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## Preface

The drummer, multi-instrumentalist, composer and educator Joe Chambers, born on June 25, 1942, is a seminal figure of the musical explorations that propelled the innovative developments of modern jazz drumming during the 1960s. Firmly rooted in the musical conventions of the bebop tradition, his musical versatility and stylistic flexibility reflect the transformational process that bridged the gap between the evolution of the so-called “modern” drummer of the bebop style to the “progressive” and “conceptual” drummer of post-bop jazz. As an integral contributor to this process, Chambers pushed and refined the stylistic developments of percussive aesthetics at the threshold between hard bop and avant-garde throughout his career. Specifically, as suggested by the limited timeframe introduced in the title of this work, the years between 1964 and 1973 are of particular importance for the thematic focus of this project. The reason behind focusing on this particular period is based on the fact that on the one hand, the year 1964 marks Chambers’ breakthrough and recording debut as a drummer for a major jazz artist, namely for Freddie Hubbard on his album *Breaking Point!*. On the other hand, 1973 was the year in which Chambers released his first album as a leader, *The Almoravid*. Both events signify major milestones during Chambers’ multifaceted career, and simultaneously form a coherent unit that allows for analytical exploration of Joe Chambers’ drumming that has not been undertaken to this extent yet.

In comparison with more prominently discussed contemporaries such as Elvin Jones and Tony Williams, the relatively small share of historic acknowledgement that his work has received so far strikingly emphasizes the importance of investigating Chambers’ career achievements in detailed analysis. Jones’ and Williams’ much larger public appraisal can be attributed not only to their pivotal, epoch-breaking drumming contributions, but also to the maximized visibility of their work. Despite lacking the heightened visibility of Jones’ and Williams’ musical collaborations with arguably the two biggest names of post-World War II jazz, John Coltrane and Miles Davis, Chambers was nevertheless a pivotal contributor to the advancement of new concepts that redefined the predominant practices of jazz drumming, especially with regards to the improvisatory ensemble processes of the post-bop era and the emancipation of the drum set from its traditional role within the bebop rhythm section.

Beyond his unique musical concepts as a drummer and percussionist, Joe Chambers was also a conservatory-trained composer and contributed significant original compositions to the recording sessions he was involved in as a sideman and leader. In retrospect, the historical significance of his achievements as a drummer reached its apex during the 1960s. During this time, Chambers developed his unique style of post-bop drumming while working as a freelance drummer with some of the most highly regarded jazz musicians of the time—including Blue Note artists Wayne Shorter, Bobby Hutcherson, Joe Henderson, Sam Rivers and McCoy Tyner, and (last but not least) Chick Corea from the Atlantic label. Their contributions to the aesthetic amalgam of musical innovations combined elements of bebop, hard bop and modal jazz, and pushed for new musical territories that led to the vanguard explorations of the evolving avant-garde. The resulting recordings have become milestones of modern jazz, and strongly substantiate the historical significance of Joe Chambers and his contributions to the developments of jazz in the United States since the advent of bebop.



**Joe Chambers recording with Wayne Shorter for the album *Etcetera*, Blue Note, 1965. Joe Chambers, drums; Herbie Hancock, piano; Cecil McBee, bass; Wayne Shorter, saxophone.**

## Chapter 1: Fifty years and counting

Since his first professional engagements as a drummer in the early 1960s, the eventful career of Joe Chambers spans over a period of over fifty years and counting. His musical contributions extend far and beyond his work as a jazz drummer, ranging from his compositions that were recorded by some of the finest musicians in jazz, to his long-lasting teaching career in a number of America's most highly-regarded academic institutions and music programs. Against the backdrop of the enormous social changes, the 1960s aesthetically were a highly adventurous and historically revolutionary period for the developments of jazz at large and for the evolution of the rhythm section in particular, with the drum set at its core. For Chambers personally, this eventful decade was highlighted by his career breakthrough as a jazz drummer, and the subsequent rise to one of the most highly sought-after drummers particularly in the New York jazz scene. Chambers' signature style of drumming, centered on the continuous flow of percussive statements in response to and expansion of the surrounding musical texture, represents his very personal, unique approach to modern jazz drumming. Consequently, this work is intended to serve as a contribution to the ongoing study of post-bop drumming since the 1960s, seeking to specifically illuminate some of the most prominent concepts that define Joe Chambers' highly expressive, melodic and most importantly, "musical" style of drumming.

