

DAVE LIEBMAN INTERVIEW

Coral Gables, Florida, January 27, 1978

W.S. I'm speaking with Dave Liebman who has been jazz artist-in-residence at the University ^{of Miami} for the ~~last~~ ^{past} two weeks. ~~We're doing an interview for N.A.J.E. Magazine.~~

Dave, I understand that recently you've become a member of N.A.J.E. and through Jamey Aebersold and some others you've become interested in jazz education. Is that true?

D.L. Yes, I joined a couple months ago and attended the convention in Dallas recently. It's mainly through my work with Jamey, doing the summer jazz clinics that he does, that I've gotten really involved in education, and of course coming here this time and last year when I came to Miami, but it's been a recent thing. Actually I did have a teaching degree when I was younger, so in a way it's returning to my original course. When I went to college I graduated with a teaching degree in [;] American history, so it's something I enjoy doing.

W.S. ~~I was interested in~~ ^{First} what was your ^{was} experience as far as music is concerned, ~~in your schooling?~~ Did you play mainly as a sideline in the beginning and study other things?

D.L. Yes, I played throughout highschool and college. I did start out as a music major at Queens College which has a very good classical department, but I realized in learning jazz it was pretty ridiculous to spend so much time listening to classical music, although I love it. I couldn't really give it the time, because in order to become a first class jazz player I had to be playing and listening to that music, so it wasn't something easy to do -- to listen to Bach and Palestrina and all the required listening that I had to do in college, so I majored in another subject which I thought would give some kind of security. I decided somewhere in the middle of college that I really didn't want to play any more gigs that weren't jazz gigs. I figured the only way to get around that was to have some other source of income and wait for the right breaks to come along, so my study was restricted to private teaching - Joe Allerd saxophone teacher. I studied with saxophonist Charles Lloyd a while and Lennie Tristano and various people along the way, and did a lot of playing in New York. That was really the workshop, playing in lofts and hanging out and listening and listening.

W.S. In addition to being a virtuoso saxophonist I ^{come to find} you also play excellent drums and piano. How did that come about?

D.L. Well, you know drums is something everyone likes to play and fool around with and I always had a set, but after working with Elvin for a few years, it was just a necessity. You got very inspired and you became very aware of what's going on in drums. The way Elvin plays, it's a natural kind of flow. If you watch him night after night and get it in your ear, it's something you really enjoy doing. I learned a lot doing that. Of course -- I started with ^{(it} as) my first instrument when I was very young before I ever touched saxophone or clarinet. Piano is a necessity for every musician in an instrument class. I want back and studied piano, took a lesson here and there from Chick Corea or people I was growing with, ~~and~~ to see what's going on in piano.

S. How do you feel about an educator who happens to be a horn player or writer or whatever, being proficient on piano, ^{as a teaching tool?}

A necessity. It's mandatory. You have to play piano, especially in this day and age with the sophistication of music, especially in harmony; and I think drums because of the sophistication of rhythm, the odd meters and so forth.

For a musician it's mandatory, and certainly for a teacher it's mandatory to translate what's happening. Because a horn is a single line instrument, sometimes it's hard to realize what's going on besides melody-- the harmony's happening and the rhythm's happening and it's not just an accompaniment, but it's an integral part of it. When you play the piano you can see the whole orchestra in front of you. When you play a horn you don't really see the keys. It's a difficult visual thing which I think affects your perception.

W.S. How about your approach to improvising and playing changes? Did you learn a theoretical approach in the beginning or transcribe solos?

D.H. Mostly I transcribed solos and extracted lines from the course, and made a book of lines. I began to write my own lines after I got familiar with what notes were the notes that made the sound I was looking for. I didn't really have methodology, although now I'm getting more familiar with David Baker and Coker and George Russell's whole scene....

~~.....which Jamey, all those guys have. It's very curious to me. It's a very methodical way, it's a different way. It's terminology. It's just another way of the Lydian method, diminished or whatever. The way we learned in New York, most people didn't do George Russell's thing, it was by ear, by just playing, training our ear in sessions.~~

Who were your main influences?

