about both? Like teaching someone?

BF: Or even in yourself. 'Cause I think I'm always a student. Like a lifetime student. I'm always trying to figure out how to do it better. Also, a lot of it hasn't been done on the banjo and I haven't had the kind of training a lot of people have when I play a lot of the kind of music I play. Like, I haven't had a lot classical training or jazz training. I'm just trying to figure it out. But the critical side of myself is it's really important. 'Cause not everything I do is what I want it to be, yet. I want to solo better, I want to write better, I want to know all that stuff. But when we go on stage to play, that critical side is the worst thing I could bring on stage with me in the world. That's when I have to embrace everything that is played, and justify it, and look for a way to enhance it, but I'm not going to be up there going, "Oh, why did I play that note?" Instead I'll say, "That was an interesting note I played, maybe I'll play it again." It's like when you're editing yourself, then you get critical. But you can't bring that on the bandstand. You have to go on stage with that open acceptance, because that's when you make something great out of what happens.

CC: I agree with that. What about when another musician has a question or wants you to take them as student? Like sometimes what happens to me, musicians will want me to evaluate for them. They'll play something and they'll want me to criticize it. They want me to say, "That was really bad, and you could improve here." They're expecting, I don't know - got brought up somehow or expecting some kind of way of training and teaching that has to do with a strictness of some kind. I wondered

what your view was.

BF: I don't think there is ever any reason to not be kind to somebody. Honesty is something that needs to be earned. Everybody doesn't deserve your complete honesty. A stranger doesn't really need you to tell them that they didn't play something well. I'm just throwing something out for conversation.

CC: What about this? The student has an attention, or should have an attention, to want to improve and learn something. The teacher, I think - whoever is helping this student - the best intention, I think, is to help the guy. Help him achieve whatever goals he's got. If that's the flow then - the question is, how do you do that? Do you strictly hit the guy with, "Nah, that wasn't that great." And there's some extreme cases of that. If you see friends that come to you and tell you their sad story, why they gave up playing. If you trace it back, a lot of the times you find out it was from some incredible heavy criticism that they got early on. Being told they had no talent or something like that.

BF: I think there's some unkindness in it, sometimes, that isn't necessary. But I'm actually a big fan of honesty. Even though I was taking the other side for a second. I'm a big fan of telling someone something. But maybe you don't have to be blunt. Maybe you might hear they don't think it's so bad. You may have not made those changes, but you did this other thing that's really cool. You can be very positive and really supportive and also speaking the truth. If you get to know someone for awhile and see what they can take, and how much truth they can take.

CC: How thick their skin.

BF: I have some friends that I can be that honest with. Like me and Edgar Meyer. We're like brothers that can argue and fight a little bit, and it's cool. We actually appreciate it a little bit. Like Victor Wooten, who I also look at as a brother. We don't have a relationship where we poke at each other or even criticize each other. It's a sweet great relationship and we also grow a lot as musicians together. With Edgar, it's a different relationship. He likes to talk about stuff, so we talk a lot. We go, "Why don't you try this?" "Okay," and we like it. We get off on the truth. Seeing if we can propel each other. But that's just the nature of our relationship. I appreciate having someone in my life who will dead-out tell me what he thinks. He's never unkind. It's just straight up.

CC: I always find the hardest thing to accomplish are the most delicate things to try and accomplish when you're trying to help them. How to really help them? How do you evaluate how critical to be, how uncritical to be? How much this way, how much that way. That's the trick of it. Because if I'm going to spend my time trying to help some students, I want to see the result. To me, the result would be that they have more certainty and more confidence about what they're doing. And that they are inspired to go on doing it. If I get a comment like that, I think that's a pretty good result. I try to judge - it's tricky how to do that. Earlier when you mentioned the term 'training.' You say you didn't have any classical training.

BF: Or jazz training.

CC: Jazz training. The thought I had when you said that was, "That's great." Because in a sense, "training" in music applies stricture and constriction. Training. Do it this way. When you train - depends on the kind of training you get. But the usual training you get is training into a certain mold. And everything that we're trying to do as musicians, it seems to me, is trying to help someone get out of a fixed mold, into a creative frame of mind and if they trust their own imaginations and they can go ahead and explore the way they react to live.

