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ARMANDO ANTHONY “CHICK” COREA
NEA Jazz Master (2006)

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Panken: Ted Panken here for the Smithsonian Institution. We’re conducting an oral history with Chick Corea at the Blue Note, November 5, 2012, the day before Election Day. Chick is here with a new quintet, and he’s graciously given us a couple of hours before it’s time to prepare for the gig. Thanks for joining us.

Corea: Yeah, sure. Yeah, I’m happy to.

Panken: I’d like to start with some basics, facts and figures, and devote this first segment to how you got involved in music, which I gather you were kind of born to. I get the feeling you may have been one of these people for whom learning music was almost like learning language, because your father was a trumpeter and bandleader.

Corea: Yeah. My Dad, Armando, Armando John... I’m Armando Anthony. I like to call myself Armando Antonio, but Antonio is my grandfather’s name. But my dad, Armando, had his own band, Armando Corea and his Orchestra, through the ‘30s—the ‘30s and the early ‘40s. I was born in ‘41. So my first memories with my folks were of my dad coming back from the gig late at night with all his musician friends piling into our little kitchen in our three-room apartment in Chelsea, Massachusetts, and my mother cooking up some great whatever she cooked, pasta, you know, or... She used to cook this frittata, she called it, with eggs and peppers and potato, like kind of an omelette. The guys would be sitting there in their tuxes, with their shirts open, smoking cigarettes, chatting, having fun, and I was a little kid, and I wanted to be involved in

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that group because were so happy! They were a happy bunch. And those were the musicians.

So my dad started taking me to gigs of his. I guess the very first real big thing that happened is that my mother, Anna, purchased an upright piano at a funeral when I was 4 years old, and it showed up in the living room, which was the middle room of this apartment, with a crane on the third floor, coming through the window—because it couldn't fit up the stairs. I remember that as a kid, this huge... The window was open, and all these men were around, and this big monolith came into the room—BOOM. That's how I started fooling around with the piano.

Panken: Just fooling around. When did you start to study it formally?

Corea: Well, the first studious thing I did on the instrument... My dad was a very kind and gentle instructor, and he wrote out... He was a good arranger. He arranged music for the band. And he wrote out several tunes. This one I remember... The very first one was called "Again." It was an old standard called "Again." He wrote it out... [SINGS REFRAIN] ...and he wrote a left-hand thing, and there were two lines of notes there. What he did is, he played it for me on the piano, and then he pointed out the note, "There's a D, and that's a D. D. D. E. E." So I related the black marks on the paper with what key they signified, and I learned the tune, and then kept going.

Panken: If I may ask, where did your father have his musical education?

Corea: I don't really know. I don't think he had any formal music education, and neither did my uncle. He was one of seven brothers and six sisters, and the second brother, Frankie, also played trumpet. In fact, Frankie was in my dad's band. But I don't think they studied formally.

Panken: Was your dad born in the States or in Italy?

Corea: In the States. My grandfather, Antonio Corea, came from Albi, a little town in Catanzaro, in the south of Italy. In fact, I met some Coreas earlier this year who came to my show in Catanzaro, and there were five different families, they were all named Corea—same spelling. They had documents that they had found in the church in Albi, in the Roman Catholic church, and in the city archives of my grandfather's birth certificate and when he left Italy, and they were all interested in hooking up a family tree. But that's where my grand-dad is from. My father was born in Boston. He was the first child. He was the oldest.

Panken: So they emigrated maybe in the first decade of the century.

Corea: 1901 or so.

Panken: With the broad Italian emigration of the time.

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Corea: That's right.

Panken: You described your father to me in a prior interview as "always the second trumpet player who played the jazz solos." And you told me that he was a multi-instrumentalist, that apart from playing trumpet, he played violin, bass, drums, he played everything...

Corea: He was originally a drummer. I saw photos of him playing drums. I never heard him play drums. But when I was born, he was solidly a trumpet player and played some piano. I never heard him play violin. My aunt played violin. Then later on, when he was getting on in years, he complained about blowing on the horn, and he took up the double bass, and he would bring those on gigs. Then he complained that the bass was too big, so then he got an electric bass and a little Ampeg amp, and he played that. He was a natural talent, and he played good jazz.

Panken: What sort of jazz did he like?

Corea: The sound of his band was kind of like a Dixieland dance kind of groove, but the music that he and his musician friends would sit there, smoking cigarettes, learning over... They'd lean over the turntable and hi-fi set listening to Miles. Miles and Dizzy were my father's idols.

Panken: So for you, that meant that you were listening by osmosis...absorbing by osmosis, I guess, quite a bit of this music from very early on.

Corea: That was it. My dad had a stack of 78-rpm vinyl, and that's what he played all the time. That's what I grew up listening to. I still remember the smell of the vinyl and the yellow Dial label with Bird and Diz and Miles and the Billy Eckstine Big Band.

Panken: I also gather from a prior interview that you first had piano lessons when you were 9, with a fellow named Salvatore Sullo.

Corea: Sullo. I went to an earlier piano teacher for one lesson, and I didn't like him, so I told my dad, "I don't like him." He didn't force me. But then Sullo, Salvatore Sullo, was an Italian friend of the family, and also quite a good concert pianist. He played with the Boston Pops every summer at the Esplanade in Boston. He played the Beethoven Piano Concerto, the *Emperor Concerto*. I remember going a couple of summers. He introduced me to the classical music of the piano—Bach and Chopin and Beethoven.

Panken: Describe the transition to being a gigging musician, and the course of how you developed your facility on the piano, what you were listening to and how you started to apply what you were listening to to what you did.

Corea: Jumping from when I was 8 years old on through into high school... Basically, once I started listening to that music through my dad, and started to go his gigs and hear the music, and

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the older musicians and his friends would... I was a little kid, and that I could play was always entertaining to everybody. “Oh, little Chickie can play.” So I’d sit in and play with them, and... Ever since then, I never had another focus in my life. I never considered doing anything else. So I just kept going, day by day, step by step. That was my ultimate thing, and fun, and creation that I wanted to do, and school was just really secondary to all of that. I would just like show up as little as possible to school, and just continue with my music, until I started meeting other young musicians, and then started through school...in grammar school and in high school, started doing dances, and getting a gig in a bar every now and again.

Finally, I guess my first really... My first really like big gig I remember as a kid was in the eighth grade or ninth grade, with a group called the Four Sounds. They were two Armenian brothers and another guy, and they needed a piano player. They wore tuxes with striped things, and it was like... I took a photo with them. I have the photo. We’re all going [HANDS STRETCHED OUT, BIG SMILE] ...you know, that kind of thing. The Four sounds, it was called. That was my first big gig. We worked some lounges around town.

Panken: So by that time it’s what, 1954 or 1955...

Corea: Yeah.

Panken: I gather by this time, you’ve been listening to Horace Silver, you’ve been listening to Bud Powell, you’ve been listening to Monk. You’ve mentioned “Un Poco Loco,” Monk’s earlier records, Horace Silver’s early trio records, stuff like that...

Corea: Mmm-hmm.

Panken: ...as making an impression on you.

Corea: Absolutely. I wanted to play like Bud right away, but it was too fast and too beyond me at first. So when... I loved everything that Miles and Bird did, but I couldn’t quite grasp it. The first grasp I had in really learning and duplicating one of my heroes’ music was Horace—and Horace’s quintet records. I spent a lot of time with them. They were like a college or a university to me. Because what I did is, I sat down and spent hours transcribing the songs. I trained myself how to understand the ins and outs of melody, harmony, and rhythm, actually, through Horace’s compositions, by needing to slow... Use a turntable to just get little bits at a time, and write them down, and then learn it on the piano, and then I’d transcribe Blue Mitchell’s trumpet solos. I actually formed a trio when I was in my last year of high school, with Joe Locatelli on the drums and Phil Panakas(?) on the bass. That was our repertoire, mostly, was Horace Silver tunes that we played as a trio. I would play the head, then I’d play Blue Mitchell’s solo, then I’d play Horace’s solo, and then I’d play some of my own solo. My first big gig was at the Stables, when Herb Pomeroy found out about my trio and had us open to the big band. That was a thrill.

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Panken: What were some of the Horace Silver tunes that were kind of seminal for you?

Corea: The one record is the record with “Sister Sadie” on it—*Blowin’ The Blues* away.

Panken: Which is from 1959, if I’m not mistaken, so that would correlate to the last year...

Corea: yeah. I practically transcribed that whole record. But I loved everything that Horace did. Horace’s... Not just his composition. His whole communicative way of... It was kind of to me like pop music, Horace’s music. It was delicious and palatable and grooving and made me happy.

Panken: You were talking about meeting other younger musicians around Boston, and Boston was a fairly interesting scene, in part because there were some academic institutions there... I’m wondering who some of the people were who you formed early affiliations with.

Corea: After working with the Four Sounds, my next memorable gig was with a trumpet player named Phil Barboza. He was a trumpet player, and he had a Latin group. It was timbales, bass, trumpet, and piano—and conga. I didn’t know anything about Latin music. I forget how I got the gig actually. Maybe through the timbale player. But I became real good friends with Bill Fitch, who was the conga player in the band. Bill was a Boston guy, and he was deep into Afro-Cuban music. He saw that I didn’t know how to play Latin music, so I kept asking him, “How do I do this?” And he introduced me. We’d sit and listen, and he’d point things out. That was my first exposure to Latin music, and playing it at a dance, where people are dancing and you’re playing... It was a perfect complement to the more serious-minded models that were Miles and Bird, and this was the kind of music that was extroversion, and it was for dancing, and had rhythm that I totally loved. So Bill Fitch was a real help to me. He was one.

