

The Music Magic Podcast with Chick Corea

Episode 8

Wallace Roney: Constantly Melodic

Chick Corea: Okay, it's rolling. Oh good. All right, Electric Lady Studios. My buddy, and my favorite trumpet player, Wallace Roney.

Wallace Roney: Thank you, Chick.

CC: Thanks for coming. We've been jamming here for a couple days with John. I don't have anything particular in mind. I know that the people that are going to be tuning in to listen to this are kind of oriented toward the idea of looking into musicians' ways of thinking, and some students and people will ask questions. They have ideas in mind. So we could go anywhere we want. I don't know. What would you like to talk about?

WR: First of all, you mentioned that we're here at the studio. I always wanted to come here. My three favorite studios was Rudy's – and I've played a lot records ...

CC: Yeah, Rudy Van Gelder, who recorded all the Blue Note stuff and Impulse!

WR: I never did the 30th St. Columbia Studio. But I did 52nd St. one. This is the one that I always wanted to –

CC: Cool, the Electric Lady Studios. This is the studio that I recorded *The Leprechaun* in with Gayle and Joe Farrell and Steve Gadd and Anthony Jackson.

WR: I know, when we were listening to the piece with Joe playing the flute and the brass section that you wrote. Amazing! Amazing!

CC: Yeah, that's a nice memory. But now, Wallace is here. Playing some – dropping in some beautiful, beautiful Roney-isms that is really making the session that we're doing, so lyrical and expanded, the way you improvise.

WR: Thank you. You know, it's funny 'cause I was getting ready to say, from that point of all the great things that have been recorded here, on your record, from when I walked into this studio and you were playing, and John was playing, and Steve. It was so expansive! You really got a depth of how it felt like, whatever I wanted to play, long as I knew what I wanted to play, you were going to be there for it.

CC: I tell you what, it's a kind of a role that I love, but it's a relationship that I love. Especially doing it with you and musicians – a handful of musicians like you, where everything that you're playing inspires me to put an orchestration to it, of kind of a sound. I just thought of something, just a free form kind of thing. But, I just thought, that when I first came across that idea, actually, I gotta give a really huge tip of the hat to Herbie Hancock. Because when I first heard the way Herbie, especially the recordings that he made with Miles in the studio, in the – you know the dates better than me. The '60s, the early '60s.

WR: From *Seven Steps* till when you joined.

CC: Exactly. And right away, I noticed that Herbie – it was the first time that I heard the piano comping or accompanying to a band or to a soloist that had an orchestral approach to it. He was very thoughtful about when he would play and what he would play. And his accompaniments were always thoughtful and were always melodic and you could pretty much take the stuff that he played and orchestrate them for a small ensemble or strings or brass or whatever. And I took that idea, I thought of that, and I thought, “That's the way to accompanying a soloist.” So I've been loving doing that ever since. So I like doing that for you.

WR: And when you do it, it's, to me, the way you think. It re-inspires me to play off of that orchestration that you might have gotten from something I might have played. So it re-inspires. Now I want to play through the pieces that I'm hearing that you just fed me. So it goes like-it's amazing.

CC: Yeah, it's really, really nice. I'll tell you one thing I'd like to get your opinion on and have the listeners get your viewpoint. Here's this amazing accomplished, creative man, who probably, I don't know, you might have thought about this or not, but a lot of people write in or call in and they ask about like, “How do you improvise?” 'Cause if you put yourself in the viewpoint of a musician who hasn't experienced doing that a lot and they maybe see someone who improvises music, it's a nice feel to do it. They haven't tried it. I say something general like “Just do it.” But what, to you, what is it? What is “improvisation”? Is that what you're always doing or is that what you do sometimes?