How Chambers implements his concepts, specifically how he incorporates melodic phrasing into his playing, and how the perception and manipulation of time and pulse define his concept of musical interactions are key points of this study. This is particularly valuable since his playing has not yet been discussed from an analytical perspective, particularly with regard to transcriptions, and few written accounts of his work have been published (the most prominent of note being the 1999 feature story by Ken Micaleff in *Modern Drummer* magazine, and John Murph's 2005 article in *JazzTimes*).

Subdivided into three main segments, this study provides an extended biographical portrait of Joe Chambers' career development in Chapter 1, highlighting his professional achievements since the 1960s. Chapter 1 is rounded up by an excursion into his teaching philosophy and a presentation of Chambers' critical observations regarding the business side of music, particularly the social and economic consequences of a changing infrastructure for the development of jazz. Chapter 2 offers an outline of the evolutionary trends that defined the developments of jazz from bebop to hard bop, and up to modal jazz and the post-bop aesthetics of the avant-garde.

How these developments have shaped and ultimately defined the role of the drummer within these currents from the tradition of the bebop model to modernity of the post-bop styles is the underlying theme of Chapter 2, particularly in regard to the actual drumming work of Joe Chambers, as exemplified in the extended music analysis of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. The study is concluded with Chapter 5, which presents a summary of the most significant results of the research. To establish a balanced perspective between Chambers' evaluations of historic currents and aesthetic developments that accompanied his career, ample space throughout this study is given to Joe Chambers' personal insights, historic recollections and aesthetic assessments. The majority of this information was obtained by the author himself in a series of interviews conducted with Joe Chambers between August 28 and August 31, 2013. The material gained from these personal conversations offers invaluable perspectives that prove fundamental for the substance and accuracy of the author's research, transcriptions and conclusions.

## In the beginning ...

When Joe Chambers was perhaps twelve years of age, he happened to be at the home of a close adolescent playmate whose older brother possessed a modest collection of jazz records—78 rpm vinyl, or what were commonly known in those seemingly ancient days as LPs (long playing records).

“I heard two particular musicians,” recalls Chambers. “I heard Max Roach and Clifford Brown. The music they were playing sounded to me like something from Mars and so I asked, ‘Jesus, what is this?’”

Then when young Chambers heard the music of another artist named Miles Davis, the mesmerized adolescent exclaimed, “Damn! This is the strangest shit!”

Chambers admits having been immediately attracted to this music, which was totally new to him. Max Roach and all the other musicians of this genre were not mainstream; they were not on television like so many of the familiar big band drummers of the day, who had endeared themselves to a wider audience; Buddy Rich and Gene Krupa, for example. Krupa quickly became Chambers’ first idol after seeing the popular drummer on television. Therefore, when Chambers heard the unique sounds of people like Davis, Roach, and Brown (among others) the future percussionist himself said that “something definitely connected; this is something I gotta find out about.” At this early age, Chambers was determined to initiate his lifelong “search” for what for him was this “new music.”

The superb artist, multi-instrumentalist, composer and educator Joe Chambers is a seminal figure of the musical explorations that successfully propelled the boldly innovative developments of what we know as modern jazz drumming during the 1960s. Chambers is firmly rooted in the musical conventions of the bebop tradition (i.e., an important innovative style of Black music characterized by a fast-tempo, instrumental virtuosity and improvisation created by artists like Dizzy Gillespie and

Charlie Parker during the early to mid-1940s.) Over the years, Chambers has presented a musical versatility and stylistic flexibility that reflects the transformational process bridging the gap between the evolution of the so-called “modern” drummer of the bebop style to the “progressive” and “conceptual” drumming of post-bop jazz.

As a pivotal contributor to this process, Chambers pushed and refined significantly the stylistic developments of percussive aesthetics. His efforts occurred at a moment while on the threshold between hard bop and avant-garde throughout a career spanning more than five decades. Across the many years of commendable productivity, Chambers aided in the advancement of new concepts that were putting forth new meaning to the predominant practices of jazz drumming, especially regarding the improvisatory ensemble processes of the post-bop era. This can be regarded as the inevitable emancipation of the drum set from its otherwise traditional and restrictive role within the bebop rhythm section.

## The formative years

When we pause to study Joe Chambers, the consummate musician and artist, we can almost see the form and structure of the classical symphony, written in four basic movements. We might well begin the observation by establishing a kind of dialogue between two contrasting themes, aggressive on the one side, and passive on the other. The formative years were indeed characterized by dramatic dissimilarities and polarity. Joseph Arthur Chambers was born June 25, 1942, in a dilapidated share-cropper cabin—there were no hospital facilities of any kind available for Black citizens during those horrid days of strictly-enforced segregation of the races—in a place called Stoneacre, Henrico County, Virginia.

