

Chick Corea

Chick Corea: From the microphone. It's running now, so- Here's what I had in mind. We're in Vannes, France. We're in Northwest of France. We got our last gig tonight after a nice month of playing. Basically what I'm going to do with this take is try to turn it into a podcast and show it to- play it for the people who has been interested in workshops. In music workshops. I'm going to sort of direct my attention to musicians and friends like that. But you know, you could talk about whatever you want to talk about. We can talk about anything you want to talk about.

Stanley Clarke: Can you hear me good?

CC: Yeah I can hear. I'm going to pull this in a little further. Here we go. I thought one thing- on this tour we got to talking about when we were coming up in the 60s. Well, me- the 60s, and you- the late 60s and 70s. Around New York, Philadelphia and New York. The first experiences we had. I always tell people when they ask about how I learned, I tell them about how I learned.

I always say that I cut my teeth, musically, in New York City. Meeting and playing with people there. I know you had some similar experiences. I think the workshop people would be interested to know- the specific thing that I was thinking about- people want to know how do you learn? How did you get there? How did you learn? So how did you learn?

SC: The thing that happened to me that was really nice when I started playing music obviously my mother was a musician. She sang, sang opera, painted. So I was introduced to it a very nice way, the way my mother presented music to me, she gave me a piano in the house. She played it. Church songs, then she was always singing. I think I would classify her as a semi pro. She sung opera singer. She was always singing in foreign languages which I was always fascinated by. What is she singing? What is that?

Music was something that I just sort of went to it all the time. For a lot of reasons, it was a nice escape for me. It was a nice thing for me to explore it too. So that was the first time that I ever got into exploring. I used to sit down at the piano and I used to just play. I saw all these keys here. I figured well- I recognize that they were all different notes. And I realized, "Well let me try to put something together," and I put some chords and melodies and some things together. It was a lot of fun for me. Later on, I started taking music lessons.

CC: Can I ask you a question about that I think would be interesting? I'm interested. You sat down at the piano and started working things out. Did anyone lead you to the piano or tell you anything about the piano and say "Do this, do that?"

SC: No it was an instrument and I recognized that it was an instrument obviously. Like as I said, I immediately saw that there were all different notes there. And I realized some of them in different octaves. So I had some sort of mathematical- some kind of breakdown of the instrument.

CC: You worked that out all on your own. Before people started to tell you about octaves?

SC: Yeah I knew about octaves and that there were notes that were similar. I also liked just the symmetry and the black notes that there were groups of 2 and 3. So I knew that there were some kind of mathematics to this. And all this stuff was flying by my head real fast. As it should.

CC: At what age?

SC: I think about 7-8 years old. Then I noticed that I was listening to the radio more. I was really listening to songs. And then- I think-you don't know this and not too many people know this. The first instrument that I took music lessons on was an accordion.

CC: You mentioned that once.

SC: Yeah I played the accordion. I can still play a little bit. And it was a guy that I think he was Belgian. Down the street, in this neighborhood that I lived in. Only music teacher. And my mother, it was very important for her for me to study music. I think I got the art bug from her. Cause my mom was really an interesting person. She sang. Completely opposite of my father in many ways. She made her own clothes.

CC: She painted too?

SC: She painted. Good painter, man. Made clothes. I remember the first time I ever saw a mini skirt was on my mother. She got this book from France. It was a big tall, like a magazine. It was the biggest one. She used to save her money to get this magazine and she would take it home and open it up. And it had all the latest stuff. And she could sew her ass off. So she's up. She made this red leather outfit. Man, oh man. When she put that thing on, "I don't think dad is going to like this."

CC: So she was artistic.

SC: Oh totally, 100 percent. She was actually the person who first told me to look at stuff. Look at paintings, look at music. Listen to it. Not just let it fly by. Like inspect it. So I got into that. Now, later, after taking accordion lessons, the next thing I took for a second, violin, a little bit of cello. My hands were- I was skinny, tall and my fingers were always long. I couldn't handle all that.

CC: What age did you pick up the violin.

