

By Allen Morrison

PHOTO BY ARNE ROSTAD

'The Music Defies Words'

JAZZ ARTIST
CHICK COREA

I have no plan for this evening. So welcome to my living room." That's how Armando "Chick" Corea opens a concert in Quebec, as heard in the opening moments of *Portraits* (Stretch Records/Concord Jazz), his recent two-CD collection of live solo performances.

Not to worry—he's got this.

He proceeds to unspool a program of favorite tunes by Thelonious Monk, Bill Evans, Stevie Wonder and Bud Powell; his improvisations on compositions by Scriabin and Bartók; several original tunes from his album *Children's Songs*; and spontaneous musical "portraits" of volunteers from the audience at shows in Poland, Morocco, Lithuania and the United States. Before each segment, Corea brings the audience into his confidence with disarming impressions of each composer and a few words about what they mean to him.

A star since he recorded his first solo album in 1966 at age 25, the NEA Jazz Master, DownBeat Hall of Fame member and 20-time Grammy winner remains one of the most versatile, productive and recorded pianist-composers in jazz. He is a restless, prolific writer whose output includes tunes considered to be jazz standards ("Spain," "La Fiesta," "Armando's Rhumba," "500 Miles High," "Crystal Silence" and "Windows" are among his most covered); chamber and symphonic music, including two piano concertos and his famous suite of children's songs; and the technically dazzling improvisations he has recorded. In that, he is a modern-day heir to the tradition of classical piano masters who dazzled audiences with spontaneous cadenzas.

Recorded in concert halls on three continents, *Portraits* constitutes just two-fifths of Corea's recorded output in 2014 (so far). *Trilogy* (Stretch/Concord), a three-CD live set released in September, documents two years of touring by Corea's elite trio with bassist Christian McBride and drummer Brian Blade. This piano trio rubs shoulders with some of the best ever, if judged by the inventiveness of its arrangements, the musical imagination and technical virtuosity of each member, its tightness around sharp corners and the intangible but all-important factor of group chemistry. The opening track, "You're My Everything," is representative of the album, boasting an ingenious reharmonization of the Harry Warren standard and sinewy, melodic soloing by all three musicians. Other selections include Irving Berlin's "How Deep Is The Ocean?" and Kurt Weill's "This Is New"; two Monk tunes; Corea favorites like "Armando's Rhumba" and "Spain" (recorded before an apparently ecstatic audience in Madrid); and ambitious new

Corea originals: the flamenco-inspired "Homage" and a previously unreleased piano sonata called "The Moon."

These live albums are just two among Corea's many recent projects. In the past few years, he has toured and recorded with his current Latin-tinged electric band The Vigil; formed the Grammy-winning Five Peace Band with John McLaughlin; reunited with his supergroup Return to Forever and joined his RTF colleagues Stanley Clarke and Lenny White in an acoustic trio; recorded Grammy-winning duos with Gary Burton and Béla Fleck; and, in his spare time, written and recorded *The Continents: Concerto For Jazz Quintet And Chamber Orchestra*.

Even the musicians who are closest to him wonder how he does it. Blade said it's hard to separate the musician from the man. "It's the heart of the man—the way he embraces people ... and exhorts, encourages and inspires them," he says. "And those qualities come out in his playing. That beautiful 'crystal silence,' the clarity with which he executes lines, and the way he invents and plays from his imagination. He's never resting on yesterday's explorations; he's always looking for another doorway."

McBride says, "Chick stays so prolific—it's beyond anything I've ever witnessed from anybody else."

Both colleagues praise his openness to their input.

"He embraces everyone's individuality—he never tries to put anyone in a box," McBride says.

Blade concurs: "Chick opens a place for you when you're with him."

DownBeat spoke to Corea via Skype about the two new live albums, his evolution as a pianist and his creative philosophy. We found him relaxing in his hotel room in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, prior to a show that night with The Vigil.

Your DownBeat Readers Poll win as top jazz artist is, among other things, confirmation that, 48 years after your debut as a solo artist, jazz fans and players still see you as relevant. To what do you attribute your enduring popularity?

