

P & K INTERVIEW
BY TED ROSENTHAL

Freedom and



Taste



Photo: Alan Nahngiun

Art should be tolerant. There can be different approaches to playing jazz. Choose your partners with great care. And turn off your TV! Chick Corea feels—and speaks—passionately.

Chick Corea's remarkable 30-year career is prolific, and it has taken him through incredibly diverse musical terrain. He has performed cutting-edge acoustic jazz, electronic fusion music, and classical music. Throughout his career he has also been extremely active as a composer.

Born Armando Anthony Corea in Chelsea, Massachusetts on June 12, 1941, he acquired his nickname at an early age. He grew up in a house filled with music. His father was a professional musician, and his first teacher. Corea moved to New York in the early 1960s and worked first with the Latin groups of Mongo Santamaria and Willie Bobo, then with jazz groups including Blue Mitchell and Sarah Vaughan. After a year playing with Vaughan, Corea was invited to join the Miles Davis band, replacing Herbie Hancock. He was on a number of Miles's recordings of electronic fusion jazz, including *Bitches Brew* and *In a Silent Way*.

After working with Miles, Corea formed an acoustic and somewhat avant-garde ensemble, Circle, which included bassist Dave Holland, drummer Barry Altschul, and saxophonist Anthony Braxton. Corea's music changed radically when, after three years of playing with Circle, he put together a new group. Return To Forever was an electric, more melodic, samba-flavored ensemble that included a vocalist. Throughout the '70s Corea was active in fusion-oriented music, but he also performed and

recorded acoustic duos with Herbie Hancock and vibraphonist Gary Burton.

In the '80s, Corea formed his highly successful Elektric Band with bassist John Patitucci and drummer Dave Weckl. They went on to perform acoustic mainstream jazz as the Akoustic Band. Corea has branched out even further in the '90s, playing and composing in a variety of (mostly) acoustic formats, including performing Mozart concertos with major international orchestras.

I met with Corea in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, before a concert he was doing on tour with longtime partner Gary Burton. They were performing music from their new CD, *Native Sense*. Although our time together was limited, Corea was warm and friendly, inviting me to join him and Gary for a backstage dinner before the concert. He also asked me to help him with balances at the sound check. After the sound check, which included a short rehearsal, Corea learned that a marimba might be available. When it was located and set up on stage, Corea decided to play it, perhaps to check on its condition, but also because he enjoys playing mallet instruments. He then motioned for me to sit down at the piano, which in turn led to a few impromptu duets. This was certainly an unexpected thrill!

The concert that evening was an eclectic mix of music, ranging from two Bartók pieces to many of Corea's jazz compositions. It was a tremendous success. On the last encore, Corea walked over to the marimba and, to the delight

of the entire crowd, played a vibes-marimba duet with Burton.

Corea speaks openly and with ease—to his fans, as he did after the concert—and to us.

I'm interested in your background, and how your style developed.

Each time I look at it I have a different way of reconstructing it in my mind. My dad started teaching me piano when I was four or five, a real little tot.

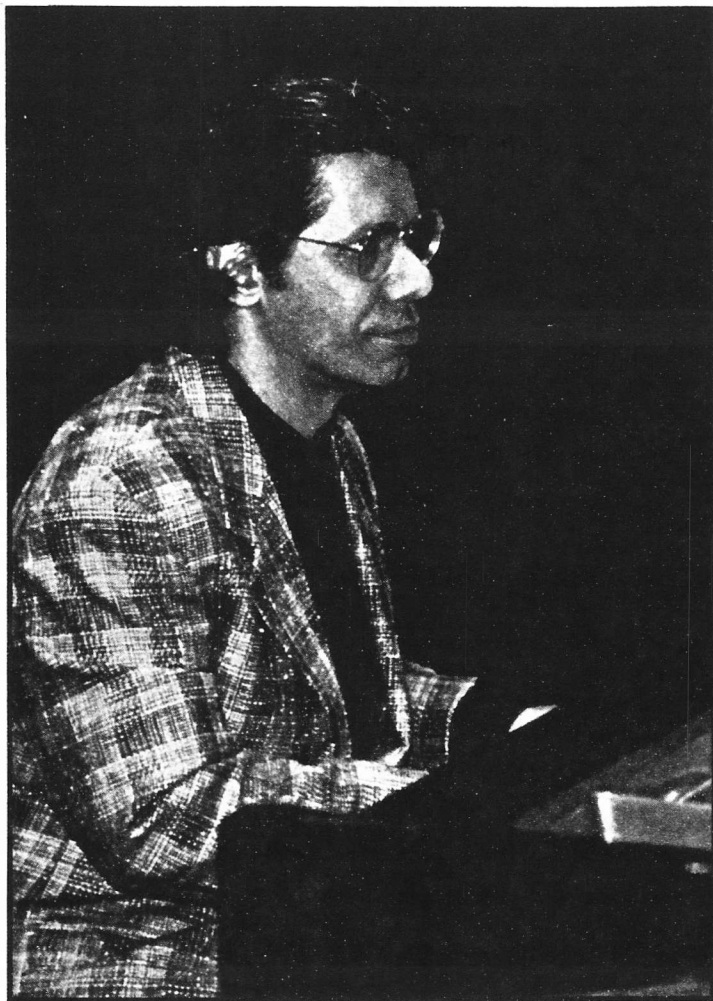
Was he a pianist?

