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RANDY WESTON
NEA Jazz Master (2001)

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Willard Jenkins: This is October 30th, 2009. We are speaking with Randy Weston. Randy, since the last oral history a lot has happened. I want to start with the various recording sessions that you've made since then and ask you about each, and the various contexts of each, and what your goals were with each of those sessions and how they all went down. Let's start with "Saga" '95.

Randy Weston: Right, I recorded for Verve in Paris, you know? I was trying to do a new recording. At the time "Saga" came, actually, from the name of an African shop that my wife, who I married afterwards, her shop was called "Saga". Saga, in the world of language means family. All of my music is geared towards family, because I think that is so important, and that's what I learned from my ancestors. So, for "Saga" I was very grateful to have the great Billy Higgins on drums. I had Neil Clarke, Alex Blake; you had Billy Harper, T.K. Blue, and Benny Powell. I don't recall all of the songs; most of them were my originals. It was, for me, a very wonderful, wonderful date. It was chosen number one by Stereo Review Magazine. It was great it was a combination of a song like "Uncle Nemo", which I wrote for an elderly gentleman, Dooley Chelson, with a hat on his head and a beard. I don't recall—if I had the disc in front of me I could run down each song better. It was a fantastic date for Verve. The president of Verve was Jean

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Philippe Alad, and he is the one that I did ten C.D.s with, so I was very happy about that date.

Jenkins: Many of your dates have a sense of a goal, a sense of a philosophy behind them. In the case of this one, you titled it “Saga” which is for family. Was there a sense of that being a cohesive factor, in terms of the songs that you put on that record?

Randy Weston: Absolutely because I figure it’s so important to know what happened before we took those piano lessons, and trumpet lessons, and saxophone lessons. I feel our ancestors are ignored in the history of our music. But following Mr. Ellington, following Mr. Thelonious Monk, many of the musicians of the 20’s and the 30’s and 40’s, they wrote music about their families. They wrote music about the African American community whether it was children; they did benefits for the churches and whatnot. So it was like, for me, our traditional music in America. With this music, we can tell many, many stories so my base has always been the true understanding of this music. Whether we call it jazz, or blues, or bass nova, whatever titles; this is Africa’s contribution to the western Hemisphere, and it’s not understood, I feel, like it should, you know? So, all of my recordings have that sense of history, of that music before Africa, before Asia, where it came out of, what it meant, what it was the spirituality of the music, the meaning of the black music etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. So, all of my compositions, all of my music is based upon love, history, and family, and respect. The blues is always underneath it all because the blues, I feel, is the language of our people, how we survived. With the blues, you can do so many things with the blues: happy blues, sad blues, in-between blues, you know. So, that’s always there, yeah.

Jenkins: Tell me about the “Earth Birth” session and the circumstances behind that.

Randy Weston: Well, I was lucky to have spent ten wonderful summers in the Berkshires of Massachusetts. I had an opportunity to be in contact with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. I met people like Luckas Foss and Leonard Bernstein. I became exposed to modern European music by being up there although; I had heard most of this music on recording before. So, that’s where I wrote most of my works because I was always moved by children. Their freedom, the way they move; they’re very free children. So, my original recording with Bernstein and Lucas, it was called seven waltzes for children. The first waltz was called, “Earth Birth” and that’s to be meant when a child is born the first thing that happens is music. The child is moving his arms, or his legs, or he’s making sounds. That’s what “Earth Birth” meant.

Jenkins: Okay, so you made that “Earth Birth” recording in 1997.

Randy Weston: Oh, you mean that one with strings?

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Jenkins: It was basically an update on that particular piece of music, “Earth Birth”, and you surrounded it with other pieces for that particular session. Talk about that particular session for the “Earth Birth” record.

Randy Weston: Okay, what happened was in 1991 I was very fortunate to write three compositions: “Portrait of Billie Holliday”, “Blues for Elma Lewis”, and a royal lady. And it was entitled “Three African Queens” and we were lucky to perform with the Boston Pops Symphony Orchestra. John Williams was the conductor and it was like 133 musicians. With me, I had Idrees Sulieman on trumpet; I had Frank Gap on drums, Jamie Onaso on bass, and myself on piano. We did “High Fly” and we did these three compositions. So, what took place in Montreal was a smaller version of that. We got 25 strings of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, Billy Higgins, Christian McBride, and myself. That was a smaller version of the bigger work that we did in 1981, in Boston.

Jenkins: That experience of doing “Earth Birth” with the strings, and I’m happy to say I was there, but that experience was part of a larger residency that you did at the Montreal Jazz Festival that year. Talk about that residency and what you did.

Randy Weston: It was incredible. I hope I can remember everything correctly, but they gave me five nights. The first night was a duo with myself and David Murray. And the next night, not necessarily in that order, I did a concert with the Gnawa musicians of Morocco with a band which consisted of TK Blue, Teddy Edwards, Benny Powell, Alex Blake, Neil Clarke...I can’t remember the names of all the musicians. Anyhow, that was like the African night, okay? Melba Liston did all the arrangements, by the way. The next time we did the blues. It came out on an album called “Volcano”, and normally we would have a guy, Johnny Copeland, singing the blues but Johnny couldn’t make it. So, we got this older brother, his name escapes me now...

Jenkins: Robert Lockwood Jr.

Randy Weston: Exactly. You know, and he’s older than Johnny Copeland, which I found out. And with this blues, one of my favorite blues had always been “Volcano Blues” and also “Harlem Blues” which was Count Basie. He sang, and at first I got the feeling he didn’t quite know we could play the blues, you know. But, after rehearsal he was very happy, and then I found out later on he was into jazz before and the blues. That was fantastic for me because I always loved the blues because the blues is the foundation of what we do in our music, you know? The next night was like, kind of like, jazz. I had Billy Harper and Walter Rodney...How many nights is that four or five?

