



Revue internationale
International Web Journal
www.sens-public.org

A Conversation with David Liebman in Paris

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Abstract: David Liebman was born in Brooklyn, New York on September 4, 1946. He began classical piano lessons at the age of nine and saxophone by twelve. His interest in jazz was sparked by seeing John Coltrane perform live in New York City clubs such as Birdland, Village Vanguard and Half Note. He is considered a renaissance man in contemporary music with a career stretching over forty years. He has played with many of the masters including Miles Davis, Elvin Jones, Chick Corea, John McLaughlin, McCoy Tyner and others.

The day after a concert in duet with Marc Copland at the Sunset Jazz Club in Paris (6 December 2011), David Liebman and Carole Dely, a saxophone player and a philosopher, met to speak about jazz.

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Carole Dely

Carole Dely – Do you think that we can play jazz without knowing its history? Would you say that jazz, for example, is essentially black music?

Dave Liebman – In any area of life, not only in the arts, it's important to know what came before in the tradition and history for a few reasons. First of all, so you know that if you're repeating something at least you're aware of it, or maybe doing something different, then you're aware of it. Most of all, it's just like a house that when it's built you need the foundation in the ground for everything to stand on. The foundation in this music is the history, and for me it's important that a musician is able to, at least to some degree, repeat what came before. The founders of jazz were mostly black but not only. It is music that came from the mixture of many cultures together, first in New Orleans, then in other cities and finally of course in New York City and to some extent Europe. It has become in the last 20/30 years a very international music. It's not black, it's not white, it's not men, it's not women. I have musicians in my class now from Turkey, from Indonesia, of course from India. The music is completely universal, it has gone everywhere in the world. It began with black people, but it has grown much more than that.

C.D. – About improvisation-- could you explain it?

D.L. – We improvise based on something that is understood to be the basis of the improvisation. Musicians call this "the song", "the chord changes", or maybe a particular rhythm; it's different all the time. I compare it to a map, *une carte*. The map tells you you're going to Troyes today... it shows you the road. But you may go off the road and come back, improvising along the way. You stop for lunch at one restaurant, etc., little things like that. Improvising means that we are speaking in the moment and trying not to think of the past or the future. It's very difficult to do that. That's a very existential state of mind whether you're a musician or not. Most jazz is small groups, two like last night¹, three, four, quartet, maybe quintet. The conversation is based on the subject that we begin with. Last night you heard the subject when I announced the title of the song, and then we begin with the music on the page, creating around it. So it takes a lot of skill, and of course spontaneity, to do it, to improvise in real time in front of people like last

¹ Dave Liebman played in a duo with the pianist Marc Copland at the Sunset Jazz Club in Paris, 6 December 2011.

night, or tonight. That's why we practice. We practice in order to be able to be ready in the moment. You can't be sure what's going to happen.

C.D. – Like in basketball, no?

D.L. – Basketball is the best analogy, a good comparison with jazz. Because basketball is five people and nobody knows who's going to do what, though there are preset roles as far as positions go. We know we want to get the ball inside and make the goal [*laugh*]. Very good Carole.

C.D. – Would you say that improvising is like telling a story?

D.L. – Well, in music it's very difficult to be, as we say in English "literal". That means it's not like: "I went here, I saw this, I had this problem, I came home". It's not like a book. But it's a story with mood, excitement, quiet, calm, dark... I'm using words that describe a feeling, a texture. That is a story in itself, it's not literal but... it's abstract, but it's a story. For example as far as I'm concerned I try to tell a story every time, but it's not like: "I did this, I did that." It's intensity, maybe followed then by quiet, maybe a storm, maybe sunlight, you know, comparisons, tensions and releases. Yes, it's a story. And the best improvisers tell a story, in my opinion, the best. Others do not tell a story, *they play*, and improvise but they don't tell a story.

C.D. – And what about the other musicians you play with?