Then later on, the jazz musicians I met in town were Jimmy Mosher, who played in Herb’s band. Paul Fontaine, the trumpet player. They had a quintet together. I eventually met Jaki Byard. I met Alan Dawson, and played with Alan. I knew John Neves, the Neves Brothers. So eventually, after high school, I’d go back and forth from New York to... Because right after high school I escaped to New York, but I kept going back, of course, to Boston.

Panken: So you moved to New York in ‘59?

Corea: ‘59, yeah.

Panken: I think you mentioned in a prior interview that you played a little bit with Tony Williams.

Corea: Oh, yeah. I think it was before Tony went to join Jackie McLean’s band. Just before. He was friends with Don Alias, the conga player. I was friends with Don through Bill Fitch,

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because Bill Fitch (the conga player) and Don were tight. So I found myself in a trio jam with Don playing conga and Tony playing drums. Also, Don played bass, too, so it was piano, bass, and drums. We played a couple of times before Tony went off.

Panken: Before I take you to New York, I'd like to ask you to talk a little bit about your relationship with the drums. You told in one of these earlier conversations, "Drums are part of my life from when I was a kid. I make music and see music through drums and rhythms." And I gather you were playing the drums as well during those years.

Corea: Oh, yeah. When I'd go to my dad's gigs as a tot, as a little guy, I would go to the piano. I'd run right over to the drums. Then they'd say, "No, you go play the piano." Finally, when I was 11, my mother saved up enough money... She worked real hard at a candy factory, Sheriff's(?) Candies. She was the businesswoman of our family, and she saved up enough money to get us a little house in Everett, the city right next to Chelsea. Downstairs, she formed...I had my first place. My uncle came over, and built me a little room, and the piano was moved down there. I talked my dad into getting me a set of drums. So I had my drums down there, practicing to Dizzy Gillespie Big Band music and other stuff.

Panken: Were there drummers that you were emulating at all, the way you did on piano...

Corea: Absolutely. The drummers were like priests to me. Max Roach, Art Blakey early on, and then... The first guy I really, really in love with and wanted to play just like him was Philly Joe Jones. All the great drummers have been my...kind of like a focus to me of...I'm not sure what—spirituality of the music. They're the soul and meat of... Just like in the African tradition, the Afro-Cuban tradition, drummers...in some Afro-Cuban religion, drummers are considered priests, and I can see why.

Panken: Well, you've played with a lot of the American drummer priests...

Corea: Yeah.

Panken: ...in your own bands and in other situations. Speaking of that, not long after you got to New York (I'm not sure how long it was), you were playing with Mongo Santamaria.

Corea: It was my first major gig with Mongo. It must have been 1960, late '60, something like that. Yeah, I got the gig with Mongo. Somehow, my friend, Al Abreu, who was the tenor player in the band at the time, he knew that I liked Latin music, and I spent a year-and-a-half playing with Mongo.

Panken: So really right after you got to New York.

Corea: Really right after I got here, yeah.

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Panken: Was that gig with Mongo how you became assimilated into the New York scene, and how people...

Corea: Well, it was one of the ways. The other way was through jam sessions and meeting people. I just had my ears and eyes open for any musical contact. Joe Farrell became an early kind of mentor for me. One of the first musicians I met when I got to New York who was my age, my friend Pete Yellin, the saxophone player. We used to hang out, playing and copying Charlie Parker solos. So he showed me around town. He was a New Yorker.

Panken: Where were you living when you got to New York?

Corea: I was at Columbia Liberal Arts School. That was my first excuse for coming to New York. I lasted about a month there. I was living in Brooklyn with some family friends at that point, a long subway ride. But then my first apartment in New York was at 71st near the Park. I rented a little upright piano there.

Panken: I gather with Pete Yellin you had a rehearsal band (speaking of drummer-priests) in which Milford Graves was playing timbales, and you were playing bebop tunes and doing what they now call ‘the Latin Side of’ or something...

Corea: That was a fun band. And I’ve got to connect up with Milford again. It’s been too many years. I know he’s active in doing a lot of creative stuff. But the spirit of that band... That was Pete Yellin, Lisle Atkinson was the bass player, Milford and myself. I think Bill Fitch played some conga in that band. The idea was me and Pete wanted to take all of the Charlie Parker tunes that we loved and put them into a salsa beat, into a mambo beat. In fact, remembering those days... I recorded the Tadd Dameron tune, “Hot House,” with Gary Burton recently, and remembering those days, I took...having the quintet this week with Stanley Clarke, I took that tune “Hot House” and put it into a salsa beat and we’re playing it like that. It’s a lot of fun.

Panken: I think you recorded “Hot House” on the recorded in 2010 at the Blue Note with Eddie Gomez and Paul Motian, too.

Corea: Yes, that’s right.

Panken: And Eddie Gomez is someone you met early on.

Corea: I met Eddie in 1960 at the apartment I was living in with my first wife, and where I had my kids. My kids were born at North Moore Street, just below Canal.

Panken: What’s now Tribeca. So that relationship goes back a long way as well. Staying on the notion of drums and the priestly function, I think I remember you saying that you would gig

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fairly often at Birdland, because Mongo was engaged there more than once, and you would go to the Palladium, and at the Palladium you'd hear this magical array of bands that were around in New York at the time.

Corea: Yeah. To me there was this incredible synergy and spark that connected the Latinos and their music with the jazz musician, the Afro-Americans and the musicians interested in creating jazz music a la our jazz roots. That was a particular meeting place, that corner, because Birdland was there with the jazz groups and the Palladium was there with the then-hot Latin groups. So musicians that were playing in both places would go to the other clubs on their breaks. When I had a break, I'd go to the Palladium; when the Latin guys had a break, they'd come to Birdland. Boy, that synergy still, to this day is producing great sparks in the music world.

Panken: Let's keep moving forward.

Corea: Ok.

Panken: You played for a while with the Cab Calloway band?

Corea: Well, it was a week. It was a week gig in Boston. That was real early on. I was not yet a senior in high school. I might have been a junior...I might have been 15 years old, putting on a tux of my dad's that was too big for me. Because I could read music, and I could play changes, so they hired me... Somehow I got the gig, and I played in Cab Calloway's show. I think I only spoke a couple of words to him all week, but it was pretty exciting being up on the stage with him.

Panken: Let's take you, then, from Mongo Santamaria to your first recordings. I think the first one was called *Is*, if I'm not mistaken...

Corea: No, that was the second one.

Panken: *Tones For Joan's Bones*.

Corea: That's right.

Panken: Let's take you through the sequence of events that got you there. Was your first appearance on record that Montego Joe recording with Eddie Gomez and Milford...

Corea: That's what I'm told. Either that, or the Mongo Santamaria that I did, called *Go, Mongo*.

Panken: But then you wind up in Blue Mitchell's, a gig you would have been as well qualified for as anybody, having transcribed so many of his solos.

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Corea: Well, look at the fortuitousness of that, which is me in love with that band, *Blowin' The Blues Away*. There's that band, and when Horace wasn't doing Horace Silver Quintet gigs, Blue would take the group and do gigs. He needed a piano player. I still can't remember how I got that gig, but I ended up in that piano chair, and did some recordings, and played gloriously with that band. It was a great experience for me.

Panken: What sorts of freelance things were you doing in New York during those years? Can you name a few highlights?

Corea: Anything to keep me from that eventful moment when I was about to get my cab license! I did everything. I did casuals. I played Fender Rhodes later on for cantors at synagogues. I played in lounges. There was about a year-and-a-half when I kind of gave up the piano and played drums.

Panken: You were sick of bad pianos, right?

Corea: I was sick of bad pianos. I was embarrassed more than sick of it. I wanted to play the piano, but I kept being embarrassed about how I sounded because they were all so bad. So I thought, "well, I love the drums; let me do that." I gigged around on drums at a few places. I did a memorable weekend barbecue-family picnic kind of thing with Lee Morgan and Paul Chambers out in Queens, I'll never forget... I did anything that came along. Actually, when I started playing the drums, figuring, "Well, I'm going to make a living playing the drums, I'm going to switch now," I hadn't given up the piano... But I thought, "I love to do this, and I have my sound now." Around that time (that was as late as '66-'67), I got the gig with Stan Getz. So when Stan called me to play, then I was able to make some money and play on a piano that was tuned, and play with Roy Haynes and Steve Swallow.

Panken: I believe you told me that Steve Swallow was the one who referred you to Stan Getz?

Corea: Yes. I met Steve earlier in that playing in Pete LaRoca's quartet with John Gilmore.

Panken: There's a recording.

Corea: There's a recording, *Women At the Turkish Baths*. Steve was another mentor of mine, and a great friend in helping me work my way through how to be a musician in New York. He was very friendly. He advised me, for instance, to go ahead and be on the *Sweet Rain* record. The original group for *Sweet Rain* was Roy Haynes and Steve Swallow, but then Stan didn't want to use Roy on that gig for some reason, whatever, and because of that, Steve, in a group spirit, said, "well, I'm not going to be on the record either." So then, in a group spirit, I said, "Well, I'm not going to be on the record either." Then Steve called me up. He said, "No-no, Chick, you should go do that record. Stan is going to record some of your songs. This will be good for you."

Panken: He did "Litha."

