



JIMMY KATZ

Keeping Time

Chico Hamilton's Historic Newport Solo

BY JOHN MURPH

IN 1958 CHICO HAMILTON CREATED A MOMENT IN TIME that will be forever associated with jazz in Newport, R.I. Luckily it was captured in Bert Stern's *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, his idyllic movie documentary on jazz and youth culture. It was the July 4th weekend at Newport's fifth annual festival, and Hamilton steered his quintet through "Blue Sands," a spectral composition written by the group's former reed player Buddy Collette. As Eric Dolphy's flute whispers the snaky melody, guitarist John Pisano strums noirish accents that now sound as if they could have been lifted from a Quentin Tarantino movie soundtrack. Cellist Nate Gershman and bassist Hal Gaylor underscore the song with somber, beautiful chords, and Hamilton softly taps out a hypnotic rhythmic figure.

Hamilton's rhythmic motif intensifies in volume and speed as he discreetly pounds out sly variations, and after Pisano's Gypsy-inflected solo climaxes and dissipates, the drummer slips into a brief, transfixing solo. Just shy of two minutes, his suspenseful a capella essay on the tom-toms obliterated time and space. The audience and the band knew something special had just happened.

"I got caught up in a trance," Hamilton recalls while seated

at the dining-room table of his Upper West Side penthouse apartment. "The rhythmic patterns were such that the solo became a Zen thing; I actually became the drums. I think that solo was my life's reward. As noisy and excited as the people were, when I got into that solo you could hear a pin drop; the whole stage just got quiet."

This year at the JVC Jazz Festival Newport's 50th anniversary, Hamilton will reprise his legendary solo as the event producers show that unforgettable performance sequence in *Jazz on a Summer's Day*. "That was a classic moment on the screen," says George Wein, CEO of Festival Productions, Inc. and founder of the Newport Jazz Festival. "We're not necessarily trying to re-create but allude to some of the great moments that happened at Newport over the years, and I wanted to present Chico in the best light possible."

This year looks to be busy for the drummer. In January Hamilton received a Jazz Masters Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and he still performs regularly with his youthful ensemble. He also teaches rhythmic analysis and improvisational ensemble at New York City's New School University where he helped found its acclaimed jazz program 17 years ago. Slated for release later in 2004 is *Juniflip*, which will feature guest appearances from veteran crooner Bill Henderson, trombonists George Bohannon and Jimmy Cheatham, and Love's Arthur Lee. Also scheduled is *The Groove Master Re-fused*, a remix project spearheaded by Soulfest and featuring DJ/producer Joe Claussell and Brian Bacchus.

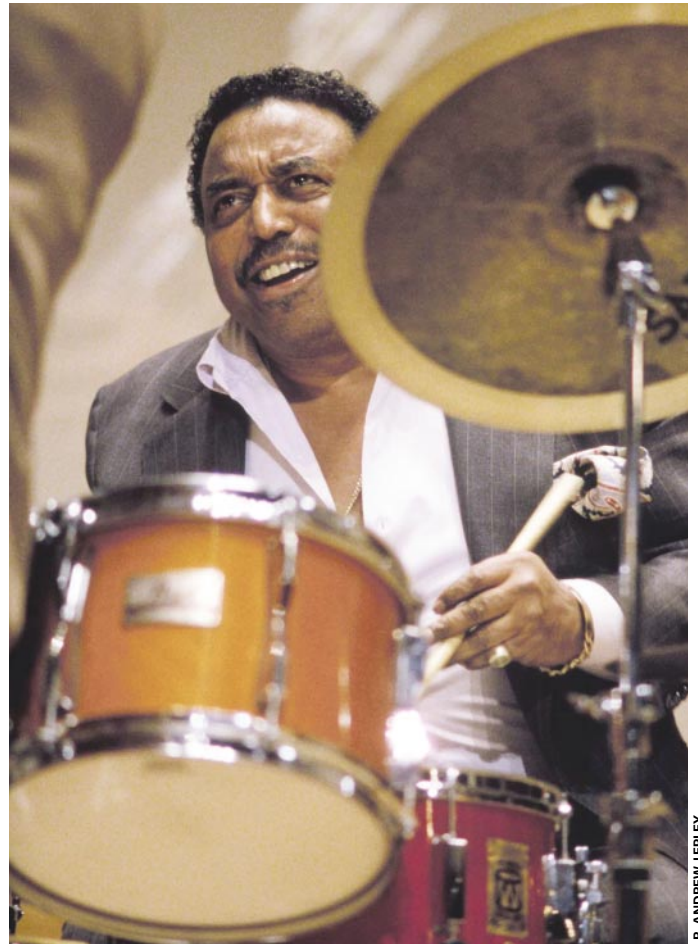
Hamilton may be a certified jazz master, but that doesn't

