

Chick Corea, jazz pianist, interview: New York is 'still bubbling with creativity'

BY [GREG THOMAS](#) / SPECIAL TO THE NEWS
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Jazz pianist Chick Corea said he initially moved to New York in 1959 because all his 'jazz heroes' were living there at the time.

To judge by the latest whirlwind of activity, jazz great [Chick Corea](#) has no intention of slowing down after more than 50 years.

Saturday he led a tribute to [Herbie Hancock](#) in [Washington, D.C.](#) Sunday he was in a [Manhattan](#) studio recording with [Roy Haynes](#), who, at 85, may be the world's greatest living jazz drummer.

Now the pianist and composer works with another legend, [Wynton Marsalis](#), when he settles in for a three-night sojourn starting Thursday at [Jazz at Lincoln Center](#) at the [Time Warner Center](#).

"For these concerts, some members of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra are writing new arrangements of Chick's music. He's one of the great figures of music," says Marsalis, artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center. "This opportunity to play his music develops our library, our arranging skills and gives us the occasion to play with an unbelievable musician."

"This will be Wynton's and my first chance to work on music together," says Corea. "I think it's going to be a blast."

Corea, born outside [Boston](#), calls [New York City](#) his "spiritual home. ... That's where I connected with art and music and the thing I love to do and work on, and express myself with."

Corea, who has Spanish and Italian ancestry, began studying piano at age 4. Jazz players [Bud Powell](#) and [Horace Silver](#) were early influences on his playing; [Mozart](#) and [Beethoven](#) inspired his compositional instincts. His first major professional gig was with [Cab Calloway](#), followed by stints with Latin bands led by [Mongo Santamaria](#) and [Willie Bobo](#).

Corea moved to [New York](#) in 1959 because "all of my jazz heroes were living and working in New York. The list in the 1960s is staggering." He lived for a while in [Brooklyn](#) and was one of the first loft owners on 19th St. in Manhattan. He attended [Columbia University](#) for a semester. Then, after seeing the [Miles Davis](#) Quintet play at Birdland, he says, "I decided that I didn't want to spend my time in a liberal arts college. I wanted to stay in the city and cut my teeth on music."

But he gave formal education another go at [Juilliard](#). Corea organized jam sessions after hours in Juilliard practice rooms, with bassist [Bill Lee](#) ([Spike Lee](#)'s father) and flutist [Hubert Laws](#).

"He was a pioneer of what was absent at Juilliard in 1960/61: jazz improvisation," says Laws, a recent recipient of the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) Jazz Masters fellowship, the nation's highest honor for jazz artists. (Corea's Jazz Master designation came in 2006.)

"And I remember some of the gigs we used to have, including him in some of the bands I put together, like at the top of the [Hotel Theresa](#) in [Harlem](#), where we'd play dances."

One of Corea's fondest memories of his days as a musical apprentice took place during a run at the [Apollo Theater](#), a half block from the Hotel Theresa. He was playing keyboard in Mongo Santamaria's band, which shared the bill with the [Maynard Ferguson Orchestra](#) and the [Thelonious Monk](#) Quartet.

"I got a chance to listen to and watch Thelonious Monk and his quartet play two shows a night, for six weeks," he says. "It was a great education. There was my university, man."

Corea left Juilliard after a semester to follow his musical muse in New York on the bandstands of trumpeter [Blue Mitchell](#), flutist [Herbie Mann](#), saxophonist [Stan Getz](#) and songstress [Sarah Vaughan](#).

After two years with Miles Davis' electronic band he went off with his own group. His first two recordings as a leader, "Tones for Joan's Bones" (1966) and "Now He Sings, Now He Sobs" (1968), are considered classics of the period. Compositions from those recordings are among the songs that the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra will, in swinging fashion, interpret.

To paraphrase [Duke Ellington](#), Corea is a musician and composer beyond category — his music may fit within the boundaries of avant garde, fusion, classical, jazz, Latin and more, but he's really not boxed into genres.

He cites [Dustin Hoffman](#) as a model, "because of how good he is at being such different characters," Corea said in a 1999 interview. "That's how I see myself as a performer."

New York has been a focal point of his creativity. In the 1960s, Corea recalls, "There were experiments going on, and the culture of other artists and art forms. It was just a great mix of artists.

"... The city has changed of course, but it's still — unbeknownst to most — full of pockets of creativity. Great musicians from all over the planet all try to live and work in New York.

"You'll find little schools of musicians experimenting with different ways of making music in Brooklyn, all through Manhattan, in Queens, in Jersey, you know?

"The city is still bubbling with creativity."

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