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Corea: Yeah, “Litha” and another one we did on that record... “Windows.”

Panken: You’re segueing me into something I’m very curious about, which is that you’re beginning to write, and you’re making recordings of original music at this time. I’m wondering if you can discuss this process.

Corea: Well, all the way through the early ‘60s, I was gigging and doing all these various things, but I loved to write. Just recently, I’ve come around to the realization that that was really my main—and still is—focus, was as a composer, and that piano never was the thing... Like, trying to be the great pianist was not ever my... I mean, I would love to now be a great pianist, so I’m starting to practice. But my focus was always composing, and I would use the piano to realize my compositions. So all through the early ‘60s, that’s what I was doing. I was writing. One of the first bands I put together that I was real excited about was the band that finally made my first recording, *Tones For Joan’s Bones*, with Steve Swallow, Joe Farrell, Joe Chambers, and Woody Shaw.

Panken: Was that band able to play gigs, or was it just a recording...

Corea: I don’t believe we ever did a gig. I did some gigs with some of those musicians, but that *Tones For Joan’s Bones* music I never got out gigging, touring. It was like rehearsal music. We used to rehearse and have fun with it. So when Herbie Mann... I was in Herbie Mann’s band, and Herbie formed the Vortex label. So he asked me to make a recording. So after I turned down his idea to use conga drums several times, he finally said, “Well, go in and so whatever you want to do,” and that was *Tones For Joan’s Bones*.

Panken: Can you speak a bit about the musical culture of New York during those years, your experience of it in a broader way. There were so many strains going on. The avant-garde guys and Coltrane, and then older guys from the pre-bop period—Coleman Hawkins was still playing and Roy Eldridge was still playing.

Corea: Duke Ellington and Count Basie. Art Tatum was still around.

Panken: Art Taylor...

Corea: Art Tatum. When did Tatum pass away?

Panken: He died in 1956.

Corea: Oh, yeah. No, he was...

Panken: But you were probably listening to him, so it seemed like he was around!

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Corea: I was listening to him, yeah. He WAS around.

Panken: But the Blue Note guys, the people you mentioned from your records. So many different streams of music going on, this incredible stew that New York City is. I'm interested in your impression of how this filtered into you, and how you refracted it into your own notions.

Corea: I was and still am a blotter for creative music and new ideas in music. It just thrills me to see something being created that just captures my attention—and New York at that time was filled with it. I was, of course, in the first decade of realizing a dream that I'd had since I was in grade school, which was being in New York City. That's where all of these guys were. That's where Miles was and Trane was, and Art Blakey's band, and Ornette Coleman, and Sonny Rollins, and everyone was here. I took everything in.

But I did have an idea how I liked to do things, and that came out in my composition. And still that becomes the focus when I want to see... That's why I like to play solo piano concerts sometimes. Because I'm kind of a sociable guy. I like to work with other musicians as my favorite thing to do. But sometimes, I like to rediscover how I am just me, and so I like to go do the solo concert. I get on a stage with an audience, there's no influences coming my way, and I see where my natural tendencies are to communicate—where my message goes. That is how I operate as a composer as well. It's like, "where is my message?" I am alone in a room. I get my pencil and paper out, or whatever, I'm doing, and I can focus on that.

Panken: I'd like to get back to your experience with Stan Getz, and I'll read back a quote to you from a prior conversation we had. You said: "Stan taught me the lyrical side of music and the quieter side. I was coming from free music, and Coltrane and Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor and Stockhausen and Bartok were my mentors. When I got the gig with Stan Getz, I had to learn how to deliver up something a little more lyrical and compact. He didn't want 15-minute piano solos. He wanted two choruses. I learned a lot doing that."

Corea: Yeah. Discipline. I also learned a good lesson about how to contribute to a group and be like a valuable group member, which was to find out what was the leader's concept and idea. I mean, at first I wasn't thinking about that so much, and I was so thrilled about playing with Roy and Steve that when the rhythm section would go, I'd forget all about Stan Getz and I'd go into some zone, and then Stan would come back with the tenor, like, "What's this kid doing?—RRRR..." Then he talked to me a little bit, and I got the idea. Like I said, I used to play these long piano introductions, and he told me, "I just need this. Then when we play on this tune, I just need two choruses." So then I started really putting my attention on how he formulates his message, and tried to help that. And I learned how to play a more concise and lyrical and piano solo and make a statement.

I also learned, I think, a very important musical thing for a jazz musician, which is an

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interesting thing to learn, that when you're playing a song or a composition that has a melody that is the basis of the song, when you improvise and take a solo on it, when you completely leave that and do something completely else, often there's no continuity to it—it just sounds like a lot of notes. Whereas when the improviser knows how to take that melody and then begin to evolve it and take the listener with you... Stan knew how to do that.

Panken: You spent a fair amount of time on a gig with Sarah Vaughan as well.

Corea: About a year-and-a-half I played with Sarah Vaughan. That was another glorious moment.

Panken: I can imagine. And I imagine you must have learned every tune in the book.

Corea: Yeah.

Panken: Or at least the ones you didn't know already, which I'm sure were quite a few.

Corea: She was a ball to work with.

Panken: She played piano herself fairly well.

Corea: Yes, and she's sit down sometimes... I'd encourage her to come over and sit down and play. Occasionally she'd sit down. She could play really, really well. Her and Carmen McRae, who was also another good pianist. I didn't play with Carmen, but I heard Carmen play. Carmen could play piano. But Sarah used to give me a lot of space and room, and she didn't mind me altering things around and putting my own ideas in. She liked it, as a matter of fact. She was a real jazz musician in that way. I arranged some songs for her. She featured the trio more and more at the beginning of her set.

Panken: Did Roy Haynes bring you into that gig, or was it...

Corea: No. I think it was Herbie Mickman, who was the musical director at that time. I got the gig through him. Steve Schaeffer was the drummer. That was the trio I worked with, with Sarah.

Panken: So a year-and-a-half with Sarah, and in 1968, I believe, you make a record that's a modern classic. I say 'classic' in the sense that the information on that record has become part of the building blocks for several subsequent generations of pianists. You can't any well-educated ones who don't reference that recording. That's *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs*. The tune "Matrix" is on it, and several other things. Can you speak about the formation of that record, and crystallize some of the ideas you were working with at the time.

Corea: I'm trying to see what did I do for that record, because at the time I didn't know that I

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did anything particular. I had compositions that I wanted to try, and I had been working with Roy with Stan Getz. Then I got the offer from Solid State. I think Manny Albam maybe was the producer. Anyway, I got an offer from Solid State to do a trio record, and I was working with Stan, and I thought, “Wow, Roy Haynes.” Then the obvious thing for me to do at that time was to have Steve be part of my trio—Steve Swallow. But then, at that time, I had just met Miroslav, and we were doing some more free kind of stuff together, me and Miroslav. I guess coming from this sociable frame of mind of mine, and also curious... And I knew of Roy’s ability to play free music, to play really unusual music—his music with Andrew Hill and Eric Dolphy and so forth. Roy was always so creative in all of that, and I thought, “Some of the music that I’ve written is a little bit like that; I wonder what it would be, putting Miroslav together with Roy?” That was the basic idea of *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs*. So we were in the studio...I can’t remember whether it was one day or two. It wasn’t more than a couple of days. Everything was a first take. Roy had such instant understanding of the compositions, and Miroslav, too, that we just threw everything down like that.

Panken: So again, there’s that ongoing theme in your career that the musicians you’re playing...you have a certain mojo that enables shape their personalities into your own argot, I guess you’d say. So it’s interesting to hear you describe it that way. Which I guess is a characteristic of Miles Davis, too, whom you joined shortly thereafter.

Corea: Well, Miles did with his repertoire what I do with my compositions. Because Miles composed some, but he was a great arranger. He was the one who would take whatever composition he was interested in, and then kind of work out how it would settle into the band, like who would play the melody and how it would be done, and so forth. That was all Miles’ genius. He was a genius arranger. So everything that Miles touched, of course, sounds like Miles. When you hear “Green Dolphin Street,” you don’t think of the person who wrote the tune. You think of Miles. Well, I do anyway.

So that was another inspiration to me, or confirmation of the way I like to work, which is: Composition is the first... It’s the game plan. Now, you have musicians. Well, what’s the game? You can either get on the stage, and nobody is going to decide to play a song, in which case you have what we call ‘free music,’ which is, ‘ok, let’s play—boom!’—and then you have that, which can be a lot of fun. But if you’re going to have a particular message for the music, it starts with a composition, and then that’s the game. It’s like a game plan. It’s like, “Is it three strikes and you’re out?” What’s the rules of the game? Well, the rules are, it’s this farm, and here’s the harmonies, and here’s the feel—or whatever the composer puts into it. It’s a thought. It’s just a magical thing that you do. You put this thought down, and then musicians...you communicate it to others in a way that they understand, and then they get their take on it, and... That’s why I like composition.

Panken: An anecdotal question. How did Miles find you? How did the call come?

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Corea: I never really asked him. Tony was the one who called me up for the gig. He said, “Miles wants you to come to Baltimore. Herbie can’t make it.” Wow. Ok. Cool. But I had met Miles a couple of times. He popped into Birdland once or twice while I was playing there with Willie Bobo’s band. Because I met him in the men’s room one time! You know, we looked at each other. I’m sure he never remembered that, but I did.