No. At that time he was a trumpet player, but he had some verse with the piano. He could sit down and play chords and tinkle out tunes because he was an arranger. He wrote arrangements for his own band back in the '30s and '40s. His wealth of knowledge was dance music, standards of the day, all the beautiful tunes. He loved Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, and Miles—the young Miles at that time. That was his passion, and it was really a perfect environment for me because I instantly liked that music on record and the way my dad's band played. So he started showing me about music and the piano when I was small.

When I was eight, he decided to send me to a pianist who knew something of classical music. That's when I went to study with Salvatore Sullo, who was my first legitimate piano teacher. Sullo didn't really like or appreciate jazz at all. In fact, he had a kind of funny attitude about Dizzy Gillespie—he'd make jokes about Dizzy's [puffy] cheeks.

While you were with Sullo, did you study strictly classical music?

Yes. He would play for me. He was a great player. He got me interested, and he introduced me to classical piano literature. He showed me some basics of fingering and piano technique, and I'm really indebted to him for getting me facile at the piano, passing along some of what I feel is basic advice about piano fingering.



Chick Corea has played in an amazing assortment of styles.

Sullo showed me that one's hands must be comfortable and under one's own control, and that there were certain various ways of fingering that seem to be more comfortable than others for most hands. He showed me some of that kind of fingering, and he took the pains to sit down and show me all the possibilities of fingering various phrases. He had short, stubby hands, so he had to make certain alterations himself. It was interesting to see how he did that.

Through all that, I formed the idea that one must get an approach and a way of fingering that is the most efficient and most natural for oneself. I think this was a good thing to learn early on, not to get stuck to certain fingerings.

Might that better accommodate spur-of-the-moment improvising?

Well, I think once you grab the concept of something like that—like fingering—you just apply it naturally. Then maybe the need to finger passages exactly becomes less and less, and you can become a little bit looser about how you finger things depending on what kind of an emotional effect you want to get. If

you want to dig into it, if you want to lay back from it, or if you want to float over it, there are different ways to attack a piano—just like a drum, or anything else.

Speaking of drums, I heard that you had a drum set, and that you used to practice drums.

Oh, yeah! Drums have been a staple in my music room since I was 11. I just love drums, and a lot of my passion, jazz-wise and swing-wise, comes through the drums—and through the drumming of Art Blakey and Philly Joe Jones. Philly Joe is one of my all-time, ultimate favorite artists on the drum kit.

Did you play with him?

I played with him a few times. He used to come and sit in with [trumpeter] Blue Mitchell's group with whom I was playing. It was just an incredible joy to play with Philly.

What was it that you liked so much?

His time was always bubbling and alive, like all the great drummers. But he had a touch and a way of making a sound on the drum

that was always very pleasant to me, too. I've been listening to the Prestige set of all of Miles's recordings—which I think is an invaluable collection—and Philly Joe is on a lot of those recordings. You can hear in the studio how the group was playing without headphones or monitors. They were just listening intently to one another as they were playing. And Philly Joe's command of the drums in that acoustic environment sets a complete standard of musicianship in the art of playing in a jazz rhythm section. So he was one of the guys that I used to listen to a lot, and I still do. He and Tony [Williams] are two of my absolute favorites, along with Roy Haynes.

