Jazz Legend Randy Weston on His Life and Celebration of "African Rhythms"

by

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The following is an interview conducted by Amy Goodman (Democracy Now!, Democracynow.org) of Randy Weston on February 20, 2012 on the stage of the Borough of Manhattan Community College Performing Arts Center (BMCC Tribeca Performing Arts Center) in Manhattan, New York before his Saturday night performance. The video and audio of this interview is available at www.Democracynow.org.

Amy Goodman (www.democracynow.org) is the host and executive producer of Democracy Now!, a national, daily, independent, award-winning news program airing on over 1,100 public television and radio stations worldwide. She is the first journalist to receive the *Right Livelihood Award*, widely known as the 'Alternative Nobel Prize' for "developing an innovative model of truly independent grassroots political journalism that brings to millions of people the alternative voices that are often excluded by the mainstream media." She is the first co-recipient of the Park Center for Independent Media's *Izzy Award*, she writes a weekly column (also produced as an audio podcast) syndicated by King Features, for which she was recognized in 2007 with the *James Aronson Award for Social Justice Reporting*.

Goodman has also received the American Women in Radio and Television Gracie Award; the Paley Center for Media's *She's Made It* Award; the *Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship*. the *George Polk Award*, *Robert F. Kennedy Prize for International Reporting*, the *Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia Award*, awards from the Associated Press, United Press International, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Project Censored, first *Communication for Peace Award* from the World Association for Christian Communication, and she has been honored by the National Council of Teachers of English with the *George Orwell Award* for Distinguished Contribution to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language.

Amy Goodman: Today, in a Black History Month special, we spend the hour with the legendary pianist and composer Randy Weston. For the past six decades, Weston has been a pioneering jazz musician, incorporating the vast rhythmic heritage of Africa. The poet Langston Hughes once wrote, quote, "When Randy Weston plays, a combination of strength and gentleness, virility and velvet, emerges from the keys in an ebb and flow of sound seemingly as natural as the waves of the sea." Randy Weston's most famous compositions include "Little Niles", "Blue Moses," and this tune, "Hi-Fly."

Randy Weston's 1960 recording, *Uhuru Afrika*, was a landmark recording that celebrated the independence movements in Africa and the influence of traditional African music on jazz. The record, which began with a freedom poem written by Langston Hughes, would later be banned by the South African apartheid regime along with albums by Max Roach and Lena Horne.

In 1961, Randy Weston visited Africa for the first time as part of a delegation that also featured Nina Simone. The trip would transform Weston's life and lead him to eventually move to Africa in 1967.

In 2001, he was named a Jazz Master by the National Endowment for the Arts. It's considered to be the nation's highest honor in jazz. Now 85 years old, Randy Weston continues to tour the world. In 2002, he performed at the inauguration of the New Library of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt. In 2010, Weston played at the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Senegal's founding as an independent republic.

Also in 2010, Duke University Press published *African Rhythms: The Autobiography of Randy Weston*. The book's cover says it was composed by Randy Weston and arranged by Willard Jenkins.

On Saturday, Randy Weston will lead his African Rhythms Orchestra at a concert at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center here in New York at the Borough of Manhattan Community College to celebrate James Reese Europe & the Harlem Hellfighters.

Last week, I sat down with Randy Weston at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center. I began by asking him to talk about his parents.

Randy Weston: My dad was born in Panama. He lived seven years in Cuba. And he came to Brooklyn and settled in Brooklyn. My mother came from Virginia, a small town called Meredithville. And she came to New York, and they got together to produce Randy Weston.

And I grew up in a very powerful, spiritual, cultural area in Brooklyn, what they call Bedford-Stuyvesant, you see. We had to be in the Black church every Sunday. That was required. Everybody had to take art. You had to take piano or trumpet or violin or dance. That was in the neighborhood.

And economically, everybody didn't have money. But culture, it was so wonderful. We had the blues bands on the corner. We had the calypso. We had the big band rehearsals during the day.

And my dad gave me two things. He was very influential. He said, number one, "My son, you are an African born in America. Therefore, you have to study the history of Africa, when Africa had its great civilizations, before colonialism, before slavery." So, because of my dad—

Amy Goodman: "You are an African born in America."

Randy Weston: Yes. Yeah, he was very clear about that, you see. To know your history, because, he says, "You're only going to get the history after colonialism and after slavery." So I had to go to the museums. I used to read about the great empires of Egypt, of Songhai, of Ghana. And my dad had maps on the wall, of African kings and queens, and books. In addition, he made sure I took piano lessons, because I was six foot at 12 years old.

Amy Goodman: Six-foot tall at 12 years old.

Randy Weston: And in those days, you know, I was a giant, right? I wanted to play basketball or football. My father made me take piano lessons. So my dad gave me Africa, he gave me music. My mom gave me the Black church. But the two of them, they kept me very spiritual. And I always saw the similarities between African-American culture coming out of Virginia—my mother—my African-Caribbean father coming out of Panama and Jamaica. So that's how I grew up. And the whole neighborhood was full of wonderful, wonderful people, great leaders and great artists, a lot of inspiration.

Amy Goodman: Marcus Garvey—what role did he play, and, especially for young people today, who he was?

Randy Weston: He was a super, super giant. You see, during that time—I'm talking about '30s, '40s, '50s—we produced some real giants, and he was certainly one. His philosophy, Africa is our ancestral home. We were taken away. And those of us who were taken away, we have to give back. We have to rebuild our motherland, which is Africa. And all humanity comes out of Africa anyhow. So, he was way ahead of his time. And he had the biggest organization of African people up until today. There was no—no computers, no airplanes. He traveled. He traveled all through the States. He went to Europe. He went to the Caribbean. So he was a great philosopher.