Jenkins: That’s five.

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Randy Weston: Yeah, so that was it. It was one of the most exciting moments of my musical career, that I could have concerts one after the other in different venues but the whole connection was Africa.

Jenkins: Now you mention that Melba Liston did all the arrangements for that and that you and Melba Liston had such a long partnership but by that point, and we're talking now '97, by that point, Melba was physically incapacitated. How did your relationship overcome her physical issues? How did you continue to work with her?

Randy Weston: Well, it was her genius and her strength, and her spiritual strength. I wanted to do this recording, "Spirit of Our Ancestors", again, trying to bring the ancestors to everybody. They are very much alive. What Louie Armstrong and Buddy Boland, and Duke Ellington, all they created, that's our royalty going back to Africa itself. For this recording, I started writing the whole concept for what I wanted to do. Then I realized that only Melba Liston could do this. She was in a wheelchair, she had been paralyzed on one side, and she can no longer play the trombone. I went to see her, and I insulted her as only musicians can do. I called her all kinds of names. I said to her, "You have to do these arrangements stroke or no stroke, handicap or no handicap," you know? She cried a little bit, you know? But, it turned out her aunt Thelma was a computer specialist and Melba started studying the computer and how to write the music with her left hand. That's how it came and her genius and her spirit came out, you know? We did, I think, three recordings after she had that stroke if I'm not mistaken.

Jenkins: No, she was living at the time in California with her Aunt Thelma, right?

Randy Weston: Exactly.

Jenkins: And you were probably still in Brooklyn.

Randy Weston: Yeah, but I was probably playing in L.A. I think I played the Jazz Bakery or something like that, you know. I was already in California.

Jenkins: Right, but these subsequent recording sessions that she continued to arrange for you, most of the time you were in Brooklyn and she was in California. How did you operate in terms of your relationship of composer and hers as arranger of your composition?

Randy Weston: Spirit. It makes no difference where she was: North Pole, or the middle of the Congo, it makes no difference. A good example of that is this, when we did the date with Coleman Hawkins, which was another miracle for me because Coleman Hawkins was my idol. When "Body and Soul" came out I was 17 years old. I bought 3 copies and I hid two. I played one so loud people could here "Body and Soul" in the

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streets. So, for the recordings, I think it was 1959 at the Five Spot, a live date. It was Roy Haynes, Clifford Jones, Wilbur Little on bass, Coleman Hawkins on tenor saxophone and Kenny Durham on trumpet. Melba had written the arrangements but she often had problems of illness before she had the stroke. What happened was, the recording took place on a Monday night at the Five Spot, and there was no time for rehearsal. She was in the hospital in California, and by some miracle the music arrived the day of the recording. I passed out the music, no time to rehearse, but I had such great musicians that they played beautifully. The same thing happened in 1985 at the Montreal Jazz Festival. I had a ten-piece group of the great Benny Bailey, Sahib Shihab, TK Blue, Clyde Lucas on drums, Mohammad Bin Fata, the Gnawa playing African percussion, myself on piano, Woodward Little was on bass. Melba got sick in the hospital in California at that time so Hale Smith took her place as conductor. The music arrived in time for the tour and after we performed at the Montreal Jazz Festival, which should be coming out soon, it was a fantastic performance, all of us got on the telephone and we called Melba in California. So this is not the first time this has happened with Melba. Unfortunately, she has had problems with illness. But, her spiritual strength is so powerful.

Jenkins: Now tell me about the “Khepera” recording session.

Randy Weston: Well, “Khepera” is like an ancient Egyptian word that means “like to regenerate, to bring back out senses.” We become so involved with machines that we lose that human contact that we had before. And, for me, for art, for music human contact is important because no matter who come in contact with, sometimes you get a vibration, sometimes you get a message; sometimes you get in an argument or whatever. “Khepera” is a way saying that we have to bring that back, to regenerate, to clean ourselves and come back, to get back to human contact. So, I was very happy to have met a woman from China, her name was Min Xiao Fen. I met her in Atlanta, Georgia and she was working with a Senegalese named Mortiem. Mortiem had musicians from different parts of the world in his group and he had heard, performing with his group, as she played an instrument called a pipa. This instrument is 2,000 years old. It’s not Chinese but it was imported into China. She’s a master but I didn’t know her and I didn’t know anything about the instrument. I did a solo concert and she heard me play solo piano. She said, “I love your piece on the piano.” She said, “I’d like you to hear me.” So, it turned out she was living in Brooklyn, at that particular time, so she came by my house and she took out the pipa and she started to play. It was so beautiful I said, “We have to play together.” At the same time, Dr. Wayne Chandler had written a book called “Ancient Future” and in this book he describes how Africa and China had much contact together, 1000 years ago. He explains that some of the original Chinese dynasties were African dynasties in China. To illustrate that, he had photographs that he showed me of ancient Chinese masks, just like African people, you see. Min, I talked to Min about this, and she got excited because she knows this part of our history. So we went to the Guggenheim museum together and it was 5,000 years of Chinese history. We discovered the mask of

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the Shang dynasty. The Shang dynasty is one of the original dynasties of China; it's one of the original African/Chinese dynasties. She was amazed as I was to the point that we contacted a professor at Harvard University who was a Chinese expert on the history of China; I forgot his name. We got books on this particular dynasty, right? So "Khepera" consisted of connecting China and Africa, which, people just can't believe the connection. We did a piece that she composed called "The Shang" and we described that as piano and pipa. On that date, we also had the great Pharaoh Sanders. With Pharaoh Sanders we did one of the Gnawa pieces, "Blue Moses" I also had Chief Bey, the great African American percussionist. Chief played African percussion and did some singing on Kofi Ghanaba, before known as Guy Warren from Ghana, his theme song. My theme song, which his composition called, "Love The History Of." I think we had Victor Lewis on drums, Alex Blake on bass, Benny Powell, you know. Melba did the arrangements for that. So, "Khepera" is a very, very spiritual word.