At the time when you joined Miles, some of those recordings have you and Herbie Hancock. Then some have you, Hancock, and Keith Jarrett. I'm fascinated by what took place and if, perhaps, some sharing of information went on between the three of you.

Well, from my remembrance, not much, actually [laughing].

Did the three of you ever sit around and discuss harmony or something?

No, never. Herbie and I did a little bit

Photo: Alan Nainigan

of that when we played together in the late '70s, but that was years later. During the Miles era, I came into the band with no communication from Herbie. It was Tony [Williams] that recommended me. I came in kind of blind, not knowing even the repertoire. I didn't speak to Herbie during that period.

And I think Keith was asked to join the band when Dave Holland and I announced to Miles that we wanted to leave to form our own group. So Miles knew he had to get someone else, and asked Keith to come in the band. Miles had this way of dove-tailing musicians so that they wouldn't come in just cold. So Keith came in, and we played several gigs together. But there were no instructions or discussions between us about what to do, unfortunately. I would have loved that, but somehow or other it didn't happen. We just played.

I think the focus of those days was the fact that Miles was searching for change, searching for sound, and searching to find an orchestration with which he was comfortable. I'm just presuming all this—I couldn't know his actual thoughts, of course. Miles had already put together two great bands. The band with Coltrane, Philly Joe, Red Garland, and Paul Chambers has got to be one of the great bands of all times—fortunately very well recorded. Then the next band was the band that Herbie was a part of, with Ron [Carter] and Tony [Williams] and Wayne [Shorter].

So after having created those two incredible sets of music, I think he was looking for another combination, and he was trying musicians. I think Miles's form was to think less about the "music," and more about which musicians to use. So he would try combinations of musicians first, and give them the form, or whatever the tune was, and just see how things jelled. I never got very many instructions directly from Miles—like play it this way, or play it that way. Occasionally he'd mention something, or ask me to try a voicing, or he'd lean over my shoulders and play some stuff on the piano and say, "Try that." I never saw him give very many instructions to other guys either, so I think his method was to see what would happen when he threw certain guys together.

The chemistry.

Yes. The great band that Herbie was

part of was already dispersed, and Miles was starting to try some other stuff. So I think those experiments in the studio, with Herbie and with [Joe] Zawinul, and later on with Keith were that kind of experimenting—to see how it would sound.

Now He Sings, Now He Sobs *is such a classic piano trio record! What can you say about what went into your development, and the things you were doing to bring that to fruition?*

My attention when I play is always on what the others are doing, not on what I'm doing.

I think I used a bit of the idea that later on I noticed Miles would use. It's not such an unusual thing for a musician to do, especially in improvised music—to choose your partners as a priority over choosing your "music." Because the partners that you play with will make the music. You could write sketches, write tunes, write this and that, but how they get played and rendered has all to do with who plays them. In jazz—in the kind of music I like, anyway—there's not a whole lot of instruction you can give to one another. The whole idea is to express yourself and approach the music with your own feeling and originality, the way you see it yourself.

At the time of that record, I was working with Stan Getz's group, and the rhythm section was myself, Roy Haynes, and Steve Swallow. I was very comfortable and accustomed to playing with that great rhythm team. So that would have been the natural choice for my trio album, except that I had played with [bassist] Miraslav Vitous before that and really liked the way he played, a more loose and wilder approach to bass. I envisioned what it might possibly sound like if Miraslav got together with Roy. They had never played together before, so that

was the stroke. I brought in a set of tunes and we spent two days in the studio laying them down, and it was kind of magical. We just played, and it kind of flowed onto the tape that way.

One of my big concerns at that time was that I wanted a longer Roy Haynes drum solo on "Steps" going into "What Was." He took an open drum solo on one take, and on another take he played another solo. I remember spending quite a bit of time editing. I loved them both, so I spent about a month listening to both drum solos to find an edit point where I could edit them both together to see if they would make sense as one longer drum solo. Finally I decided on this one point, and edited it together, and sent it to Roy on a cassette and said, "Roy, listen to this track and tell me if your drum solo sounds okay. Really listen to it." He listened to it and called me back and said, "It sounds all right to me." So I thought if Roy didn't notice the edit, then I'm cool. So I got a longer Roy Haynes drum solo. That was my big concern. But other than that, I think putting Miraslav together with Roy was the thing that made the special spirit of that record.