WR: Always. And it's interesting. There's a million answers to that, but since we're free-flowing and letting it flow, I guess what I would say is constantly being melodic. And creating a melodic sequence or composition or variations. Maybe that's what it is. When I hear music, when I'm participating in it, even if I'm not participating in it. I'm hearing what's next. Whatever is next, is the improvisation and it's melodic. Sometimes melodicism can have depth harmonically. But it's still melodic. Even if it's rhythmic, it's

melodically rhythmic. I'm a melodicist player, who spent a lot of time loving the deepness of harmony. That's what I would say.

CC: I see. Okay, I get that. Now what about –

WR: How?

CC: I'm going to be a guy – I'm going to try to be a guy who says, "Alright, how do I get to be melodic, playing a particular tune? I feel like I'm stuck on the melody or the harmony. How far out can I go or far in can I go? What are the rules? And all that."

WR: There's a lot of ways to answer that. The first basic answer is, you must know your instrument. The second basic – maybe that's the second answer. The first thing is you gotta know yourself. Meaning, I think that anyone could improvise if they didn't have the limitation of the instrument. In other words, if you had a kid who was listening to the radio, and he was listening to his favorite song, he could probably continue while singing something along with it. This is just my opinion. If you could free yourself to be the person that can sing along with it. Now the problem is there's no problem.

Then you got an instrument that you have to express yourself with. Then you owe it to yourself – you owe it if you're going to be that kind of – you know, you gotta learn your instrument so it wouldn't handicap the freedom. So we're talking about not only learning the instrument, but harmonically and discipline and all that.

Then you have to learn the language of the music in question. Which, I guess, we're about jazz. Because jazz is basically the improvisational music. I mean there's other music that is improvisation. We're talking about jazz. You gotta learn the language in my opinion. Then, I'm real interested in learning about other musics and incorporating whatever their improvisational techniques and to not changing my language but just adding to it. Like you just showed me a gypsy scale, you know? I played those notes. I didn't play it in that sequence, and if I did play it in that sequence, I didn't mindfully play it in that sequence. Now I mindfully got it along with the other language. The scales, or arpeggio, or – you know what I'm saying.

CC: Absolutely. If you remember our little discussion about our scale, which I call the "Flamenco Scale," but all you have to do is listen to a great flamenco player like Paco de Lucia, or some great flamenco singer like Camarón, or some other singer, and you hear how they do it. Then that becomes real. That scale was just a technical thing of notes become a real expression.

You know what it seems to me, Wallace? I'm talking to a handful of musicians now, I've talked to great musicians. I'm talking to you, I've talked to John Mayer, I've talked to Steve Jordan today. I've talked to Béla Fleck. I've talked to Bobby McFerrin. I've talked to Stanley Clarke. I'm getting to the idea, 'cause I'm on this, this to start to a conversation, I'm on this idea of what is "improvisation" in order to jump start a musician who is asking the question about what it is and would like to do it. I'm wanting them to do it. You know what I'm coming around to thinking? It's all improvisation. Even if you take a melody that's on a written page or someone sings the melody to you and you play it back, you're still playing it. If you played a Haydn Trumpet Concerto that had every note written down.

WR: You're interpreting.

CC: Even if you tried playing the notes exactly as possible, it would still be your concept of exactness. And so, it would be your expressions. So every time you play – So it sort of blows up the concept of "improvisation." What is "improvisation?" The word sort of disappears and all it is, is you play. And how do you play? And how do you play an instrument and you get down to some technical things. But, I like to – I think of it as being able to be where you are, when you are, without, like me looking at you and talking to you without thinking of the last time we talked. Or me being able to say something to you without me thinking of some other past thing. So if we can be right here, coming up with the –

WR: Spontaneous.

CC: Spontaneous, new thought. Then it's gotta be improvisation. It's the same way you walk down the street. You say "I'm going to go across the street to that restaurant and you say, "I'm going to be across the street." And your body is going left foot, right. You're improvising the whole thing. You're not thinking about what muscle to move what leg.

WR: Wayne Shorter said it's composing with an invisible pen, or composing –

CC: Who said?

