

Soul



WEATHER REPORT minus Joe Zawinul

Joni Mitchell? Clark Gable?

What have they got to do with JOE ZAWINUL? ROBIN KATZ finds a connection

THERE WAS a running joke in the movie 'Inserts' that went something like this. The film centred around a silent movie director who was a recluse. Every visitor who came to see him mentioned that there was a new kid in town, Clark Gable, who wanted to meet him. The gag was that Gable was always mentioned, but never seen. He was also to become more famous than the old silent director would ever be.

So it went on the afternoon that cordial, forty something year old Josef Zawinul of Weather Report was giving me a concentrated history of the innovative jazz quintet. The Clark Gable in this case was Joni Mitchell, who was over at Island's Basing Street Studios working over a period of two days with Weather Report's Wayne Shorter and Jaco Pastorius.

Shorter briefly described the sessions as "a Jamaican, jungly sound". Joni Mitchell has sold millions of records, while Weather Report are waiting to see an album hit gold. Still, they innovated the now popular jazz style and they haven't changed too much to do it. So while rumours of Joni Mitchell's latest appearances filtered through the hotel, the history began.

Zawinul came from Austria where he was pianist to Dinah Washington and later penned 'Mercy Mercy Mercy' for Cannonball Adderley. He went on to work with Miles Davis, writing the title track to 'In A Silent Way' and tracks from 'Bitches Brew'. Wayne Shorter grew up in New Jersey and went to work for Horace Silver and Maynard Ferguson. He was part of the Miles Davis quintet that included Herbie Hancock and Tony Williams.

"Wayne and I had known each other since 1959," began Zawinul. "We had both written very successful material for the people we worked for. It was time that we did the same for ourselves. We wanted to break away, experiment, not have to be told how to play or what

interpretation to do. We liked the idea of a partnership.

"My music tends to be very sunshiny and happy because I'm a fairly happy-go-lucky type of person. Wayne's music is more serious and introspective. Without him I would have probably gone over the top in my area, maybe he would have in his. The good thing about a partnership is that it gives you a chance to check yourself out."

The key to Weather Report, it was explained, was not to have a consistent, recognizable sound. The foundation of this group was jazz certainly, but artistry above all. "The first band we had was more of a space band" recalled Zawinul. "When we played, it was to feel good. When that couldn't grow anymore, we changed group members. Wayne and I have no love of sitting still. As soon as you change a musician, the music automatically starts to sound different."

"There is talk that jazz is making a comeback. Certainly jazz is making a comeback economically. What happened was that jazz was alive and well and then it got itself into a state where it was uninteresting and predictable. What has remained consistent is the form of jazz itself. That might sound like a contradiction to you because much of jazz is improvisation.

"But the form will always be there. Herbie Hancock tried r&b. There were other jazz artists who went straight in for rock and roll. We are number one, I feel, because we never played anything but jazz. It's just that we do it our way. We change. A lot of the early crossover efforts were interesting; Chick Corea and the Aha-vishna Orchestra when they began. But the music became more mechanised. It lacked a feeling of flow."

Weather Report's refreshing free flight music has served as the tip of the iceberg in luring many unlikely types into new jazz fans. If one knew nothing about jazz, where in the

name of back catalogue would a genius like Josef Zawinul recommend one to start.

"It's possible to start from the beginning, but there are so many albums!" he smiled generously. "Let's see. I'd recommend you start with the first Dizzy Gillespie Live Band, which was recorded in Pasadena in 1948. There's 'Duke Ellington At Newport' from 1957 or '58. H m m m m m. There's Billie Holiday's 'Lady In Satin' — talk about feeling in music! Billie Holiday was in a category all her own. 'Porgy and Bess' by Miles Davis, the first Mahavishna album, our 'Mysterious Train' and 'In A Silent Way', which was Miles Davis of about seven years ago."

Seven years is a long time for a partnership that sprouted from such differences. Zawinul feels the only point of tension, which might have been dangerous was not in the music, but in disciplining the outfit. Both he and Shorter contributed equally from a musical standpoint, but it was Zawinul who became the disciplinarian. "It's like being a parent. A good parent disciplines and loves. If you're only doing the disciplining, then you don't enjoy the success as much."

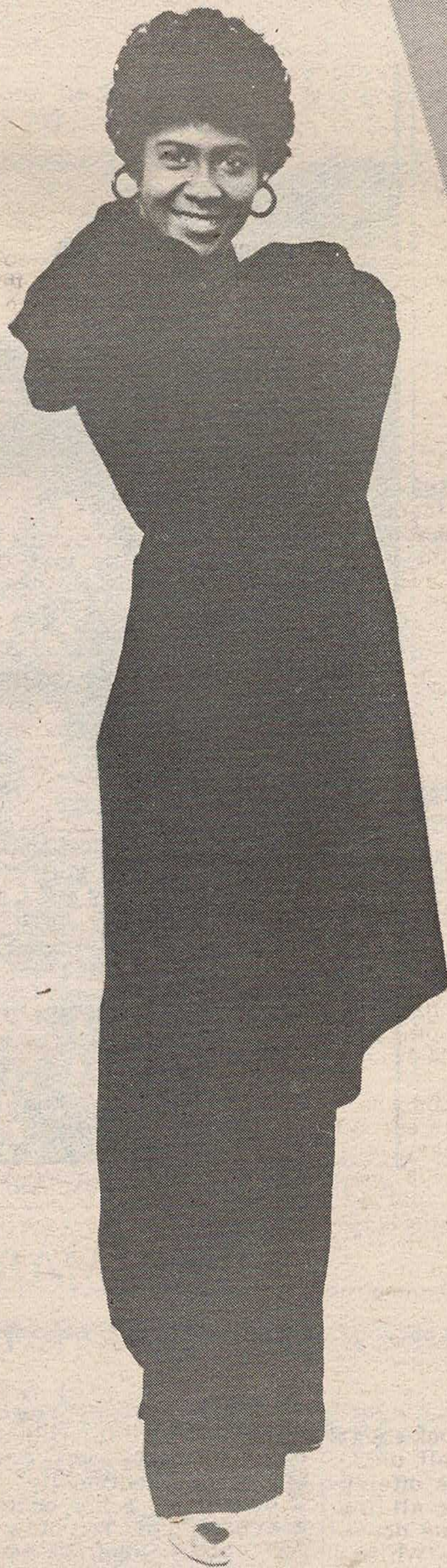
"We respect each other's differences", he continued. "Wayne tends to sit down at a piano and writes and rewrites his songs. He rearranges his rearrangements. It's all very specific. I'm very different. I tend to improvise with a tape recorder at my side. I tape down all this music and then, perhaps I'll do something with it. If I didn't write another song for the next two or three years I'd have plenty of material. There are songs that go back years. I've heard things of Wayne's that he wrote when he was 17 and they still sound wonderful. That's not like rock, is it?"

At that moment, Wayne Shorter put his head in through the door and smiled. Speaking of improvisation, he had just come back from a session with Joni Mitchell. No doubt the session with Joni Mitchell...

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