But along with the fabulous interplay and all the things that make it a great record as a trio, there's your piano style, which is unique and ground-breaking, too. Is there anything you could say about where you were coming from, influence-wise, or what led you in that direction?

You know, that's a very slippery question to answer because I wasn't trying to break new ground, and I don't consider that I was playing any differently than I ever had. My attention when I play is always on what the others are doing, not on what I'm doing. That's the way I remember it. As far as a musical concept goes, I wanted only to have some kind of shorter, looser structures to use. I didn't write anything extensive. I used short themes, just to get some jumping-off points for improvisation.

I heard you at the Blue Note a couple of years ago, and you took out a long score and laid it out on the piano. How does being a composer/pianist affect your improvisational approach?

I look at formulating music as a series of freedoms and barriers. It's up to me to set the freedom-of-choice areas and the areas that I decide I want to be there—not barriers particularly, but fixed

sound—something that gets written, an ensemble that gets played, a melody that gets rendered, a tempo that gets settled, a harmony that gets exposed, whatever it is. Something that grounds the tune and makes it that tune and not some other tune. Then there is the part of the composition that you open up and explore. Mixing and merging those two elements is what it's all about, in any kind of music. It's where the performer comes together with the composer, or arranger, and those two heads come together and make music. It's endless what you can do in that mix; the palette is quite large. Sometimes I think in terms not just of a tune, but a whole set, or an evening of music—maybe two sets. In a concert with an intermission, where is the stroke of the evening going to be? I try to view it like a dramatic play.

Programming.

Yes. I think to myself, "How do I want this evening to roll? I've got an hour here, a break, and then another hour here. How do I want it to roll? How much composition? How much freedom? Do I leave it all open—leave it up to the gods? Or do I want it to come out a certain way? How much of it do I state? What's my agreement with the partners I'm playing with? How much freedom and how much restriction?" That's the game. Mixing those elements is endless. That's the art, I think, of creating a performance.

Do you find it's something that comes naturally to you? Or, in a larger piece, do you struggle as to where to open it up or bring it back?

I think my tendency always leans toward opening it up and improvising. Sometimes I want to compose something because there's a particular message I want to set down and use as a song or a theme. For instance, the music I'm doing with Gary [Burton] works out to be very composed, a lot of structure. Even though we improvise quite a bit, we still stick pretty much to the song and to the structure in this particular music. Whereas I very often like to use the song or the theme only as a starting point and then leave it open, like with the new band I'm forming now. It's a sextet, and we're

having fun using the idea of no matter what we start with, we're open to explore with one another. It varies how we do it, but I feel comfortable with improvising. For instance, I love to play classical music, and the Mozart that I've been playing lately has been very fulfilling. But I love to be able to have a way to bring a fresh view and a fresh expression to the song every night, and sometimes, for me, that involves improvising.

I heard your Mozart performance with the New York Philharmonic and really

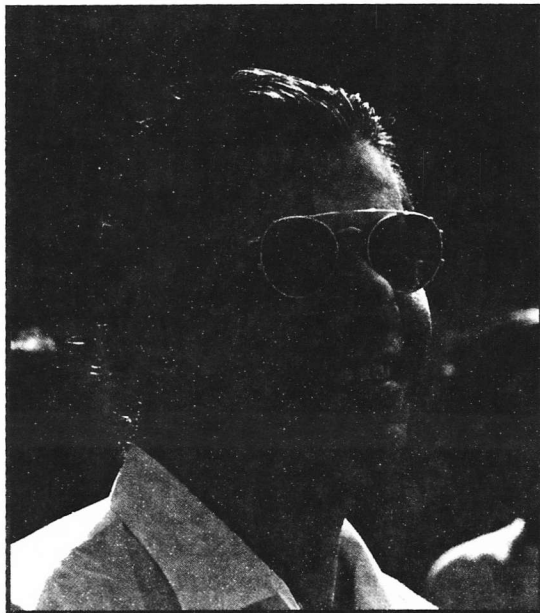


Photo: Alan Nahngan

Corea sees composing as formulating a series of freedom-of-choice areas and barriers, or fixed sounds.