Henrico County is one of America's oldest counties, having been officially established in 1611. Present-day Henrico County, as in the year of Chambers's birth, borders the state capital of Richmond. This is no mere coincidence; Interstate Route 95 runs through Stoneacre and Richmond, and much like the iconic Underground Railroad used by escaping Black slaves, I-95 easily directs the traveler following the path of the North Star as trustworthy guide during the nightmarish era of plantation slavery throughout the South: northward toward Wilmington, Philadelphia, New York and onward.

When Chambers was a mere two years of age, the family realized that there was absolutely no future in Henrico County and thus determined to abandon Virginia altogether, heading North like so many other hundreds of thousands of Blacks during the period of what was referred to as the second Great Migration.

The first Great Migration occurred between 1916 and 1930, when the nation witnessed more than a million Blacks leave the South for the North—an intense period of massive relocation, involving such push factors as dire economic despair and a truly vicious white racism in the South. The Second World War had a similar effect, and so in the 1940s an additional 1.6 million Black southerners are estimated to have left heading for the North as well as the West.

The family established a foothold in a then-booming, World War II-era industrial port on the Delaware River, the city of Chester, Pennsylvania, situated about 13 miles south from Philadelphia.

The bustling metropolitan area of Philly, while in some ways a stark contrast from Stoneacre, at the same time presented certain immediately recognizable similarities. There were clear patterns of rigid housing segregation and shamefully unequal funding of public schools. However, despite this hideous reality, the new area afforded the family any number of welcoming life-altering opportunities and unanticipated rewards—as Chester had most surely for so many other Black families that had made the trek out of the South. Settling in Chester marked the start of an exciting artistic transformation for Chambers' family. Although both parents harbored creative instincts—his mother was a writer and singer, his father, a writer—they somehow were not able to nurture these impulses fruitfully.

Nevertheless, the Chambers household was constantly awash in an eclectic music collection consisting of European symphonic music, jazz and contemporary rhythm-and-blues, thus expanding further the aspiring drummer's musical exposure. There was also an admirable demonstration of talent in the visual arts, dance, and writing on the part of all the siblings.

"I started playing music at a very early age; I always wanted to play music and wanted to find out what made this music," Chambers remarked many years later during a series of extensive personal interviews with Christian Schnorr.

Chambers gravitated toward drums, assembling an improvised drum set using various utensils from his mother's kitchen when he was merely five years old. Although he received occasional piano lessons from the neighborhood music teacher at different periods throughout the course of his childhood, along with all his siblings who did indeed pursue formal instruction, it was not until high school that Chambers began intensive training on drum and piano. He was a very active member of the school band and began serious study in music theory and composition.

Without doubt, it was the widely acclaimed quality of the overall music education program in the Philadelphia area during the mid-1950s that exerted such a positive influence in Chambers' musical development. Even if the reality of those industrial hubs around Philadelphia was one of naked, unadorned roughness and grit, in dramatic contrast stood a very fertile and welcoming environment allowing for the flowering and cultivation of hope and the creative arts. In Chambers' environment, there was an abundance of after-school cultural programs offering dance and painting lessons, puppetry arts and other crafts workshops, vocal and instrumental training; in the local high school there was an array of musical exposition: an award-winning (district-wide) marching band, jazz band, dance band, concert orchestra. Many young, gifted vocalists literally stunned the neighborhood during the annual spring concert as these youthful singers delivered powerful operatic arias and choruses, even at the junior high school level!

Joe Chambers also demonstrated exceptional athletic prowess. As a graduating senior in 1960, he was offered a lucrative football scholarship to attend Virginia State College, but he was not interested in playing American football. He decided simply to refuse the offer (to no one's great surprise). Instead he elected to continue developing his uncompromising love of music. He did this with unrivaled passion.

His first professional engagement as a drummer occurred in 1960, at the age of 18. He toured with the widely popular rhythm-and-blues artist Bobby Charles, whose major 1961 hit single was the song "Tossin' and Turnin'."

Following the successful Bobby Charles tour, Chambers began formal studies in theory and composition at the prestigious Philadelphia Conservatory of Music, later studying composition at the American University in Washington, D.C. An admittedly strong influential force in his decision to undertake serious study in composition and arranging was an older brother, Talib Rasul Hakeem, himself a classically-trained clarinetist and composer.

