

## MUSICIAN



Courtesy of Chick Corea Productions

## CHICK COREA

After five decades, this jazz pioneer forever returns with something new

By Jeff Tamarkin

A HALF-CENTURY INTO ONE OF THE MOST STORIED careers in jazz history, Chick Corea finds himself drawn to the allure of live performance now more than ever. "Rather than pull back and say, 'Well, I'm getting a little older, I'll tour less,' I decided to do the opposite and tour more," says the keyboard giant, who recently turned 70. The 15-time Grammy winner has spent much of the past year on the road, working on three continents in a variety of duo, trio and quartet configurations. "Years ago I came to terms with the fact that most of my musical fulfillment is in live performance," he says.

Now he's thrilling fans onstage again with *Return to Forever IV*—the latest incarnation of the groundbreaking jazz fusion band he has led through a dizzying array of lineups, breakups and reunions since 1972. The classic lineup of Corea, bassist Stanley Clarke, drummer Lenny White and guitarist Al Di Meola came back together

in 2008 after 25 years apart to tour. Since then the reassembled friends have recorded the recently released double-disc acoustic set *Forever* sans Di Meola as Corea, Clarke & White. The current version of the group that fans shorthand as "RTF" includes Corea; White; guitarist Frank Gambale, a member of Corea's post-RTF outfit the Chick Corea Elektric Band; violinist Jean-Luc Ponty, who played on Corea's classic 1976 album *My Spanish Heart*—and of course Clarke, the group's only other constant member.

Born in Massachusetts, Corea came to New York in the 1960s. By his mid-20s he was already being recognized for his superior musicianship and artistic restlessness. An early champion was Miles Davis, with whom Corea helped bridge jazz and rock on 1970's fusion landmark *Bitches Brew*. Corea spoke to us from his Florida home about his history, his artistry and the long and winding story of *Return to Forever*.

#### Why was RTF away for so long?

We were never uncomfortable with one another. It was just different ideas of what should be done with *Return to Forever*. As time went on we drifted off into our own creations. It was just a matter of talking it through and seeing what we wanted to do. When we did the 2008 tour we experienced how nice it was to have the band back together. I've had such a long and deep relationship with Stanley, ever since we met in 1971. He was my partner through all of the changes we went through. That's why we're giving the new band a number: *Return to Forever IV*. It's the basic rhythm section since [1973's] *Hymn of the Seventh Galaxy*, which is Stanley, Lenny and myself. This version is with Frank Gambale, who was with my Elektric Band, and Jean-Luc Ponty, who's a friendly connection that we all had from the '70s. I feel fortunate to be so rich in musical friends.

**'I just want to keep making music and present it to a new audience!'**

#### Why make the acoustic album?

After the '08 tour, we were saying, "Let's do something again." But the strongest attraction Stanley and I had was to explore our musical roots. During the tour we had a section of the show where each of us played a solo. When I played mine, I felt kind of lonely with the guys just standing there. So I invited Lenny and Stanley in, and we would play a little bop during my solo. All of us grinned ear to ear, so we decided to do a trio tour and really explore what we had never explored. At first we were going out as an electric trio.

#### What changed?

Literally the day before we were about to leave town for the tour, I suddenly thought carrying equipment was going to be a problem. Plus what we all really want to play is jazz. So I called Stanley and the conversation went like this: "What do you think about playing acoustic instruments on this tour?" And before I finished the word "tour" Stanley said, "Yeah, let's go." The same with Lenny when I called him. So

that's how that '09 tour became what it was. It was a total hoot. It was a challenge. But all we did was adjust to the touch and feel of our acoustic instruments, and it was an easy transition.

#### What was it like turning rock fans on to jazz fusion with RTF?

I had already experienced a bit of that with Miles. When we started sharing stages with rock bands, I saw people of my own generation with long hair and paisley shirts. Actually it was a huge joy, because all artists want their music to affect all ages. Later on, when we put together the first versions of *Return to Forever*, teens would come up and say, "We were rockers, but after listening to you guys we started listening to Miles Davis and John Coltrane."

