

Pop Talk: Corea is living the sweet life

by *George_Varga*

Whether it's recently touring with banjo wiz Bela Fleck, performing with the Foo Fighters at the 2004 Grammy Awards or his collaborations with such jazz giants as Miles Davis, Sarah Vaughan and Stan Getz, Chick Corea is a musician who knows few boundaries.

THE SWEET LIFE - At age 66, keyboard wizard Chick Corea gets to play with his favorite Musicians. 'It is exactly like being in a candy store,' he says. CNS Photo courtesy of Michael Greco. He also seems to know exactly what to play, and what not to play, as demonstrated by his past work with Duke Ellington and Cat Stevens, or by his more recent teamings with such guitar luminaries as Carlos Santana, Robben Ford and Spanish flamenco master Paco de Lucia.

It's almost as if this veteran keyboardist, composer and bandleader is a veteran "actor" who immerses himself in each musical role, the better to achieve as much artistic and emotional impact as possible. Make that a veteran actor who has rarely wavered in his quest to achieve the timeless qualities suggested by the name of his pioneering fusion-jazz band of the 1970s, Return to Forever.

"In a sense, I try to do what Dustin Hoffman does as an actor," said Corea. "Not in terms of being a different person on stage so much, but in creating a program of music with other musicians that has a particular message or feel, or that tells a particular story. And using the movies as an analogy frees myself up as the maker of stories."

The musical stories Corea has told over the course of his five-decade career have been remarkably varied, and he continues to add new chapters on an almost monthly basis.

Last month, he did a tour of Australia that found him performing on different nights with vibraphonist Gary Burton, electric guitarist Frank Gambale and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. As soon as he returned to the United States, Corea began a tour with banjo innovator Fleck to promote their aptly titled new duo album, "The Enchantment."

He and Burton are now on a monthlong European concert trek billed as the 35th anniversary "Crystal Silence" tour, in honor of their classic 1972 album of the same name. Before a U.S. fall tour with his reunited Elektric Band, Corea will head to Tokyo in September for a tour with Japanese pianist Hiromi and a trio that teams him with bassist John Patitucci, a longtime musical partner, and Mexican drum marvel Antonio Sanchez.

The Japanese tour coincides with the release there of a five-CD box set that features five different Corea-led trios that feature such veteran bassists and drummers as Patitucci and Hart; Eddie Gomez and Jack DeJohnette; Gomez and Brazil's Airto Moriera; Christian McBride and Jeff Ballard; as well as newcomers Hadrien Feraud and Richie Barshay.

With so many musical partners, it's hard not to think of Corea as a kid romping in a giant musical candy store.

"That's a simple, exact way of saying how I feel when I play music," said Corea, who turned 66 on June 12. "When I was actually a kid, it was through recordings that I was in the candy store, because I couldn't get up on stage at that time with Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. So I'd put my two hi-fi speakers up behind my ears - this was before headphones - and drum or play piano along with all my heroes, Parker, the Dizzy Gillespie Big Band, the Bud Powell Trio, Horace Silver ...

"So, now that I'm 66, I get to play with musicians, young and old, who are my favorites in the world. And it is exactly like being in a candy store. I feel so refreshed and happy that I could be able to do that. I can't conceive of anything that would be more fun than that."

Those young musicians include bassist Feraud, 22, and drummer Barshay, 24. While both regard Corea as a key mentor, he is quick to sing their praises.

"Check that out: These guys are 44 and 42 years my junior!" Corea said. "And they are mature, thorough, incredible, inspiring musicians. After I played with them, I thought to myself that I'm missing out on a lot of musicians I haven't even met. So, I have all these plans now to find and play with younger musicians. There's a whole new wave of creativity now I want to tap into and ride."

Corea himself was barely out of high school when he began playing in the big band of Cab Calloway. This was followed by stints in the groups led by the fiery Latin percussionists Mongo Santamaria and Willie Bobo, in 1962 and 1963, respectively.

The Boston-bred Corea went on to work with trumpeter Blue Mitchell, flutist Herbie Mann and saxophonist Getz before he made his first solo album in 1966, the acclaimed "Tones for Joan's Bones." By the time he made his next album a year later, "Now He Sings, Now He Sobs," the young pianist had also worked with vocal icon Vaughan and trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie and Donald Byrd.