Truly, what an honest biographical portrait of Joe Chambers readily underscores is the holistic combination of delicate aesthetic characteristics and a specific hardiness of the socio-political realities of music that played such a crucial role in Chambers' early childhood, his later adolescence and young adulthood. This transformative period yielded in every conceivable fashion a determination to follow the guidance of that North Star leading to a solid and unwavering commitment to the often intoxicating world of music in general and to the focused specialization in the jazz idiom in particular.

## Summary: Edifying cornerstones of style and concept

Five fundamental characteristics emerged from the combination of interview material and transcriptions that represent the cornerstones of Joe Chambers's virtuoso drumming. What emerges is a multi-faceted and accomplished musician whose musical contributions, particularly regarding the art of jazz drumming, aided enormously in pushing the envelope beyond limits in order to preserve the tradition of jazz as one of America's most original, most esteemed cultural expressions.

These are those stellar characteristics that speak resoundingly to what Joe Chambers imparts via his artistry.

1. **Musicality:** Chambers's playing strongly reflects a particular composition and the interactions of its harmonic and rhythmic signature.
2. **Melodic phrasing:** often simultaneously, his cymbal-driven comping approach embodies a reflection, ornamentation or counterpart to a given melodic shape, the textural density and dynamic arch of a soloist or the direction of the ensemble.
3. **Playing and sustaining pulse, not time:** Chambers's playing has completely absorbed the concept of an elastic pulse as opposed to playing time. Depending upon the esthetic direction of a piece, the pulse is flexible like a rubber band that can be manipulated, pushed, pulled or interpreted in a true or quasi-rubato style. Sustaining pulse while superimposing phrases of conflicting accent schemes over the existing time signature or phrasing in melodic shapes according to the dramatic flow are trademarks of his style.
4. **Playing in a circle:** As adapted by many of the leading drummers of the post-bebop generation, this concept is an integral part of playing pulsating music. Chambers's drumming is fundamentally based on this conceptual approach of combining small motifs into larger phrases, which almost literally move around in a circular motion between all parts of the drum set. The continuous development of theme and variation, repetition and improvisation are omnipresent components here, and the independence as well as the interdependence of all limbs characterizes this approach.
5. **The study of the rhythms of the hemisphere:** for Chambers, learning and interpreting world rhythms, specifically Latin rhythms, is an integral part of percussive training and aesthetics. This relates not only to the study of rhythms, but also it is linked with the social history out of which these rhythms and the music they embedded in general.



## Chapter 9: Interview with Joe Chambers.

Narrator: Christian Schnorr, Interviewed on August 28, 29, 30 and 31, 2013, Wilmington, NC

**CS:** What made you leave New York and move to Wilmington, NC, and what are the differences between living in the city for many years, and now down here?

**JC:** As you get older, of course, you want it to be a little easier. When I came down here and I worked and got that position, and I had the money, the living is easier, much easier, almost like the song says: “summertime and the livin’ is easy.” And the problem with New York always has been—but you don’t realize until you get out of it when you get older—New York is too vertical; it’s a vertical city. They have nowhere to go. The only place they have is up, higher and higher. I envision New York—you see those sci-fi movies where they’re traveling in the air? That’s what New York’s going to be. It’s gonna be like that. They have nowhere to go but up; there’s no space on the ground. Down here it’s horizontal. New York is vertical, man. It’s vertical and it’s congested, which is a result of a neurosis there, because you’re fighting for your space all the time. On the ground, you’re fighting for your space, literally. New York is too expensive. When you’re young, it doesn’t matter, you know.

Of course, there’s a lot going on there. There’s nothing going on over here (Wilmington, NC). They have stuff, but still, you got space. It’s easier, you can relax. That’s the difference, that’s a major difference. So, I have a house down here, my wife and me. When the job ended, I said, “Well you know, let’s relax for a minute.” I’m getting a little antsy, getting to feel like I want to leave here. I have some idea; I’m not going back to New York. New York is too expensive. What is going on in the large cities in the United States is gentrification and moving poor people out. For example, there are people who have lived in buildings, apartments for twenty, thirty years in New York City. All of a sudden, the owner of that particular building decides to turn the apartments into co-ops. Not only in the city of New York, but all the major cities, Chicago, San Francisco, LA, Philly. Apartments are going for a million dollars, a million and a half. We sold our apartment just before we came down here for half a million. So in other words, when the owner of the building says, “OK, I’m going to go co-op,” they give the existing tenant their first choice. Now, most of these people don’t have a million dollars. They cannot put you out in New York, but they can move you. They’re moving them to places like Rockaway, out of the cities to, that’s out in the suburbs, Queens. This is the trend in all this: make it unaffordable for poor people. They turn these apartments into co-ops and they’re selling them for millions of dollars. This is the trend, basically. I mean, there’s always people, medium poor people, there’s always low income people, and there’s gonna be that, everywhere. They’re making it so it’s unaffordable for them to live there. You’ve heard of these small apartments, kitchenettes, one room, they’re going for like fifteen hundred a month, that’s the trend. So when I wanted some excitement, gonna go hear some music, see some theater, I can just take a plane, it takes an hour.