But he came up to Minton’s Playhouse. I used to do six-week stints up there with the Sister Sadie All-Stars, with Blue Mitchell’s band, and he came up a couple of times and sat in with the band, and I was playing piano. So he heard me play then, and then Tony maybe recommended me...

Panken: And one thing led to another.

Corea: Yeah.

Panken: Now, when you joined Miles, I gather it was still an acoustic experience.

Corea: Yeah.

Panken: But it soon became more than an acoustic experience.

Corea: It was six months before the Rhodes. I played six months of gigs before the electric piano turned up on the scene. That’s a long story. Hah-hah!

Panken: It might take the whole time...

Corea: Well, briefly, in hindsight, it looked like Miles was looking to change the form of his message, and one of the things he heard in that... This is my take on this. One of the things he heard in that was electric piano and electric instruments. I think that with the quintet with Herbie, Ron and Wayne and Tony, that famous, I think he took...HE felt that he took that form of sound and improvisation as far as it could go. Because that quintet finally became a free music quintet. They would take a standard, and you would never know what song they were playing, and it was gorgeous music because it was so...whatever that word is that THIS is. So I think... He said to me a couple of times... He would make a comment to me when we’d be walking off the stage... He said about change. He was in change. So he was looking for something, and I think the electric piano was one of the physical sonic things that fit his concept, the new way he wanted to communicate.

Panken: When you joined the band, was Tony Williams still part of it?

Corea: Yeah, for six months.

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Panken: Then Jack DeJohnette comes in. But Dave Holland was there when you got there.

Corea: Dave was there when I got there, yeah.

Panken: The reason I'm asking... This maybe will seem like a bit of a stretch as a question. But you mentioned your involvement particularly in hearing Stockhausen's music, and there were things that you were doing on Ring Modulator with Miles that had an affinity to some of Stockhausen's *musique concrete*. I'm wondering if you can elaborate on some of the ideas that were elaborated while you were there, and maybe take us to what you were doing subsequently in Circle. I know you and Dave Holland were very close at that particular time, living in the 19th Street loft and so on.

Corea: Well, I was always...from when I first got to New York in '59-'60, I was always interested in improvisation, and Trane's developing directions, and what Ornette Coleman was doing, and the free players, and what Cecil Taylor was doing, all interested me. So I immediately would start to explore what that game was like, of not having a structure and just deciding not to know what you're going to play, and then create it as you go. It was another kind of a game for me. On the classical side of things, Bartok's and Stravinsky's music were the musics that... Bartok's String Quartets, for instance. John Cage's piano music. Some of Stockhausen's ideas. Varese. Earle Brown, who was an electronic composer. So I started to experiment in many different ways. But at that time, I didn't have very many electronics. So once I started to find gizmos that made sounds other than just a diatonic scale pitch to create atmospheres, I became intensely interested in it. That's why synthesizers eventually began to interest me.

Panken: Circle was a group that fascinated a certain type of listener at that time, with Dave Holland and Barry Altschul and Anthony Braxton. You made a trio record with Holland and Altschul called *A R C*... Can you speak about your experience with that group.

Corea: When I was in Miles' band, Dave Holland and I had a growing affinity for playing together, and playing freely together. It becomes obvious when you watch and listen to that quintet, which is now being released more...you can check that quintet out... There was some pretty loose, free improvisation within that group. When Dave and I saw that Miles was wanting to go in a different direction rhythmically and so forth, there was the parting of the ways. Dave and I were still highly interested in free improvisation, and that's where... We actually rehearsed at our 19th Street loft for months before we found a drummer. We would just play together, piano and bass. Then we said, "Well, let's make a trio," and we started looking for a drummer, and Barry joined us, and that's how that all began. But we kept the spirit of free improvisation.

Panken: Braxton came in...

Corea: He came in about a year later, and we turned it into a quartet. Then we started writing little sketches and little pieces.

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Panken: Well, I've taken us about ten minutes past the 40 minutes I promised to devote to the first portion of your career. But around late 1971-early 1972, your direction starts to change, or so it would seem, sonically. You've described it as such. And you begin composing and performing the music that made you a kind of household name among jazz people and people beyond jazz, with the Return To Forever band. I'd like you to describe the process.

Corea: Being in Miles' band was a great musical experience, and part of that musical experience was being a part of how...watching how Miles was developing his message and what he was trying to do with and for audience. I became more and more aware of that factor, of the fact that there was an audience out there. I did a lot of traveling with Stan Getz and with Miles. We played all over the world.

Panken: And with Sarah.

Corea: I didn't go overseas with Sarah, but with Stan and Miles I went everywhere, and I began to experience this phenomenon of different audiences, small, big, different cultures, and what they would do, what Miles would do, and what he was trying to do to communicate. It made me very aware of the aspect of communication.

Right around that time, in '68, I discovered L. Ron Hubbard's work, and his work is very, very much centered around the idea of communication and the ability to communicate. And I, on my own, discovered the importance of that connection, that primal connection between the artist and listener. Because no matter what happens with technology, no matter what we do with digital or TV or whatever, from caveman days into whatever future we're going to have, there's always going to be an artist performing something, dancing or singing or playing, and there's going to be some listeners there, and there's going to be an audience—and it's going to be live. That's the experience I think that all... That's the primal experience that all art is built on.

So I became quite interested in that, and I wanted to... Right toward the end of Circle, I noticed that we were playing for a very limited kind of audience, like you mentioned, and I wanted to play for more different kind of people. Plus, that I was connected with that...was the way of music that I had grown up in, with jazz and Latin music, which was with a groove...

Panken: Your father's dance band.

Corea: Exactly. The Four Sounds. And with melody. And with Mongo Santamaria...the dancers that I used to play for up in Harlem with Mongo's band, with the dancers sweating out there, and us having a ball. I missed that, and I decided I wanted to try to put a band together that had all of those elements, that had the element of free music, that had the element of composition, that had the element of... That's why I introduced the vocalist in that band. I wanted to have a song that communicated. Then when I met Stanley [Clarke], we both agreed on

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that direction. He loved that, too, and there we went.

Panken: You made a remark to me that you fell in love with the sound of that band, and it put you on a roll. And many of the compositions that are your big hits, as it were, were generated during that period.

Corea: Yeah. And the question is?

Panken: Just a comment.

Corea: Oh, I see. My comment is that it seems to me that anything fresh and new is what can excite an audience. Not only were the compositions new and the group new but we were all young, too, so we were kind of new on the scene, too. I think all of those elements together... I don't know. You'd be better to comment on why that occurred.

Panken: I don't think so, but that's all right. I think you'd do just fine at that.

Corea: Yeah...

Panken: But I'll ask you this, then. Apart from Return to Forever and the touring, you were also starting what people would call your "acoustic chamber" things—your solo piano record for ECM, your duets for Gary Burton. Those things begin at this time as well. And indeed, you start forming these units, these bands that you've described as "complete living units," that continue to nourish your musical production to this day.

Corea: Yeah.

Panken: Was this a conscious thing? Was it something that just happened organically?—you'd get interested in something, do a project, it would happen, it would lead to something. How did these things go?

Corea: Well, the organic part of it is where you get into something, and you know it just feels right. The conscious intentional part of it...

The organic part is like you kind of go with the feeling; you're not thinking about what you're doing. The conscious, intentional part is kind of stepping back from what you're doing, and having a look at it, and going, "Yeah—what are these elements?" Like I said before, I find that one of the strongest, deepest elements that continues to drive me is the social element. It's the element of being together in a group, and then forming something that is very high—high fun, high creation, fine. And then, try to make that as communicative as possible to the rest of the game, which is the audience. That became kind of a form for me.

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So I see it as: I have an idea, make a composition to form a game, and then find musicians. In addition to the week I'm doing with Stanley Clarke this week with a new quintet, I've also been on tour with Gary Burton and a string quartet, and each group, we form this social group. We're a group. It's the teamwork of it that really excites me, and is what makes the power of the message.

Think about one of my all-time favorite social-musical groups of all time, which is the John Coltrane Quartet with McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison, and Elvin Jones. That was a family. That was a spiritual unit. That was a message that John had that these musicians fully understood and could contribute to, and create within, and he was a perfect leader. John Coltrane was a perfect leader. So you have this unit, this power, this beauty. That to me has always been my favorite game in music to play. I mean, I can write a piece for a symphony orchestra and play with them, and that's nice. You do one gig or a couple of gigs. There's nothing wrong with that. But my favorite game is the one of forming groups.

Panken: And watching it grow over time.

Corea: Yes. Being a...

Panken: It must be a great pleasure.

Corea: Yes, I just love it. And that's what I'm now doing again for next year.

[END OF TRACK ONE]

Corea: I so miss New York, man. It's my favorite city in the world.

Panken: Part two, with the very patient Mr. Corea.

Corea: Part two.

Panken: I'd like to pick up on your point of bands as organic living units. What other bands can you think of? You mentioned Coltrane...

Corea: So many. Miles, of course, was able to formulate that social unit as well. His relationship with his musicians went way beyond just like hiring a guy to play music, especially the groups that we can see wasn't just a gig or two. One of the early ones...one of my favorite quintets was with Philly Joe Jones, Red Garland, Paul Chambers, and Coltrane. That was a real social unit of beauty. Art Blakey was able to do that with his bands. He had a genuine love for the musicians that he hired. He liked young guys. He liked guys to come in and write that music. He was proud of them. When Wayne would write and play, and Freddie would blow like that, he was just the proudest guy up there playing the drums. You can feel that. There's a beauty about that.