enjoyed it. I was sitting at the edge of my seat, mostly because I knew that there would be parts with improvisation. You did a little improvisation right at the beginning, but I knew there would also be an improvised cadenza. It was a terrific experience to be at Avery Fisher Hall with the New York Philharmonic, hearing a piano concerto, but to have that unknown, what-could-happen-next kind of feeling. I loved that. I heard that many critics and some people didn't respond to those things, and were nit-picking more about your Mozart style. I wonder how you felt about that reaction. Is there something you'd like to tell these people in order to get them to understand the process better?

No. I think no amount of explanation and description and prompting is really apropos. Maybe a simple statement. But, after that, music and art always have to be accepted on the same level. Rule num-

ber one is that everyone has his own taste, each one has a right to his own freedoms, his own decisions. If you like it, you like it. And if you don't like it, you don't like it. End of subject. I never really enjoyed trying to convince someone of something I like if they didn't like it—that's no fun to me.

But is it frustrating for you? I noticed that, in the orchestra, some people were really there, listening—like, wow, this is great! And other people sat there uninvolved.

Yes. I knew from the very beginning that improvising in a Mozart concerto was going to do exactly that. It's hard to be on the fence or indifferent about it. You're either going to like the spirit of wanting to improvise a cadenza with Mozart, or you're going to think that it's awfully audacious, and that it doesn't sound good, and that you should stick to the notes. I expected that. In fact, that was one of the things that almost drove me away from the project at first.

But then I thought, there's certainly a lot of fun in it for me. I have no intention of ruffling feathers, or stepping on people's aesthetic sensibilities, and I don't like going around making people feel bad, or worse, embarrassed. As I did it, Bobby McFerrin was really the one who pulled me along through it, because he has a sensibility like that, too. Both of us together made a partnership and a statement with it. I know I left some of the orchestra members thinking, "Gee, I hope he never comes back." But some people really enjoyed it, and got incredibly excited. For me, I found that I could not play Mozart any other way, because it was the way I heard it, the way I desired to do it, and it was the only honest way I could actually approach it.

Did you coach with anybody when you were doing the Mozart performances? Any kind of lessons?

I tried getting a "professional" viewpoint a couple of times, but I stopped almost right away. There was so much criticism, and evaluation, and set, fixed ideas ...

So it was a bad experience for you.

Yes. I finally came back to resting on my own principles—which is that I hear Mozart and love Mozart the way I do. I don't need anyone to tell me how to put my fingers on the piano right now [laughing].

Did you think about whether your cadenza improvisation should stick more to the themes of the piece, or go off into the harmonic territory where you as a jazz player might freely go? Was there a stylistic route that you wanted to take, or that you thought about?

Actually, when I first did it, in 1981, I hadn't studied Mozart's harmonic language and voicings enough to feel comfortable improvising within them. So I just naturally kind of toppled over into my own harmonic language—which I found was an incredible shock to the audience. People were running out the doors!

After that experience, I thought it behooved me to go deeper into the concerto and into Mozart, and I began to look into more of Mozart's music. I learned all the orchestral parts of the D-minor concerto, and I began to be able to improvise within that harmonic framework a little bit more. I decided that was the route I would take with the cadenza, for the purpose of easing the listener in—and easing myself in, as well—and to make sense out of the composition. So I attempted to do that more on the recording, and lately to do that more in performances. Occasionally, in a performance when I can feel that things are rolling right, I'll stretch out a little further with it.

Let's talk a bit about your harmonic approaches. In the late '60s your harmonies were quite dense and chromatic, and the references to 20th-century harmony were very strong. And then, perhaps with the start of Return to Forever, your harmonic language simplified. Did you make a conscious musical decision to go in another direction? What was the thinking behind it, or the need to do that?

Well, density or openness, complexity or simplicity, atonality or tonality, dissonance or consonance—all of these dichotomies are part of life. They're part of music, and part of art. They're also a part of taste. I think that to try to analyze music and harmonies and the techniques involved and the physicality of art really comes to a dead end very quickly unless you add the spiritual element of taste—the spiritual element, and the perception of the listener in relation to the communication of the player and the composer. Once you add that, then you have a full picture.

