

by Christopher Collins

*“Intensity, passion, experience, depth, balance, artistry...These were the adjectives that echoed through my mind as I prepared to interview Dave Liebman. As a saxophonist and pursuer of the jazz tradition, I had come to know Dave through years of listening, reading, and studying his musical language. I felt as though I was going to meet an old friend.” – C.C.*

COLLINS: Give me some thoughts about your birthplace, your family background, and your initial playing experiences.

LIEBMAN: I grew up in Brooklyn, in a middle-class Jewish/Italian area. Music was in my home; my mother knew enough about music to insist that I take piano before I could choose any specific instrument. I took a little more than two years when I was ten; at twelve years old I played clarinet for one year and then finally saxophone.

Eventually I studied at a local school taught by a family in their house; the Bromley Studios in Brooklyn. I went for a piano lesson, saxophone lesson, and a combo workshop every Saturday morning. They taught you how to play dance music and helped me get a gig in the Catskills by age thirteen. I worked the Catskills my whole teenage life; weekends, April until October and the summers. There were a lot of great musicians who were playing in these show bands at hotels there. And they would have jam sessions; so this was really was my first exposure to hearing jazz.

COLLINS: When did you first hear a “name” jazz musician?

LIEBMAN: My first, really great experience with jazz was going to Birdland when I was 14. I saw Mulligan and Count Basie. But then I saw Coltrane. And that was a definite revelation, seeing him and hearing him – and then many times after that. I began to say: “Well, whatever this is, I gotta try to do it.” I mean that was really the impetus and the inspiration to want to play the saxophone in that kind of way: jazz. I didn’t know what “jazz” meant at that time; I had no idea what he was playing. But the power was incredible, and it took me right away. When I was 14, I was already convinced that this was a very amazing thing that was happening.

COLLINS: Many artists seem to reminisce about some turning point, some experience that propels them into their craft. Is that what you would consider it in your life?

## Background

<sup>1</sup> published in the *Jazz Educators Journal*, March 1995.

LIEBMAN: Definitely, by far. Seeing him many times and hearing the music. I never knew that music could be that powerful – any kind of music. I was into rock-and-roll when I was a kid, up to age twelve; my first idol was Elvis Presley. I had no idea what jazz was. So it was an education for me – and completely from feeling. There was really nowhere to go to learn jazz except your friends. I had a very good friend, a pianist in my first band named Mike Garson and we pursued it. So it was a long process to find out: trial and error, by asking.

### *The Saxophone*

COLLINS: Could you discuss the profound effect the great master Joe Allard had on your saxophone playing?

LIEBMAN: At seventeen I went to Carnegie Hall studios, where he taught. I would take the subway and see him every Saturday for a few years and then on and off throughout the rest of his life. The main effect Joe had was talking about sax sound – it had nothing to do with style.

Blowing the saxophone is no different from the process of speaking and singing. The voice naturally adjusts to the sound that you hear in your head. This occurs below the threshold of consciousness; so all you have to do is let that work. Instead of moving this, tightening this, loosening this, his whole thing was “don’t do anything and it’ll be fine.” I’m making it simple but that was really the thing. Now I was not mature enough to hear that message. I was the kind of student who wanted to know “#1, #2, #3” – what order of events and how to practice. I really didn’t get the point until many years later when I finally wrote the book about the saxophone. Then I realized it is really that simple. You have to unlearn many bad habits.

COLLINS: In your book, *Developing A Personal Saxophone Sound*, you call them “habitualized bodily tensions” and you offer a plethora of helpful, detailed exercises that I see as ways of exploring the pallet of tonal colors available through physical self-awareness.

LIEBMAN: Right. That’s well put.

COLLINS: This seems very familiar to me in other relaxation methods. Are you familiar with or utilizing the Feldenkrais technique or any similar methods?

