

Charnett Moffett

Interview by Eric Harabadian

Visit: www.charnettmoffett.net

Bassist extraordinaire Charnett Moffett speaks as he plays; with a pensive wisdom and thoughtful approach that is, at once, engaging and spiritually energetic. Growing up in a musical family, he is the son of legendary drummer Charles Moffett, who played for years with Ornette Coleman. Charnett first appeared on a recording at age seven playing with the Moffett Family Band. At age 16, while studying at Juilliard, he left to join the Wynton Marsalis Quintet. And he hasn't looked back since! Stints have included work with Art Blakey, Tony Williams, Stanley Jordan, Dizzy Gillespie, Herbie Hancock, Harry Connick, Jr. and many, many others. Currently he is in the midst of promoting his first solo bass album called *The Bridge*, a new group recording entitled *Spirit of Sound* and a new duo project with singer-songwriter/guitarist Jana Herzen called *Passion of a Lonely Heart*. These releases are all on the Motema Music label.

Jazz Inside: You play both acoustic and electric bass. What influences the decision on what type of bass to use on a particular piece?

Charnett Moffett: That's a great question. What provokes that is based on which sound is gonna allow me to express the melodic idea to its fullest value. Each person has a different voice in how they speak. You have the sound of your voice; I have the sound of my voice. We talk about many different subject matters—it can

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be music, politics, sports, whatever. But basically our excitement as human beings and the information that we share, depending on what it is that we are expressing, changes the sound of how we feel about things. Whether we are joyous about something, which will change the pitch of our voice or if we're feeling more mellow or laid back, the sound might come from a lower frequency. And being a bassist and composer the bass has to be the foundation of all musical situations. Compositionally speaking, things have to stem from what sound is going to best allow me to give the message in its most

complete form. When I did the *Beauty Within* album back for Blue Note the title cut was done on the upright double bass. That melody would have never sounded the same on any other instrument because it was designed to be spoken in that voice. So the same can be said here for the solo project *The Bridge* as well as *Spirit of Sound*. For example, if you take one of the compositions like “Opera”, which features Amareia Moffett, the melody relies better on the fretless bass because of the range. The singer represents more of a soprano voice while the fretless represents a tenor kind of voice. If we take another song like the title cut “Spirit of Sound,” that is speaking more from the raga tradition where the bow is speaking as the voice and being supported by the tambour. It has a more mellow and lower tone so that the emotional weight and depth of the message can be felt more accurately. If we take a piece, for example, that features Jana Herzen, who I've had the pleasure of recording the *Passion of a Lonely Heart* album, where I play the double bass, here I play the piccolo bass. And the tune I play is more upbeat and requires a higher frequency and movement. So everything is based on the sound and frequency—different colors and timbres around it. It also has to do with what is the overall feeling that we're trying to convey in the emotion that we want to share with our listener. So that determines what instrument I play from a compositional standpoint.

JJ: That's fascinating. Regarding the inception of the *Spirit of Sound*, it is obviously very diverse. Was that your intent before you got started or did it just evolve into an eclectic album?

CM: Well as a bassist I started out in the Moffett Family Band. We did our first tour in 1975 and I was just the tender age of eight years old. When you are in the Far East and you are that young listening to eastern sounds, with two drummers and an additional bass player, with a front line of

trumpet and saxophone without piano, that sound is memorable and implanted in your well being for a lifetime. And so the way I was introduced to music at a very early age felt quite natural to express myself in this form. In theory the diatonic system only has 12 notes in western music. These 12 notes represent 12 colors that we choose to do our painting with a canvas. But that doesn't mean you can't mix those 12 colors with other ones to create new colors. This same thing applies to music whether it's European classical music, Eastern music or jazz. It's still the same 12 notes that are being unified. Now



these 12 notes represent tools for people to communicate. As human beings we need fresh air to breathe and water to drink. It doesn't matter who we are. It's really about finding the balance or common denominator of what flows with you creatively to share that energy with others to be used in a different light from circumstances that may have not been used in that way before. That's the whole point of this album *The Spirit of Sound*. It's taking the sound of each person who's actually been a part of creating this sound, whether it's Oran Etkin in the saxophone or clarinet department, Marc Cary in the piano department or Tessa Souter on vocals, it's the way each idea or sound is expressed. And each idea is expressed by the energy that goes into it and that energy is what we call spirit. And that's what the title is about the spirit of sound.