Jenkins: Now, "Spirit: The Power of Music" was a live performance that was captured on record, and it was also a very special situation; talk about that.

Randy Weston: Which one?

Jenkins: "Spirit: The Power of Music", the one with the Gnawa church in Brooklyn.

Randy Weston: Oh that one?

Jenkins: Yes.

Randy Weston: Okay. I was able to bring over six Gnawa. Gnawa are the black Moroccans. They were taken in slavery as soldiers from the ancient Mali Empire. A lot of their songs they sing about villages like they talk about the cities of Bambara; they sing about Segou, which is [comprised of] ancient African cities and empires, you know? They migrated; they were taken up to North Africa, and as most African people do wherever they do, whatever they come into contact with, they create a spiritual music. No matter what their religion is; it makes no difference. You find this is true in Brazil, in Cuba, in Venezuela, in Puerto Rico, in Jamaica, all over the world. America, Mississippi, New York, that's always there, that firm foundation. I had these six Gnawa come to New York for concerts; three were from Tangiers, three from Marrakech. The Tangiers Gnawa was my original contact with Gnawa in 1967. I met a young Gnawa; his name was Abdullah Al-Gourd. Abdullah worked for "Voice of America" so he spoke English. Most of the Gnawa only speak Arabic, you see, and very little French. Abdullah Al-Gourd, he was very interested in the history of his people. Because of him, I recorded and I met some of the old Gnawa. I met Gnawa who were 80 and 90 years old, who remember were walking across the Sahara desert. They were creating this music; where these rhythms come from. Their instruments are basic instruments we knew as a ginbiri. They call it the hajhouj.

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Sometimes it's called a santir. It's a three-stringed instrument. With the instrument they had contact with the creator. They call sprits with these instruments, they play games with these instruments, they do things with instruments that we cannot do in the West. They are directly in contact with the ancient spirits of Africa and the universe. So I had three of them, and three from Marrakech. Abdullah from Tangiers, Marrakech, and the chief is M'Barek Ben Othman. I met him one or two years later. Ever since then, when I can have a Gnawa performance I always get three from Tangiers and three from Marrakech. It's almost like the north of Morocco and the southern part of Morocco. Now, this was in a Christian church on Lafayette Avenue in Brooklyn; I've forgotten the particular name of the church. It was powerful because at that particular concert we opened up with Babatunde Olatunji, with his traditional group of dancers and music. After Babatunde Olatunji performed, then we came out, and then we performed with the Gnawa. In this Christian church we had three religions at the same time, through music: Yoruba, Islam, and Christianity. In the audience were all the denominations, all the colors, all the ages, and all the genders. It was powerful because we all experience a very powerful experience to see the whole connection of humanity, which can only happen with music. With music you don't have to read to music, you don't have to see to music, you just hear and you feel. With all that music, with ourselves, I had TK Blue, Benny Powell, Alex Blake, Neil Clarke with the six Gnawa, and the night before that we had Olatunji. That was a very powerful experience.

Jenkins: We've seen where, often times, Western musicians, when they are engaged with the music of other cultures, there is kind of a tendency to look to create a fusion. I don't see that in your connection with the Gnawa, I don't see that you have a sense of trying to force a fusion; talk about that.

Randy Weston: Well, we're the same people, we just happen to speak different languages; we just happen to be on different parts of the planet earth but we're the same people. Our ancestors survived the Atlantic Ocean. Months on those boats, you know, some committed suicide, but those who arrived and had to go through that whole scene of slavery, they survived. The same thing happened with the Gnawa people in Morocco. We're like brothers and sisters but the difference is this, the traditional music of Africa describes Africa itself. African music is as old as Africa, and Africa is the oldest civilization. They are totally in tune with Mother Nature, you see? So, with their music, they are at the origin of what we do. For example, when the Gnawa master plays his instrument, its only five notes. But, they can take one sound, one note and get what we called the intensity factor. They get inside that note. The same thing happens in the black church, the same thing happens with something meaningful, when Louie Armstrong picks up his trumpet he only had to hit one note. When Coleman Hawkins picks up his saxophone he only has to hit one note, you see? It's the origin of what we do. Africa, for me, it's the center of spirituality on the planet earth. No matter where you go on the continent the music swings because the music describes the continent itself. For me, the

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continent was swinging before man ever arrived. Early man had to listen to the sound of the wind, the sound of the forest, the sounds of the animals, the insects, to create music. Original musical instruments were made from the trees, from the skin of a goat, or sheep, or fish. So, were totally in tune with nature so that's the origin of us, you see? We come from that, so whenever we play with Gnawa people, all of us, they take us to school. But, they take us to the spiritual school, you see?

Jenkins: Now, you had made a solo recording before the Montreal Jazz Festival. But more recently, you made the recording "Ancient Future." How did you come to make that record?