D.L. – We hope that we're talking about the same subject [*laugh*]. It's like a conversation as we're having now. If we were to talk about the weather, you would say: "Tomorrow it's going to be sunny", and another person says: "It's going to snow" and I say: "Where is the coffee?" That's not too good. It's the same in the playing. We try to be on the same subject and we have to listen to each other. We don't look, we listen. I can feel somebody doing something musically, or emotionally, and that's how we are conversing. We hope that the people in the audience understand. We don't have signs, we don't have directions, we just have the music.

C.D. – And what about the work at home?

D.L. – Preparation?

C.D. – Yes.

D.L. – You have to be prepared technically. That means the knowledge of the tradition, knowledge of the language which means in this case scales, chords, rhythms, the saxophone itself, the piano voicings and on. You have to know that because if it comes up in the moment and

you haven't experienced it you'll be blank. You say: "I don't know what that is" and the conversation is finished. It would be again like you saying to me: "Tomorrow it's going to snow" and I say "What's snow?" Maybe I don't even know.... I come from Africa. I don't know what snow is, maybe I don't. So now you have to tell me. Well, we stop our conversation in order for you to give me information. In real life it's okay, but when we're playing, you wanna be ready with all the information. That's technical, and that's the point of practicing in jazz music.

C.D. – Do you play at home like in the concert sometimes, or is it different?

D.L. – No, no, it's completely different. You can never imitate the atmosphere of a live performance, because of people. If it's three people, if it's three hundred people, or maybe there is a difference when it is three thousand people. At home it's only the saxophone and the wall. That's not very good for... my reality. So you can try to play... you can play with a record, but it's not the same. You have to play in live performance. In this music you must play in front of people.

C.D. – And do you think it's boring when you play at home?

D.L. – Of course, practicing is boring. Who likes to practice C scales? Nobody, but you have to do it. If you do it when you're younger, it's a little easier than when you're older [*laugh*].

C.D. – Could you explain what a "phrase" is in jazz? You know, all musicians have different ways of "phrasing" which sounds more or less good.

D.L. – Phrasing means a musical idea, like a sentence. It's exactly how we talk. I'm phrasing like Dave while you're phrasing like Carole. He's phrasing like Jean-Jacques, etc. It's very individual.... the way we talk. So when we play, we hope that the phrasing in the music reflects the personality of the person playing. If we play together, you're going to play the phrase very differently than I am, just like you would speak differently. You might say: "Wow, today is a big day" and I might say: "Today is a nice day". We just said the same thing, but in a different way. So the phrasing is individual. Musically it has to do with accents, dynamics, nuance, rhythmical placement, tone color, sound, and of course again the interaction of the other musicians.

C.D. – Don't you think that energy is particularly important in jazz?

D.L. – It depends on the kind of energy. In history, maybe you know somebody like Bill Evans, the piano player. His energy was very different than Cecil Taylor, for example. My energy is very different than another musician who might have played last night. That's a very individual thing. You cannot compare apples and oranges. Bill Evans is an apple, Cecil Taylor is an orange... they're both fruits, and they're both good. It depends on the situation. Some music... some kinds of music

demand intensity and energy. By energy I mean "forceful" or "aggressive." Some music demands quiet and calm. Last night, for example, only duet with Marc Copland, there was a range of intensity from very soft, very douce and gentle, quiet to very intense and strong. That is what we do. Some other musicians might do it in a different way. But I think for the word "energy" I would rather use the word "intensity." It could be a quiet intensity or it could be an aggressive intensity.

C.D. – What about Coltrane?

D.L. – Coltrane was an example of completely from left to right in this regard. He could be gentle, we know some recordings of him. For example if you know the recording with singer Johnny Hartman. It's a beautiful recording. Also, the most beautiful recording of Trane called "Ballads".... he plays beautifully. The whole group plays beautifully. And then, you could see them that night somewhere in New York City and it would be the most intense music I've ever heard in my life with the very same musicians. The main point is to focus on the mood of the moment, whatever is appropriate to that time and place and that music.