JJ: I understand that your solo bass record *The Bridge* was a long time coming. Can you talk about the evolution of making this album?

CM: Well unlike *The Spirit of Sound*, solo bass work is a different concept. Now we're only using one sound and that sound is a lower frequency. So now we have to find the right compositions that will work with bass or have been written for bass. I recorded the Beatles' “Eleanor Rigby” and I had to find the right key that fits the instrument naturally yet still expresses the song and has a value to be able to play the melody from a low frequency standpoint. I had the opportunity to work with Stanley Jordan for many, many years and this is a song that people always wanted to hear him play. And I always wondered what it would be like with the bass doing it as a solo piece. On a piece like that what you're trying to do is making sure that the main point of the melody is heard clearly from an instrument that does not normally play the melody. But see the instrument does not know it's not supposed to play the melody. The instrument is just a tool for an artist to express what they feel. It's their voice. If you happen to speak in a lower frequency voice it doesn't mean that a person can't understand what you're saying, it's just that the tone and the range of the voice that shares the information is expressed in a different

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manner. And when you're using a solo instrument like the bass it's a lot easier and you have a lot more clarity for people to follow along when there aren't too many other sounds that have to fight for space. So everything's about space, time and flow. This allows a natural energy to move without force. And being that it is a solo instrument and that the bass is a supportive instrument it can also support itself. You can play the melody, you can play the root of the bass line, you can play the harmony line. You can play different registers, change the timing and do some strumming. There's all these different places you can go. You can add effects if you choose to. So now you're adding different colors that make it more diverse from its normal standard position.

JJ: Why do you think there have not been many bass players that have done solo records?

CM: Well I think people make choices. And I made a choice to do it because it felt natural to do so. I can remember going back to my earlier experiences playing because everything goes full circle when you think about it. What happened, Eric, was when we as bassists were not allowed to travel with our instruments, due to the circumstances of the politics of traveling with instruments with the airlines; we basically had a few choices. Either you got a bass at the venue or festival you were performing in or you figured out a way to bring your own instrument. I now have switched over to the Kolstein Bussetto travel bass which I've been playing now, and is the instrument that was recorded on *The Bridge*. It's basically a smaller size instrument but it is still acoustic. It reminded me of when I started out as a youngster; I had a half-size bass. And when you return to certain types of instruments like this they make you remember some of the sounds you enjoyed making when you didn't have the musical knowledge or wisdom that you attain over three decades. So now you take your youthful innocence and apply some wisdom to it and you open yourself up to new possibilities and directions in music. Humbly speaking, that makes sense in the tradition which is why songs like "Haitian Fight Song" was recorded. The same is true for "Caravan" which was one of my features during a 25 year run with the Manhattan Jazz Quintet. Even a song like Sting's "Fragile," which was composed by a bassist, allowed myself to find my voice on a popular song where you can actually hear what I'm doing and it is something familiar.

JJ: You mentioned recording material by The Beatles, Sting and you do a version of Adele's "Rolling in the Deep." Have any of these pop artists heard your work or made any comments on it?

CM: I meet a lot of jazz players in my travels that are fans of many different types of music. I can't say that I've been approached by any of these artists personally but I admire their work

and the important thing is to play music that you can be sincere about and make that connection with the people. This is really what it was about when recording *The Bridge*. It was also about paying homage to all the great masters that I've had the opportunity to work with in the past that allowed me to express myself as a solo artist.

JJ: I was reading in your bio that you've appeared on over 200 recordings. You've played with everyone from Tony Williams, Dizzy Gillespie and Herbie Hancock to David Sanborn and Bette Midler. Would it be a fair question to ask if you could recall any specific collaborative highlights?