WR: Wayne Shorter. Composing with an invisible pen, or your horn becomes your pen.

CC: So it breaks down the barriers of the concepts of improvisation, composition and so forth. So what do you want to talk about now?

WR: You know what?

CC: What's your interest? I don't want to end. Because I'm enjoying talking to you.

WR: You know what? Music is my love. I box, too. But music is my heart. And I get so much out of listening to you, or Herbie, or John Coltrane, Miles. Of course you know Miles. Miles is my mentor, my hero. Even Jimi Hendrix. Wes Montgomery. But those guys, you guys, set something to me that's – I heard people say music's supposed to serve something, or it's meant to do something. Sometimes music should give you a feeling, experience, you know, take you somewhere. You know, lift you up. I'm inspired by that. By those – and that's what I get from you. That's what I get from my – the best of music. It almost transports you or cleanses you. Or inspires you to think or see. Some people say it inspires a revolution. All of that.

CC: I see that. I agree with that. It's why we love to do it. I try and point out the fact that that we do something that's kind of special. I thought about it earlier today because we're playing our instruments, especially in a situation like this. I think the situations that you play as well for yourself and your band and situations that I create and when we play together, we're playing in situations where we're playing freely. When I ask you to come and play some music with me or vice versa, you ask me to come play some music with you, we're just asking each other to come and be ourselves. Not something else. So that's kind of a free area and a way to be. I like to – if you do it well and you enjoy doing it and take enough time to put something together that people will enjoy, then I think we're doing something that contributes, something really valuable to the environment. Plus we get away with it because we're doing what we love to do.

WR: You know, we're not really getting away with it. We put a lot of time practicing. Like I say, I box. But sometimes some of the hardest things is practicing. You've got to make sure you discipline your finger so your muscle won't – So we put in a lot of time.

CC: Do you still practice?

WR: Yeah.

CC: I mean, do you have some sort of regimen?

WR: I have something that starts my day. I guess you can say it's a regimen. But yeah. 'Cause there's things I know that's going to happen on the instrument that I haven't thought of yet. And I want to be part of that. I mean, I listen to all the greatest musicians and virtuosos and I'm thinking to myself, "Oh, that's amazing." Everybody is getting closer. Not closer to what they've done. You start to think, "50 years from now, something else is going to happen on this instrument. I'm trying to figure out what it is. Let me see if I can push it. Maybe it's beauty. Maybe it's technical. I don't know." So those are the things that I've been thinking about.

CC: So what do you do to get to it? When you say you do things daily, what kind of things? Do you just pick up the horn?

WR: Well, first of all, I do try to keep the basic things going. I read something out of Schlossberg ...

CC: To keep up sight reading.

WR: And that is like cross training. You've got some technical exercise and you're reading. So I do that. And then I try and push the technical studies a little bit more.

CC: How do you do that? I'm curious.

WR: Faster or slower. And whatever. And then the tone. I try to make the tone almost, in my opinion, when Miles would say, without attitude.

CC: You're well known for, well I'm not the only one. I've discussed this with other friends and musicians that you have a particular deep and rich tone.

WR: Thank you.

CC: ... that I personally love. You play one note and I know it's Wallace. You don't have to play a line. Because you have particular tone. So how do you work on tone?

WR: That's the beauty. 'Cause when you love the sound, you hear something in your head. And you're playing – when I play long tones, it's not long tones to me anymore. It's melody, it's melodic. And you're trying to get that note as clear, or as much in the center, and then when you get in the center you can open it up a little more. And I just – that's what I keep doing. That's what I keep doing everyday. I keep trying to open it up from the center of the note. Make it whiter or darker. Make it more expressive. The goal, without attitude or something that dates the set. Try to be as - Sometimes I feel like John Coltrane was trying to hear a sound that – a universal sound, that was trying to link to it. I think Miles had it too. Even if he didn't – I'm going to tell you something Miles told me. It's trying to get that sound to be as pure as what you imagine it sounds like 200 light years away. Miles said to me, "I wonder what it sounds like to play out in space." I understood that. I understood what he meant.

