

## A FIRESIDE CHAT WITH JACKIE MCLEAN

When President Clinton stands next to Jackie McLean, I am not too certain which sax player I would like to vibe with. Yeah, I do. I would rather talk to McLean any day of the week and twice on Sundays. After all, Clinton is merely some guy who got a little too friendly with an intern. And McLean, well, anyone who has seen as much as he has or has recorded as many landmark albums as he has is nothing short of a legend. I sat down with the legend himself from his Northeast home for a candid one on one, as always unedited and in his own words.

FRED JUNG: Let's start from the beginning.

JACKIE MCLEAN: It was an experience that came over a period of years of sitting next to my godfather's church, who played the saxophone in the church, in a little church ensemble and so from the time I was about five years old until about fourteen, I sat every Sunday in that little orchestra pit with the soprano saxophone that he played. Another gentleman played the flute. Another gentleman played the violin. There was piano and of course there was the organ and then the choir. That took care of the music. It was the Abyssinian Baptist Church on 138th Street in Harlem and the minister was the very legendary Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who later became a Congressman. So that's how I got introduced to listening to the soprano saxophone every Sunday, but I never had any dreams of playing it until I heard a recording of Lester Young when I was about thirteen. I heard the recording at one of my uncle's houses. It just blew my top and when I found out that the instrument he played was just like the soprano saxophone, that if you played one, you could play the other, that's when I asked my godfather to let me learn how to play it. He had two of them. He had a silver straight soprano and he had a gold straight soprano. So he gave me the silver one to learn on. I started learning the saxophone at fourteen years old, inspired by Lester Young.

FJ: What was it about Lester that moved you?

JACKIE MCLEAN: You know it's a funny thing, Fred. It's a total mystery to me. I heard Coleman Hawkins. My uncle played him for me too and I even know the piece that I heard. I heard "The Man I Love," with Coleman Hawkins and Oscar Pettiford. It's a wonderful recording. I liked it a lot, but it didn't make me want to play the saxophone. Then he played Lester Young for me the same afternoon and as soon as I heard that sound, I was really into doing it, so much so that when I left his house I went to the record shop and I remember I paid eighty-five cents or something like that for a copy of Just You, Just Me on the Keynote label. I took it home and I had a little wind up record player in my room and I put that on immediately.

FJ: Let's touch on some of the legends of this music that you have collaborated on through the years. First, Ornette Coleman.

JACKIE MCLEAN: It was a chance for us to play together and to make a historical statement. In my mind, I thought we would both perhaps play the saxophone, but he opted to play the trumpet on this recording (New and Old Gospel) and so Blue Note thought it was a good idea and good project and we did it. He's a very fine composer and a very fine musician. I think everything has been written about him. What can I say? He's an incredible composer and a wonderful multi-instrumentalist.

FJ: Sonny Rollins?

JACKIE MCLEAN: Well, Sonny and I came up together. We came out of the same neighborhood. Sonny's a year or so older than me and I always looked up to him because he was playing excellent when he was fourteen, fifteen years old.

FJ: What neighborhood was that?

JACKIE MCLEAN: We both came up on Sugar Hill, which is up in Harlem, from 140th, 155th, 153rd Street, between Edgecomb Avenue, St. Nicholas Avenue, that area.

FJ: And Thelonious Monk?

JACKIE MCLEAN: Monk was someone that we used to go down to his house, some of us, and he'd let us come in and listen to him play. When I was about fifteen, he let me come one time and sit in with him when he was playing in the Bronx. Of course, I couldn't play anything. I was only playing a year. Monk made himself available to a lot of young guys at that time. He liked people that were interested in music. If he saw a young guy trying to play, he certainly didn't get in the way of it. He tried to support it.

FJ: Bud Powell?

JACKIE MCLEAN: Oh, that was the turning point in my life, when I met Bud I was fifteen and I had been playing a year. In fact, I met Bud right around the same time that I had met Thelonious. I met Bud through his brother Richard and once I started going to Bud's house to visit, it was just incredible. I was going there every week for a couple of years until I learned so much listening to him play in his house and talking to him and being around him.