Dissonance and consonance are subjective. So are complexity and simplicity.

Now, if you look at it from that viewpoint, all of a sudden you have a completely different way to evaluate what you have in front of you. You can ask the more useful, fulfilling question—what effect does the artist want to create? And that doesn't mean on the piano, or on the floor, or on the wall. It means on the living spiritual beings who are sitting right there with their emotions and tastes and attention and life in front of you—that's what it's all about. My feeling is that any techniques in music or art are just techniques, and any balances between the two extremes or dichotomies of consonance and dissonance are judgments that the composer or player or artist uses to create his effect.

I don't find it fulfilling to view music or art as a historical, chronological thing—like 20th-century, 19th-century, 18th-century, old music, new music. It's much more workable for me to view just what exists. You've always had the possibility of putting your arm on a keyboard and creating dissonance; the cavemen could cre-

ate dissonance. Remember Sid Caesar in that scene in "The Meaning of Life" where he invented music? He dropped a rock on a caveman's foot, and the guy screamed. And Caesar said, "Ah! Music!"

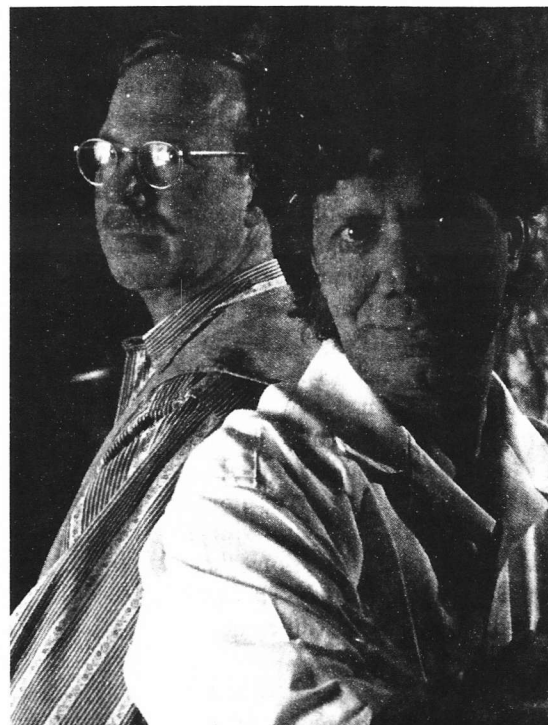


Photo: Alan Nahigian

Corea and his longtime partner, vibraphonist Gary Burton, have just released a new album, *Native Sense*.

Chick Corea A Selective Discography

- 1966 Chick Corea: *Tones For Joan's Bones* (Vortex/Atlantic 2004)
- 1968 Chick Corea: *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs* (Blue Note B21y-90055)
- 1971 Chick Corea: *A.R.C.* (ECM 78118-21009-2)
- 1972 *Return To Forever: Light as a Feather* (Polydor 827148-2)
- 1975 Chick Corea: *My Spanish Heart* (Polydor 825657-2)
- 1978 *An Evening With Herbie Hancock And Chick Corea In Concert* (Columbia 35663)
- 1979 Chick Corea and Gary Burton: *In Concert, Zurich* (ECM-78118-21182-2)
- 1982 Chick Corea: *Lyric Suite For Sextet* (ECM 78118-21260-2)
- 1983 Chick Corea: *Children's Songs* (ECM 78118-21627-2/78118-21627-4)
- 1984 Chick Corea: *Septet* (ECM 78118-21297-2)
- 1990 Chick Corea Elektric Band: *Inside Out* (GRP Records GRD-9601/GRC-9601)
- 1996 Chick Corea & Bobby McFerrin: *The Mozart Sessions* (Sony Classics SK 62601)
- 1996 Chick Corea & Friends: *Remembering Bud Powell* (Stretch Records SCD-9012-2)
- 1997 Chick Corea and Gary Burton: *Native Sense* (Stretch Records)

You see, time is an illusion. It's something that should be removed when you're trying to look at the question of what kind of effect you want to create. I've never been interested in a dissonance, or in a consonance, or in thick harmonies, or in simpler harmonies. I've always been interested in how I can use these things. My own personal tastes and techniques of art are pretty wide. There's not a lot I dislike—I even like country music! It's the *effect* that I get interested in. I have my own personal tastes if I want to listen, or if I want to study up on something. But I like to create effects as a musician. And I like to share with an audience particular passions that I get involved with myself. That takes me through a lot of different terrains.