**CS:** When you first came to New York, what was the vibe then?

**JC:** When I came to New York, we’re talking about 1963. I was twenty-one years old. I was just excited, it didn’t matter, I was just excited to be there. I lived in Washington DC for 3 years. I got out of high school in 1960. I was raised outside Philadelphia, a school in Chester. At that time, Chester had a very good school. The arts were premier; the education was tremendous in Chester that I had. It was a time when the great emphasis on the arts, music, dance—secondary schools had everything. And the trend was what they called “rent an instrument.” You couldn’t afford an instrument; you could rent an instrument on a monthly basis. All the little kids were getting instruments. They weren’t gonna play them, but it was available to them. My thing was athletics and music. I played ball, football, American football, track, running, basketball, and music. We had school bands in grade school, middle school and high school. All kinds of bands, marching band, concert band, jazz band, that was what was going on, that was the emphasis, and I took advantage of it.

When I got out of high school, when I graduated in 1960, I was a good enough athlete that I could have gone on an athletic scholarship to Virginia University. I was already playing in bands in school, rhythm and blues and that type of stuff. And the coach was ready to get me hooked up with Virginia University as a ball player. I was actually done, I didn't wanna play anymore ball. But the music was pulling me you know, I wanted to find out about the music. I went to the Philadelphia Conservatory for one year, then moved to Washington DC and I stayed there. Well, actually I went on the road with a rhythm and blues group, and landed in DC, liked DC, and I stayed there from '60 to '63. Worked at one place called the Bohemian Caverns, which still exists, worked there six nights a week, and I studied composition at American University. I was always interested in that, that's like my thing.

In DC, I met a lot of people. You have to understand the times, you know, if you're dealing with "jazz" per se. Those were good times for jazz, matter of fact excellent times, even though with the encroachment of rock 'n' roll, the establishment of "rock." Those were good times.

The '50s and '60s were really good times for jazz. Jazz was very visible. You used to see it on TV. The TV shows, the late night shows, they would have Steve Allen; we're talking about Steve Allen, Jack Parr. They were way before these people they have now; you know the late night TV. They would have jazz groups on there; Art Blakey and the Messengers, Benny Golson. You see jazz groups. One thing that is extremely important as to the visibility of jazz was the jukebox industry. The jukebox industry, you know what that is, you know what a jukebox is? I have to ask a young person.

One of my duties here as a so-called distinguished professor, well I taught privately, I had ensembles, and I taught history, so-called jazz history. I'm a big history person. History is my thing. Matter of fact, I'm gonna actually do a history of jazz book. But my emphasis in jazz history is on the social history of it, which none of the books cover. This guy Gridley, he has the monopoly, but what can I say until I get a book out. One thing in understanding the so-called jazz history. You see, as opposed to now, jazz is not that visible, comparatively speaking; it's not visible like it used to be.

One of the primary reasons for the great visibility of jazz in '50s and early '60s was the jukebox industry. The jukebox industry was actually controlled by the mob; the mob liked jazz. The jukebox industry was very important for the great visibility of jazz until early '60s. It was paramount for the direction of jazz, and it was controlled by the mob. When I was a teenager in mid- to late 1950s, we would go to sandwich shops in Philly and eat the steaks. Every table would have a jukebox on it. You would have a big jukebox, and every table would have a jukebox. Those jukeboxes, not only were they filled with the current rhythm-and-blues, it was filled with jazz, filled with jazz. Everybody: Miles, Horace Silver, everything. They had jazz on the jukebox.

The record company Blue Note—the founders were two Germans, Alfred Lion and Frank Wolf—they were basically blues-oriented people. They loved jazz. When they started out, they started recording Meade Lux Lewis, the stride pianist, Albert Ammons. Every major black jazz musician recorded for Blue Note at one time or another. Every major one. Believe it. Now, here's the story with them. They didn't care really what you played, as long as you put something on the program they could pull out and put on the jukebox.