SC: I think 11, 12.

CC: So you were already a tall guy.

SC: Yeah. Eventually I made my way to the bass and I really liked the bass. And it's funny. I had two different lives. Two different ways I approached the bass. I approached the bass the I had to approach it in order to play in the school orchestra and note-learn this music. And learn notation.

And then I had this whole other thing, which was free, which was to play the instrument. And those two things were very- there was a partition between those two things. As I grew older, both those two ways of looking at the instrument converged and then disappeared.

CC: That's interesting how you think about it. What happened to getting you to play for the school orchestra. What was the that route? Someone asked you to come play for the school orchestra?

SC: Yeah there was an announcement for extra activities and that you come and you pick up the instrument you want. I got there late and the only thing that was left was the acoustic bass in the corner, a big bass drum and a sousaphone. It's all bottom. I came into it from the bottom. So looking at these three, I tried each one. I couldn't get nothing out of the sousaphone. After picking up the bass, I did play the sousaphone in the high school band. So with the bass, I liked the idea that there was music. I liked the idea that there was a guy who said he was a teacher.

CC: Music meaning written music?

SC: Yeah written music. There was some kind of method. I liked that. This guy's name was Mr. Birch.

CC: Birch.

SC: Mr. Birch, yeah. Then I met my hero Alessio Rossi.

CC: This was the guy you told me about.

SC: I was tall and he was really short, Italian guy. Maybe shorter than your mother. I used to call him my little Roman friend. And he was my hero, man. This guy- he was determined to get through to me.

CC: What was he trying to get through to you?

SC: He was trying to get through to just me. I was a kid- I was kind of wild actually. I had this friend from the street and I had a lot of life. I don't personally consider that I was wild. I was just not tamed. I was unleashed. I'll put it that way. I won't say wild. When I started studying with Alessio Rossi, I got things- we talked about discipline. Being on time and most importantly being prepared. So we had these lessons. We had the Simandl book, which is what all bass players go through.

CC: Let me back up a bit. Can you remember when you came across written music and how you learned to read and write music?

SC: Yeah. The music that we did in elementary school like the last couple years in elementary school, it was kind of, it was simple. It was kind of “mm pah pah music.” So in that kind of music, that kind of language, bass parts are always on 1 and 3 and sometimes there’s a passing tone and then you get “Whoa,” something on the 4th beat. You get [Hum music.] And the fourth beat, WHOA. There it is!

And what happened to me. A beautiful thing happened to me. That’s when I first got hooked into harmony. I remember this song that we did around Christmas. [Hum music.] And the bridge on that is killer [Hum music.] Chord! And the bass lines were very simple but they had these passing notes that went to these chords and I remember thinking “That’s really cool. There’s passing tones and they’re going to- and it sounds so right. Why?” And I remember at a young age looking at that bass part which I could play with my eyes closed still today and trying to figure out why these passing tones were-

CC: So that was before you played any music of Bach say. That was way before that.

SC: This was way before that. I mean I’m playing mm pah pah music. Just a basic elementary stuff that you did. Then in high school I did.

CC: In 8th grade or earlier?

SC: Earlier. 7. But then, I got into high school and I met another- my teacher in high school. His name was Harry Giamo. He was another one of my heroes.

CC: Oh that’s the guy you told me about. He’s the guy who stood up for you!

SC: Yeah he’s the guy who lifted up the chemistry teacher and put him on the wall and said “You’re going to pass Stanley or you’re going to have to see me everyday for the rest of your life.” Yeah Harry-

CC: That’s a friend.

SC: If he hears this, he’ll remember me. He’s probably 80 something now. He still looks like he just came out of the marines. And Harry introduced me to Stan Getz. I remember there was this Mingus record that was floating around. I don’t know what it was called. “Clown” or something. There was this Mingus record floating around. And all this kind of stuff was interesting to me. And I listened to it. But not until it was 1960- something. After ‘65. When did “Love Supreme” come out?

CC: A little bit earlier than that.

SC: ‘61?

CC: ‘63? Cause Trane left Miles in about 1960.