#### What do you recall about the *Bitches Brew* sessions?

I was in my late 20s and I was playing with my ultimate hero, Miles Davis. It was very exciting, and I was drinking it in day by day. The actual sessions were kind of an enigma, because the live gigs for me were where all the excitement was. In the studio I wasn't sure what was happening, and I only worked out later on that Miles was basically experimenting, like he usually did. It was like a rehearsal. I never spent any time in the control room. It wasn't until [producer] Teo Macero edited it that we heard what it was. And even then I thought it sounded like a rehearsal.

#### What lessons did you learn?

The single lesson I kept learning was to stay true to my own goals and always do what feels right as an artist, and not be swayed by what others think I ought to do. Not that I wouldn't take advice, but whatever you do can't be based on what someone else thinks.

#### What do you get from improvisation?

That's home base, man! That's where my personal musical taste stems from, in free improvisation, discovering it as you go.

#### Yet you've also played a lot of classical music, which doesn't allow for that.

It's definitely a different discipline. But it's part of the richness of this planet's musical culture, which I've been interested in since I was a young boy. I'd come home and practice Mozart or Stravinsky or Scriabin. I'd look at the piano music as a student of music and see what I could learn from these geniuses.

## ESSENTIAL COREA



#### LIGHT AS A FEATHER (1972)

The second album issued under the *Return to Forever* rubric, this stunner has very little in common with the music yet to come—but it's a keeper in its own right. Although not always as light as its title implies, the program leans toward Brazilian rhythms and sensibilities, pastoral ballads and tasteful jams. Corea's melodic "Spain" remains a staple of his shows today.



#### WHERE HAVE I KNOWN YOU BEFORE? (1974)

The first *Return to Forever* album to feature the classic lineup of Corea, Clarke, Di Meola and White is quintessential jazz fusion, replete with the fiery solos, relentless jams and the volcanic energy of '70s hard rock spliced with the sophistication and precision of jazz.



#### TRIO MUSIC (1981)

Early in Corea's career he established impressive credibility as a free-jazzer, reaching for the sky with ambitious improvisations that were often a far cry from the perfectly sculpted compositions of his later career. He revisited those days for this double album—the first half on-the-fly improvs, the second go-for-broke takes on seven Thelonious Monk tunes.



#### THE NEW CRYSTAL SILENCE (2008)

Corea loves the duo format (he's paired with Herbie Hancock, Bobby McFerrin, Béla Fleck, Hiromi and others), but vibraphone master Gary Burton may well be his most simpatico one-on-one partner. Their original 1972 *Crystal Silence* is a landmark, and this fitting two-disc sequel finds Corea and Burton unaccompanied on half and augmented by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra on the other. Two very different moods, equally sublime.



**'Not that I won't take advice, but what you do can't be based on what someone else thinks!'**

MUSICIAN

Onstage with Return to Forever, Melbourne, Australia, February 2011



Inset photo: C. Taylor Crothers, Kimberly Wright, Miles Standish Patengill III

Return to Forever: Jean Luc Ponty, Lenny White, Corea, Stanley Clarke, Frank Gambale



**‘My personal musical taste stems from free improvisation, discovering it as you go.’**

**What’s your composition process?**

I’ve learned that the best way to approach something new is to invent the process as you go along. That way the end result can be kept bright and fresh. “What kind of effect do I want to make this time?” Then I attempt to put together the techniques and the way to do it. It’s always a new mixture.

**What are your goals now?**

My goals are the same as they were 50 years ago, except that they’re clarified, more confirmed and validated. I just want to keep making music and try to overcome the challenge of how to present my music to a new audience. But the goal is the same: I love to make music.

**TOOLS OF THE TRADE**

Chick Corea has had a long relationship with Yamaha. “They now have a digital instrument called an AvantGrand, which I’m using with Return to Forever on tour,” he says. “It feels so much like an acoustic instrument that the lines between acoustic and electric blur. I have a Yamaha grand at home, and a Bösendorfer in my studio that I’ve played since 1981. What we’ve done over the past year is to sample my standard Rhodes with the sound that I love. Yamaha took the samples and converted them into a form that fits into a Motif, which is their latest keyboard. It sounds just like my Rhodes, and it feels great. Within the Motif I have all the pads that I’m going to use to make my basic keyboard sounds. I also have Voyager, Moog’s latest version of the old Minimoog. That rig will be what we record with if we go into the studio, and we’re recording every night on the road.”

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