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Panken: I guess your musical relationship with Gary Burton, who you mentioned a couple of times in the here and now, and goes back to at least 1971...

Corea: True.

Panken: An incredible affinity. Can you speak to how that started to crystallize?

Corea: That was one of those things that was more organic than intentional. Every time we would get together, some nice stuff would happen, and we would both enjoy it. Then after the experience, there wasn't any particular thing of, "wow, let's do this or let's do that," but then a gig would come: "Oh, there's an offer here; let's go do that." It would be kind of like that. Through the years it kept developing like that. Then we started doing tours. Gary and I had both been working with the same agent, since he got started actually—Ted Kurland and his group. So we had this little organization that, "Oh, some offers have come in for some gigs, you guys"—BOOM. Then Manfred Eicher became a help to the duet because he was the first one who suggested that we do a recording, which resulted in our first record, *Crystal Silence*. So my relationship with Gary just kind of... It goes on because we always have fun. Now we're working with a string quartet, and it's like, wow, a whole other thing. He likes my compositions, too, and my arranging, and so, like I said, I love to do that. So here's a magnificent master musician who likes my stuff. Wow, I can write for the duet. I wrote for the duet like a chamber ensemble.

Panken: But the duos you did with him were also not really like anything you'd done before. If we're going to look for clues in your musical production in the '60s or turn of the '70s, we're really not going to see it. If you just go by the documents, it's as though, "Oh, this is just appearing."

Corea: It's true.

Panken: I'm wondering if you can talk about what process you went through to arrive at those sounds, at those ideas.

Corea: It was kind of like stumbling into it, in the sense that I wasn't thinking to myself, "Wow, I wonder how it would sound if I played with a vibraphone." What happened is...the story we often tell is that there was a concert either in Munich or Berlin (Gary will remember), and the concert was formed by soloists. There were like four-five-six soloists. Albert Mangelsdorff played a trombone solo, like 20 minutes on the trombone. John McLaughlin played guitar. I think Jean-Luc Ponty played a violin solo. Gary played a vibes solo. I played a piano solo. The German audience loved the show, so they were like hootin' and hollerin' at the end of the show, and we were standing backstage, and the promoter was going, "Why don't you guys go out there and play an encore." So I was standing next to Gary, and his vibes were out on the stage, and I thought, "Gee, 'La Fiesta' is a pretty simple tune, it has one chord in it—you

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want to go out and play?" So we improvised "La Fiesta." Manfred Eicher heard it and invited us to do a duet.

So we kind of stumbled into it. The duet setting was something kind of unusual, but both I and Gary liked the openness of it, and then we immediately found things to do. We found a way to deal with it. Like, how do you play with another guy without a drummer and a bass player? How do you do that? But I mean, I had some grounding in solo piano. Art Tatum was already a hero of mine, and the history of jazz piano, of course, has all kind of rhythm in it. We developed it from there.

Panken: Stanley Clarke and Lenny White come into your life at this time. They're still in your life in a very consequential way. What's the link you share with Stanley Clarke? It seems to have continued unabated and grown over four decades.

Corea: Yes. It's one of those spiritual things that just happens. We became friends. He's ten years younger than me. That's one of the things we always know, because he's exactly ten years younger than me. (It's a joke we have.) When we met, we kind of came together through listening to John Coltrane's music. We were telling the audience that last night. We listened to "Wise One." Then we listened to "A Love Supreme" together. That was a connection spirit for us. I had these songs that I had written, and I wanted to experiment with them. We met in Joe Henderson's band. We did a gig with Joe Henderson in Philly (Stanley is from Philly), and we played together. I was playing Fender Rhodes.

So I wanted Stanley to come and play my music with me, and we experimented with a few drummers until we found Airtio. To make a long story short, that was the first version of Return to Forever. Then when Airtio and Flora left the band and had other things to do, and that ensemble split up, we wanted to continue Return to Forever. At that point, I had zero kind of marketing idea in my head. It's like, "Well, is it going to be the same music?" I didn't care. It was still Return to Forever. A lot of people tell me how shocked they were when they heard "Hymn of the Seventh Galaxy," which was like a complete new direction.

So Stanley and I just... We have this agreement that has lasted through the decades of stuff... We love to play together. In fact, we have plans to do some duet concerts, some more trio stuff. He loves to compose. He's a great movie score writer as well as writing for his own band. We share a lot of interests.

Panken: Had you met Lenny White via Miles?

Corea: Well, I met him playing with Miles, but I really came into a friendship with Lenny through Stanley. Stanley recommended Lenny for the new band, the Hymn of the Seventh Galaxy band. So we went out... Stanley and I engaged Lenny to be a trio at Todd Barkan's San Francisco's place, and we played a week there to audition guitar players. That was our purpose.

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That's when we found Billy Connors on the guitar—he was living out there. That's when we found Mingo Lewis, playing conga. That was the first Return To Forever. Then the trio kind of came together real quick.

Panken: The feel you got was a certain definitive sound of that period. Whatever it was that you got together seems to be a lasting thing, apart from everything else...

Corea: Well, rock music, and blues, and funk music, and those kinds of influences were... Stanley and Lenny grew up with that stuff. I didn't so much, but I liked it from a distance. I liked Stevie Wonder's music, for instance, from the beginning. But in Stanley's and Lenny's rhythm, they combine all those influences together. We talk about it sometimes. Lenny is the real historian of the trio. He can discuss how those influences come together. He uses his jazz sensibility and roots combined with his groove roots, and they come together with a kind of drumming that's pretty unique.

Panken: So the '70s progress, the '80s progress, we don't have to get into all the minutiae... But at a certain point, you start linking up with the bassist who was your primary bass partner after Stanley Clarke, John Patitucci, with whom you do a number of things over a decade. That also seems like an important link. I know you also encouraged him to strike out on his own after a certain point. Can you describe that relationship.

Corea: Around '82 or '83, I started to want to form another group that had an electric sound to it, so I could write music kind of in the direction of Return to Forever, but with a new set of musicians. We were living in L.A. at that time, and my wife Gayle and I would put on Valentine's parties... Gayle loves hearts and valentines, and so we would host a Valentine's party in L.A., and invite musicians and friends, just to come over. Gayle would always promote jamming during the evening. At that time, I was looking for a bass player. Gayle helped me find John somehow. I think he was playing with Victor Feldman... Anyway, I found him on a cassette tape, and I thought, wow, this guy is great. He was invited over to the house, the Valentine's party, and I heard him play. Then I thought, "All I need now is a drummer." I wanted to start with a rhythm section. That was always a successful action for me, is to start with a rhythm section, no matter what kind of a band I wanted to build.

Then the other fortunate thing that happened is that when I was in New York right after that time, I asked Michael Brecker, "who's the best young drummer around?" and without a lag he said, "Dave Weckl." I'd never heard of Dave. So we saw that Dave was playing with Billy Connors' trio down on the East Side there, and I went and saw Weckl play. He blew me away. I hired him that night. I said, "Can you come out and do these gigs?" That's how the Elecktric Band got started. But John came along and just covered the whole... He's one of the few bassists I can think of, including Christian, too, Christian McBride... John can cover all the musical bases, like Stanley can. That's an unintentional band.

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Panken: Do the electric, do the acoustic, every...

Corea: Yes, and every kind of music. John is a very wide musician, interested in everything, and a quite good composer and bandleader.

Panken: Did this group also generate new ideas for writing for you?

Corea: It did. The Elektric Band was more... It remained more my band as a composer. The guys were 15-20 years younger than me, and happy to play my music. And I was happy to write for it. Whereas Return to Forever became more of a cooperative band where everybody was writing music. So that's kind of the direction that I think the Elektric Band took. We recorded 5 or 6 or 7 records, and it was always a new repertoire, and then we always took it out and played.

The other nice thing about the Elektric Band that I really enjoyed was the fact that the rhythm section—John Patitucci and Dave Weckl—within the group formed a trio that could play acoustic-style jazz, if you want to call it that, in the older tradition that I loved. Because I would get invites to do that while I had the Elektric Band, and I didn't particularly want to go out and form another band. So we did an experiment one time. I said, "Dave, can you play a small kit of drums?" He said, "Yeah, I'll give it a go." Then John took out his acoustic bass and the Akoustic Band was formed.

Panken: There are two things I want to make a point of addressing. One is that you mentioned, again in these earlier conversations, that you began to rekindle your interest in classical music in a serious way, specifically the music of Mozart, at some point in the '70s or the early '80s, and that this is one interest that starts to animate you during those years. Can you talk about how that happened? I think you mentioned that you'd heard classical music, you'd played, it wasn't something you took particularly seriously, and in your late thirties it started to grab you again.

Corea: It's funny how these strains of histories all seem a little bit separate, but they were all tied in. That's a very definite track that I can follow, that starts with me going to Mr. Salvatore Sullo, him introducing me to the piano music of Bach and Beethoven, like I said, and me liking it a lot, but not...it didn't strike me as being something for me to delve into. Plus the fact that, like I said, the first classical music composers that really piqued my interest were the modern ones—Bartok and Stravinsky and Berg and Scriabin more.