I don't know—it's hard to say. I play a *lot*. I'm all over the place—U.S., Europe, Japan; we just finished South America ... people see me. I'm always experimenting, and the audiences continually seem to accept my experiments, which encourages me to do more.



Part of the attraction to your live shows is that people come not knowing what you're going to do, and perhaps you don't, either.

That may be. I just finished reading the book *Coltrane on Coltrane*, a book of interviews with him. I was privileged to see Trane play a lot in New York clubs, from '59 to '67, but never spoke or played with him. He was quite articulate, intelligent and deep thinking, as I had assumed from his amazing musical output.

That's the artistic culture that I came from—improvisation, always trying to form something spontaneously and always trying new techniques. Reading that book validated all of that again for me.

How did you go about selecting the tracks for *Trilogy*?

We recorded every night on the three long tours we did. My first idea was to put out all three tours, like *complete* [laughs]. Over 100 concerts. But that was a little bit over the top for my partners. There was so much to choose from.

Although we played so many concerts, we didn't play a different repertoire every night. There were probably 20 to 30 pieces. Certain pieces we played often, so they developed, like playing a blues every night. So it became a matter of finding a take, and then balancing out the program. For instance, we'd open the show with a standard. I probably had 30 or 40 takes of "How Deep Is The Ocean?" And I started to listen to them. And I

thought, my goodness, we should make a whole record of just "How Deep Is The Ocean"s.

That would be very interesting.

Yeah, because they're all so different. I didn't listen to all of them—I couldn't stand it! [laughs]. So instead, I might make a comment to Bernie [Kirsh, Corea's longtime audio engineer] after a show, like, "Gee, that was a good take tonight." I would have him mark it down for me, so we wouldn't forget. Then I'd review two or three [of those] takes. For example, there might be a take of "How Deep" that stated the melody at the beginning. Then there'd be one that never stated the melody at all. And one that was so abstract that you could never tell what song it was. ... Ultimately, I would pick one, then try to balance [the album] with other pieces that have more or less melodic content.

This is a gifted trio.

Each group has such unique synergy—you can't really compare them. For instance, I've played with Christian with other drummers, and that's a completely different thing. I've actually played with Brian a few times with other bass players, and *that's* a completely different thing. But when Christian, Brian and I play, there's a chemistry that I love.

On *Portraits*, we hear you telling an audience that this concert will be like having them in your living room. But how is the experience of playing solo onstage different from when you're alone?

In live performance, I'm trying to tell a story. ... At home, I'm just tinkering. I might spend hours on one page of a Schoenberg piano piece—even my beautiful wife, Gayle, who loves everything I do, has to leave the room!

How have your touch and tone evolved over the years?

It's important—it's your voice. Early on, I didn't think about tone too much. ... I was just thinking about how to play a tune. And when I was gigging in New York in the '60s, there were not many well-prepared pianos. Around 1966, after about five years in New York, I became so frustrated with all the bad pianos. I'd come to the gig, and the other guys would bring a real shiny saxophone, or the trumpet player would be cleaning his trumpet and checking his valves. Everybody's caring for their own sound, and I've got this monster of untuned trash to try to play on. It would come to my solo, and I'd be embarrassed.

So there was a year when I gave it up and started playing drums. I gigged around NYC as a drummer for a year-and-a-half. This was '66, just before I got the gig with Stan Getz. He called me in '67. I had been planning to apply for my New York City hack license to supplement my income. Then, when Stan called me, I found myself playing prepared concert grands. And I thought, "Wow, this is nice."

My ideal of playing the piano is to try to play it like you see a great ballet dancer, like Baryshnikov, fly around the stage—it looks effortless. I know

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when I feel my best, that's how it feels. I was trying to develop that lightness of touch—and I'm still trying to develop it. Art Tatum played with this incredible velvet touch—and he grew up on bad pianos. And Bill Evans brought an amazing piano sound into the jazz world—also Red Garland and Herbie [Hancock].

You have had an unusual trajectory for a jazz artist. Your early style was quite avant-garde, but you changed directions many times, moving more toward the melodic and lyrical. Do you see it that way?