BF: I definitely appreciate the areas where my lack of training gave me more of my own personality, to be myself. I do wish I could look at a piece of paper and I could sight-read it. I do wish I understood more about harmony, so that when you went wild into the crazy stuff, I had a better chance of coming up with something that complemented it. So there are two sides of all these things. The training side of it, learning to read music. That's probably a good thing for most people. I can barely read music, but I found ways to deal with it.

CC: I'll bet that knowing you, the bit that I do, I'll bet that if you decided, at some point, that you really wanted to - that you

thought, that you put, of wanting to read music better at a certain level of importance, and you decided that you were going to do that - I'm sure that you would do it. It seems to me that needing to read music, the way that you're envisioning, isn't that important; otherwise you would do it. 'Cause you are totally capable of doing it.

BF: I figured out all these work arounds. Now I'm used to them. So the time it would take me to get that together would take my time away from being creative. So now I would rather keep on working on what I'm working on, that I'm into now.

CC: See, I was right.

BF: You're always right.

CC: So are you. We're all right. The student is right, the teacher's right, we're all right. That's a good place to start, so then you gotta compare the rightnesses and see how right is right. 'Cause right is not black and white. It's just "how right" and "how wrong."

BF: And "how right and wrong" is totally different from one person to another.

CC: Especially in art and in music. 'Cause there's always this final thing. That is, what is true for that individual isn't always true for another individual. And what one musician thinks and admires, and thinks is beautiful, and wants to attain, is not the same as another. And that's what makes this world a multicolored adventurous game.

BF: It's awesome actually. Because the thing that's hardest to teach is actually for someone to be more like themselves. That's the whole goal and the whole exercise is how to be the most you can be. If you're going to be an artist of any kind, how can you be you? And that's not necessarily what we talk about when we're talking about learning to play or learning to be a musician.

CC: It's hard to talk about it cause there's not a lot of nomenclature about it. There's a lot of negative nomenclature but there's not a lot of personal - but I think that phrase is understood by everybody. Wanting to be more yourself is an understandable thing. To me, that means being certain about your own ideas and not asking for a license to see if that's okay, to try and get an agreement. You think of something. You think of a tune, you think of something that you think is nice to you. To look around and see if it's okay to do that is not the way to go. It's very constraining. You want to be more yourself - means you want to be more certain about what your ideas are, and just be willing to put them out and accept what ever comes back and do the next thing.

BF: Yeah, and accepting that everybody isn't everything. There might be an area that you're really good at. Maybe you're really good at rhythm or you're really good at harmony or you're somebody who is really into melody and someone told you that you really have to do this other stuff too, or you have to be complete. But the poetry of you is finding those things that are you unique to you and that are natural to you in your human system.

CC: I found one way, for me, that's a monitor of, "How do you know whether you're being yourself or not?," which I think is a pretty simple test: which is, what makes you feel good. And what seems simple or true to you. What makes you brighten up and smile. What doesn't seem complex, and seems, "Oh there it is." And you kind of recognize the simple truth. When you feel good. I know when I feel good about it, I think there's something real true about it.

BF: I know in my little jazz study that I've been doing my whole life, whenever I hear something that I get excited about, that's a marker for me. If I hear somebody, like when I heard you play "Spain" for the first time, there's something about it, or when I heard Charlie Parker the first time. It might be a lick, it might be a song, it might be a feel. It charged me up. Other things that I listened to didn't charge me up the same way. That was a marker there, that there was something in me reacted to that, and that meant if I investigated it further there was some juice in there.

CC: It's the same when you're outflowing - that's inflowing something, and you know what you like. But when you're trying to create something, a way that you do it, no matter if you struggle with it or not, the way and you finally do it, you have decided

which note to put down if you're making a composition. You have to say, "Well that's the phrase, and now I'm going to make this phrase come after that. And this note is going to have to come after that note." And you have to make all these little and big decisions, and the only way you're going to know how to make those decisions is your own trust of yourself.

BF: It has to feel true or inevitable to you when you're writing. "These are the right notes, I just know it, it feels right." For me, I find it on the banjo, when I'm playing the banjo. I find a voicing or a melody, and I go, "This feels right, it feels like it's supposed to be here." Then I have to flush it out. I'm going to take my craft and take that inspired idea and grow it into a song, and feels like it's supposed to be there for some reason.