CM: It's a very fair question. Honestly, I look at this whole thing as a large circumference. It's a big circle and it just depends on what point within the circle you're at with your livelihood or creative thought process. It's not that one is better than the other it's just that we change based on the time of day and the seasons that we're in. Sometimes we may want a specific type of food and then the next day you want something else. Musically, it's the same way. Obviously all the things I've done are very important periods of my life and made me who I am today. And *Spirit of Sound* is the highest form of collaboration. Not only am I collaborating with the Motema family of musicians, with people like Marc Cary and some of the other artists, but also the next generation of the Moffett family band of my immediate family. There's my daughter Amareia Moffett on vocals, my son Max—who recently just made me a grandfather—on drums and tabla and my wife Angela on tamboura and spoken word. It's a much different experience. I didn't hire them because they were family; I hired them based on the sound that I was looking for. So whatever environment you're in is going to determine the next way that you organize music. So being influenced by Wynton Marsalis and playing on the *Black Codes* album at age 17 certainly had influence on the records I made during that time in my career. The same goes for Tony Williams right on up to collaborations with many wonderful artists like Elvin Jones and Pharoah Sanders on the great Sonny Sharrock recording. On the flip side of it there's the David Sanborn years, which is a different kind of music but a perfect example of those same 12 notes being applied. Obviously Ornette Coleman has been a major contributor to me in many facets of life.

JJ: Expanding on the aspect of working with your family, it's gotta be a blessing in a lot of ways?

CM: This is something that has been very natural for me for many years now. And that goes back to when I was playing with my brothers and sisters on early Moffett Family Band albums. Ultimately, whether I'm making music with family members or musicians that are non-family members, they're still family because I'm making music with them. It's all about the love that's expressed in the music. And wherever you can find a harmony, a union of compassion, of respect and understanding is when the best ele-

ments of music are going to be made. Really it's about the chemistry that musicians have together that will create the best results.

JJ: Could you reflect on this past March and April with your "Moffett Meets Manhattan" tour of jazz clubs? What was the impetus for that and how did it go?

CM: I thought it went really well. My producer, Mary Ann Topper really has done a fabulous job with *The Bridge* project as well as my executive producer Jana Herzen. We're just getting started as far as future gigs coming up, with festivals and things that are being planned now for the fall. When you're surrounded with these kinda people in your creative camp that can see a vision and believe in an artist, they can uphold the possibilities of what keeps jazz music moving.

JJ: What are some short and longer term goals you would like to accomplish in the foreseeable future?

CM: Well there are many. I just got back from a show in Brazil supporting Will Calhoun who is my label mate along with Marc Cary. That turned out to be fabulous. I had a chance to talk with some of the other musicians that were a part of the festival like Stanley Clarke and Victor Wooten. There was this bass player camaraderie so maybe there might be some projects we'll do in the future. Vernon Reid was also there with his band and they were absolutely extraordinary! I don't discriminate against sound. There's only two kinds of music—good and bad. I like to focus on the good music that is positive and see how I can make it better. So when you're around these music festivals and around other musicians it's all about new opportunities and finding choices. So it's all about coming together as a musical neighborhood with musicians in the jazz community as well as others who have great appreciation for improvised music. But it's all one kind of music when you think about it. I choose to express myself from the American jazz traditional point of view. Jazz exemplifies so many different things because it's totally American. And America is completely diverse.

JJ: So whether it's funk or fusion or whatever elements are mixed with jazz, you're good with all of it?

CM: Yes I am because that's being true to who I am as a jazz artist.

JJ: I understand you're going to be doing a special event for Motema's 10th anniversary in September?

CM: Yes I will be doing a concert in our nation's capitol with Nicholas Payton and Lenny White and I'm looking forward to that. You're only as good as your last show so the main thing for us is to try to stay focused for where we are at the moment. When we have the next opportunity for a show we want to give our best, honestly. And we still wanna enjoy it and have fun too!