W.S. Well, Coltrane of course, and Sonny Rollins, and I'd say all saxophonists, Wayne Shorter, Joe Henderson, a lot of Herbie Hancock, and Chick and McCoy -- of course Elvin, Tony -- all the great musicians I've learned something from, but Coltrane's group is my main inspiration.

W.S. How did you get into this business of teaching? have you taught privately?

D.H. Yes, I did teach privately on and off through the years. It was kind of a thing to make money and keep yourself together, but not lately. Teaching privately demands some sort of a routine and musicians' schedule is very far from routine, ~~week to week, so I haven't done really private teaching.~~ I see people once, twice, then a few months later. I like to check people out, guide them, but the classroom situation, like workshops with Jamey or this situation is something I've done just in the last year....exactly....last January was the first time I did it with Jamey and then I came here. This is something I find really interesting. I think it's pretty heavy...the way teaching is done, the approach, bebop, learning changes, really from the ground up. I'm surprised to see so many kids interested in it. I think it's really good, gratifying.

W.S. Dave, what do you see happening in jazz education? Do you see movement away from improvisation? In what direction do you think we're heading?

D.H. Well, I think the history of it is primarily big band oriented and I think slowly but surely it's becoming small group oriented, which I think is very good. Things take a long time to settle, some twenty years after the fact, but at least it's starting to happen. I think more and more recognition by educators is coming that small group playing is the essence of improvisation...that you have to be able to do that-- run through chord changes...everybody should be equipped to do that. Certainly at this school, Miami, the stress is on that and everybody plays in small groups and has improvisation class, and analysis of small group styles, great innovations in jazz. Besides the fact they play in big bands for performance purpose and for ensemble work and playing with other people. I think it's moving more in that direction. Small group playing is where you get to express yourself.

W.S. Do you have any suggestions for an educator who is ~~primarily~~ interested in teaching improvisation but is not a strong improviser himself-- as far as getting a view of what improvisation is all about?

D.L. Now there's very adequate literature on jazz which didn't exist ten to fifteen years ago --many, many books. Of course, I love Jerry Coker's two little books. I think they're the most succinct explanation of the technical aspects of jazz. There've been a lot of books in the last few years, so I think that's one thing - reading about it, getting familiar with the terms. Then in any of these books is listed a discography which becomes important because a lot of people who don't teach it, aren't exposed to it because they never heard it. They really don't know what it means -- what we mean by a 'Joe Henderson' or a 'Miles' sixties period' or 'early Miles with Coltrane'. I think they have to become familiar with it, do some research on it. Another thing I like--these records that Jamey is putting out, that are in a sense 'music minus one'. It's playing with a rhythm section which is a pretty good rhythm section with a lot of variety of tunes and different compositions of different artists-- In fact I'm going to be doing one of my tunes for him in the next few weeks. When you put them on, you can get a chance to play with a decent rhythm section. That seems to be the biggest problem--to find rhythm sections in these out of the way places, places that aren't main media centers. You don't really have a choice of three or four great drummers or bass players or keyboard players. It seems you have to rely on weaker musicians, and when that happens it's very difficult for a guy to become a first class improviser. So as a substitute I like these records Jamey's putting out.

W.S. Among musicians you've been associated with ~~in New York~~ over the past few years, have you noticed any change in their training? Are many people popping up on the scene who have a formalized education in music as opposed to learning on the streets?

D.L. Yes, definitely many more are coming out of places like this. There's a much more systemized study of bebop, because we're looking at an art form that is thirty or forty years old, 1945 or so. Anything takes a certain amount of time to be codefied and explained again and then put out for mass consumption. I think that's finally happening. Now, most young cats do have that together if they're interested in jazz. If they're into the funk thing, that's another story. More and more I find young cats in New York can play pretty good on changes -- in the tradition of Sonny or Coltrane, Charlie Parker -- and really like doing it. I'd say in New York 80% of the musicians you hear in the clubs, of which there are so many now, will be playing bebop, straight ahead bebop, standard tunes and old bebop tunes. I think there's a recognition that that is where the literature and the traditions are at, and you must know that before you even consider moving on to your own innovative style.

W.S. Are you interested in the avant-garde -- the Anthony Braxton's, the non-change oriented part of music?