After my group Circle [in the early '70s], I had a desire to widen my audience. I felt the need to put rhythm back into my music. And that led me to melodic content, and sound and groove, as well as to include Latin rhythms.

Wynton Marsalis likes to say that, to be called jazz, the music must have some elements of blues and swing. What's your take?

I have thought for years that to try to label the music *anything* has always been a restriction. I don't think of it that way. Jazz, classical ... they're just words. The music defies words. Words are symbols, whereas the music is the music; the emotion is the emotion; the groove is the groove. And it's different for everybody.

When I'm creating music, I love to see people experiencing pleasure or inspiration. And one of the great expressions of that is dancing—you move! You can sit back and totally love it, too—there's nothing wrong with that. I think we should dance. It's an expression [of music] through the body. We do use our bodies to groove when we play. So just stand up and use the rest of it.

You have often cited Bud Powell, Horace Silver and Bill Evans as major influences on your style. What did you learn from them?

That's a good basic list, but you gotta put Monk in there, and Art Tatum. Then you have to add Red Garland and Wynton Kelly, and McCoy [Tyner] and Herbie. They're all unique. Horace Silver inspired me to compose music—those were the first jazz records I ever got my hands on. My dad had Bird and Diz, and he had the Dizzy Gillespie Big Band. That music was fast moving, and for me as a youngster, daunting. I couldn't play it very well. But, when I was in grade school and high school, I could approach Horace's music. And I started transcribing it. The fact that his music was so orderly, and had such a great feel to it, got me wanting to write music.

Bill Evans inspired me to have a more delicate touch and a clarity of phrasing that I also learned from classical pianists. Mozart's music and Bach's takes a certain finger technique and clarity that I like to have. A lot of younger pianists have this ... for instance, Gonzalo Rubalcaba has an amazing technical clarity in his renditions; so does Hiromi, the young Japanese pianist.

I saw Monk play many times as well. Isn't it interesting that Monk used to be considered as a "different" kind of player, with an unusual tech-

nique? Sometimes it's even expressed in derogatory terms—that he couldn't really play the piano that well. But it turns out that Monk's compositions are some of the most popular jazz tunes.

He had the courage to be his own man completely, which probably has a lot to do with why he's covered so much today. When you're the best Monk that you can be, or the best Chick you can be, then people have to come to you for that, because no one else is doing that.

Yeah, yeah, yeah! That's what you get from all of these greats: They demonstrate that being themselves, and allowing their own way of doing things to fully emerge, without any restraint—that's how you succeed. That's very inspiring.

What do you have planned for the next couple of years?

My manager and I are developing Internet workshops. We already did one. I find it very rewarding. I try to encourage people to keep doing what they love to do. They ask specific things, and I try to demonstrate *my* way of doing it. But letting them know that it's just my way; it's not dogma.

My band The Vigil will be a platform for my musical ideas and small group experiments. Next year, Herbie Hancock and I are going to do duet concerts around the world. I've also got a tour coming up in Germany with Bobby McFerrin, which is a duo I love. Bobby's very inspiring. And I have a list of requests to write chamber music for string quartets and other groups that I'd like to fill. I've got a third piano concerto in mind.

Gary Bartz, who is himself a jazz educator, recently said many jazz education programs are putting the cart before the horse—they're teaching students all the theory but the students don't know how to "hear" the music. Do you agree?

Education in music is important but extremely misunderstood. You can't teach someone to *know* or *appreciate* something, or to know what they like, no matter how much data you give them. You could read every book in the library and still not *know* anything; that's what I think. [Musicians] know what they like. But you have to encourage them to have the strength of their own conviction, to live the truth of what they like and don't like.

The word *like* may sound like a weak word, but that's how an artist makes a decision. How do you write a song or paint a painting? Well, you put something down that you "like," that you think works. No one can instruct you how to reach that decision. When you try, it invalidates their innate knowingness. So, "instruction" in music is very tricky. If it's done with an authoritarian stance—like, *this* is right and *this* is wrong—it could destroy a young artist. You *can* teach techniques, though. Even that is tricky, because each artist has to find the technique that he needs to develop what's inside him. I'd like to help more artists and encourage more artistic creation. We need more musicians to lift our spirits around the world. **DB**

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