But it was with another trumpeter, Miles Davis, that Corea really blossomed after he replaced Herbie Hancock in late 1968. He subsequently performed on such landmark Davis albums as "In a Silent Way," "Bitches Brew" and "Live-Evil."

"I joined him in 1968, after 21 years of immersing myself in his musical development through every record he made," Corea recalled of Davis. "And he actually sat in one time with Blue Mitchell at Minton's Playhouse (in New York) when I was working with Blue."

"But when I finally got to play with him that first time in Baltimore as a member of his band, it was a nerve-racking, exciting, adrenaline-filled and horror-filled evening, getting up on stage not only with Miles, but with a band that had already developed its performance over hundreds of shows, playing the same tunes and developing a style that was literally pretty free-form. It was like Miles' version of the Ornette Coleman Quartet."

"I remember that night we played 'Delores,' and - as soon as the melody was faintly stated - (drummer) Tony (Williams) and Miles were off into an improvisation that was beyond me. All I remembered was Miles' instructions to me, which were to play what I heard. It was quite thrilling; I'll have to write poetry about it some time."

Poetry is an especially fitting description of Corea's solo piano concerts, which allow him to pursue his love of improvisation in its purest, most direct form.

"The hardest thing for me to do when I play solo is to kind of shake off the whole act of 'getting prepared for a concert,' such as deciding on a program to play and what tunes to do," Corea said. "I like, as much as I possibly can, to just walk on stage and be with the audience - as if they had just walked into my living room for a surprise visit - and then decide as I go along how I will put something together. Ultimately, the performance is for the audience."

Copley News Service

Chick it out: Corea's best collaborations

Few jazz artists have performed with as diverse an array of musicians as Armando Anthony "Chick" Corea. A full list of this versatile keyboardist's notable collaborations would fill this page, but here's a look at four of his most memorable albums and, in one instance, televised performances with other artists.

- With Miles Davis, "Bitches Brew" (1970, YouTube video): Hailed as one of the most important releases of the past century, this epic 1969 double-album by trumpet icon Davis inspired countless musicians, in particular the members of Radiohead, who cite "Bitches Brew" as a profound influence on its landmark "OK Computer" album. Those who want to see, as well as hear, what the fuss is all about should log on to YouTube.com, which has an extended, six-part 1970 live version of "Bitches Brew's" mighty title track. The second and fifth parts feature a blue headbanded Corea soloing adroitly on a Fender Rhodes electric piano, as bassist Dave Holland and drummer Jack DeJohnette sizzle behind him. Watch it here.

- With Stan Getz, "Captain Marvel" (1972, Columbia): Corea wrote five of the six songs on this superb

album by tenor saxophonist Getz, in whose band he played in 1966-67. Two of those songs, "La Fiesta" and "500 Miles High," have since become classics and are also featured on "Light As a Feather," the superb 1972 album by Corea's groundbreaking band, Return to Forever.

- With Gary Burton, "Crystal Silence" (1972, ECM): Together, Corea and vibraphonist Burton created a series of luminous duets that are as remarkable for their near-telepathic interplay as for their seamless fusion of jazz, classical, Latin and more. Their 1997 sequel, "Native Sense: The New Duets," is equally enchanting.

- With Michael Brecker, Eddie Gomez and Steve Gadd, "Three Quartets" (1981, Warner Bros./Stretch): As vital today as it was 26 years ago, this stunning quartet album finds Corea paying homage to Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker and Bill Evans, although it is its own musical personality that shines brightest. Drummer Gadd and saxophonist Brecker, who died in January, have rarely sounded better.

- With Bela Fleck, "The Enchantment" (2007, Concord Records): This absorbing duo album teams Corea for the first time with banjo master Fleck and they sound like they've been musical partners for years. Songs like "Mountain" and "Sunset Road" take Corea closer to country and bluegrass than he's ever come before. But he has no difficulty making these styles his own - or injecting them with jazzy sonorities that dazzle and delight.

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