Your Septet and Lyric Suite for Sextet, which I just love, deal with the concept of the written versus the improvised. The way you interwove written and improvised music was just astonishing. To me, this marriage of many influences, like chamber music and jazz, make this American music at its pinnacle. I wonder if you thought, like I do, that these pieces should be more widely dispersed, getting a great deal more exposure in concert venues?

I agree with you. If we say America, we're talking about running away from Europe to get away from having to belong to a particular church, or think a certain way. Here we've got what we call classical music, and we've got everything we've grown up with—we've got it all. I think that the audiences themselves, individual to individual, are more or less kind of open, more open than venues and the marketplace give them credit for.

I notice that once people are in the club, or in the concert hall—and they're comfortable—we can pretty much take them any place we want. People are ready for a good adventure. But the venue says it's got to be classical music, and which Mozart concerto are you playing, and will you improvise the cadenza or won't you? The musicians are still a little bit split. There aren't a lot of musicians that feel comfortable roaming around these territories of written and improvised music, you know, and it's an ideal of mine. So I

think that a particular breed of musician is the key here; it's not just the piece itself. In fact, that's some of the writing I'd like to do for my new band now—writing where the notes are not worshipped and played exactly the same way every time, because the musicians who are playing the notes are great improvisers. So I would like even the ensemble



Photo: Alan Nangian

Corea believes strongly in freedom of choice, freedom of taste. For him, that's what art is all about.

parts to be loosened up and improvised and done in different ways.

As artists, one of the things we do is envision new mixes of stuff. That's one of our jobs. You envision stuff, you put new stuff together ... it's new ideas, it's presenting a new spirit. I don't think we should ever be too shocked or too worried that these new ideas click in, or that everybody applauds them right away. It's not going to be that way. It's just not the way life is. We have to be willing to stick to the idea and keep putting it across, and see what happens.

What do you think about the current jazz scene?

The main thing is that there aren't as many gathering places to play anymore. A lot of guys complain about that, and I think it's true. Jazz has got to be a little bit more neighborhood to me. There's nothing wrong with jazz in a concert hall, but in order for ideas and exchanges between artists to flourish, there's got to be more

of a neighborhood scene. If people living in this country would only start to take responsibility and initiative for the art in their neighborhood, for performance places, for a place to go—rather than waiting for the government, or somebody else, to come in and build a Bennigans, or a Hard Rock Café. These are the entertainment places in the neighborhood now.

I really miss the scene where there were clubs where music gets played. Our culture is changing at an ever faster rate, discarding what we had going a week before. We're living with the TV. All this forms a haze, and it has a hypnotic effect that takes people out of the creative process. You've got to turn the TV off first!

Go to the neighborhood place ...

And then you've got to talk to somebody, at least *talk* to somebody. Then take your flute out, or start singing ... art has to be creative. I think we've gotten the idea that you can just turn on the TV and that's art, because you're being entertained. It's taken the culture away.

There seem to be culture wars even in jazz, with this camp versus that camp. You seem to rise above it somehow. You just pursue your music, and you don't get bogged down in an ideology.

The last thing we need in art is camps, because the clarion trumpet call is freedom to think and be. The word used in the human-rights field is "tolerance." Where else should tolerance be but in the arts, for one another's creations? So this guy wants to make music like that, and this guy wants to make music like that. Okay, let's start with tolerance, guys, and work from there. What message are we trying to give to the world? As artists, how do we want to effect people? We want to rehabilitate in them their desire for creativity—their own participation in creative things. We're not going to do that by warring against one another.

It's the opposite of what should be happening.

Exactly. The artist should be able to think for himself. That's what art is all about. Can you conceive of meeting a guy who's against art? Even PR-wise that's not acceptable. We've got this little opening to experience freedoms—freedoms of choice, freedoms of taste. As artists, I think we should spread it around because it might be the last little opening until the door shuts completely. ❖