C.D. – What does it mean to make the music "happen?"

D.L. – "Happen" is slang meaning we are in a good conversation. It's rich and has meaning... it has good technique... it has intellectual and emotional. When that's happening we say: "The music is happening" [*laugh*]. Sometimes the music is not happening, you know. It's okay, but sometimes it's really happening. Sometimes it's just sort of happening. It's a matter of degrees.

C.D. – I think you have a kind of physical and passionate relationship with your instrument. Which do you prefer... resistance or an instrument that is easy to play?

D.L. – I need a certain amount of resistance in the mouthpiece and reed. That's important for me. I need a reed that has resistance and a mouthpiece that is pretty large as far as opening is concerned because I need to be able to blow hard. To control it when I play soft is a challenge of course. I would say in general that I need a certain amount of resistance to make things work.

C.D. – And about the saxophone. Do you like the last model of Selmer saxophones, or do you prefer old saxophones?

D.L. – You know everybody prefers the old ones. Some of this is because it's true and some of it only because it's supposed to be true [*laugh*]. The old ones are great, the Balanced Action, Super Balanced, some of the Mark VI are great. I think Selmer is not as good as it used to be in general. But I don't play Selmer... I play Keilwerth which I like very much. For the last thirty years I've been playing this German saxophone. It has a lot of resistance. It's not as fleet or legere, but

it has a deeper sound. The bore is bigger and you have to blow harder. I enjoy it, especially on soprano sax. Resistance for me is important. Some other musicians, you know, they play very light and easily without much resistance and it is beautiful. It depends.

C.D. – Is your relationship to the instrument different depending on the soprano and the tenor and do you play alto as well?

D.L. – I never played the alto.

C.D. – No?

D.L. – No. If I play the alto, the only thing I would want to do would be to play like Charlie Parker... [*they laugh*].

C.D. – I thought it was that...

D.L. – It was not a good idea. I never could see any other way to play the alto. The tenor was my first woodwind with the soprano coming much later. But the soprano has become for me like my arm, my hand, a part of my body. I mean it's an extension, it just feels like I'm lifting a fork. The tenor is like driving a Mercedes. You're in a real car. With a real body around you. The tenor is like a truck, you know. I love it for certain kinds of music, certain things. The soprano for some things is not good. They both have their different potentials depending on the mood in the music. I like playing both but I certainly put more time in soprano during the last twenty to thirty years. I think that I developed a sound on soprano that's my own and more individual. The tenor is, you know, not the same but I enjoy it anyway.

C.D. – A truck?

Jean-Jacques Quesada (Dave's friend and driver) – "Truck" *c'est un camion, un poids lourd*.

D.L. – Compared to a rowboat [*laugh*].

C.D. – [*To Jean-Jacques*] *Il a beaucoup travaillé l'instrument pour lui-même...*

J.-J.Q. – Yes, you did a lot of work with the instrument, the technique, the tool?

D.L. – Yeah. I mean I'm not going to tell you that I practiced hundreds of hours. I did not practice hundreds of hours, ever.

C.D. – [*To Jean-Jacques*] Hundreds?

J.-J.Q. – *Il n'a jamais travaillé des centaines d'heures sur l'instrument.*

C.D. – [*To Dave*] No?

D.L. – I never did it, *jamais*. But I played a lot.

C.D. – *En concert?*

D.L. – In jazz the most important thing is to play a lot in concert, in jam sessions, etc. Practicing is important but playing is more important because of what we spoke about earlier, all those things. You have to get used to doing that. Technique comes from playing. Of course you could sit and practice technique alone. For example, Coltrane practiced technique a lot... you can hear that. Michael Brecker practiced technique a lot and a friend of ours, an American man, Rick Margitza, a wonderful saxophone player, he practices a lot. You can hear this kind of practicing in the way they all play. I never had the desire to sound like that and I didn't have the time [*laugh*].

