

Randy Weston: Max taught me African American classical music. That's why I call my music African rhythms. My mother and father Frank and Vivian Weston. They knew the music. They didn't take us to jazz school. They took us to see Duke Ellington, and Count Basie and they had the best records in the house. They danced. My Virginia mother and my Panamanian father, I'm born here, but with the music they knew the best of everything.

Ishmael Reed: Would you contribute your longevity to knowing where you came from?

Randy Weston: I report everyday to them folks. Mom and Pop.

Ishmael Reed: So you have a reverence for ancestors.

Randy Weston: Marcus Garvey, Africa, my father. This house...

Ishmael Reed: Your father was a Garveyite.

Randy Weston: Oh, yeah. Completely. Completely. But he would go back to Timbuktu and the Pyramids. He read J.A. Rodgers. When I was a kid I had to read his books. So Pop programmed me and Mom gave me the Black Church and the music. Pop the Calypso and all that stuff. My father wanted me to be a businessman, but insisted that I take piano lessons. Then hanging out with Max Roach. At Max's house I met Dizzy and Charlie Parker. I met Miles.

Ishmael Reed: There's a stereotype about Charlie Parker perpetuated by ethno-nationalist critics, the kind of people who rank Bill Evans as the second greatest jazz pianist of all times. The Bird depended upon drugs in order to create great music. What is the other side of Charlie Parker?

Randy Weston: He was a very spiritual human being. Charlie Parker wouldn't go to the supermarket without carrying that saxophone, you know.

Ishmael Reed: Where was the first restaurant located?

Randy Weston: Summit Avenue, which is now Marcus Garvey Boulevard, ironically.

Someone would come in the shop and Dad would say, "What do you know about Africa?" When I had a few hours off, I'd go to Max's house and in those days you didn't call up on the phone. You just knock on the door and entered.

Ishmael Reed: And where was this? Where was he living?

Randy Weston: On Cornrow Street. We're trying to get the street named after him. It's a struggle, but we tried. During that time, I'm only making amateur gigs. Weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. So Max said to me, "Randy, play one of your songs for Charlie Parker."

Ishmael Reed: Wow.

Randy Weston: I almost peed on myself. I said, "What?" "Yeah, man, go onto the piano."

I sat at the piano. I played something, right? One month later we would go to the Royal Roost, which were Tadd Dameron, Charles Ross, "Fats" Navarro were performing, so we were going to go to hear them. So we're going down the stairs and there's Charlie Parker.

Ishmael Reed: This was at the Royal Roost?

Randy Weston: Royal Roost. On Broadway.

Ishmael Reed: Broadway? What club was it?

Randy Weston: The Onyx Club. The Downbeat. Three Deuces. Yeah, and some other clubs. About five clubs.

Ishmael Reed: Okay, and they were all jazz clubs?

Randy Weston: From Eddie Condon to Louis to Dizzy, Errol Gardner. They all played there. But Royal Roost was on Broadway.

Ishmael Reed: Okay.

Randy Weston: So this young drummer says, “Hey, man, he’s talking to you.” I said, “He doesn’t remember me.” He does this, and we go down to the bar and Tadd Dameron and the group is on this side, right? Parker says, “What y’all doin’?” I said, “We’re coming to hear Tadd Dameron.” Charlie Parker said, “Come with me.” He takes us upstairs, calls a taxi, put is in a taxi, takes us to 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, we go into a Club called Three Deuces, and there’s a band playing. White boys playing. He walks in the club in the middle of a song, told the piano player to get up, told the drummer to get up. Now you don’t do that to musicians. That’s a way to die. But Charlie Parker had that power. Charlie Parker told me to sit at the piano, my buddy on the drums, took out his horn and played forty-five minutes with us. Bagged his horn and left. He didn’t say another word.

Ishmael Reed: Wow.

Randy Weston: We were in Heaven. We played with Bird.

Ishmael Reed: Who were the other people who were playing with you?

Randy Weston: No, just me and the drummer.