CC: It could possibly mean without any other influence.

WR: He was saying, because you don't know gravity.

CC: No influence, no gravitic influence, no human influence either. You're far enough away from other people's ideas of what a pure sound is. You can just be left with your own imagination.

WR: And that sounds — you play, and it just comes straight out.

CC: I'd like to do that with a band on stage.

WR: That's what I'm saying. That's what you're imagining. You're connecting it. I'll tell you something else, when you're talking about Miles, I was very fortunate. I was able to hang with him a lot. I'm going to tell you two great stories. I used to go over there sometimes and we were talking and he'd be telling me things. He'd be showing me some stuff. I remember one time, I said, "You remember that from something?" "Yeah, what you want a concert or B Flat?"

CC: What did you he say?

WR: A concert or B Flat. So he would show me a chord on the piano and he would show me a particular chord, let's say, a flat 9 chord. But he would show a flat 9 chord, I don't want to get too deep but maybe a root A.

CC: A root.

WR: Yeah, and he would put a triad over top. And the flat nine be on top and it might be in second version or something. Then he would bring a note, like there's something, and he said "Find a note there." You got to find the relationship there. "Find it there." And I'd have to find that note.

CC: Oh, he would change the voicing?

WR: Yeah, but you would have to find the relationship there, that flat 9 to the voicing that he was doing.

CC: That's a game. Train your ear.

WR: Yeah, it would make you hear. Cause he would play these things and he would move it down like this and you say "Okay, oh!" Because the overtone of the chord or the cluster of the chord might make you hear something else. But you have to find it. "Right here. Right there. Now C-Flat. Bang! Right here." I'll tell you another story real quick.

CC: No, take your time.

WR: We started – I tried to see him whenever I could. If he was in town and I could go over, I'd go see him.

CC: What were these years?

WR: Between '83 and '91. All the way.

CC: He left us in '91, didn't he?

WR: '91, yeah. You played with him right before. I did the Gil thing with him.

CC: That's right. That was in '90?

WR: That was in '91.

CC: That was in '91? I did the Gil Evans, Montreux.

WR: You did the Paris thing.

CC: I did the Paris thing just before then.

WR: At the time he told me, he was talking about doing it from 1988, a lot of people thought that he didn't want to do it. He wanted to do it.

CC: He wanted to do that Montreux, Gil Evans revisit.

WR: He wanted to do that and he wanted to do the band where Herbie and them, but whatever it wound up turning out, it became all-inclusive with you and Dave and Al. I think he, at that point –

CC: Steve Grossman was there and a lot of the musicians that play with him.

WR: He used to tell me, "I want you to do it with me because you play just like me, but perfect." But we would be talking, I'd be hanging with him. We'd talk about Tony a lot because I was playing with Tony. He loved Tony. He used to tell me all these stories about Tony. And we used to go back and forth. One day we were playing at the Vanguard. I don't know if I told you this story.

CC: I don't remember.

WR: We were playing at the Vanguard and we were playing on a Tuesday. And I got a call from Miles. "Wallace, what are you doing?" I said, "I'm playing." "Where?" "The Vanguard." "With who?" "With Tony." "Okay, come over." So I came over to his place.

He said, “Tonight, when you play with Tony, your first solo, I want you to just peck for a couple choruses.” So he showed me what pecking was.

CC: Oh “peck.” What did he mean by that? I’ve heard him use that word before.

WR: Pecking is taking a phrase and leaving space in between a phrase. So if you got a phrase like [Hums music.], you play like [Hums music.] So I’m playing, and he would tell me “[Hums music.]” So I’m mimicking that, that night I got up on stage [Hums music.] Tony goes [Hums music.]