Randy Weston: That wonderful book that Dr. Wayne Chandler wrote, which says that in order for us to go ahead we have got to go back. It's like...I'm sure we all have the same experience. Mom and Pop told us some things when we were younger which we either rejected or we didn't understand. When we become older, "Oh! That's what Pop meant! That's what Mom meant!" That goes all the way, all the way back. The ancient Egyptians, they created a concept of music, which is based upon spiritual values. Each planet has got its own sound. Each planet has its own rhythms, you see? The ancient ancestors—it's said, this came from the ancient Nubian people, Pharaohs like Osiris, Isis, that they were able to be in tune with the sounds of the universe and from that comes the diatonic scale, you see? When you look at the origin of music and how, from Africa, how this music went up to Europe, how this music went to Asia. Wherever and whenever, it will adapt according to the environment. So if you listen to "Rites Of Spring" by Stravinsky, you can feel Russia, you know? Our spiritual is the original language of humanity. The whole idea from "Ancient Future" is for us to go ahead we have to know where we came from as a human race, and where we are going to go. We have to go back because today, as I said earlier, we are so hung up with machines. I drive my car in New York and I see people walking the street with cell phones in their ears, not looking at the traffic or nothing like that. I see people walking around with their earphones. I see them walking around pressing buttons all the time. That sounds very hip, but it's not. When it happens, you loose that contact. I play the piano like I play because I had the human contact with Thelonious Monk, because I had the spiritual contact with Nat King Cole, who I never met. I had the spiritual contact with Count Basie, or Coleman Hawkins, or Dizzy Gillespie. I saw them, I touched their hands, you see? You know, when we created, we didn't have any machines. The purpose of "Ancient Future" was inspired by that book to somehow bring us back.

Jenkins: Were you inspired by that book and by what that book said to you when you read it? Were you inspired by that book to make this particular record as a solo piano record?

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Randy Weston: Yeah, because that book only confirms the things I had read about all my life because I had a wonderful father and mother. They were fantastic, my father and mother, you see? My father taught me to study African civilization when Africa was great. Most of us get the education of Africa, Africa after slavery, that's where we start. My father, he already said, "Man, in my house in Brooklyn we grew up with maps of African kings and queens in the house. He'd have books written by African historians, old maps." So, my father conditioned me, he told me, "You have to go back because you're an African born in America. To respect your ancestors, if they came here as Africans, what else can you be? They give you those simple things." So, it came from my Dad, plus he made me take piano lessons. I'm very big, and I didn't want to practice the piano, I wanted to play football and baseball. My father made me take piano lessons and my mother gave me black church. I had to be there every Sunday. To me, while we had the big band and the blues group, you know growing up in New York was a blessing because all the giants would all come to New York. I don't know if I answered your question or not, I might have taken off.

Jenkins: Well, so many of your records have been ensembles with horns. But, in this case, you decided to make a solo piano record and I get the sense that the whole theme, "Ancient Future", had something to do with your decision to make it a solo piano record. Was that the case?

Randy Weston: Not really, it really happened at the Montreal Jazz Festival, the first time I performed there. The year was 1974, because I had never been to Europe; I had been to Africa 7 years before. 1974, I played the Montreal Jazz Festival. I had Ahmed Abdul-Malik on the oud; I had William Allen on bass, myself at the piano, Steve Berrios on percussion cause my son couldn't make it. We toured, the first time, to play Europe. That was the year that Duke Ellington died. I was very close to Duke and I did a solo rendition of Duke Ellington, just solo piano, about seven minutes. When I got through those seven minutes, the Swiss audience said to me, "We love your solo piano." But I was already playing solo piano in the Berkshires. Duke's sister, she only wanted to hear me play solo piano. My first solo concert was at Antibes-Juan le Pins in France, was my very first solo concert, so I had already been playing solo. I did a solo recording for Riverside, so I was already there. Maybe with this one, I wanted to express something by doing solo piano.

Jenkins: Now, your most recent recording with your regular ensemble was a concert live in St. Lucia; talk about that.

Randy Weston: It was great because the weather was wonderful. It was hot. We did my usual songs and people say to me sometimes—I used to say, "Why did Duke Ellington play those same songs all the time? He's got about 10,000 compositions. Why do you play these songs all the time." Then I realized, certain songs, the messages are eternal, nothing changes. There's no such things as this is old, this is new, certain songs have a

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particular message, you know? At this particular concert, which was outdoors, again, Benny, TK Blue, Alex, myself and Neil Clarke; we played outdoors and it was wonderful because of the audience and the temperature. The climate has a lot to do with how you play. Maybe what you had for breakfast may affect how you play, maybe who you see, I don't know. It's a whole spiritual thing. In a warm climate, you know, like St. Lucia, it was wonderful. There was a lot of energy and everybody felt really good.

Jenkins: There's a D.V.D of that.

Randy Weston: Yes.

Jenkins: Now your most recent recording is the trio record, "Zep Tepi" Explain "Zep Tepi" and the whole trio session that made that record.

Randy Weston: The recording was...I had my regular guys: Alex Blake and Neil Clark. "Zep Tepi" is an ancient Egyptian word, it means "the first time". It's when the creator decided to give us music, because it was a time when there was just silence, there was nothing. Then the whole process of creation took place. I'm not a scientist, I'm not an anthropologist but it appears certain things have happened to create the earth. During that process, according to the ancients, there was a period of complete silence, there was nothing. All of the sudden there was one vibration, then two vibrations, then three vibrations, and these vibrations came to various kingdoms: the animal kingdom, the vegetable kingdom, and then man; man arrived. But, "Zep Tepi" is ancient Egyptian language going all the way back, not Arabic, Egyptian, "Zep Tepi" means "the first time". That means when the creator gave us music for the first time, he gave us the foundation and from that up until 2009 the whole planet can share, express, and enjoy, what we call music. I repeated some of my earlier songs like "Berkshire Blues". I don't remember all the titles of the recordings. It was done at a studio in the lower east side. The guy who did it, independent guy, named Rick Congress. I enjoyed that date.

Jenkins: There is one song on there, it's a rather short piece, but it kind of has a Japanese feel to it.

Randy Weston: Oh, "Tamashii."

Jenkins: Was that inspired by your journeys to Japan?