LIEBMAN: Sure. I know Feldenkrais’ assistant, now one of the heads of the movement in New York and I know general yoga and breathing techniques. Everything is basically to get your body to work the way you want it to and not to have it be encumbered by blockage – mental blockage which forms physical blockage. A lot of this is mind over matter. I mean, to get your larynx to articulate what you hear in your head is a natural, God-given thing. A baby cries and does so right away. A human’s ability to vocalize emotion by tone, dynamics and all the vocal control you take for granted, as well as singing, are natural.

So don't block it by bad habits. Teachers can instill ideas that get in the way. Get back to the basics; get back to the natural. My main exercise, saxophone-wise, is to do the overtones. Do the harmonics, match the overtone sound with the natural "real" fingering. Get your larynx to sing the sound; hear it in your head before your larynx sings it. You don't have to do much in your embouchure at all. This leaves the embouchure – the lips, teeth, jaw, tongue – all open for expressiveness.

COLLINS: One of the things I like most about that book is the way you explain why you should do these exercises.

LIEBMAN: Joe gave me all of this and I didn't understand why at the time. He gave me the same lesson over and over again. I went to see him for years to try to keep getting what he really was saying. After I was with Miles, after I was with Elvin, after I was already recording, I got the point. Of course, the more mature I got as a saxophonist, the more I heard what he was saying. I started to write it down; asked him questions; started to analyze it to see the real reasons – the physics of it. I really wanted to understand which is why I wrote the book. He had his way of teaching but I felt the logic and reason for doing it could be clearer.

COLLINS: Do you recall any practicing techniques from your youth when you were really getting going, that helped you to break through and begin to understand and absorb the concepts of jazz improvisation?

LIEBMAN: Well, I always say the same thing: transcription. I'm a believer in exact duplication of a solo. I have to be clear about how exact because students will say they've transcribed. But then I play them this tape which I carry with me while teaching which has about thirty students of mine over the past many years now who have done this exact duplication. I put this tape on and you can't tell if it's Sonny Rollins or the student ... or Trane ... or Miles. And then I look at them and say: "Have you transcribed?" And they look at me and say: "No" – because most haven't done it to that degree.

COLLINS: Right.

LIEBMAN: The thing that's the most difficult to get about jazz is phrasing. You can't get it through a book. You get it through experience, first with a model to imitate. And phrasing is a big word: it means articulation, time feel, dynamics, how much spit in the sound, vibrato or non-vibrato, the attack. We're talking about ten to fifteen subtle elements that go into making it swing – making two notes come together in an eighth-note feel that is jazz.

Anyone can say: "Oh that's swinging; that's not swinging" in someone else's playing. But it's very hard to do on your own saxophone, on your trumpet, on your piano, because now you're talking

## *Improvisation*

about getting the body to respond in a certain way to what your ear is telling you to do. That is subconscious. You can't explain it; it can only be done by imitation – I play, you play. I always talk about this. If we were in a slower society, you'd only learn by ear, not on paper. That is the way it was in ancient time. Certainly in Indian music it still exists quite a bit. You sit with the master and one day you took one phrase and that was it for two, three or four hours. Then the next day another phrase. That's exactly what we do when we transcribe in this way. We must copy it exactly to get the feeling.

Then there's this method of getting it to grow into where it becomes you. I mean, you are a combination of all you've learned. But first you have to have gone through it to such a degree that you are exactly what you've heard; not just close, but as close as possible. And you know, students can do it! That is a regimen that someone who wants to play jazz should go through. Some people object to it as parasitical; stealing or copying licks becomes a crutch. It's great that you sound like somebody. When kids who can't play do that, they sound good for one solo. They love it! They know they sound good on a couple of licks. We don't want that to be the substitute for finding some kind of direction on your own, some kind of personal way of doing things. But to start off, as long as you understand it's a means to an end, I don't see a problem.

COLLINS: And as a teacher, often finding what thing unlocks that energy, that excitement in a player is the real task. If you can get them to the level where they're excited about going to the next step, then they're on their own.