D.L. I'm at least interested in that it provides an alternative. I like anything that provides an alternative because it keeps the field open, the air clear. I think guys like that keep you curious about how they play their instruments. They get different sounds and different tones and they have a totally different approach to playing. For instance, I think the Art Ensemble of Chicago is an excellent group. There's nobody who could see the Art Ensemble and not walk out digging it. They play very outside and they also play very inside, some straight ahead blues, blues shouts and things like that. It's really a great band and it's a very different kind of band. I'm interested in it, but to me a lot of the avant-garde comes from the late Coltrane period and Ornette Coleman in the late '60's, which is the period I came up on. To me that was the

better quality of avant-garde. In a way it's been diluted the way bebop's been diluted. It's good to listen to, but it's not all that great.

W.S. Is there room for experimentation in the avant-garde in terms of jazz education in a school setting? How should a teacher get into that or how much emphasis should he put on it?

D.L. That's a good question. Carl Berger who's a vibes player has a school in Woodstock, New York. He's had it several years and he runs workshops in the city. I once went to one of his workshops and he had twenty or thirty people play sounds or had them play a score. He'd say "flutter here; trill this or trill that," or moods, or "follow the conductor." I thought it was a very interesting approach to improvising, especially at a very beginning level - to really get people to improvise before they have to worry about chord changes. There is a certain kind of fear and trepidation in learning chord changes and feeling you are good enough to play, because it's so technical, so much to know, and so much practice. In a sense the real inspiration for improvising gets lost in the technical aspect. "you gotta know the changes or you can't play" - I think that's good, but it also has to be tempered with "let's just go play together". "Let's just start on a note and play that one note", or "Let's play this fluttery" or "Let's play high in the altissimo range of your instruments", something like that. Just using your instrument to say something is important besides being technically correct. I think the avant-garde can offer that to schools, but it'll be quite a while before that happens.

W.S. How about rhythm and blues? You were in my improvisation class. It's a second semester class, ~~where~~ we spent the first semester working with changes, 2-5-1 major and minor, altered dominants and a variety of things. It seems the most difficult thing for a student to do is to get down to one of the most basic fundamentals, the traditional blues and make sense out of a small amount of material. Would you comment on that?

D.L. I think that in an improvisation course there should be several sessions or a week or so devoted to old time blues players. I mean the traditional guitar blues players of the '20's and '30's. Muddy Waters, Otis Spann, Blind Lemon Jefferson, John Lee Hooker, Lightnin' Hopkins; these are the names I know. I think it's very important to see how they improvise on such a little thing -- such little material, the blues and the three blues chords. They played it for thirty-forty years. Some are still playing it. I think by taking off some of the solos, playing along with those solos can be of great value for a jazz musician, because once again you get caught up with that technical thing of a lot of notes, a lot of chords and a lot of harmony. You lose the essence of what you're doing which is trying to express something. The blues is certainly a very clear cut expression (with) very limited material. I think that's a very good discipline for a jazz musician to do, especially since the blues is so related to jazz.

W.S. I found interesting your analogy between the traditional blues scale and Indian music.

D.L. Indian Raga is similar in a sense. You have a scale and a certain rhythm, which would be like having blues changes, and you play within that. You explore those notes one at a time. You build up a scale and you build up rhythms. Of course the exploration of Raga takes many hours in Indian classical music, but the point is they're supposed to play the material and interpret it, not necessarily come up with new material. The Western world is innovation conscious, always wanting new things and experimenting. When Bird came out, the great thing about Bird was he found new notes to play, not new, but different notes to put together in combination. Coltrane was the same way, he was a great innovator because of his expansion of the material. In more traditional music in the East it's not expansion of the material, it's the knowledge and subtlety of

what's been there for thousands of years, which is their culture and not suitable for here, but I think that discipline for musicians is great. The blues is probably the closest thing we have to that.

W.S. Is the study of ethnic music relevant to the study of jazz? Should a young student be pointed in the direction of Indian music?