FJ: Who is and who isn't an innovator is a contentious argument, but Bud Powell in particular always seems to be left out of the fray. After all, Powell, along with Monk, revolutionized the way the piano is played in jazz music.

JACKIE MCLEAN: Fred, I would go further than that. I would say Bud is one of the architects of this music called bebop. He's one of the people that developed the concepts within the bebop style. He is definitely, no question about it, one of the greatest piano players, if not the greatest stylist that ever played the piano. Thelonious loved to play Bud play his compositions. Thelonious always thought that Bud was a great interpreter of Thelonious Monk's music. Bud loved Thelonious. He worshipped him as an idol. Charlie Parker was the great player at that time, that whenever he was on the bandstand playing, everyone else played, except for Bud. Bud always played up to the highest standards of Charlie Parker. He played as well as Charlie Parker, sometimes better. At the time, Bud had a great influence on me, in terms of building ideas and thinking of lines to play, as much as Charlie Parker.

FJ: Who else influenced you?

JACKIE MCLEAN: Sonny Stitt was a great influence on me. Sonny Rollins, even though he and I were a year apart as far as age was concerned, Sonny had a great influence on me in terms of his playing, and of course, Lester and Dexter. I think it's a coming together of all these different influences that make you come up with something.

FJ: Art Blakey?

JACKIE MCLEAN: Oh, yeah. That's my paternal father.

FJ: Lastly, Charles Mingus.

JACKIE MCLEAN: I was in his band for years. I was in his band on two different occasions. I was in his band and then I left his band and then I came back to his band. Yeah, that was a wonderful experience for me. I enjoyed working with Mingus. It was difficult because he was not an easy person to be around and he's not an easy person to work for, but he certainly was a genius and I learned so much from him. He helped me to really develop into an original sound. He used to beat me up for trying to play like Bird.

FJ: Really?

JACKIE MCLEAN: Oh, yeah, he used to say to me all the time, "What are you playing that for? Bird already did that." I'd be playing a blues or one of his tunes and I would quote Bird's play, a famous Bird quote and he wouldn't leave that alone. He'd wait until after the set was over and he'd come over to me and say, "I heard what you did on 'A Foggy Day.' You played a great solo up until you played that shit that Bird already played. Why do you keep on playing his shit? Get a style of your own, man. There's a sound and a real style inside of Jackie McLean. Why the hell do you keep on playing Bird's stuff? You can't play anything that he played better than he played it." Months past by before I started to get a picture of that. I said, "Wait a minute, he's right. Maybe I should try this or try that," because he used to tell me what to do. He'd say, "Play this. Blah-la-la-la-la-la." "I don't want to play that, man," I'd say. He used to make a loud sound like that. I don't want to play "Blah-la-la-la-la-la." I want to play some of those beautiful lines that I hear other people play. He woke me up.

FJ: Brutal, but honest.

JACKIE MCLEAN: Yeah, he gave me a lot to think about.

FJ: One Step Beyond, Let Freedom Ring, and Destination Out are advanced. But as you changed your style and approach, the media has been less than receptive.

JACKIE MCLEAN: Yeah, you know, Fred, I had to learn early on not to pay any attention to people that write about the music because it turns out that they're not the ones that have to make the decision as to what you play. A lot of times, they really don't understand what causes somebody to do certain things. Now for me, Bird said to me when I was about, official Bird through Bud when I was about sixteen. I was talking to him one day