Ishmael Reed: Just you and the drummer. What do you know about Tadd Dameron?

Randy Weston: Oh, he was wonderful. Great, great arranger. Beautiful human being.

Yeah, I loved Tadd, Man. He was set. He was that class that came up with that generation. That class.

Ishmael Reed: Extended harmonies.

Randy Weston: Exactly. He was special.

Ishmael Reed: What about Dizzy? He survived.

Randy Weston: I went to Max’s house one day that’s when Dizzy was doing “Cabano-Be-Cubana Bop” which he brought from Cuba. That was a big revolution. We’re talking about the late ‘40s, and Max always said to me, “Listen to Baby Dodds. Listen to Big Sid Calett.”

Ishmael Reed: Who?

Randy Weston: Big Sid, the drummer. “Listen to Old Man Joe Jones. Listen to Ti Roro from Haiti.” Ti Roro. A great, great percussionist.

Ishmael Reed: Okay.

Randy Weston: So Max always taught me that you should go back as far as you can so you can understand this music.

Ishmael Reed: How do you get this affect when you sound like an orchestra? I mean, you don’t sound like you’re just playing a piano. It’s like orchestral. How do you get that sound?

Randy Weston: The boss.

Ishmael Reed: You use a lot of space.

Randy Weston: The boss. Ellington. That cat, man. He taught me that the piano is an orchestra.

Ishmael Reed: But you have your own voice?

Randy Weston: I don’t know. I just do what comes natural. Some combinations.

Ishmael Reed: Trial and error?

Randy Weston: I’m a combination of Basie for space, for message...

Ishmael Reed: Okay.

Randy Weston: Nat King Cole for beauty, Art Taylor for daring, imagination...

Ishmael Reed: Okay, okay...

Randy Weston: Count Basie, Thelonius Monk for magic and Duke for everything because they were so disciplined and also, you know, I don't have to tell you this... Mom and Pop, if they told you something, they would give you three or four words and you know, they give you a look and you would know whether you messed up or not, you know, so that way of communication goes all the way back to Africa. That way of taking music as a way of communication. That's what they do. My father, you know, my father was too much, man. He, like Basie, Monk, and Duke, was disciplined. My father would play on the playground with the kids. I was ten or eleven years old and my father had three whistles. I don't know how the hell he did this. The first whistle I was in the playground I thought, "I better put on my shoes. We're getting ready to go home." The second whistle I better be downstairs getting ready to go up into the house. The third whistle I better have the key in that door or I'm in trouble. So being older I said, "Wait a minute now. This is Africa, man." My pop would take them three whistles and I knew what they meant. That generation. Those people. I love them so much. My father taught me that falling in love with that woman on that slave ship, you're ancient great great great grandmother to fall in love with her. I was taught to fall in love with her.

Ishmael Reed: Your father ran a restaurant.

Randy Weston: Yeah.

Ishmael Reed: What was on the menu?

Randy Weston: He had everything from Caribbean cooking...

Ishmael Reed: He's from Panama, is that correct?

Randy Weston: He was from Panama. He had wooed a woman from Virginia. So you get everything from pig's foot to pig nuggets to peas and rice and baklava. So pop he just loved it.

Ishmael Reed: What kind of prices?

Randy Weston: Just in the neighborhood, you know. Nothing.

Ishmael Reed: What was the name of the restaurant again?

Randy Weston: It was called Trios.

Ishmael Reed: Trios?

Randy Weston: Yes.

Ishmael Reed: Wow.

Randy Weston: And when I took it over after I came out of the army that's when I got this incredible jukebox. See Max made a big impact on me. He was the Emperor of Brooklyn for me. He gave me everything, Max, and because of Max I met George Russell and George Russell was working with Cabano Be-Cubana Bop. Through George Russell I got introduced to European modern classical music. Shostakovich, Stravinsky, all of these incredible artists.

Ishmael Reed: Among Stravinsky's early pieces were eighteen pieces of Ragtime.