So my experience with Mozart really revolves around Friedrich Gulda, the great Austrian pianist. I'm trying to make it brief, so I don't bore you to death with it. There was a great Cypriot classical pianist named Nicolas Economou, who showed up at some of my gigs. He was this wild guy. I thought, "Who is this guy?" He said, "Oh, I love your music; I'm a piano player, too." "Oh, ok." I said, "Play something for me." He sat down—KRRRWWW... I thought, "Wow." We became friends, me and Nicolas. Anyway, Nicolas was proud of the classical music environment in... He lived in Germany. And there was the first year of what became the famous festival called the Klaviersommer out of Munich, put together by Loch Productions. The first year of that was

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a collection of just classical pianists. But Nicolas, being kind of a wild guy and liking improvising (and he liked the way I played), invited me in to play, to be this jazz guy. So I found myself in this group of Martha Argerich, [(?)Roian Tradrin(?)—18:08], the great Russian composer. Nelson Freire, the Brazilian pianist. Friedrich Gulda. These great classical pianists. I just did my thing; I improvised and so forth.

Anyway, Gulda wanted to do a duet with me, because Gulda was always a jazz guy, too. He wanted to play jazz, and he liked me. So we met on stage and did an improvised two-piano concert. In the middle of the concert (it's one of these moments in my life), he started into this melody that was gorgeous, so I just took my hands off the piano and listened for a while. It became obvious that he was playing a piece of written music. The moment just took me out there. As he's playing, I'm thinking, "Who is this composer? It must be some young, brilliant guy who is writing in the style of the classical composers." I was really inspired.

So after the concert was over, I said to Gulda, who had a kind of gruff, Austrian demeanor... I said, "Friedrich, what was that gorgeous piece that you played?" He looked at me like this. He said, "That was Mozart!" That was Mozart?! So in my mind, it went BOOM. "Wow, I haven't been listening to Mozart." I was thinking that Mozart was candy music, see. So it got me very interested. I said, "How can I learn more about this Mozart stuff?" Gulda said, "Oh, you want to learn more about that? Ok, I send you something." So not more than a month later, I received in the mail a mini-score of Mozart's Double Piano Concerto in E-flat major, the only two-piano concerto that Mozart wrote, and Gulda said, "I invite you to perform this with me in six months with the Concertgebouw of Amsterdam at the Mozart Festival in Amsterdam.

Panken: Threw down the gauntlet.

Corea: Yeah! I looked at the score, and I thought, "Well, I can do this." Like, naively. I got the score, and I had just a glorious six months practicing that first piano concerto, and went to Amsterdam with a complete naive, unreverential attitude toward Mozart. I didn't worship Mozart, but I loved Mozart. We met in this room (another moment I remember) with Gulda to rehearse the concerto with the conductor. I don't know if you know the name Nikolaus Harnoncourt, but he's one of the most revered classical composers. He's still active, and I found out later this... Anyway, he was in the room, and we rehearsed, and he was a very sweet man. He gave me a compliment about the way I played. And we recorded with the Concertgebouw.

So I became enamored of classical music at that point, especially through Mozart. That's how it began anyway.

Panken: Can you trace any developments in your m.o. from being immersed in classical music, in your composing...

Corea: What's "m.o.?"

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Panken: Modus operandi. Your way of doing things.

Corea: Oh, ok.

Panken: In terms of composing, setting up groups, attitude towards performance? Any direct impact? Separate files of activity?

Corea: From classical music...

Panken: From immersing yourself in classical music.

Corea: Oh, I see. With the composers who are no longer alive, the dead composers, so to speak, who are not dead at all, I found a very, very valuable and treasured connection to these fellows, that I'm sure many other musicians use. Which is: When you open up a score of a composer like Mozart or Beethoven or Bach, or any one of these greats who the culture has kept alive... They are not famous because they were famous. They were famous because their music touched people and people kept doing it, kept wanting it. So the real connection into these great men's lives is not through biographies or what other people say, or it's not even through renditions of their music—although that's closer. What it is, is it's through their written scores. Because that's what they put down on that sheet to tell someone else to play. So when I began with this attitude of studying the scores of Mozart, of Scriabin, and Satie, and other composers, I developed this perception of being with them at the moment they were writing, and picking up what they were into. What was this message? What were they doing? Then I would read some background about them, and I'd say, "Oh, yeah, that corroborates; I figured it was like that." It was a way of study for me and an inspiration for me that continues to this day.

Panken: So it really enriched you, is what you're saying. Enriched the experience.

Corea: Totally, and continues to. And now, I realize that this is a connection to any composer, living or wherever he is, that when he composes something, that initial sheet, that initial idea... For instance, take Wayne Shorter's music. Great composer. One of my favorites. He wrote a bunch of these short-form pieces that Miles took and recorded, as we all know, as a great oeuvre of works. They're like one page long. They're very short and simple. But when Miles began to perform them, of course the musicians took these initial ideas and improvised with them, and then expanded them, and now you're really listening to Herbie and Ron and Tony and Miles, and you kind of forget about the composer, in a way. But if you go back to the written note and what was originally conceived by Wayne when he wrote... For instance, we're doing "Prince of Darkness" this week, and I pulled that song out of Wayne's oeuvre. I learn what Wayne was thinking that moment, and I get enriched.

Panken: I said there were two points I wanted to bring up, and the second is that in the early

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'80s, I believe for the first time, you start to record jazz repertoire, on the *Trio Music* recording with Roy Haynes and Miroslav Vitous, where you're interpreting Monk tunes. So you start to present your interpretations of Thelonious, then subsequently in the '90s you address the Bud Powell book... Would that be connected to the process that you were just describing?

Corea: Absolutely. For instance, in jazz, because the way jazz musicians compose is not like Mozart in the sense that Mozart wrote out every note for an orchestra on a piece in a piano concerto, for instance, that lasted a half-hour. The way a jazz musician writes is, he writes a game plan—like I was talking about before. You write down something that's a theme, and get enough form in it that the group can grasp onto and then expand. That's a different way. But in jazz, the composer is not acknowledged that much. When a jazz group plays in a club or in a concert, they might announce who composed this piece, but it's not that important, you write a new piece... You write it as a game plan; you just play it. But I think the compositions are quite important, and the jazz composers have their way of writing that's equally a rich catalogue.

Panken: Back when you were a student... Well, you're an eternal student. Back in your formative years, your apprentice years, let's say, and hearing Monk's early records, were you trying to play his music at that time?

Corea: Monk?

Panken: Monk early on, when you were a teenager. What brought you to Monk as a vehicle?

Corea: I always loved what Monk did. I guess it was a little bit later on that I started to try to interpret and play Monk's music. Then certainly, when I met Roy... Roy was one of the great Monk drummers, and Roy loved, and loves, Monk. So when I'd hang out with Roy, Roy would talk about Monk and... And I saw Monk's quartet play quite a bit here in the city actually. I spent one two- or three-week engagement at the Apollo Theater opposite Monk's quartet, and saw every set. So Monk was another mentor and teacher for me, and I began to play his music and try to interpret his compositions. From his compositions... From every composer (Monk, like Mozart, or like Wayne, or like Scriabin), there's something... In order for me to play that music the way I would like to, there's something of the composer that I want to keep putting into it. So when I play Monk's music, I try to make it sound a little bit like Monk.

Panken: Then in the '90s, you start to address Bud Powell's body of work, though more in an ensemble context than in a trio context. You've described him as a hero. You went to hear him when he came from France to play at Birdland in 1964, and you absorbed his recordings early on. You can describe your feelings about interpreting his music?

Corea: Bud was one of my first... Well, first of all, he was the first pianist I heard on that 78-vinyl when I was a kid that got me real sparkled about the piano. I wanted to be able to play with that kind of fluidity. So during the '60s, one of the things I did with Bud's music and his

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recordings was set up a scene where I had my piano in my practice room, and I set up my two hi-fi speakers (we used to use that term) here and here, and I'd turn the volume of the vinyl to a volume where, when I played the piano, the sound coming out of the record and my piano were about equal, so I could play right along with Bud. I tried to learn how to play Bud's phrasing that way.

Bud always had a depth about him. And when it came to the Remembering Bud Powell project, I realized that Bud, along with Monk, along with Bill Evans, along with many other jazz pianists... We have great composers, and their role as a composer was never really... Well, Monk's was. But Bud's wasn't acknowledged that much. It wasn't realized what a great composer of music that Bud was. So that was an inspiration to want to delve into Bud's compositions.

Panken: Could you go into more depth about Bud Powell as a composer?

Corea: Well, "Glass Enclosure" [sings first four notes] is his influence of classical music, for instance. It's written almost as a classical piece. It's like an interesting fusion of music. [SINGS ANOTHER REFRAIN] That's different than Duke or Monk. It had a classical influence to it. Which I didn't realize then, but now, looking back at it, I thought... Bud studied Bach. I know he studied Bach. In fact, he has one track of...

Panken: "Bud On Bach."

Corea: "Bud On Bach." Yeah, exactly. Bud was a deep guy. The lesson to be... One of the lessons I learned about Bud, through Bud, was a non-musical lesson, which was the real horrific effects of psycho-surgery and psychiatry on certain jazz musicians. And drugs. That's what took Thelonious Monk out, too, if you read that recent bio that Robin Kelley wrote.

Panken: It was a big hazard among a lot of musicians at the time you were coming up.

Corea: Yes. It was street drugs, but it was being pushed by psychiatry, and that's what's the unknown part about it. What happened to Bud through all of those horrible experiences, of course, harmed his body. But I saw him, I think it was a year before he passed away, at Birdland, although his body looked a little bit slow around, when he put his hands on the piano there was all of the depth that was ever there.

Panken: we now have about a half-hour to go, and I'd like to talk about the last 15-20 years.