and he said to me, "Have you ever heard The Rite of Spring?" And I said, "What is that?" He said, "It's by Igor Stravinsky." He said, "You ought to listen to those things, The Firebird, The Rite of Spring." So I was with my buddy and when Bird walked away, I said, "Oh, man, he's trying to throw me off. Are you kidding? Why should I go listen to some rites of somebody? I'm listening to him. He's not going to throw me off. He's not going to take me off of his trail (laughing)." I was so determined to play like Charlie Parker that it didn't mean anything to me at that point, but when Bird died, years later, I went to a record shop and asked if they had this thing called The Rite of Spring. He handed me a 12-inch, old breakable record. I took that home and put it on the record machine and it opened up a world for me. I understood what Bird was trying to tell me to do. It opened up a lot for me. I went from Stravinsky and then I moved backwards. I went to Bartok and went back to Tchaikovsky and I worked my way back. I had never listened to Western classical music in my life. It was my first experience with Stravinsky and then I began to find this world of music, Romeo and Juliet, Prokofiev's The Love for Three Oranges, all this beautiful music that was there all the time that I didn't even know about. I was born and raised in Harlem and came up in a Black church, so my experience was that of an African-American. I did not have anyone in my family who was versed in Western classical. The closest I knew about that kind of music was when I went to the movies and heard background music during films, something with Errol Flynn.

FJ: You have spoken at great length as to how much you wanted to sound like Charlie Parker. You weren't the only one. As in the dark as it may sound, why? Was it that revolutionary?

JACKIE MCLEAN: Yes, it was. You know what, Fred? You could go to practically every musician that lived during that period and ask them the same question and they wouldn't be able to tell you what it was, they would just say it was something. It was like a virus. I didn't even like the alto saxophone that much because my stepfather, not my godfather, my godfather took me to the Apollo to hear people like Charlie Barnett, who I liked a lot when I was a kid, but everybody that I loved was a tenor player, except for Louis Jordan. I liked him a lot. He was the only alto player that I really loved before I heard Bird. My stepfather made me listen to Johnny Hodges, Willie Smith, all those guys, I didn't like them. I didn't like the alto. It was too high, too sweet. I loved the tenor, that is until I heard Charlie Parker. When I first heard Bird, that was it. I knew that that was the way I wanted to play the alto. That's how I wanted the alto to sound. I think it was the same way with practically everybody, Jimmy Heath, Benny Golson, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, piano players like Walter Bishop or Kenny Drew, you name them, Gerry Mulligan, everybody. Everybody that heard Bird was drawn like a magnet to his musical concept. He was truly the greatest musician of his time. He was certainly one of the greatest musicians ever produced on this planet, up at a level of creativity of anybody you can name, even Europe or Africa or China or India or anywhere, just remarkable. It is something that I can't put my finger on. I've talked to Benny Golson about it. I've talked to Sonny about him, Jimmy Heath, and everybody that was around at that time, they all said the same thing. They were drawn to that concept.

FJ: Something always bothered me about the way Bird has been portrayed. Charlie Parker's lifestyle always prefaces his music or his involvement in drugs and alcohol overshadow his contributions, but that is never the case with Beethoven or Tchaikovsky.

JACKIE MCLEAN: That's true. I think that is such a crime. When people ask me about Clint Eastwood's effort to do a movie about Bird, I always say that I think Clint Eastwood is wonderful to bring Bird out of the closet and make his name and make his presence on this planet available, so people can say, "Oh, there was a man named Charlie Parker that played a great instrument and played great music." But not once in that movie do they call him a genius, not once to they focus in him working on music. Everything in that movie is just like the books that they write about Bird and most jazz musicians. They talk about anything that's wrong in their lives other than the music. And Bird was the most awesome musician and no one cares. I studied the life of Beethoven and people used to have to come and peel his clothes off him. He was funky. He did this. He did that. He got drunk. Nobody talks about that, Fred. Nobody cares about that. People only care about what was the product that he produced and sounds. That's the most important thing. Jazz musicians, with Bud, they want to talk about all the terrible things. Bud was no different than any other great genius that was consumed by his music, the same with Thelonious. Thelonious was consumed. They both were in a state of grace. They were both beyond everyday living. I know that because I was around them. Bird wasn't. Bird was not in a state of grace. Bird could tell you what team own the World Series or who was President of the United States, what's going on in the world, but Bud couldn't tell you that. You could walk up to Bud and say, "Bud, who is the President?" He didn't know. It was of no interest to him. Bud was consumed by his music.

FJ: It is a family affair for the McLeans, your son Rene plays in your band.