Randy Weston: Right. Of course. You come into the restaurant, which was open twenty-four hours a day. Everybody in that jukebox from Sarah Vaughn to Miles to Duke to Stravinsky to Bartok.

Ishmael Reed: In the jukebox?

Randy Weston: In the jukebox.

Ishmael Reed: Wow.

Randy Weston: So all the cats would come by. I'd pick up Monk at his house and bring him over to Brooklyn, you know. I was the owner of the restaurant, so a lot of the cats got

free food. I wasn't a great businessman, but it was an incredible place because everybody would come and discuss music.

Ishmael Reed: How long did this last?

Randy Weston: Three years.

Ishmael Reed: So when did you decide to leave? First of all you were in the army how long?

Randy Weston: Three years.

Ishmael Reed: And which war was that?

Randy Weston: Second World War.

Ishmael Reed: So there was a lot of racism. Harry Belafonte said he got into fights with White soldiers and John A. Williams, too.

Randy Weston: Oh, yeah. Completely.

Ishmael Reed: Fistfights.

Randy Weston: Completely.

Ishmael Reed: So this was a segregated army. Until Truman integrated it.

Randy Weston: Serious segregation. Luckily, I was in the construction outfit, so I didn't have to shoot anybody.

Ishmael Reed: Okay, so you didn't get into combat.

Randy Weston: No, no combat. We came there right after the war. But the Japanese snipers were still up in the mountains. The Okinawans ran out of food so we would give them food. We could go places in Okinawa where White soldiers couldn't go.

Ishmael Reed: So the army three years. Then you returned to the United States?

Randy Weston: Yeah.

Ishmael Reed: When did you leave the United States?

Randy Weston: When did I leave the United States? 1944.

Ishmael Reed: That early?

Randy Weston: Yeah, I came back in '47 just in time for bebop.

Ishmael Reed: 1947? Yeah, I mean, right, right, but where did you go?

Randy Weston: Okinawa.

Ishmael Reed: Okay. No, no, I'm talking about when you left the United States to perform.

Randy Weston: Oh, you mean after the war.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah. After the war.

Randy Weston: I was local, you know marriage, dances. I was an amateur musician.

Ishmael Reed: Okay, but I mean you finally went to North Africa.

Randy Weston: I went to North Africa in 1967.

Ishmael Reed: Why did you choose North Africa?

Randy Weston: I didn't choose North Africa.

Ishmael Reed: I see. Most of the guys, they want to go to Paris.

Randy Weston: Well number one my father programmed me. Africa. He programmed me. I say that seriously. Pop was serious about Africa. He don't play with Africa. So Africa was already on my mind with wanting to go back and Marcus Garvey. We have to get back to the motherland.

Ishmael Reed: Right.

Randy Weston: That's what Pop emphasized. Marcus Garvey not only was a great philosopher but a great revolutionary. He wrote books about Black women and a lot of

women don't know about the beauty of African American women and the importance of art. I met Marshall Stearns and Marshall was doing a history of jazz, but he had a Pan African concert for White scholars.

Ishmael Reed: Marshall Stearns?

Randy Weston: Oh, yeah. Langston Hughes, Olatunji, Candido, Butterfly McQueen, Dan Burley, John Lee Hooker, I could just name all of the people who came up to the Berkshires because of him.

Ishmael Reed: They all performed.

Randy Weston: Well, no, I was working as a cook.

Ishmael Reed: But they were performing.

Randy Weston: Well they were invited to be part of Marshall's class.

Ishmael Reed: Oh, I see. I see.

Randy Weston: He'd have a big blackboard...

Ishmael Reed: He was teaching jazz at that time?

Randy Weston: He was teaching the influence of African culture on Black music.

Ishmael Reed: We're talking about the 1940s?

Randy Weston: No, this was the early 1950s.

Ishmael Reed: That's incredible. That's early.

Randy Weston: Yeah. That's where I met Brock Peters there, I met Sonny McGhee.