Corea: Can we take a break?
[BREAK AT 32:29]

Panken: In 1992, I think it is, you form your own record label.

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Corea: Stretch.

Panken: Stretch. Why?

Corea: Why? Well, I had the model of Larry Rosen and Dave Grusin at GRP. They were two musicians who got together and made a record company. I thought, “You know, musicians should make record companies, because we’re musicians...” I’ve always enjoyed having the musicians, especially younger than me, who work with me...help them get their careers going. It’s natural. That’s how I would want to be treated when I was in a band. There’s so much talent around. “Gee, let’s do this.” So there was funding available to do that. When I made my association with Glen Barros and John at Concord Records, that idea was right there. So we gave it a try. We got some funding, put a deal together, and I think I... Chick Corea Records... I recorded 10 or 11 under the Stretch label, or maybe a few more, and then the rest, there were another 20 or 30 or so that we recorded of other musicians. I’m proud of all of the releases, and I hope they see the light of day again at some point. But at one point, I realized that me... I didn’t know how to run a record company, business-wise, and so the economics of it just started not working. And rather than me going in, figuring it out and piecing it all together, Stretch just kind of de-stretched and got put in an archive. Now what I’m trying to do with Stretch is just retain the label name—because I like the name. The name is a cool name—Stretch Records. I would like to use as it could to continue to help other artists, maybe put my own records on it. But as far as selling records goes, it’s one of the furthest things from my mind at the moment.

Panken: I’m going to hold that thought. But one thing I’d like to ask you: It’s my impression (and you can tell me if there’s anything to it or I’m just fantasizing) that your proprietorship of the label coincides with another creative direction. Not long thereafter, you launch Origin, the acoustic sextet, which you hadn’t done for a while. You start the “new trio,” I think you called it, with Avishai Cohen and Jeff Ballard. You start to find different duo partners and reunite with old ones. I think you described it to me as renewing your relationships with your old friends, and finding your next step in that manner. So I’m wondering if there was any connection. Or, if not, what was your mindset as you turned 50, as you entered that decade?

Corea: During the ‘70s, when I formed Return to Forever and started actually having a platform to get my writing and my own compositions performed with groups that I loved, I really focused so heavily on that, I found that after 10-15 years I started losing connection with my past...very rich bunch of friends. I also had this thought (which I still have, but it was more of an assertion back there) that I’ve got to do something new. That’s old. Working with that guy is old. I’ve got to do something new. It was kind of an assertive thought that really didn’t need to be so black-and-white like that. Then, I don’t know, something happened around that time where I thought, “Gee, the richness of my life is my musical associations with my musicians. It really is.” Because as a composer, it’s just half an act. The other half (just to give an arbitrary number) is what happens when a group gets put together. So my relationships with my musicians is THE

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richness of my life. So I started reconnecting again, and thinking, “Yeah, you know, this feels really, really good.”

Actually, that trend, I still love it. You know, you’re always trying, everybody’s always trying to get some kind of a balance in their lives, and I’ve got this balance between wanting to keep all of my really treasured connections, but at the same time always wanting to do something new, too. So it’s a balance.

Panken: Let’s talk about some of the specific components by which you’ve attained equipoise over the last 15-20 years. For one, the Origin Sextet was a remarkable band. You did a 6-CD set with them from this very venue.

Corea: Yes.

Panken: They were young musicians who hadn’t been in your orbit before. It was really a new band.

Corea: It was a new band. That was a real quick, simple connection, which is: A friend of mine gave me a cassette tape, of an unreleased date that this musician named Avishai Cohen did with his band. I listened to it, and I kept listening to it over and over again. It had all these musical elements that I love. So when I did a gig here at the Blue Note, I finally got to meet Avishai. He came up, we met. At that time, I had Stretch Records going. So my initial thing with Avishai was, “Take this music that I hear on this cassette, and make a record for Stretch.” He loved the idea. He wanted to produce his record. So I helped him “produce” his first record, which my role was I sat around and just enjoyed everything, and let him get on with it.

Panken: What were the things that attracted you?

Corea: It was that thing I mentioned before. It was this spark of creativity that I can hear coming through, and there’s this composer at the basis of it. It’s not just musicians playing free music. There’s this message that comes through the composition, and you can tell that the bass player and his compositions set the mood for this music. It was unique to me.

So I wanted to help this musician. And then, during the process of helping Avishai make that first record for Stretch, I met all of his musicians, and I had this idea of putting an acoustic group together, and I thought, “There’s my group! Avishai, do you mind if I rip your group off?” Everyone was quite happy to come tour.

Panken: There are a few elements I can think of in his music. One thing is that there was this mix of North African, Afro-Cuban, and swing elements that pervaded the pieces and the improvising, and those flavors have been attractive to you over the years. Your immersion in Spanish music, which we haven’t talked about (this might be a time to connect to that feel) and

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other things. Can you elaborate a bit on what was going on during those years?

Corea: Well, that was that reality factor of high affinity for the same kinds of things. I listened to Avishai and his music, and I thought, “wow, I can relate to all that; I want to play with that guy, too,” because of all of his tastes and elements, and the sound that he got on the bass. Everything. That was how that affinity came together, was me recognizing our love for these kind of rhythms and this kind of music.

Panken: Does immersing yourself in his tonal personality, or other musicians, spark musical ideas which thereby generate compositions and a flow of music?

Corea: Absolutely.

Panken: There’s that feedback process that happens for you.

Corea: Absolutely. Like I said, it’s a social tendency to want to interact with other musicians and set a game plan to play, and then learn from them, see what they bring to the table. Because like I say, it’s not like Mozart Piano Concerto where all the notes are written. It’s this song form, and a form that everyone improvises off of, which means that the musicians now bring a lot to it, and Avishai certainly brought a lot to it. Origin had a couple of his nice compositions in it, too.

Panken: You did several duos with Bobby McFerrin as well, which really exist unto themselves. Nothing I can think of sounds like those duos you did with him. Well, nothing he does sounds like anything else.

Corea: That’s true.

Panken: But I think with you, it was a particularly felicitous interplay.

Corea: Yeah. And with Bobby it still is. We just finished a tour recently. We had the most fun ever. I sometimes call him “Point Man,” in terms of the fact that, in terms of taking a sophisticated art form, he’s able to, in his way, communicate that to a vast number of people. I find that fascinating. I mean, it’s not like he’s getting out there with a group with a big beat. He goes out on the stage all by himself. And he’s very, very communicative with audiences. He does a very special thing. So I learned a lot from Bobby when we worked together about that aspect of it, and just as a musician he’s sparkling. I mean, we did Mozart together. He conducted the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and we conducted two Mozart piano concerti.

Panken: There’s a kind of characterological affinity that I sense between the two of you, and I think the word I could use for it is the title of one of your records, “chameleon.” You can both exist and function in so many different voices and roles that you assume in the course of interacting in notes and tones or generating them autonomously.

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Corea: Our connection point was the name of our first record, which was actually *Play*. Bobby and I, when we're together, we discuss this and that about music, and we share things, but there's not a lot of philosophical conversation. But that is about as philosophical as we get. What are we doing on stage? Oh, we're playing. This is real play, like kids playing. That's a connective spirit that we've always had in the beginning.

Panken: But you have expressed your approval of the term "chameleon" as a kind of descriptor of you. At least you told me that a couple of years ago.

Corea: Oh, yeah? Well, again, I'm pretty sociable and open about people expressing themselves, including writers and critics, and whoever wants to speak about music should to speak about music in the terms that they want. So I thought it was kind of a cute term, "chameleon."

Panken: The way you put it at the time was that you liked Dustin Hoffman vis-a-vis Robert DeNiro. Both great actors, but Robert DiNiro is Robert DiNiro, and Dustin Hoffman...

Corea: Is everybody. Yeah.

Panken: You kind of applied it to yourself.

Corea: The basic thing is that I never found it too interesting to think about myself at all. It's not a place of interest. I don't find anything there. What I find interesting is others, and musicians, and projects. So when I get into creating a project, or composing something, there's always a scenario about it, which means there's other musicians, there's a kind of idea of where we want to place this. Are we going to do a record, or are we doing kind of gigs, like this... It becomes this performance that could be likened to a movie, making a movie. It's got all of these elements. It's got a script. It's got a message. It's got a soundtrack. It's got a way you operate. Of course, it's got this mellifluous thing that movies don't have, which is that it keeps changing performance after performance—which a movie doesn't. That's why I don't look at myself and say, "Well, I am this, and therefore I am going to do that." I don't think that way. I think, "Well, I can be I guess whatever it's necessary to be in order to play that game." So it's the game out there that's interesting to me, not myself.

Panken: So it's always the game.

Corea: Yeah.

Panken: Talk about the game of duo piano. Recently, Hiromi. Gonzalo Rubalcaba.

Corea: Yeah.

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Panken: Stefano Bollani.

Corea: Yeah. Marcus Roberts. Marcus Roberts came down to the Blue Note and played a night with me last November. I love Marcus' playing. He's a beauty.

Yeah, duo piano started with Herbie, was my first... Duets in general are very intimate. When I have a partner, where the flow of communication is just seamless... It's actually this thing I described about not being interested in myself, being interested in the project. The other pianist, the other duet partner is kind of doing that same thing. He's not interested in himself. He's interested in what's over here. And I'm not interested in myself. I'm interested in what's over here. And you get this beautiful synergy. I love the game.

Panken: A philosophical question. Is music language?