C.D. – Don't you think that it was easier in the past to have a lot of opportunities to play--more than now?

D.L. – Oh yes, definitely. Our situation is getting very precarious.... it's not so good for the future. There are no places to play. The Sunset is the only place, more or less, in Paris. Paris is a major city. Of course New York has more. But other cities do not have anything anymore. It's a very bad situation. And we have more students than ever, and better than ever. But we don't have anywhere to play. This is the problem now. I'm not sure we have an answer to this problem.

C.D. – So is it possible that a musician can think to himself: "I'll stop playing because I have nowhere to play?" I heard the drummer Jeff Ballard say something like that in a master class in the Conservatory in Paris, organized by Riccardo Del Fra. He said: "Music is not safe, it's dangerous. You have to know that. It's really, really hard. It's not enough to conceptualize it, it's necessary that you feel it."

D.L. – Yeah, very good. All true.

C.D. – Have you ever been afraid?

D.L. – Well, not afraid, I mean... music is not "life or death".

C.D. – No?

D.L. – No. There are many more important things than music, like poverty and war and prejudice, and... you know what I mean. Music, art, is not "dangerous." Art is necessary, maybe, but more necessary are food and water, and bread. Do you understand?

C.D. – More?

D.L. – More important, yes. Life! Music is not as important as life. But when you're a musician, it's very important to you. And that means that you're always trying to do your best. I don't know what the word "dangerous" means, but it means that sometimes I cannot execute a phrase, so I'm a little upset with myself. But it's not like going to the hospital for an operation. Not quite.

C.D. – But, maybe he meant.....

J.-J.Q. – To make a living... to pay the rent...

D.L. – We don't know what he means... Yes, it's difficult, but it's not dangerous. Dangerous is when you walk across the street.

C.D. – But there can be some risk... no? With yourself, when you give everything when you play.... no?

D.L. – No, there's plenty more to give. There's no stop to that. I think what he's speaking about is the amount of intensity and energy that you have to commit to being excellent. And that's of course very personal and very intense, and I agree with that. Of course "dangerous" is a word which in English means something like "being killed." That's not the case [*laugh*], not quite.

C.D. – What can you say about your experience with Miles (Davis)?

D.L. – It was of course very good for my career, obviously [*they laugh*]. And most of all, it was that I could see how he played by standing next to him. Proximity. This is something you cannot describe in words. When you stand next to someone, it's a very different experience than if you're listening to them from the audience or on recording. I was able to really feel what he did. He didn't talk too much and he didn't say very much to me or anyone in the band. I just observed what he was doing. As well I learned a lot about rhythm, about sounds, the trumpet, about intensity in the moment and some of these things I'm talking to you about. Of course with a man like that I learned something about the tradition, because he is the history or was the history. So it was a big experience for me. The other great experience was playing with Elvin Jones, the drummer. In some ways it was even more special, because he was THE rhythm. He was the person I saw with Coltrane many times in New York clubs when I was a teenager. Elvin was also a

very deep, wise soul. Miles was a very smart man, very intelligent, very smart, and very perceptive. But Elvin was like earth. He was Africa. He had something, you know, in his heart that I've never seen before. He was very special.

C.D. – You have never seen...

D.L. – No, that was my experience in that period. I think my father had a lot of depth also, *mon père*, but... of the people I've met, Elvin was the deepest person I know. You know, deep in spirit and in heart.

C.D. – Okay. Mmm...

D.L. – Jazz today? [*Dave Liebman reads upside-down the list of questions that Carole Dely has put on the table*].

C.D. – Yeah.

D.L. – We just did it. We don't know what's going to happen. I will tell you one thing about jazz today. The music is better that it's ever been in the history of jazz.

C.D. – Technically, or...?