scare away the legion of young fans who relish his distinctively delicate cymbal work and mesmeric grooves. “My music is sort of timeless for the simple reason of its melodic structures,” Hamilton says. “I like long melodic lines, but the most important thing is the rhythmic aspect that is underneath them.”

While Hamilton’s music is mostly known for its finesse rather than its funk, he’s now a hero among leading DJs. Some of his lesser-known ’70s albums on Blue Note and Stax are priceless rare-groove gems for crate-diggers. Hamilton’s fully aware of his high-reverence in the house-music scene, and the drummer showed his appreciation by covering Claussell’s “Je Ka Jo” on his 2002 CD, *Thoughts Of...* “The reason Chico’s music is so loved by DJ culture is because of his groove and his sound,” Bacchus says. “For me that ride cymbal sound is like a signature. I think his whole thing has always been about dancers. He’s always thinking about how people relate to his music physically as well as mentally.” Hamilton has even attended Claussell’s popular Sunday-afternoon tea and dance session, *Body & Soul*, where he was greeted by hordes of dancers. “He was happy to see that the folks in the club knew who he was and were happy to see him,” Bacchus says. “In fact, DJs were pulling out copies of his old jams from their crates to get signed.”

“I can truthfully say that I like everything I’ve done,” Hamilton says when asked to pinpoint his favorite album. “I don’t think that I’ve yet recorded the ultimate Chico Hamilton album, but I’ve been very honest about *all* the records that I’ve made.”

With a huge discography that covers everything from Third Stream and avant-garde to bebop and jazz-funk fusion,



R. ANDREW LEFLEY

“It takes a whole bunch of things to play music, but only two things to make it: patience and fortitude.”

Hamilton’s recording history and unique drumming often overshadows his skills as a bandleader, talent scout and mentor. Throughout his career, his various bands have become launching pads for jazz luminaries, such as alto saxophonist Arthur Blythe, guitarist Larry Coryell, and trombonist Steve Turre (who played electric bass in Hamilton’s fusion years). “It takes a whole bunch of things to play music, but only two things to make it: patience and fortitude,” Hamilton says. “I have the patience to let someone develop, and I have the fortitude to kick them in the ass and make them do it. I sort of play to their weakness so in turn, they become stronger.”

Tenor saxophonist Evan Schwam agrees. A former student of Hamilton’s from the New School, he has been playing in Hamilton’s band for four years. “When I first joined the band,

one of my weaknesses was playing on faster tempos. So, guess what? Chico would always make me solo on a fast tempo,” Schwam says. “He’ll play to my strengths too—slow, bluesy stuff. But he’ll come up with a chord progression that makes me think more, taking me out of my comfort zone. It forces me to try new things and use every musical skill I have to succeed. It’s kind of like being dropped in the middle of warfare, except that it’s a lot friendlier.”

Ever since he stopped backing people like Lena Horne and Gerry Mulligan and recorded his first albums for Pacific in the mid-’50s, Hamilton has been a hip bandleader who constantly pushes stylistic envelopes. “Once you jump out there as a leader, there’s no turning back,” Hamilton says. “I keep time for no one but myself.” ☪



NEWPORT
 Saturday, August 14
Chico Hamilton – A solo performance
 (JVC Jazz Stage)

Newport All-Stars with Howard Alden, James Moody, Lewis Nash, Ken Peplowski, Randy Sandke, Cedar Walton & Peter Washington (Dunkin’ Donuts Stage)
 Fort Adams State Park 11:30am – 7:30pm



James Moody by Bette Marshall