D.L. Yes, I think there's definitely two areas where a student should go that they don't go -- which is blues or be it 'pop' -- George Gershwin -- there should be a course in that. If there's one thing in common in Western music its the use of chords and use of certain kinds of rhythms, whether it's improvised or not. I think there should be some kind of study of Tin Pan Alley songs -- George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin; where it came from, the structure of the tunes and knowledge of those songs. There should also be a course in ethnic music required.-- certainly Indian, certainly African, and certainly South American. There are so many influences from that music. Jazz came from America, and America is a melting pot for mainly Europe, certainly Europe and Africa, and now in the last thirty to forty years the Caribbean influence. There was no such thing as Mambo in America till 1930 and the Bossa Nova came from Brzil in the last fifteen years. I think it has great value. Ethnic music stresses rhythm and rhythm is what jazz stresses.

W.S. What about rock groups? Cream, Rolling Stones the Beatles or whatever? What is their relevance, do they have any place as far as our instruction is concerned?

D.L. I think in the same sense Irving Berlin does, as song writers and movers of popular music -- certainly the Beatles, Paul Simon, Bob Dylan-- how they put music together. The thing to me about jazz education, which comes to me in this conversation, is that it would be of great value to enlarge the education to the contemporary music scene and not just jazz. If you really look at what jazz is now you can't even call jazz 'jazz'. I call it "contemporary improvised music". In my music I use Indian influences, Latin drummers. I used the European classical influence on my duet album with Beirach. Strict jazz comes from Dixieland, came up through the cities, the black music, and that is jazz and bebop, but jazz now is a mixture of all the techniques, rock-n-roll, bebop, classic, South American and Indian. All the world is one place now. It's really important for someone learning jazz to get an awareness of that -- a little bit at least.

W.S. That brings me to another question and this is a loaded one. Traditional music schools have been steeped in European classical music, ~~a little bit of American classical but still European roots.~~ How relevant is the concentrated study of European classical music to the development of a jazz musician?

D.L. I don't think a concentrated study. I think they should know the historic evolution of it, who the major innovators were and why. I think there's large similarities between innovations in jazz in the last 20 years and the contemporary classical music from the beginning on. Your baroque period was like Dixieland, Beethoven and Wagner put a little drama in it, they were like Louis Armstrong. Debussy and Ravel were like Bill Evans, impressionism. Scriabin is like McCoy Tyner. These are the symbols. I learned a lot from Richard Beirach who's a major music - ? master, has been playing since he was six years old. He studies the classical things to get the chords out of it because he sees that coming up. Mahler, Scriabin, Schoenberg, Bartok are very important, and I certainly think twentieth century music should be explored. The older music should be looked at, but concentrated study takes away a lot of time.

W.S. What about instruction from an applied standpoint on one's instrument, say saxophone, how important is classical saxophone study to an individual primarily interested in jazz?

D.L. It's important only from a technical standpoint, the ability to know what it's about and be able to duplicate it is of value, but not a necessity. When I started I was thirteen or so, my first four or five years were book after book of classical studies. I learned how to read, to articulate, now whether that did me any good in jazz I don't know, but it certainly got me to get around the saxophone much quicker than if I waited till I knew chord changes, so I was playing my instrument at a young age. When a guy gets to be older he probably has his instrument fairly well together. In instrumental teaching there should be some emphasis on classical literature as far as being able to play fluid, whether you interpret it according to the rules is another story. It's beautiful music and a saxophone player should be interested in it.

W.S. Do you feel, as a strong soloist and an individual force on your instrument, ~~that studio playing would do damage to your musical direction?~~ studio playing would do damage to your musical direction?

D.L. Nothing will do damage if it's done positively and if it's done at the right time. Certainly studio work, having to double, having to be right on the case, be very accurate in tune, etc. is very important. I didn't go through that. It's very relative to each man's situation. If there were a way of building a jazz musician and planning his journeyman gigs along the way, I would say the best way would be to play with an organ trio, the next best gig is to play rock-n-roll or Latin music, because it's improvisation with some kind of expression, then play show music and then studio music. Everything has value, even country and western has value. It depends on what your priorities are. There came a time for me when I couldn't play club dates anymore. That's what I did mostly as a teenager. I found a stylistic conflict in my approach to saxophone, whereas I couldn't go home and expect to play hip, like cutting phrases short, legato and that tonguing, and not using a funny vibrato-- all the things I was doing on my job for four hours in a tuxedo which was part of the job. I couldn't go home and change personalities musically like that. It was easy to take off a tuxedo and put on dungarees, but it wasn't easy to go home and phrase the same tune I'd played three hours ago, rephrasing it and making it into jazz language. What I had to realize was I had to stop doing that because it was having a debilitating effect. It's really very personal, everyone must decide what he has to do.