Ishmael Reed: I gotta take a second look at Marshall Stearns.

Randy Weston: Yeah, because he had that concert with Africa. So the first time I heard him do a class I was working at another resort. I was washing dishes because I had to get out of New York. That's when the heroin hit us in 1950 a good brother told me, "Go up to the Berkshires and get a job. He's the one that introduced to me the whole history of jazz. He and Langston Hughes.

Ishmael Reed: That's amazing because most of these White critics are ethno-nationalists.

Randy Weston: Right, and he was the one that told me that he was doing the history of jazz on his own but I joined him. He said, "You listen, to Jimmy Yancy, you listen to Meade Lux Lewis. These are the oldest pianists you can find with this music." So he and Max gave me the secret. Ancient Future.

Ishmael Reed: Absolutely.

Randy Weston: I did the State Department tour.

Ishmael Reed: Where did you go?

Randy Weston: To fourteen countries in Africa plus Beirut, Lebanon in 1967 with Clifford Jordan, Ray Copeland, Chief Bey, Ed Blackwell...

Ishmael Reed: What kind of guy was Clifford Jordan?

Randy Weston: Great.

Ishmael Reed: Great guy. He used to come to my poetry readings.

Randy Weston: Great. Great. Fantastic guy and he had his son.

Ishmael Reed: Underrated?

Randy Weston: Definitely. So we toured fourteen countries. Morocco was the last country. I wanted to go back to Africa because I had been there in 1961 and 1963 in Nigeria. After you do those State Department tours they give you half the money before you go and the other half you get, you have to make a report with what you liked and what you didn't like. Three months in Africa and I went back to New York about a month later I got a letter from Morocco saying that the Moroccans were crazy about our music. Ed

Blackwell did a solo on the last concert of the tour. He did that solo and he put that New Orleans thing in it. Incredible. So Morocco shows me...I said, "Why Morocco?" No Spanish, no French, no Berber, no Arabic. Why would I go there?" But I discovered that Gnawa in Morocco, that's where I discovered the Black people.

Ishmael Reed: Where are these people located?

Randy Weston: Gnawa. They're everywhere. They're in the Sahara, they're in Casablanca, they're in Rabat, they're in Marrakesh, they're all over and they have the history of slavery. They were taken from Timbuktu and they were taken up to Morocco. Slaves and soldiers. But like we always do, we produce some other kind of music. So today this is the most popular music in Morocco the Gnawa music. But when I first heard them they tried to discourage me. They told me I got to listen to the Egyptian classical music but when I heard these people, I said, "wow."

Ishmael Reed: What about their music attracted you?

Randy Weston: So, when I went to one of their spiritual ceremonies, because they do things with music that they can't do, they call spirits, they have colors, acrobats, eat fire, do things with knives, all this mad shit they do. But when I heard their music at the secret ceremony I heard blues, jazz, the Black Church all at the same time. That made me realize that we are an African people. We just are an extension of Mother Africa and the music is the best test right there. I've taken them to Europe, I've brought them to the States, and this instrument, it only plays five notes. But each note has a power. And I thought about Coleman Hawkins. His sound. Louis. His sound. It's a power. Nobody can sound like them cats. Duke on the piano. Nobody can sound like Duke Ellington on the piano. Nobody. Nobody can sound like Count Basie. Nobody can sound like Nat King Cole. Nobody can sound like Errol Gardner.

Ishmael Reed: Well the rap on Count Basie is that he's economical. He does a lot with a few notes.

Randy Weston: And with Count he can just do two or three notes and sound simple, but it's not simple. So because of that, you know, I'm very happy about this because this is the first documentary of Cheikh Anta Diop and they used our music.

Ishmael Reed: Oh, great. Great.

Randy Weston: I'm so happy, Man.

Ishmael Reed: Great.

Randy Weston: So thrilled.

Ishmael Reed: Absolutely. Great.

Randy Weston: And in this one Wayne Chandler does a narration. Jayne Cortez is on this.