LIEBMAN: That's true, because suddenly they finally sound good and they know they sound good.

COLLINS: The methods you put together, like the chromatic approach, what about these?

LIEBMAN: It's completely from me – and from Richie Beirach and our work together. The main thing about the book, *A Chromatic Approach to Harmony and Melody*, is that after years of my playing outside of the tonality, cats would say: "How do you do it?" So I sat down and said: "What was I just doing?" Over about five years I figured it out after the fact. And then I figured I'd write a kind of workbook: a player could read this and get a sampling of many ways of thinking about that. How many ways can you talk about one thing? If you can take any one of those ways, it will hopefully lead into that kind of hearing by getting your mental process together.

I get a lot of guys that come in who are very competent, play very well in changes and want to go into chromaticism. Their problem is accepting dissonance. So I have to start them off first of all with hearing Bartók, Webern, Schoenberg, etc., and of course late Coltrane and Miles mid 1960's. After they listen to certain things,

their ear accepts dissonance as being ok.

COLLINS: Your compositions cover so many areas. How do you approach the process of composing?

## Composition

LIEBMAN: I compose according to a particular musical context. I have about four or five formats: a straight-ahead format (jazz changes, from complex to easy); a free context (where it's bass, horn, and drums-type thing – no chords, just bass line); a fusion context (not a jazz rhythm, more vamp-type music); the 20th-century classical context; and ethnic-type stuff (odd meters, more of an Indian thing, flutes). So I'm eclectic, and I'm proud to say it. I have a lot of musical interests and every record is different – which has been a problem attracting an audience in one way but it's been so interesting. I've really been able to delve into so many kinds of music. So for me composition depends on the context I want. Within that I go with that particular sound in my ear.

Then I think: "What would I like to play on? Will I and the musicians who I play with be interested in and challenged by playing this tune or the particular musical problem posed by improvising on it?" Improvising is solving a musical problem. For instance, the album *The Tree* is a solo recording. It's all a metaphor of a tree's structure as compared to the evolution of an art form. So, branches equals fast, light, etc. If by confronting that problem I'm going to have to raise myself up to be at my best to do it, then that's a composition to me. That's really the basis.

I will often change something, so my writing is a building-block process. Though I didn't study formal composition in school, I did do a lot of studying of scores on my own – of course, jazz tunes – but Beethoven and everything. I've written some chamber music, so I had to study scores for the strings and the woodwinds and everything: Elliot Carter, Stravinsky, etc. I understand what came before which gives me a potpourri of many different influences, so I have tunes in many different contexts.

COLLINS: I know you have a B.A. in American History from New York University.

LIEBMAN: Yes.

COLLINS: Did you at the same time do any formal music study?

LIEBMAN: When I was studying with Joe Allard I went to Charles Lloyd. It was a very unique and singular experience. He was playing with Cannonball Adderley and I went up to him at a club and said: "Do you teach?" I studied with him for a year, but he was not a formal teacher. It was like hanging out with one of the guys on the scene. This was 1965. That was the only jazz study I had besides a little with Lennie Tristano.

COLLINS: Any traditional study?

LIEBMAN: I studied with a contemporary composer, Ursula Mamlock who was up at the Manhattan School of Music. I traded a few lessons with David Baker many years ago. He wanted some of my chromatic ideas for which he gave me some composition lessons. In other words, along the way I got some formal bits and pieces, but from beginning to end I learned on my own through classical books and so forth.

### *Balance*

COLLINS: In the “chromatic” book there are a couple of brief sections in which you discuss playing with a group and that interactive process. I’ve discussed with advanced players before the idea of pursuing things on a theoretical, almost mathematical level within a group, trying to “push that envelope” a little bit and yet not losing sort of that intimate, spontaneous, interactive thing that’s so ...

LIEBMAN: ... passion ...