W.S. We've all been very interested in hearing your approach to jazz composition. Possibly, the teaching of jazz composition is a new idea to our readers. How important is the study of jazz composition?

D.L. Extremely important, because jazz composition is improvisation taken down to its most subtle level. In other words, an improviser is basically composing all the time, but he doesn't have time to choose whether to play a 'C' or a 'B', shall I play a C major or C minor; he follows and makes alterations on the spot based on habit and experience. As a composer, you are bound to sit down and say this is what I'm choosing here -- this is the rhythm, the chord, the melody, the notes that come on the fourth beat (and not on the "and" of the fourth beat) and for what reason. It's not just inspiration. Composition is reason and rules...why you do something in order to achieve another effect. When you compose you have to make decisions. It trains your mind so that you can make decisions when you improvise. I found that writing really helped my improvisation in some kind of way which I can't explain except I know when I'm writing I have to make a choice between one note or another, or a certain kind of line or melody. I'm making musical decisions based on choice and problem.

What is my goal here? What am I trying to achieve? What's the answer to the problem? When you improvise you basically do that in split second time. I think composition is very important. A great course would be the compositions of the great composers like Duke, Mingus, Miles Davis, Coltrane, Bird, Wayne Shorter; just to see what are the similar threads in their writing -- what do they use, and what do you think went on in their minds. I've been going into these classes with Ron Miller and giving out some of my tunes, and telling them exactly how what they see on the paper came about, what the decisions were, how the inspiration came, what the original inspiration was, if it was the melody or the chord, how I built on top of it, and how it was changed in performance. This is going to be covered in this book coming out, probably by the time this article comes out. It's called Small Group Improvisation: A Case Study, Look Out Farm. That was the name of the group I had for a few years after I left Miles. It's going to be published by Alinor Publications. It's going to be an indepth study of five tunes of ours that are on record from the time of composition to performance -- all the things I'm talking about now -- how it was changed, what happened in performance, how did the drums relate to the bass and so forth. These are the kinds of things I think are very good for indepth study.

W.S. ~~2019~~, How do you view your role in music education or jazz education in the future? Are you going to continue your summer clinics and guest spots?

D.L. yes, as time allows. My schedule is full for the next six months, but if I can be around people who are 'on the case' I enjoy it. There's a great atmosphere here, everybody is very hip, intelligent and into music, good musicians. Jamey's thing is great. I go out on those workshops with David Baker, Jerry Coker, Joe Henderson, who are guys I enjoy being with, playing with, so I definitely will do this for always (again). I think a musician only pays back his privilege of being able to make a living by teaching. I feel privileged to live the way I live, play the music I like. So many people are frustrated having to support whomever they have to support. I've been lucky, I worked hard, but I've been very lucky and I think the only way to pay that back is to teach the people who want to hear it. That's the way you pay back your luck. Without being modest, self effacing, I feel that's important to do. When I have kids come up to me who've taken lines from my solos, what to know what it is, that takes me out, it's beautiful. They actually spend time just like I spend time taking Coltrane solos. That changed my life, so maybe this'll have some affect on their lives. Certainly anybody who's interested in jazz or playing music, for his whole evolution as a human being, gets something good out of music. Playing music is a spiritual thing. I feels it's a duty for musicians to teach --if you're good at it. Certainly I'm pretty verbal and had experience teaching, so I do it. A lot of guys can't, don't know how to talk about it, that's cool, but if you can you ought to do it.

W.S. David, you certainly have touched the musical and personal lives of the staff and students at the University of Miami. In closing we'd like to thank you very much for being a part of our program for the second time and we look forward to having you back on campus again soon. We hope our colleagues throughout the country will avail themselves of your services when your busy schedule allows. ~~Thank you David.~~