Ishmael Reed: Wow. Yeah.

Randy Weston: Yeah, and we go back to Nubia.

Ishmael Reed: Jayne Cortez is a jazz poet, alright.

Randy Weston: "Monk's Mood." When I first heard Monk, number 1 I didn't understand what he was doing. I thought he couldn't play. But my God was Coleman Hawkins, which up until today that's my love because Coleman went all the way from the beginning up until what they call Miles, Dizzy is Coleman Hawkins and Monk worked for two years with Coleman Hawkins. So I said, "What are we talking about, old music?" and Duke said, "There's no such thing as old music. I just left Jamaica and I didn't know about the new Marcus Garvey museum. Man, it's fantastic. It's in Kingston. This is the

brochure and they have a huge statue of Garvey and they have a big screen like a big television screen and my wife is from Senegal, right, and they call her and say, "Come." They press a button. You see the map of Senegal with all the products: oil, fish, gold, whatever of every country in Africa and I didn't know about it. I was so moved, man. Then they have another museum on African traditional instruments, plus they have Jamaican artists like one Jamaican artist who made a sculpture of a European string base. But with the African thing they have drums ten foot tall. In Jamaica. I didn't know nothin' about it and they honored Melba Liston like no place on the planet because I took her there for seven years.

Ishmael Reed: She is a composer.

Randy Weston: Yeah, she's an arranger. She did "Uhuru Afrika." What we did in 1960. So I just wanted to let you know about it. I was so moved, Man. Yeah and I asked Herbie Miller to send me more copies of this. A lot people love Garvey. Plus he knew the importance of the artists. The artist was the key. Don't kill the people kill the art.

Ishmael Reed: So Garvey was...you know, he had the intellect.

Randy Weston: Oh, yeah. That's why I'm saying I had no choice and from him comes everything. My father, Man. That's my father right there. From Harriet Jackson to Calypso to Duke Ellington. All kinds of music they were into. I said, "Wow, Man, who are those people, Man?" Who raised Randy Weston?

Ishmael Reed: I wrote the Newport Jazz Festival...you don't remember that.

Randy Weston: In Monterey?

Ishmael Reed: No, Newport Jazz Festival. I wrote the brochure and have you in there. You and Dizzy.

Randy Weston: Yeah, I forgot about that.

Ishmael Reed: I said you guys were role models not only in music but in style.

Randy Weston: But I do remember something, although I don't have that book but you gave me a book. I do remember that John A. Williams wrote something. It was so powerful. You gave me that book. I'll never forget that.

Ishmael Reed: You talking about *The Man Who Cried I Am?* That's why you don't hear about him. You don't hear about him, right?

Randy Weston: No.

Ishmael Reed: Okay.

Randy Weston: That book you gave me I'll never forget it.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, John A. Williams was a good friend of mine. He died and he has not received an honor. He and John Killens were two.

Randy Weston: John Killens. That's my man.

Ishmael Reed: The people who supported Baldwin found these two hard to take.

Randy Weston: Every Sunday John Killens would have those poets and musicians, Abby Lincoln, Max, myself at his house.

Ishmael Reed: He has a book named *And Then We Heard the Thunder* where he talks about the racism in the armed forces and how they had to fight the White G.I.s The Blacks and Whites would get into fights and so in one scene these encampments were bombed by the Japanese and the Black soldier runs out, "Fly, Black Man, Fly!" So they said, "We can't deal with John Killens." Then John A. Williams wrote about the plan to arrest all Black leaders and artists and that plan is still in existence from the F.B.I. My name is on that list.

Randy Weston: I'll never forget that book, Man.

Ishmael Reed: There's a guy named William Maxwell wrote a book called *F.B. Eyes*. My name's in there. In case of an emergency they'll put Black writers and artists in custodial detention and you see what they're doing to these Hispanic kids. You know if they do that to these babies they'll do that to us.

Ishmael Reed: Thank you, Randy.

Randy Weston: Thank you.