Randy Weston: Oh my god yes. Japanese experience, wow! That's very deep. I have to back a little bit on that. I have one sister, no brothers. My sister was five years older than me. She was my boss, you know? When I was younger, despite my physical size, if anybody messed with me I'd get my sister. She was strong but very spiritual, very giving. She died; this was 2001. At the same time, I got a contact from people in Japan that they

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wanted me to play solo piano in the Shinto shrine. And this shrine is called a Kamigamo shrine. It's recognized by UNESCO as the world heritage site; it's something like 1,600 years old. I had been to Japan before but I never had an opportunity to play at a spiritual place like the Shinto shrine. So that was in the works and we decided... the day of the funeral of my sister was the tenth of September 2001, no?

Jenkins: 11th, September 11th.

Randy Weston: You sure?

Jenkins: Cause that when we talked and the planes were...

Randy Weston: No, the black church was on the day before.

Jenkins: Well, you buried her on the 11th.

Randy Weston: Exactly, but the day before TK Blue and the guys came to the church and they all prayed for my sister in the church. She was going to the same church as my mother, the People's Institutional Church on Monroe Street and Stuyvesant Ave in Brooklyn. It was right around the corner from where Eubie Blake used to live, okay? So we had the ceremony, and the next day, the 11th, on our way to the Evergreen Cemetery and all of the sudden 9-11. We get to the cemetery in Brooklyn, the Evergreen Cemetery, and there's the priest. He's has to read over my sister, put her in the ground, and at the same time we can see the smoke from the World Trade Center. So the priest had to read about that too. I'll never forget this because my sister is so dynamic. You know, black people, sometimes we find humor in anything. I said, "Only my sister would be buried on a day like today with 9-11, only her." She had a great sense of humor. Getting back to Japan, okay we had the black church, we had the cemetery, and my next time to perform would be in Japan, in Kyoto, Japan. Kyoto is the spiritual center of Japan; the original capital of Japan is Kyoto. So, two weeks later I'm on my way to Japan. They meet me at the airport, check into the hotel and they take me to Shinto shrine. In the meanwhile I had gotten a call from a woman. She plays a traditional Japanese instrument, I forgot the name of the instrument, and she's very close to a woman who is a healer in Japan. I saw her in the Village before this; they came with a traditional group to perform somewhere and went because I'm always interested in traditional music, all kinds of traditional music. So, anyhow, she saw this woman in Tokyo, before I came. This woman said when she saw my picture she started to cry and she said she had to see me. So when I arrived in Tokyo the [inaudible], she came with me. I remember because she was translating, this woman came from Tokyo, and she came to meet me the day of the concert. We sat together and she started crying. She looked at me and she started crying. She said, "You are supposed to be here at this particular time. There's something spiritual about your appearance here, now. You have to do a ceremony before you play." So we went to the

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Kamigamo shrine and I met the priest, and I had to go into the shrine, I had to get on my knees and they started saying certain prayers, of course in Japanese, which I didn't understand. I could feel that they were chasing away the evil spirits. I sat down and they said certain words and I met the head priest and whatnot and afterwards they took me to the place where I was supposed to perform. They had this had this incredible imperial piano, the piano I love the most. It has seven extra notes in the bass. This piano, I just love this piano. They had this huge piano in the shrine and they had about 20 or 25 Japanese cleaning the floor of where the piano was on stage and they had nothing but mats all over the shrine. I tried the piano and they were getting everything ready, they made special lanterns, they made huge sign, "Welcome Randy Weston," and what not. The plan was that—this shrine holds about 200 people and the plan was I was supposed to...nobody wears shoes. They all sit on these mats, and they just sit there, and the whole idea was that my shoes were at the piano. So, I had to walk through the shrine without shoes, cause nobody had shoes. So when I got to the piano I looked at my shoes, I already where a size 16 and they looked like a size 26. I said, "I can't put these shoes on." And I had to play without shoes; it was my first time doing a concert without shoes. This place was so spiritually powerful that after I got through playing the one Japanese man he said he thought he couldn't move. After everybody had left they had to come pick him up. He said the music had him glued to the floor. So, we had the black church, the Shinto shrine, and this woman who came from Tokyo, what had happened with 9-11. It was just an incredible experience. That was what happened in Japan. I played at the Shinto shrine last year, and this time I took Alex Blake. So, I've played there three times. I also played a Buddhist temple in that same year, 2001. I played for a lot of children and I played in a town called Shizuoka, which is not far from Kyoto. That was an experience because what happened, they had a traditional Japanese priest and they had the musicians and they would play their instruments before I played solo piano. In other words, after they played the last note, you know, I would go to the piano and I would try and capture that note. And from that note I played a solo concert. They had children there. The amazing thing Japan is this, we played a concert, this happened even the last time, and there were children in the audience two years old and four years old. You could not hear a sound until we were finished. Then the children ran up on stage and greeted us. Japan is very, very special. I never had an experience like that anywhere else in the world.

Jenkins: There was another of your playing solo piano. You've been playing trio a lot in the last three years. Is it fair to say that over the last 10 or 15 years, or so, you've worked more trio and solo piano than you have in the preceding years?

Randy Weston: Yeah. But it's hard to think of numbers, you know. I did a lot of things with the Quintet, with the sextet, with Gnawa. Solo trio? Maybe more.

Jenkins: How do you approach the task differently when you're playing solo or when you're playing trio? Both of which place greater demands on you as a piano player. How

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do you approach those situations differently, in your head and as a musician, than you do when you're playing with the quintet or the sextet?