SC: All I remember was hearing a “Love Supreme.” And when I heard that- that did it. And it was interesting what happened to me. It was the first time I heard music that I didn't know if I liked it or didn't like it. It was just something that I recognized as being something special. It's really interesting. I don't know whether this is true for you, or even others I haven't really spoken about this much. But sometimes I listen to music and I don't really- I just look at it for what it is. Not “I like it, oh man this is great. or “I don't like it.”

Its just like I'm looking at it like the phone there. It's a great phone and I have viewpoints about it. It's there and it's going to stay there. Trane's music was like. I had to know everything about his guy. And what happened to me was I backed up from that point, I sort of backed up and I got into early Coltrane and then Miles Davis and all sorts of other groups. That was the first thing that touched me.

CC: You were first in school, or high school? '63, right. I graduated in '59.

SC: I graduated in '68 so it was like-

CC: So, wow! That's interesting. From one perspective that I try to present when I talked to musicians. Cause everyone wants to know how to learn. And I have my own viewpoints. I know how I learned. Which was real similar to how you learned. Different set of circumstances.

My father was the musical one in the family. My mother cooked great and she took care of us. My dad was the musician. They were both encouraging. You had an encouraging mother and so you were wild in your way. I had encouraging parents and I was a little bit wild in my way. Like kind of- you used the term unleashed. It was like I was on no leash either. There was no leash on me. I could stay out at night and hang out with who I wanted to. Because they knew that I was basically interested in music.

When I talk to the workshoppers and musicians come in it's like I never realized that the way I came out musically is maybe rare amongst musicians. Lot of the musicians that come up nowadays come up through some kind of training. Like formal training in music. And there's questions about that 'cause more and more in our kind of music and our creative music, improvised music, jazz whatever you want to call it. There's more and more music schools. There's more and more tendency to educate.

SC: It's the commerce behind the teaching of anything. When we were coming up- I know when I was coming up, there was so few, not many, there were very few music teachers and in many ways, I won't say that I was forced to learn on my own. But it was natural, I didn't have a bass teacher, \$35 an hour. There was no internet, there wasn't some guy on the internet who says you can't learn unless you learn from me. I find that a lot in the bass world. I find that some of my friends do that. I just- I believe that a real healthy artist, whether he's a musician or whatever he has to- he doesn't have to- but it's just healthy when a person just sees something that he wants to do and starts doing it. Whether its great, good, or not good, or whatever that gets determined by how much information he may get.

Now, having a teacher is not bad. I think that if there's any purpose for music teacher, is if there's someone who wants to know what a scale is, they want to find out some basics in music. Maybe, basics in theory and that's it. Then you go. And you just go out and do it. Then the guys that really want to get it, are going to get it anyway. It's just helpful to have a guy who says well this is g-minor 11th chord. This is a g 7 flat 5. You flatten that. You go "Oh okay." The guy that's going to- and even if there's no one there to tell you that, if there's a guy who really wants to get that, he's going to get it.

This may sound a little harsh but I just believe that there's some, there's a lot of reasons to play music. I have friends who play instruments that went into completely other fields of life. They played music because it's a great activity. It's something that enriched their life. They learned many things from it. Discipline, camaraderie, teamwork, all that kind of stuff.

That guy, he can have- that guy who wants to own an insurance company, which one of my friends does and he was a great trombone player, you can give him all the greatest teachers in the world, if he wants to go form that insurance company, he's going to do that. I have a lot of friends that still to this day, I'm in contact with and we're all musicians and some guys went here some guys went there and so on and so on.

CC: Its obvious to me that a lot of times I'll try to think of a title for my workshop. And one of the first titles I came up years ago, it was when I was giving a music workshop in Japan, and there's a total language barrier. I needed a translator to speak to the audience. I wanted to have some catchphrase that would be easily understood. I put up a big sign on a big white piece of paper out on the stage and I put "Think for yourself" and I put the Japanese translation underneath. It basically leads all into what I feel is one of the best encouragements that could be given to an artist, is to learn to trust his own judgment, and learn whatever he wants to do.