JACKIE MCLEAN: Yeah, we're getting ready to go out now. Oh, man, Fred, that's one of the most wonderful things. I've reached a place now where I can do, sort of, what I want to do and there is only three ways I enjoy playing. I enjoy playing quartets and if I have to pick a rhythm section, one of the rhythm sections that I love is Cedar Walton, Billy Higgins, and David Williams. I love to play with them. I also have a youthful band, a band of younger musicians that I have developed, Steve Davis, a trombonist, Alan Jay Palmer, my pianist, Eric McPherson, the drummer, and Phil Bowler, the bass. They're all my students that have come out of my program at Hartford. They've gone on to become musicians in their own right. I play with them. I enjoy working with them. The other thing I enjoy is working with Rene. Rene has written an incredible body of music and we switch between tunes that I wrote and tunes that he wrote. The two of us have a quintet that is really fun and I really

enjoy going out and playing. I also enjoy playing with young trumpet players like Darren Barrett. Have you heard him yet, Fred?

FJ: He won the Thelonious Monk Competition.

JACKIE MCLEAN: Right, Darren's been working with me a lot. I've been taking him to Japan and using him on different projects. I love him. I also like Cyrus Chestnut, so there's a lot of different things that I have been enjoying these days. I'm also part of the Dizzy Gillespie Alumni Band with Slide Hampton, Jon Faddis, and James Moody, myself, Mulgrew Miller. It's fun. We go and play Dizzy's music. I enjoy that too. That is the only time that I enjoy playing that music when I am playing with those authentic guys.

FJ: Your quartet, Billy Higgins, David Williams, and Cedar Walton are on your latest Blue Note record, Nature Boy, a program of standards.

JACKIE MCLEAN: Well, Fred, it was a request from the Japanese producers. They asked me to do that. When I go to Japan, I get a lot of requests for these sentimental songs. For some reason, they really love me to play ballads. So the producer asked me, "Jackie, will you do me a favor and let me produce a nice album of all ballads." He gave me a list and I said, "Look, man, I can't play all these tunes." So I stuck in "Nature Boy," "What is This Thing Called Love," and "You Don't Know What Love Is." I enjoyed what we did. I thought it was interesting.

FJ: Looking back on your career, what sticks out in your mind?

JACKIE MCLEAN: You see, Fred, I was a bebop baby. All of those guys thought, "Oh, man, little Jackie," because I was younger than Sonny. Sonny was a bebop baby too, but I was younger than Sonny and looked younger than him. I was chubby and had a real youthful look and my voice didn't change until late. Bud and Monk, as well as Bird, they would all, "Oh, yeah, Jackie." Suddenly, after the two and a half years that I sat in Bud's house, practically on a daily basis, because I went to Bud's house at least four to five times per week, every week for two and a half years. I'd spend the night down there. My mother would let me go down there and sleep over. It was just incredible, all the music I heard. I had been following Bird on 52nd Street when I was fifteen. I used to get on the subway and go down there. My mother didn't know it, but I used to sneak down there at night. I had to be home by ten. I would run downtown at eight and hang out on 52nd Street and watch Bird and them come to work. By the time they got inside the club and started taking their instruments out, I had to run for the subway because I had to be back home at ten. I would just go down there to watch Bird walk down 52nd Street. We'd run up and talk to him and speak to him. One night he looked at us and said, "You kids live around here? Every night I come here, you guys are here." I said, "No, we live up in Harlem." "You come way down here? Why do you come down here?" I said, "We came here to see you go to work." He said, "When you come here on Friday night, I'm going to get you in." So we went down there on Friday night and we got there and we were in front of the club when Bird arrived. He let us in and we stood right by the door, by the coatroom, and he went up on the stage and started playing "Salt Peanuts," he and Miles, Max, and Duke Jordan and I'm telling you, Fred, we were in heaven. We couldn't listen to the whole thing. We listened to about half of it and we had to run out the door to get home. He remembered us as kids and then I officially met him again when I was seventeen. Bud introduced me to him and Bird said, "I remember you. You're that little boy that used to be on 52nd Street. You play?" I said, "Yeah." Bud said, "You better watch out Bird, this boy is learning fast." It was great, Fred. I wouldn't trade anything for those days and being in the aura of those men.