COLLINS: ... yeah, the group experience. People are dealing with that balance – any thoughts about that?

LIEBMAN: Well, it is THE question, because to grow is to push the envelope. That’s well put. There’s the physical envelope, like playing a long solo, playing fast, even playing a ballad. Harmony is a mental envelope; it’s about how much the mind can think about – especially the improviser who does it on the spot.

I divide it into three things: the hand, the head, and the heart ... “The 3-H Club”. The hand is the technique; it’s the physical skill needed to play any instrument. The head is the intellect; what we’re talking about now. The heart is the passion; the soul, the emotion; and it is the cement that glues it all together. When you are a player – or even just as a person, no matter who you are or what you do – you are at given times a different balance of those three things. Sometimes you’re using the brain more than you’re using the technique and sometimes you’re just out there with raw emotion.

Now in the great artists of all, from literature to painting, you probably could see a very good balance among those three throughout their career: “Man ... great, deep thoughts, fantastic technique, and what passion!” Now when you’re learning and develop something, you’re not going to have those three balanced. You gotta’ accept it: “For now, my head is going to be stronger than my heart.” You can’t get uptight about it and feel guilty and say: “I’m becoming like a machine, there’s no heart in here”, or the opposite: “It’s all feeling – I don’t know what I’m doing.” These strengths are good, too, for awhile.

You see, the path of the artist is to balance these three eternally and to work on that balance. If anyone ever balances all three at the same time all the time, they wouldn’t be on the planet any more; they’d be in Nirvana. They would be out there in the ozone, because

that means perfect balance between all the aspects of what life is really about. The ability to handle things in the mind, the ability to translate it to people through communication and the ability to be able to learn something technically and do it well – that’s the challenge.

So I have no problem when I talk to a cat and say: “Look, this is where you are right now – go with it. Remember you have to come back over here though and you’ve got all your life I hope. This is a long road you’re on. The art road is forever. It’s not five years and then you get a degree – it’s forever. I have to assume that you’re going to understand the balance thing, that you’re going to pay attention to this other stuff. I want you to put down this transcription, go out and live a little bit, travel a little bit, see the world – love gained and lost. I also want you to sit down and read. I want you to put in some hours and learn to play that instrument. This is what I expect from you and from myself. You will play that balancing game forever. That’s what’s coming out in your playing. So when you hear a player displaying one of those three things, you know that he’s hitting that one hard right there. But it’s balance that you’re looking for ultimately.”

COLLINS: I’d like to just mention a couple of the artists you’ve played with and get kind of a spontaneous response ... Richie Beirach.

LIEBMAN: Richie’s a true artist. He has pursued his own thing. It is very hard to come up with a style. This music is only 100 years old now but it has moved at the rate of 400 years of classical music in those hundred years. Nobody sounds like him. You hear two notes; you know it’s Richie. And I would hope it’s the same with me. Very few people care to do it; to go out on an artistic limb. Finding yourself is psychologically like going in front of gun-fire. You don’t know if you’re going to come out, you don’t know what it’s going to be worth – it’s scary. This guy did it and we did it together, which is why we had a long and strong alliance. For that, he will always be one of the top in so far as gaining my respect.

The thing that made us a common alliance, a common heart, was we’re both very dramatic. And of course the thing that we had to learn – I know I had to learn – was how to control that – how not to just lay it all out at the first moment. See, when I saw Coltrane, I mistook that for completely laying raw emotion out. It was my mistake. He was weeding it out slowly but it was incredibly intense. I learned from Miles how to parcel it out because he was the master, at least on the horn, of giving you a little bit at a time and making you come back for more. He would say, “You don’t have to spell out the whole thing, bro’! Leave it to the rhythm section! You’re goin’ to that chord, but you don’t have to – do you need to play the I chord?