And in your example, you had a friend who wanted to do an insurance company. That's fine. You don't have to make music. If you do want to make music, what kind of music and how you're going to go about it and how much you're going to learn about notation of music or how much you want to get rid of that and just do something else. It's a wide open field. And that's one of the reasons why I love it. It's very human- humanistic. It's very spiritual, it's a very basic impulse that everyone's got. But we've known each other such a long time and only these past couple of tours we seemed to have time to talk about how we came up. Cause in the '70s when we were touring with Return To Forever, it was the gig and the next time. We never talked about the surrounding thing.

SC: You know, there were individuals, I call them like sparks in my life. Sparks of light. There was this one guy who passed recent. His name was Byard Lancaster. He was an alto saxophone. I was really into classical music at this time. I was like just getting into college or something and I was practicing everyday, hard. I used to see this guy come out of his house with a saxophone playing. [Hum music.]

CC: He's a Philly guy?

SC: Yeah, he lived three doors up the road from me. He'd go [Hums music.] He'd come out his door, walk down the street and he'd put on some wild clothes and he'd look on me. And sometimes I'd be on my porch with my bass. He'd just look at me. And he just kept going, go down to main street and make a left and go into the park and just play for a little while and then come back, play and go back in the house.

CC: Would people be listening?

SC: Oh, they just thought he was a nut. And actually to be honest. I don't know. A few of us musicians were like "Wow, oh. Byard. Wow!" And some of the older- I have no idea what they thought. But I just thought, this was great.

CC: The '60s.

SC: Just this guy walking around and playing. I just thought- my first thing that I thought was how I was going to strap the bass on me. I wanted to join in with him. Just walk down the street playing. I wanted to get some of these clothes. He had these wild clothes. It was- he was like this walking artistic organism.

CC: I love that that was some of the spirit of the '60s. In the late '60s I had an experience. I had this band after I left Miles' band, with Dave Holland called Circle and Anthony Braxton was playing saxophone and Barry Altschul on the drums.

We would try- we were experimenting with stuff. We were rehearsing at my loft on 19th Street. One of the things that we did, it was like what Byard did, except we did it organized as a group. We said "We're going to walk out the door on 19th street."

And of course Anthony had his saxophone, so he could carry that. Barry had to take some kind of percussion stuff and I'm not sure what Dave took out on the street. Maybe a flute. A wooden flute. I think I took out some percussion thing out on the street.

And we said we're going to walk around in different directions and keep our ears open for one another and when we hear each other we'll kind of converge and we went around for like a half hour around 19th St and 7th Avenue and 6th Avenue. It was fun. And people were thinking we were nuts, too.

SC: I love it. Matter fact. My first great experience. My first gig in a major jazz club. It was a club. It was Pep's in Philly and the other one was-

CC: Pep's, I remember Peps.

SC: There was another one.

CC: Showboat.

SC: Byard goes- I was 15. I remember he goes, "Stanley, I want you to get Darryl." Darryl was a drummer. Darryl Brown. He's a doctor now. He goes, "I want you guys to join my band for this weekend." I go "Who else is in the band?" He says, "Me." I said, "What are we going to play?" He says, "Don't worry about that. When I say start, then you worry about that."

CC: Great instructions, huh?

SC: I called Darryl. I said "Man, Darryl we got this gig." I remember he paid us like 50 bucks 75 bucks. It was a lot of money. It was a lot of money back then. My apartment was 35 dollars. I didn't have an apartment then. But my later apartment was 35 dollars a month. So 50 bucks-75 bucks was a lot of money back then. I remember we went to the Show Boat. And somehow he talked the owner into letting us play because we were underage. And man, we went up there and he looked at me, he said "Ladies and gentlemen, The Byard Lancaster Trio." He just lifted his horn and his foot went up like that, and he went BANG! And it all came to [Hum music.] And I started going and I haven't stopped.

CC: Oh, that's nice!