CC: That summates the gleeful simplicity of the overall motto of the Chick Corea Workshops which is, "Think for yourself." It's a great motto. Sometimes I lecture on it. The lecture on "Think for yourself" last about 5 seconds. It goes "Hmm, think for yourself."

BF: I have to think about that.

CC: Right, well lets think. There you go, you're thinking for yourself. What do you think, Béla? Anything else you would like to cover? Do you have anything you'd like to introduce into the universe at this particular moment in time?

BF: Well, I could go on and on. I love talking about this stuff.

CC: Let's go on and on.

BF: You start and pretty soon you're into something good.

CC: I had a question. Only because I'm trying to find musicians who I really highly respect. Who inspire me, like yourself. I like to ask the question that it seems, by survey, is one of the most-asked questions: How do you improvise? What's that all about? Is that too big of deal to get into? Make a statement on that.

BF: It's a great discussion. I'd love to hear what you have on it, but I'll go first since you asked. 'Cause improvising is something to do with allowing your subconscious mind to take over. This is something I got from Marcus Roberts, 'cause we talked a lot when we were touring together. He talked about inputting and outputting. You input information to figure out the game for this particular piece or what ever. Like, when we talk we don't spell out the words. You and I talked about this the other day. We don't say, "S-A-Y S-O-M-E-T-H-I-N-G." We just speak. We are already familiar with the letters and the words and the way they go together. So when we speak, we just improvise speaking, but we get across the point that's in our mind to each other. And usually pretty elegantly, most of the time. We're not having any trouble communicating, speaking wise. But when it comes to music and you set up these games that we're going to go out on stage and play, there's a part of you, you're just thinking in terms of broader direction of yourself. Not thinking, I'm going to play an F sharp here and I'm going to play a G and I'm going to play an A. You don't have time for it; you're laying it too fast. So you have to develop tools and the comfort to let it flow and follow that line; follow the flow of things and see where they take you. The more you can relax and not sweat it the better it goes.

CC: I'm trying to put myself in the viewpoint of someone who really wants to see how to get started doing this.

BF: Well, I think the best way to get started is to make a really simple game. I'm going to watch my little boy playing the piano and the game is to put his hands down where he wants. And that's the game. He's making music then. But you could start with a blues scale. But you could start with one note and just play. Play like a kid in the sandbox. And just play with that note. The first game would be to play along with the metronome and to play in time. And the second game would be to add a second note and just play those two notes and have fun with those two notes. And gradually work up to something like a pentatonic scale and having 5 notes that you can play around with in different orders as you feel.

CC: So many games that you could make. I just thought of something, when you were trying to work out what would be an

exercise or a way a person could get going with improvisation. I noticed we both worked with very, very highly skilled and artistic and virtuosic classical musicians, who don't have a background in improvisation and who, I know when I would ask one who I'm working with, I'd say "Come on, you can improvise in this section. It's just this sound." And there'd be this incredible reluctance to make a sound. Even to make a sound, because somehow their sensibilities are so tuned up to what is good music and they're totally convinced that they can't make it on their own, that they don't want to make a sound. So in thinking about that, I thought that a good exercise for not only a musician like that, but anyone who wants to kind of get a flow going, like you were talking about, is just not worry about what the music is at the moment. But just start touching your instrument. Just sit down and touch the piano. I meet people- people come to me and say, "I used to play the piano. I had a few lessons when I was a kid." I'd ask "Would you like to be able to play it?" "Yeah, I don't think I can -" and so forth. So I tell them the first lesson for someone at that level is to - number one, get a piano, get real practical about it. Or a keyboard. Sit down on it and start making sounds. Any kind of sounds. Just like you would test out a new car. Press the accelerator, it goes forward.

BF: Get familiar with it.

CC: Yeah, get familiar with it. Make a sound, sit on it. Anything. Just to see that it is an inanimate object and it's built like it's built, with all these complex mechanisms, and there it is in front of you. It has no opinion. The piano has zero opinion. It doesn't think a thing.

BF: It doesn't judge you.

CC: It doesn't judge you. And it won't do anything unless you touch it. So it's a completely open feel. It's a good place to start I think.

BF: Yeah, I love that.

CC: I'm going to do that myself.

BF: I should do that. That's what I'm thinking I need to do.