Randy Weston: Well, the approach is always the same—just love. Just love. To be honest, I could play music in any formation and you give 100 percent all the time there. In a way, in the trio, in the solo you're more free. When you have an orchestra you have to be more controlled, but that's great too. We played with the Symphony Orchestra. November 5th and 6th I'm doing two concerts with Arturo O'Farrill's Cuban Orchestra. We're going to do "African Sunrise", "Blues to Africa", and "African Voodoo [inaudible]" with his orchestra. That's great, but it's more controlled. With a solo piano I can go anywhere. I can hit any bad note and nobody knows the difference. With my trio I can do the same thing because we know each other and we emphasize rhythm and spirituality and we always try to be in tune with the audience, with the climate, with the temperature, with how you feel that particular day.

Jenkins: I think of you as a very selfless bandleader when you're working with your horns and your larger ensembles. I have heard people say, for example, a couple of weeks ago when you did the book even with Robin Kelley with the Monk book, I was backstage and a gentleman came back and he told you that he had seen you playing trio and he really enjoyed that. He said that he had enjoyed all of your music but he especially enjoyed seeing you in trio because, for him, he got to hear more of the essence of Randy Weston the piano player in a trio setting than he did with the quintet or the sextet. I've heard other people say that as well. How do you react to that?

Randy Weston: My very first recording, Riverside records heard me in the Berkshires. I did their first recording, and my first recording. I had been playing solo piano in the Berkshires in these little hotels. You have to understand that I grew up with the king and queens of piano. When you grow up with people like Dorothy Dandridge and Duke Ellington, and Count Basie, and Art Tatum, Earl Hines, Nat King Cole, Monk, I mean, you know that period, for me, it was the royalty of piano. Trying to go towards that direction, I was always very timid, very unsure. But, they heard me in solo piano in 1954 and Riverside Records; they wanted me to do a solo album. I didn't want to do a solo album, I wanted a trio and we argued about that. Finally, we compromised with myself and Sam Gill on bass. So, my first recording of Cole Porter was piano and bass, but they wanted me to do solo piano. People had heard me on solo piano. Duke Ellington's sister, Ruth Ellington; she didn't want to hear me any other way. Maurice Cullaz's wife in Paris, she only wanted to hear me solo piano. I don't know what it is, I really don't know. But I'm happy that people like me doing solo piano, but I was always reluctant because, like I said, I grew up with the heavyweights.

Jenkins: Your trombone player, Benny Powell, he always kind of laughs and chuckles and he's been playing with you for so many years and he says, "When I play with Randy

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Weston we don't do gigs, we have adventures." You just described your experience at the Kamigano shrine and your experience in Japan. Now, you've been blessed with so many spiritual experiences. Besides the experience in Kyoto, talk about some of the highlights that you've had over the last few years, some of the things that really stand out in your mind from that respect, from the spiritual aspect in terms of engagements as a musician and that kind of thing.

Randy Weston: Well, I think Morocco would have to stand out, for sure. They did a film, a documentary, on me called "Randy in Tangiers," which was a combination of channel three in France and Spanish television. The director was a French director and so, to do the film it would cover my life in Morocco, basically with three traditional groups. Like I said before, when I go to Africa I only want to be with the traditional people. When you go with traditional music anywhere on the planet, that's when you become close to the people. The music and the food are the two keys, anywhere you go on the planet earth. The musicians and the cooks, they know what's going on in the community. That's for sure, that's guaranteed right? So what happened? I brought the sextet over Alan Hayward on drums, on bass was...how did I forget the bass player? It'll come back to me. Eric Asante, African percussion from Ghana I had Benny Powell, and I had Billy Hopper. So what happened...there are three traditional groups of people that I spent time with in Morocco. One was the Gnawa people, which I talked about earlier. The second group was the people called the Gullah people. These are Sufi masters and they also live in Tangiers; I spent time with them. The third people were called the people of Jajouka. Jajouka is a village up in the Rif Mountains in Morocco where they are great healers, and they play instruments they call the lira, like this, you know?

Jenkins: Flutes, in-bloom flutes.

Randy Weston: Yeah. So to get there you have to take donkeys, but the guys in the band didn't know this. So when we got to the staging place where you start to go up the mountain, here you got Al Hayward, you got all the guys, you know? Billy Harper was the only one that was cool, because Billy, being from Texas, he knew how to ride horses and donkeys. Anyhow, seeing these guys with their musical instruments...Tom McKenzie was the bass player. Seeing these guys going up the mountains on these donkeys, with their instruments, that was incredible. Benny said, "We have adventure! We have adventure!" (Laughs) We got to the village and it was no electricity and no lights. They do rights of passage; they have a special thing. See, Morocco, why it's such a great country is because you have all kinds of different kinds of traditional people: Sahara, mountains...it's different! We stayed up there and we had a great time. That stands out in my mind. The festival we organized in 1972 in Tangiers, I had, by this time, I'd opened up my own club called the African Rhythms club. We organized this festival and I brought over Odetta, Max Roach's without Max: Cecil Bridgewater, Billy Harper, Junior Booth, my son Azzedine played percussion. We had Ahmed Abdul-Malik, we had

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Mandrill, and Pucho and His Latin Soul Brothers, and we had 40 African musicians. We had this three-day festival at a bullring in Tangiers. Two nights it was at the bullring and the next night it was a Sahara sandstorm coming from the Sahara. We couldn't play in the bull right so we had to rush and clean up this theatre called Theatre Cervantes in Tangiers. That was an experience, and I having that club, that was an experience. We had a blues band from Chicago sometime. We had singers from the Congo...we played records of James Brown, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, so the young Moroccans could hear our real music cause they were getting imitations of our music from Europe; they weren't hearing the real thing. That was an experience (Laughs).

Jenkins: You have an experience with the Arch Bishop of Canterbury, talk about that.

Randy Weston: Well, that was organized by a woman from India, Zeba...

Jenkins: Rahman?