### *Impressions*

Do you really need to play the turnaround?” That’s how I’m translating it. He was saying that if you lean this way musically, implication and innuendo are enough. Let the others take it. You don’t have to spell it all out. He’d have you on the edge of your seat. And that’s where I am now, emotionally, when I play: I try to parcel it out, hold back. When I was younger it was all out on the floor – all out right away ... as fast as I could.

COLLINS: Another name: Elvin Jones.

LIEBMAN: Well, of course, from a musical standpoint, he is the drums. First of all, he was with Coltrane. So to play with him was like a dream come true; to play with that kind of feel behind you and understand that deep, deep time – I mean just incontestable swing, especially at certain tempos that no one else can play. So to play with him was a tremendous experience.

But even more important with him especially, even more than Miles, was Elvin as a person; what he brings to the music, to see that and be with him every night, and to know him: his commitment, his power, his sincerity, conviction and truthfulness when he would get on that bandstand. He would draw the audience in. I never saw anything like that! To play with a kind of guy like that, and then of course, compounding it by going on and playing with Miles immediately after Elvin was great. Miles’ thing was: “Get on the bandstand, man; you better be ready, baby, because this is the most important thing you do in your life” – and anything could happen.

So, this combination of an amazing tower of strength – a pillar of incredible strength and reservoir of the ocean which was Elvin – and going to this mercurial, temperamental, “on top of the case” Miles, who quivered with electricity when he was on the bandstand...by the time I was done with those two over four years, I didn’t even know until later how heavy it was. I was still in a cloud for a couple of years. It took me until the 1980’s, really another five to ten years to really understand, to really absorb it. And now I can even talk about it, the lessons playing with those two guys. Those were the masters and to play with them on a steady basis meant that I was very fortunate to have that. I want to stress again – not because of the music so much – because that you’d learn anyway – but the people, the way they did it. To see their lives, then to be close to them – it’s amazing – what an experience!

### *The IASJ*

COLLINS: I do want to ask you about the *International Association of Schools of Jazz*.

LIEBMAN: You know, I travel so much in the year that I get to really know a lot of people all over the world. And it came to me how cats in France didn’t know who cats in Germany were. Or Norway didn’t know the musicians in Spain or the teaching that was going on.



Borders really separated the music. So I wrote to people over a three-year period starting around '86: "Are you interested in uniting?" I called a meeting in Germany and lo and behold, twenty people from fifteen countries came representing a dozen schools. We met for our fifth year at the New School last June (1994).

It's a small organization at this time. We have very little money. My goal is different from the International Association of Jazz Educators' (IAJE) – the most important thing for me about IASJ is cross-cultural communication. That's my little slogan: "cross-cultural communication." I want kids to get together and use the music to understand each other, period. I don't really care what they play. To tell the truth, these things are secondary. The main thing is that a kid from Denmark is with a kid from Israel, from Japan. And this is what happens at our meetings. On Monday we form groups from our 50-60 students. Some of them can't even speak a common language to some of their combo partners. By Friday they're playing an amazing concert. I mean this is real work. The teachers, who are also from everywhere, get them going and by Wednesday, I have the teachers leave the room. This is not a clinic; it's a workshop.

I'd say 300-400 kids from maybe 30-40 countries have passed through and have gotten the address of a person they can stay with in Berlin or wherever. They've gotten gigs. I think we're really helping form a network of young students. Of course, they move on; new students take their place. But the idea of this school thing is to get the kids to interact. That's the only thing that means something. So it's really an organization built on trying to personalize relationships using jazz as the vehicle – jazz is the means to the end. Jazz will live; there's enough good guys out there. I care that it can be used – it's the old statement for music – as a universal language. I mean, these people communicate. And then they start talking politics, maybe; and they start talking about their country; and maybe these guys will know each other. Who knows what this can really come to? It could be a lot more than playing *All Blues* together.

That was the impetus of it and now we're in the throes of a non-profit organization. It's a pain in the neck, but we've met in New York, Graz, Sienna, Dublin, and The Hague...Our sixth will be in Tel Aviv in early July. You get to the end of the week and you see these kids sittin' there palsy-walsy who couldn't even talk to each other in the beginning of the week. It feels pretty good.