CC: Yeah, let's go. There you go: improvising.

BF: Yeah, I see that problem with classical musicians as well which is the music that they grew up in is so revered and so incredible that they're afraid that what they play won't be up to snuff, so they're afraid to play anything. That's a tough problem. 'Cause you have to give yourself permission to not sound good all the time. You can't sound good all the time anyway. So you have to give yourself permission, and not get mad at yourself 'cause you don't sound good the first time you try and do something.

CC: 'Cause the "sounding good" is what you think. The other one is sitting there and going, "Oh, that didn't sound good." Based on what? There's another long hook going completely the other way, on the way, to get focused on that, or to get a monitor by which you can start to judge things. Like, what does sound good, and what doesn't sound good. To you! To the person who's listening. Which is, to try and get a handle on why you're doing it. Why do - let's take it right down, to the floor. Beneath the floor. Under the foundation. To the earth. Take it to the center of the earth and try to work out: Why am I doing this? Why do I want to play the piano? If you could really thoroughly answer that question, you wouldn't have that much of a problem playing it. That's what I would think. You see how there's an incredible high level, but incredible simplicity in that. Why are you playing? What is your judgment for what sounds good?

BF: Is it that important to know why? I'm just sitting here racking my brain thinking, "Why do I play the banjo? Why do I care about this thing?" And I'm struggling, thinking why do I - I'm from New York City, I'm not a country guy. I just love this instrument. I just love having it in my hands and hear the sounds coming out of it, and I love the information. New information turns me on. That's my conduit to it. That's the area that I know. So when I get a new Chick Corea lick or tune, or Bach phrase or

whatever, it activates that pleasure center that we were talking about a little while ago. Then I get turned on. I like being turned on. I'd rather be turned on than dulled out. Watching television. Do you hear a booming sound?

CC: I'm giving you lots of booms 'cause you're answering exactly the question. To me that's a very satisfying answer. 'Cause you love doing it.

BF: And I'm attracted to it in the beginning too. When I heard the sound it excited me.

CC: You don't need a reason for it. I didn't ask you the reason, I asked what's the motivation. Like why? That's the answer. I personally think that that, probably, in some version or another, is everyone's answer to why they do something. Well, hopefully. The really creative answer. Not the answer of a slave or a robot. Which is, I'm doing this because I must, or because I'm afraid if I don't do it I'm going to get killed. But I'm doing this because I love doing it. That's what you were saying. I love to do this, I get inspired by that and bum bum bum. That's the reason why I do it, too.

BF: The only thing that I don't understand, and I would ask this question to you, is why would you play the piano when you could play the banjo?

CC: It's a really simple answer. It's because I hate the banjo. And if it wasn't for loving what you do I would never go near the banjo for the rest of my life. No -

[Both laugh.]

BF: What a coincidence, I hate the piano.

CC: There was a banjo in the back of the car and the guy locked the door. No - it's a joke.

BF: And he came back, there were two banjos.

CC: Yeah, that's kind of nice. You do it because you like to do it.

BF: I can take the heat. It's the underdog. You know how jazz can be an underdog. The banjo can be an underdog.

CC: You got it. You win that one.

BF: I like being an underdog. It's a very American instrument - that is the whole story of America, and the slave is tied up in it, and Africa. The different mongrel music that came together on it. The black string bands, and 1910, and Dixieland music. Earl Scruggs. It's a really American trip.

CC: It's beautiful. I still don't want to play it. But it's great.

BF: I don't understand that. I just don't understand.

CC: It's beautiful. I love talking to you. I love hanging out. We have a gig to go to. We have to relieve Bernie.

BF: I have one last question. Bernie, you're an engineer. That's the not the question. The question is why do you engineer when you could play the banjo instead?

CC: That's a good question. Come on, man! Out with it.

Bernie Kirsh: Uhhh...

[All laugh.]

CC: On the spot.

BK: I'll tell you. Well, personally it gives me a chance to engineer with a lot of different music and a lot of different musicians. And I find that pleasurable.

CC: You don't have to practice the banjo.

BK: I have to practice wires.

BF: You have to carry around more stuff than me.

BK: I do.

CC: Okay, fading out here in Boulder, Colorado.

BF: Thanks, Chick. Thanks, Bernie.

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