Corea: Oh, it's way more than language. Language is just a mechanic. It's just like saying, "Is communication language?" Language is just what style of symbols you use to express what you actually intend.

Panken: So music is life, is what you're saying?

Corea: Music is a communication to me, which is life. To me, communication is life. Because nothing happens without communication. When you get up, even if you're alone in a room, if you look at the wall, that's communication.

Panken: Do you have a broader attitude towards communication than let's say you did...

Corea: Yes.

Panken: ...30-40 years ago?

Corea: Yes, much more so.

Panken: Talk about how it evolved. It seems you're using all the components you've ever used in your musical history at any given moment, and you could access any of those components at any time.

Corea: Communication... L. Ron Hubbard researched communication in terms of the spirit, and his ideas helped me clarify what I experience in life as what communication is. That's why I use the term. It's a cause-distance effect. There's something intended, there's something put across a distance, there's something that's understood over there, and then reversed—there's something intended, put across a distance, understood over here. Not just with beings, not just with people, human beings, but with physical environments as well, with the universe around you. To me,

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that's what life is. If you're awake... Joe Farrell wrote a tune called "When You're Awake," which has a funny... But when you're awake, that's what you do. You have your attention which you put on things. It's a mechanic. It's kind of a mechanical thing. You can get good at it. You can practice that. You can get better at it if you understand its mechanics. So to me, communication forms everything. But it's the intention that's important, not the language. There's hundreds of languages. Music also has a lot of different languages actually, a lot of different symbols and a lot of different sounds, and different agreements about the way music moves. Look at the difference between Indian music and jazz in terms of rhythm, for instance. A different language.

Panken: But what's fascinating is that they communicate. With someone who understands both languages thoroughly enough, they can transmute into hybrids. That's one of the things I think you've done via your use of flamenco and your knowledge of Afro-Cuban rhythms. You've created various hybrid idioms that you can use at any given moment.

Corea: It's a love for culture. Culture meaning not just highbrow and things like that—not that definition. But culture meaning the beauty and aesthetics that gets created generation after generation, when one generation gives to another. So you have Spanish culture, and you have Indian culture, and you have the various cultures of the human race. Of course, with our world now, as is often noticed (you can't not notice it), because of travel and ways of communication, different cultures are able to communicate with other cultures. So you have this ability to transcend language, and always create something new. That's what an artist is interested in, is creating a new message, creating some new game, creating something beautiful.

Panken: I just have a few more things to ask you, although that would have been a beautiful place to end. Nonetheless, I do have my game plan.

Corea: That's all right.

Panken: A couple of other projects. One of them that fascinated me when I heard it was the Five Peace Band. I thought it was an extraordinarily rewarding project to listen to, for me personally. Can you speak about its evolution. For one thing, as we discussed the last time I spoke with you, it was almost two different bands, depending on who was playing drums.

Corea: Exactly. Which shows the priesthood of the drums! The Five Peace Band was just my love for my friend John McLaughlin, and what I think of him, and how I value his music and how I study what he does, what our friendship means through the years. He's one of my favorite all-time musicians of any era. So I always wanted to... We never really did a project together. We had little hits together, and we always admired each other's way, and have been friends through the years.

So that was the idea. I talked to John, and brought to him this idea of putting a band

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together. I knew that he didn't do collaborations too much, so I was hoping that he might go for it. We planned it, and he wrote some things, I wrote some things, and there you go.

Panken: Well, there's more to it than that.

Corea: I'm sure!

Panken: You had two, maybe three very long tours with that band, and you were together a long time, and I'm sure it was a very different experience at the end than it was at the beginning. I saw it early on, and I saw it later on...

Corea: Well, the initial band with John and Kenny Garrett... Kenny Garrett is a monster musician and bandleader and composer, of course, in his own right. So me and John and Kenny, just us getting together, was an interesting way to find how to be on stage together and create together. It happened pretty quickly. Then having Christian there, who is another monster... That synergy took a while. Vinnie was there, holding it all together, and playing great. So it took a while to develop the groupness of it. We started playing and enjoying it. The compositions were quite different from one another, but then it started to coalesce into a set of music.

But then when we found out that Vinnie didn't have the schedule to make the second part of the tour, I recommended Brian, because he is one of my favorites to play with, but also knew that it would give the same repertoire a completely new look. So when Brian came in, I made sure to not... I might have sent Brian one of the live recordings that I did, but I said, "Brian, look, just come in and interpret this music the way you want to interpret this music." Of course, John is of that mindset as well. So Brian came in and immediately put a whole other spin on the same set.

Panken: It seems almost like a Miles Davis experience, in terms of the music shifting in different directions every night.

Corea: Yes, that's true. John's excursions and Kenny's excursions would take us in all kinds of different exploratory directions.

Panken: A second project I want to ask you about, although it was a fairly short-term event, but it produced a very consequential recorded document in your corpus, is the Bill Evans homage that you did with Eddie Gomez, your old friend, and Paul Motian, with whom you hadn't played before. One reason I wanted to ask you about is because of Paul Motian's ability to... Well, he also had that alchemy, but it took a very different shape than other drummers. I found it fascinating all the way to listen to the three-way interplay, and I wonder what the experience was like for you and what generated it for you.

Corea: What generated it was my love for both of those musicians. Also with Bill Evans' spirit

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kind of hovering over the whole thing, because of the fact that every time I've ever worked with Eddie Gomez, it's not possible to work with Eddie without being aware of his 11 years with Bill Evans—of course. And then Paul, my God, he made those seminal recordings that will be remembered forever with Bill. I thought these two guys have never played together, two great Bill Evans alumni, and this would be a way to immerse myself in a vibe that who knows what's going to happen? So during these two weeks here at the Blue Note, it was a float for me to experience what happened every set. There was no way to predict what would ever happen with any of the renditions, which was very exciting for me.

Panken: Was that unusual for you?

Corea: Kind of unusual recently. It was unusual recently to have such an open feel. But Eddie was the key, because Eddie has a formal mind, musically, that is totally grounded in the most traditional, beautiful way, classically, musically generally. And he also has an open, wide ability to improvise in any way at all. Of course, Paul was just an interpreter. He was just a painter on the drums. And Eddie can play very, very rhythmically, and Paul at that point was not into playing very hard rhythm. So I thought, "Well, this is going to be interesting," and it certainly was. They both found what to do with each other's offerings, and I kind of floated in and around the middle of that.

Panken: You made a comment once about the lyrical side of the piano and the percussive side of the piano—and all the modulations in between. This gig to me seemed like a great example of that.

Corea: Of all kinds of different ways to play the piano. Yeah, it's true. Well, my partners were perfect for that kind of thing, to play rhythmically and also of course to play lyrically, and also inspired by the great lyricism of Bill Evans and some of his repertoire.

Panken: One thing that seems evident is that you've kept your ears wide open to the generation after yours, and the generation after that, and the generation after that, and have interacted and performed with them, and taken what you can use, and mentored. Where I'm going with that is your project last year with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, where they played arrangements of your repertoire by their now-formidable staff of in-band arrangers. I'm wondering two things. Was that the first time that a project like that has been done, fresh arrangements within an orchestra of your compositions? Also, what the experience of working with the JALCO was like.

Corea: The one experience I had like that before that was working with Erland Skomsvoll, the Norwegian pianist and composer and bandleader, with the Trondheim Jazz Band. Erland wrote arrangements of my songs for that band. There's a recording that we did which I am very, very proud of. That became a real group. So I had that experience one time. This was different, because the musicians in the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra are different musicians, and each one brought some really interesting twists to my songs. Wynton wrote three arrangements that

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are incredibly creative and beautiful. So I had a blast playing with those guys. We're going to do it again next year.

Panken: Finally, you like to talk about the future, and you've talked about the future. But in the here and now, there's another new band that you'll be going on stage with in promptly two hours and twenty-five minutes.

Corea: Yes. There's another new band that's leading into another new band actually. Because that balance I was talking about of connecting with my old friends and doing collaborations, kind of went... It went this way, and I needed to bring it more this way in terms of me writing and putting my own ideas together with a new band. That was the workshop idea for me and Stanley this week, was some young musicians who are incredible to play with—Ravi Coltrane; Charles Altura, who is a real discovery for me on the guitar; and Marcus Gilmore, who is Roy Haynes' grandson, who is just an amazing creative man...

Panken: And who has toured with you in the past.

Corea: Yes.

Panken: You did a Mozart project, I think...

Corea: That's right. My concerto. He first sat in with me when he was 14 years old, playing his head off. So that's a project that's also leading into a brand-new band I'm putting together next year called the Vigil. It's my vigil on art and life and music, from a point of view of everything changes, but this vigil on this basic thing never changes. It's also going to be with young musicians, with new compositions, and I'm writing and arranging now, and we have a full year of touring next year.

Panken: So you're already booked for 2013.

Corea: Well, it's getting booked now. The summer and all the way through September and October.

Panken: How far out are you booked?

Corea: Well, I've got some gigs into '14, some gigs into 2014.

Panken: Well, that's far enough into the future to end this conversation.

Corea: Ok!

Panken: Thank you. It was an honor to spend two hours with you. You're so concise.

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Amazing.

Corea: Great pleasure, man, on my part. Thanks for your interest. It was fun talking about the days.

Panken: I know you don't care to dwell on history.

Corea: It's fun. I enjoy it, just so long as none of it is taken as any kind of rules or anything.

[END OF CONVERSATION]

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