Randy Weston: Rachman, and she arranged for us... they were having a meeting of spiritual leaders from all over the world and the Arch Bishop of Canterbury in England. So she arranged for myself, and three Gnawa from Tangiers and leaders from everywhere. So it was my first experience to be in Canterbury. And when you go down in the basement you see all the bishops of England, you see all the various...it's an amazing place, you know? We had to play for them. But it was an interesting experience because the hajhouj, or the ginbiri as I described before as the key instrument for Gnawa, plus what they call a kekeba. The original percussion instrument is called a kekeba. SO what they had to do...it's always difficult to tune this instrument to the piano but it usually works after a while. They use saliva to tune the instrument, they don't have any keys, you know. For some reason the spirits in this place were so strong that it took a half hour for this instrument to be in tune with the piano, because the instrument picks up the spirits of wherever you are, you see? It had signs like "Lieutenant so and so, the hero of the battle in Egypt." It was really, sort of English empire in this place, you know. But it was wonderful and afterwards I had an opportunity to speak to very spiritual leaders about the importance of music.

Jenkins: I wanted to ask you about another one of your adventures and that was the opening of the library in Alexandria.

Randy Weston: Say it again?

Jenkins: The opening of the library in Alexandria.

Randy Weston: Yeah, a dear friend of mine, in fact he died last year and I didn't find out until two months ago, his name is Salah Ragab. Salah Ragab is in Cairo, in Egypt and he

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has a big band. He plays Duke, Basie, everything. He was a good friend of mine. We were in Egypt and we spent time with him, my wife and I. And what happened, they were getting ready to open a new library in Alexandria, in Egypt. He thought I should be there so what he did was he contacted the director of music in Egypt and the director of the library in Alexandria. We got together and we talked and as it turned out, myself and a bass player...I forget his name, he lived in Paris.

Jenkins: Stafford James?

Randy Weston: No, not Stafford. It'll come to me.

Jenkins: William Allen?

Randy Weston: No. It's on the tip of my tongue. Anyhow, all the heads of state came and we were the only ones to really represent America. It was just myself and a group from South Africa, most of the others were Arab singers and whatnot, you know? And that was quite an experience because it was a new library and when the heads of state came, the president of Egypt, the president of Greece, and the Queen, you know, they all came to open this thing. What I remember very clearly was, at a certain point they told the artist, they said, "If you got to go to the toilet you have to go before four-o'clock because that's on that side and that's where all the heads of state are, and they got that security, you know?" But we played, and for me it was a great honor. I had played the Alexandria in 1967 so coming back, that was quite an experience, yeah.

Jenkins: Now, since this last oral history was done for the Smithsonian, you have met and married Fatu. Talk about that whole evolution and how you met Fatu, and the story of your getting married.

Randy Weston: Well, I'll make it short. I won't spend too much time talking about marriage. (Laughs)

Jenkins: Well, I mean the whole marriage thing that has a spiritual aspect to it, too.

Randy Weston: A powerful experience.

Jenkins: Right.

Randy Weston: Well, what happened was, I met my wife, Fatoumata Mbengue. She's a Lebo woman, Wulluf, from Senegal. She has a beautiful African shop in Paris. We met because some of the Gnawans invited her to my concert in Paris, with Gnawa. So she saw me before I saw her. I passed her shop many times and never went in for some reason, but I realized when I went in that that was it; I'd never come out again. (Laughs) I finally

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went into the shop after two or three trips from New York back to Paris. She saw me, I never saw her. What happened was, because I was invited because a photographer named Ariane Smolderen, she's from Belgium; we made trips to Morocco to photograph a history of the Gnawa people. We traveled Fez, to Marrakech, to Telouet, to Agadir, we went down the Sahara just photographing Gnawa families, because there are different parts of Morocco. She was close to a woman in Paris who was from Belgium. She owned a gallery, and they were having a conference on Sufi music in Gwana, in Egypt. Gwana is near Karnak, Egypt. She knew my interests in Sufism, so we were invited to go to this conference. The two of us went and they brought...

Jenkins: You and Fatou?

Randy Weston: Yes, Fatou and myself. They had Sufi singers from the Nile and one would come every night to sing in the ancient text, the ancient Arabic text. It was beautiful, I mean I didn't understand the language but you could feel the power of the music. They had one blind guy; he was incredible. At the same time, again speaking about spirits because that's the world that I'm in; I'm in the world of ancestors and spirits because they guide me, I had this desire to see the temple of Isis. The temple of Isis is in Aswan, in Egypt. So after the week conference, I decided we would go to Aswan from Gwana. And Gwana is near Karnak and it's about a three-hour drive. We talked to the taxi cab driver to take us, Ramsey, I'll never forget him. He took the seat out of the taxi and made sure I had a lot of legroom, he threw the whole seat out! (Laughs) And we had to go in a convoy because just before that, just a year before that, a lot of tourists had been murdered at one of the sites in Egypt. So to go from one place to another place they would have a convoy of soldiers to take you. So they would go to different hotels, and pick up different tourists to make this particular tour. Everybody wasn't going to Aswan, but they were all going to different cities in Egypt. So finally Ramsey says, "Look, let's get away from this convoy." So we left the convoy and we drove to Azwan. We arrived at night so on her next day I said, "Do you want to go see the temple of Isis?" Isis is one of the greatest Egyptian queens. Is she a myth; is she real? She's the daughter of the creator. So we went to this temple of Isis, magnificent, huge walls, you can see these monuments with all musical instruments that are thousand and thousand of years old. We sat there and the guy came over and he saw us, because most of the tourists were Europeans, we might have been the only two or three blacks there, you know? He says, "Are you enjoying yourself?" We say, "Yeah," and he says, "My name is Shadley, I'm with the inspectors of antiquity of Egyptian art." He said, "I'd like to take you around." So he took us and we went to the Nubian museum. He introduced us to the head of the Nubian museum in Aswan. We talked with him and we got to meet all the hip people. So, anyhow, after that experience we went back to America. We came back again to Egypt right after I got my Jazz Masters grant, because the Jazz Masters is connected to this too. So, with that wonderful tribute they gave me we went back to Egypt and we saw this guy again. One day, we were sitting in a hotel, the three of us, and all of the sudden the spirit