D.L. – All ways, technically for sure... variety, amount of information. Everybody comes from a different thing with all the mixtures.... what I said earlier. You have students from everywhere in the world.... the drums from everywhere, all kinds of things. Because of YouTube and the Internet, anybody can see everything. You don't have to be there. Of course it's different if you are there. But you could see the all history of jazz sitting in your office in one hour. You could see Louis Armstrong to John Coltrane to Dave Liebman in one hour. Anywhere.... in the middle of the jungle. That means the information now is for everybody. It's not only for you and me, sitting in a club, it's for everybody who wants it. That means there's a spreading of information. And it's happening in medicine, in science.... it's happening everywhere, in every field. It's a period of transition now. The world is very shaky. Things are not established in a "new order" or whatever you want to call it. It's the same with the jazz. But the problem is that people don't want to go to music so much. They don't want to pay for music. They are used to getting it for free. We have a problem with how to make a living, as a musician, as an artist. First as a musician, then artist. I mean that the craft and the technical is first, with artistry above that. This is a challenge and a big problem as to how to live, but the music today..... fantastic!!

C.D. – Don't you think that the intensity, maybe in life in general, was stronger in the seventies, or the sixties?

D.L. – There was a lot of experimentation in the sixties and in the seventies. Everything was tried and retried. But it was experimentation based on a tradition which had lasted for decades in jazz. You played a blues... you played a standard (you know what I mean by standard?)... you played a ballad and then you played a blues again. The next set? Same, more or less. But in the sixties you had the beginning of rock and roll, fusion, world music influences, and things began to change. The European influence by the sixties was very big. So, it appeared there was a lot more then because what was before was relatively calm. But I think now it's even more exciting. There's so much going on. It's fantastic. It's a great period for the music.

C.D. – Thank you very much... And for me, could you repeat what you said at the start about the clock?

D.L. – The clock?

C.D. – Yes, when I said I was thirty-five years old and it's very old...

D.L. – Okay, okay Carole [*they laugh*]. I'll repeat it, okay. *Pour vous* and everybody. Music has no time line. Enjoying and playing music has no time line. You can be six years old, six hundred years old and you can enjoy music. No one is concerned about what a performer's age is until after the performance. And that is only curiosity: "Oh, how old are you? Wow, wow, wow", you know... "Wow, you're young," or "Wow, you're old." When somebody plays they don't have a sign "I'm thirty five years old." They just play. Then afterwards you say: "That's good... where are you come from?" or "How do you play like that?"... "Oh, how old are you?" You play well, that's the most important thing. So for somebody who is practicing music, answering your question, the only time line you have is how you think about it. If you think that it's late, it's late. If you think it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. It's up to you, the person who's doing this, to think about that the way they want. But when somebody plays, nobody talks about age. I mean, of course, if you see Roy Haynes, he's eighty-five years old.

C.D. – Or Rollins...

D.L. – For example, or if you see another musician who is eighty years old and he plays wonderful, you say "Wow man, that's great." He's healthy, he's playing well. You wouldn't say: "Oh, he's so old, he should be better by now." Nobody talks like this. I tell older folks playing music: "Look, one thing you do better than the young musician." The young musician does not know how to practice. You know how to practice. You know why? You don't have a lot of time

because you are an adult. When you are an adult, you have other responsibilities obviously: family, business, making a living. When you put in two hours, those two hours are equal to a young person's four hours, in practice time. Because you know what to do. You are more focused because you are older and more mature. When I was young practicing, I might be thinking about playing basketball, seeing some girls or something. I mean I was, you know... young. When I got older... I don't have one minute where I'm not doing something, because I'm sixty-five and the clock is running. I don't waste any time. So I believe that it's just part of being mature. Being older means you approach the music in a different way. You can't think: "I should be better by now, I'm thirty-five, I should be good." You should be good, as good as you wanna be, but don't let that bother anybody. Music has no age [*laugh*]. Okay?

C.D. – Thank you.

Paris, rue Sainte Opportune, 7th December 2011

Transcription edited by George Blecher, New York City.