CC: You leave space.

WR: Yeah!

CC: That’s definitely a thing to do.

WR: Next day he called me and said “How did it go?” I said, “Went great.” He said “Okay, now tomorrow I want you to, after you peck for a couple choruses, I want you to play, but I want you to end your phrases on a three or a four, or over a bar, end on one. Don’t finish a phrase. If you gotta, finish over.” [Hums music.] So we had to get that together. So I start playing. I peck first, this is now Wednesday, I peck [hum music.] Then the next song, [hum music.] And Tony was going [Hums music.] I said “Oh, man! Okay.” Cause now I’m getting a different reaction from Tony instead of Tony playing some back stuff. So Miles was like “How’d that work?” I said, “Wow!” So he “Okay, tonight I want you to play my solo on *Milestones*.”

CC: Play what?

WR: He said, “Tony loves my solo on *Milestones*. Play it!” How did he know I knew it? But he knew I did. So I’m thinking, “Okay where am I going to fit in *Milestones*?” Tony had a song called “Arboretum.” And it was in F. [Hums music.] And Tony! So we were having a three-way conversation. And that’s Thursday night. So Friday night comes. He says, “Wallace, okay how’d that work out?” I said “It was killer. Tony just smiled.” “I know. I know. I know.” So he says, “Now do this thing [hums music.]” Now he plays it for me.

CC: [Hums music.]

WR: “Now if I’m playing straight, everyone’s just gonna play. If I stagger at the first part, that means fours. If I stack at both parts, drum solo.” [Hums music.] Fours. But if I [Hums music.] Drum solo. So I made sure I had it. He said “Play that.” So now we’re on the bandstand, we get up-tempo here, [Hums music.] So I’m taking my solo. [Hums

music.] Tony says! [Makes drum noises.] Then he starts to laughs and he just cracks up. He says “Wally don’t do that! Cause if you do that-”

CC: He goes into automatic drum solo.

WR: So we’re all laughing. So Miles called me the next morning and said “What happened?” And cracked up. I didn’t even have to tell him.

CC: That was some games, huh? That was some incredible games. That’s really being inside. Miles and Tony were inside of each other like that.

You know what’s interesting to me about what you were saying about pecking. Just for the students to check out. Cause, the way I’ve experienced that, when I experience that in terms of playing with other musicians, drummer, any other musician you're interacting with. If I’m playing with a soloist, if I’m playing with you and you’re blowing or if I’m in the rhythm section and I’m playing with the drummer especially, but if I’m interacting with someone – even if I’m interacting with another accompanist. If I’m accompanying on keyboards and if a guitar is there, I can do that with a guitar. Or anyone. But the concept is, space is something you create by putting something down over here, and then when you don’t put anything down, you’re now creating something which is called space. Right, when you put something down a little bit, quote unquote, “later,” and that defines a space. But the thing about space, when you're playing, is that it’s an invitation to your partner. To the person – it’s an invitation. If I go [hums music.] It’s an invitation! If I’m going [hums music.]

WR: You’re saying “I’ve got it.”

CC: Yeah! There’s no invitation. Then your partner can put something in. But creating space is definitely an invitation. To me, it’s always been a goal when I’m playing. Even if I’m playing solo. I’m trying to work on my piano solo so I can create space within that. Cause it invites me to play something or it invites the audience just to imagine something or to think something. Do you know what I mean? The creation of space to me is one of the most important things that you can do as a musician. Especially if the anchors that you put on either side of the space are pretty. But those are cool stories about Miles. Thank you, Wallace.

WR: Thank you, Chick.

CC: We’ll have to create a part 2 at some point. And you have to come down, and we’ll do something together.

WR: Anytime you want me, I'm there. I love you, man. I love you.

CC: Likewise. Wallace Roney and Chick Corea, Electric Lady Studios. Ding dong, ding dong.

WR: Ding Dong.

CC: Thank you.