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came and said to me... I told this guy, "I want to marry this woman." I don't know where it came from. The guy looked at me, Fatou looked at me, "What's happening." And I said, "I want to marry this woman." This guy said, "Okay." He took us to this Nubian village and took us to get jewelry, took us to get photographs and dress us in Nubian clothes. We said, "We have one condition, we don't want a lot of people. We want maybe four or five people for this marriage." He said, "Okay, no problem." He said, "When you go get the photographs taken, don't speak at all cause I'm going to tell them that you and your wife are Nubian. That way you don't have to pay a lot for the photographs." Now, they knew we weren't Nubian, you know. I did the whole Hollywood bit (Laughs). I grabbed my wife, well she wasn't my wife yet, but I grabbed her and we did the whole thing. Then we got back in the car and we go back to this village and we had been to the village before, that's where they dress us in Nubian clothes and whatnot. We got there and the next thing we hear is drums. All of the sudden, the whole village, they put us on thrones. These thrones are made out of cardboard, all the musicians came and they partied all night. We did a Nubian ceremony, a Nubian marriage. It was something, some kind of adventure. Now, my wife, she's Muslim, so I had to call her father and tell him that you married this guy from Brooklyn in Nubia! (Laughs) Her grandfather was an Imam. But, I called her father and he was so nice. That's how it happened. Again, it came from the ancestral spirits that guided me and had me say something like that. I've been very blessed.

Jenkins: Now, you mentioned the NEA Jazz Masters Award. That was 2003, right? You were selected along with Jackie McLean and John Lewis. What did that mean for you, to receive the National Endowment For The Arts Jazz Masters Fellowship?

Randy Weston: Miracle, [it was a] miracle. I have to be dreaming. This is the guy that the piano teacher gave up on after three years. He told my father to save his money! (Laughs) You never are going to forget something like that you know. I said, "Well, I'm in heaven." A miracle. My whole life, everything that I have explained to you it's like destiny. It's like my whole life has been laid out already by the creator. Things that happen, I can't explain. People say, "Randy Weston, you did this! You did!" I didn't do any of those things. Somehow I was put into a certain place at a certain time, you know. That's why, with this music, I have such an appreciation for music itself, and I try to explain whether I do a master class or whether I talk with people, that music is a spiritual language. It's much deeper than we realize, you know? If musical was to stop on the planet tomorrow; the planet would die. You've got the music of the forest, you've got the music of the trees, you've got the music of the insects, you've got the music of the cow, he makes all of the animals, and the birds, and on, and on, and on. In our music we capture the beauty of nature and the beauty of humanity, you see? So, to answer that question, I am just amazed. I can't believe it, it happened, but I still can't believe it

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Jenkins: Now you talk about, as one of your guiding forces—you even named a record after it—and you always talk about the spirits of our ancestors. How have you gotten closer to the spirits of your ancestors over the last few years?

Randy Weston: I was born with it, but I couldn't identify it, I had to go back. Growing up in Brooklyn, economically, we were all poor. I got allowance, maybe 50 cents a week, but we had so much love that nobody cared. We had...economics...it was hard watching Mom and Pop having to struggle. They couldn't go here, they couldn't go there, because of the color of their skin. How they kept us spiritual, how they kept us with so much love, it's something that amazes me up until this minute. Everyday that I'm home I look at my mother and father and I say, "How did y'all do it? How did Louie Jordan do it? How did Nat King Cole do it? How did Diana Washington do it?" You look at the contribution that African people have made to the world in music, its mind-boggling! We spent, my wife, we spent ten days at the Mississippi Delta. Now I've written 40 blues, I thought I knew the blues, but I didn't know the blues until I went to Mississippi. I saw the slave shacks; I physically saw a cotton field. You can see a cotton field in a movie but when you see a cotton field, which is almost two football fields, and you realize that our ancestors used to have to pick cotton and give a quota. They came back with that cotton and if they didn't give that certain quota, then that quota would be raised. What they had to go through to produce a Randy Weston, man, that is something that I will always be amazed, and grateful, and respectful of. This is what I try and tell people about music, it's not notes, and chords, and sounds that are arranged, that's just one part. The real music is how our ancestors were able to create this beauty in a time of pain, how they did it, how we also did it. You know, all those guys, you know how they did it. They had to be in the back of the bus and they couldn't go here, and they couldn't go there. They created all this beauty: the black church, the blues, the jazz, the bassa nova, the samba, the reggae, the hip-hop, you name it! It's Africa's contribution. Africa is the spiritual center, the center of gravity of our mothers and fathers and our grandparents going all the way back to when were just one human race. That's something that I'll always be excited about, and I'll always be humble and grateful that I've been given a gift and to be able to, like a relay race, Mr. Ellington me passed the baton to me. Mr. Ellington said to Gillespie, "He passed it on me. So wherever I go, I have to honor these people. But, not enough is known about what they had to go through to produce this music, about what the conditions were at that particular time. We don't have that problem today, we can go anywhere we want to go. But those people! God bless them, and I've met most of them, you know? I shook Louie Armstrong's hand in Oklahoma City. I'll never forget that handshake. I shook Paul Robinson's hand at a ballroom in New York City. I shook Paul's hand. I looked at Duke Ellington, like this, sitting in front of him. I sat opposite of Billie Holiday to shake her hand. To me, what can I tell you? It's something that's extraordinary.

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END OF INTERVIEW

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