SC: That was the beginning of my performance chain. Like the chain of events. It's funny. Some years ago, before Byard passed, I just thanked him so much. That was the coolest thing. That pleasure moment has inspired- it still inspires me. Even when I talk about it now, 'cause I still approach music like that.

CC: Just play.

SC: I just play. I get up on stage and I play.

CC: Not I can't play. Maybe I can play. What should I play? How is that that I just played? I just played that, how was that? Do they like it? Does he like it? Should I play that again? Just get rid of all that and just play.

SC: That's so important. That's the thing that these schools and the teachers and the organized instructions that they have going on now. If I had any advice for kids and young guys, you know you gotta keep it simple. Just get on the stage and play. You're going to know what you know. And there's nothing wrong with having a teacher and having a book and you learn this and you learn that. It's kind of like putting money in the bank.

You read a bunch of books and I guess you'll speak better books if you read a thousand books. Perhaps. Maybe not. Chances are your English is going to be pretty good. If you look at a lot of things in music, transcribed things. I remember there was this book the Walter Piston Theory Book. I got into that, that was interesting. Blah, blah, blah. When it comes time to play, there is this beautiful thing that happens when the person decides to play. All information, all the knowingness that you have, you use it. It doesn't- it's not hidden back there. It's just- you use it. It's a beautiful. And you just unleash it and just go for it and have a lot of fun. Wasn't Charlie Parker- what did he say?

CC: He- I don't- I've never heard him say it. It's written down a lot. Where he was asked, I think, when him and Dizzy were given some sort of award and Leonard Feather was presenting the award and said, "Well, how would you describe your music?" It was on video, it's a little video clip. You might be able to find it on Youtube. "How would you describe your music Parker?" "Well Leonard, we don't try to describe our music, we just let the music speak for itself. So we're going to play now." Then he begins the tune. And the music itself is the answer to what is the music. That is what the music is.

That's a beautiful thing and it definitely is- if that's not there then all the fun and all of the creativity and joy you get out of it is gone. It's got to be there. And that balance between- and like it's another really interesting subject that's almost hard to talk about because when you say those things which you just said, which I fully agree with, then I can just put myself in the viewpoint and the people in the workshop, and they listen to that and they'll go, "Yeah, but how do you let yourself go like that?" And there's no really way to easily answer that except you just have to trust yourself and let yourself go. Just stop thinking and stop "what do you think about when you play?" Well nothing, stop thinking, just play. And you just have to try that out. Try those simplicities out. And see.

SC: It's funny, you know. I remember one time a lawyer said to me. Maybe he was a judge. He said "You know, I never make a decision when I'm angry." It's funny he was just talking about when he goes into the courtroom he has to get himself together. It's kind of an interesting way, like a way to happiness.

I believe when you go on the stage as a musician, there's certain things that have to be together in order to get on the stage and be comfortable and whatever that is. And we could talk about all these things for three or four hours. And one thing that I do is I try to have a low stress life.

It's hard for me to get into detail and say well don't do this and do this cause that's like the trap. I think if you go on the stage and you're well-being is up there on the scale that will help with the unleashing yourself. If you go up there and you're running from the law, you just robbed a bank, just stressed out.

CC: Little stressed out there.

SC: Or you're planning to rob a bank the next time, you might want to put down the instrument down for a little bit.

CC: And figure the other thing out. All that's good all that's nice. Let's see now, we gotta go play in a- we got a concert to play in about 40 minutes or so.

SC: It's our last gig of this month.

CC: I just wanted to recap that briefly, because this is the first time we went out and played music as a duet. Just piano and bass. Acoustic piano, acoustic bass, it's been a really learning experience. A lot of fun working it out. Not that we're playing any new pieces, but everything seems new because of the situations. There's no drums and no electric instruments. Lot of listening and intimacy involved.

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SC: Yeah, that's going to be nice. Yeah, It's beautiful.

CC: Alright, man. I'll see you later.

SC: I'll see you later. All you guys out there, who's listening to this, I'll see you in the future. Have a good time. Play. Unleash yourself.

CC: Unleash. Unleash yourself. ■