COLLINS: I always think about the statement you had on the back of one of the *Quest* albums; you defined the quest of an artist in a couple of sentences. What do you think is the next step in your quest?

LIEBMAN: Well, I don't think in terms like that any more. When I was younger I thought very dramatic; you learn later that everyday is

*The Future*

what's most important – not this monumental Nirvana at the end. You realize you've done everything you wanted to do. So I realize that it's the everyday thing that's the most important. First of all the personal, the family, the kid...that's number one. Number two is your effect on people through your work. For us, it's through music; and in our case, it's very much through education. We are affecting young people. Forget that they love Coltrane – that's really not the point. We're talkin' 22 year-old kids from all over the world who are going to do something – and certainly not a lot of them are gonna be playing jazz in fifteen years. We're helping form people and that's a heavy responsibility. That's the teacher thing that there's no end to – you just do. We do that all day.

The artistic side of me is to just keep getting that soprano to feel like it's my arm. Wouldn't it be nice to have an instrument feel like a toothbrush or feel like it's your shirt. And to be so natural with your instrument that it's a complete translation of your feelings. This is a goal until the day you die. You just want to keep playing continually better and improve at translating your feelings to the people who are interested – not to everybody, or you have to dilute your message – through your medium (in our case it's jazz, and in my case right now the soprano saxophone). The number of listeners may be small. They will grow very slowly, but there will be enough that you'll feel good about.

But if you think that you want to talk to everybody at the same time, then don't go into a heavy art form because you're going to be disappointed. And that is I'm sorry to say, the sad state of jazz in a lot of ways now. It's inevitable: something is underground, it becomes over-ground; everybody knows about it and it loses its center. The music has become trivialized and subject to the whims of the mass media marketplace. Everybody sounds the same. Of course I'm generalizing, but something of quality doesn't have to be popular. Yet every once in a while you do see that one student, that one person who comes up to you – usually a grown man or woman – and looks at you straight in the eye and you know this one knows what's going on.

That's the one you look for; that's the one out of the hundred. The other ninety nine I just want to understand that this is a heavy thing and they should respect it. But that one, I expect him to go out and take care of business. They must do this because we need this positive influence in the world. Jazz is still a wonderful thing. So if you're heavy and you know how to do that, please try to do something good with it because this world needs it. It's bad out there.

COLLINS: On a personal note, I started as a player, as a lot of kids do. I got involved, went to the university, started to learn some things, went on with it – and all of a sudden, before I knew it I'm teaching.

I enjoy that and the reasons I pursue it are the reasons you talk about: you learn a lot about yourself, you learn about really what you're doing, how you can express that. Now I'm having a problem trying to balance my artistic pursuits with doing the teaching gig. I know with all the different things you do, you've got to experience that dilemma.

LIEBMAN: I do. I have a very busy life. Still, I answer every student's letter. You have to find a way to balance it because the teaching thing is as important as the artistic thing, but you can't do the teaching thing without the input from the artistic side because it doesn't feel right and then you're not validated, especially teaching a performing art. You have to be involved in the field I feel, to teach certain aspects of it – and to be excited about it. My artistic work is my inspiration for teaching. If you don't have that, then the kids know and then they don't get the real buzz. They can get the information from a book. They're supposed to get the buzz from you. That's what you really are doing as a teacher. You're turning a kid on.

Like Joe Allard; I didn't know what he was talking about until later. Coltrane – I didn't know until later. It made me realize more and more that what you're doing as a teacher is inspiring students. And unless you're turned on, they're not going to be turned on. So this is the dilemma of the teacher in the performing arts; how to keep the artistic input hot, keep the fire going so that you are burning with it and the kid gets it. Without that you're not going to be effective as a teacher. It's a real dilemma of balance.