Amy Goodman: The United Negro Improvement Association.

Randy Weston: Exactly. And he gave that pride to our people, because our history was taken away. And, you know, your history of your ancestors is your foundation. So he gave us that. So he was a very, very important man. And my father loved Marcus Garvey. So we would have books on Marcus Garvey in the house—J.A. Rogers, all these great people, Hansbury, yes.

Amy Goodman: So you started with classical music—

Randy Weston: Yes.

Amy Goodman: —but didn't like it too much.

Randy Weston: Well, because it didn't swing, you know? [inaudible] I had a great piano teacher. God bless her. She was a sweetheart. Fifty cents a lesson. Hit my hand with a ruler when I made a mistake, and I was always making a mistake, because I had long legs and big feet. I didn't want to practice, you know. But she gave me that foundation. Then, after three years, she told my father, "Forget it. Your son will never play the piano." And I don't blame her. In fact, and I got her picture in the book, because she gave me that foundation, of that—of the women of that time, how they had that dignity and pride and class, you know, and give you those music lessons and want to make sure that you knew—played those lessons.

Amy Goodman: But your father wouldn't give up.

Randy Weston: No way. He got another teacher, a guy named Professor Atwell, and he knew a few popular songs. So he taught me the classic tradition of piano, but also a few popular songs. And that's how I got into start to learn to play the piano.

Amy Goodman: So you're playing music, and then World War II.

Randy Weston: Yeah, yeah. Well, World War II, I was drafted in the Army, spent three years in the Army. They have little local bands. But even before World War II, we had small local bands in Brooklyn, you know? And we play everything from polkas to marriages, you name it, you know? Little small groups, people like the great Ray Copeland, people like Cecil Payne, all these musicians. And we had the great Max Roach in Brooklyn. And a lot of giants lived in Brooklyn. Eubie Blake lived in Brooklyn. So, the world—and we had Black musicians' club at that time, you see. So we can go to this club as kids and see the older musicians. They'd be playing cards, or they have a blackboard. They say, "Son, you're going to play over there. Make sure you get $2, not $1." So we had that respect and love for the ancestors.

Amy Goodman: So who were you watching then? Who were you listening to?

Randy Weston: Oh, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, you know, Louis Armstrong, Art Tatum, Earl Hines.

Amy Goodman: Did you meet Louis Armstrong?

Randy Weston: Yes, I shook his hand. That was enough. I shook his hand in Oklahoma City when I made my first tour with a rhythm-and-blues band, Bullmoose Jackson. And he was in the hotel room. He said, "Weston, you want to meet Louis Armstrong?" "Of course I want to meet the king, you know." So, he was in the room, and I shook his hand. And that was it. But a handshake I'll never forget.

Amy Goodman: Count Basie.

Randy Weston: Count Basie. Count Basie—I used to play opposite Count Basie at Birdland when I started playing trio. I loved Basie because of his touch, his class, and his love of the blues, because Basie played all kind of blues. And I finally met him at a festival in Holland, of all places. And I used to try to play like Count Basie. So when I saw him, I said, "Count, I just want you to know how much I love you and how much you gave me on the piano." He said, "Oh, man, don't talk like that." But Basie was very, very important.

Amy Goodman: And what about Thelonious Monk, Randy?

Randy Weston: Thelonious Monk, the Magic Man. Thelonious Monk became in my life because of my love for Coleman Hawkins. Coleman Hawkins was my idol. Coleman Hawkins go back to the Fletcher Henderson days, in the early '20s, you know, all the way up to the first one to record Dizzy, the first one to record Monk, the first one to record Miles Davis—was Coleman Hawkins.

So I used to go to 52nd Street all the time in those days. You can go in these great clubs, one next to each other. All the masters of the music—Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, you name it, you know? And I went one night to hear Coleman Hawkins, and he had this guy playing the piano. And what he was playing, I didn't understand what he was playing. I said, you know, "I don't know what he's doing with this guy, you know? I can play more piano than this guy, you know." But I went back, and I discovered the genius of Monk, fell in love with his music, and spent almost three years just hanging out with Monk, picking him up, taking him to Brooklyn, taking him to my father's house. My dad had a restaurant at that time.

Amy Goodman: Trios?

Randy Weston: Yeah, called Trios. We were open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We had the hippest jukebox in the world. On the jukebox, we had everybody from Louis Jordan to Duke Ellington to Nat King Cole to Sarah Vaughan; on the other side, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Darius Milhaud. So musicians would come all night long and argue: who is better, Coleman Hawkins or Lester Young? So, culturally, it was an incredible period, because I spent time, I listened to our royalty of this music.

Amy Goodman: The legendary jazz musician Randy Weston, as we continue this Black History Month special.

[break]

Amy Goodman: Randy Weston playing "Hi-Fly," his song about being six-eight. This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org, *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman, as we return to my conversation as we sat at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center in Lower Manhattan with the legendary jazz pianist and composer Randy Weston. After serving in a segregated Army unit during World War II, he returned to his home in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. He later moved to the Berkshires in western Massachusetts, a decision that changed his life.

Randy Weston: After we came out of the Army, the powers that be put the heroin into the Black community. And they always picked the artists for drugs, always, because the artists influenced the people, you know. And it was spread throughout the neighborhood. And I wanted to get away. And luckily, I had a good friend of mine; he was a semi-professional basketball player. His name was Lefty Morris. And he played with a team up in Lenox, Mass. He said, "Randy," he said, "you go up to the Berkshires. Take any kind of job," he said, "because it's full of music. The Boston Symphony is there during the summer, chamber music. People love music." So that's what I did. I went up there. I took—I was washing dishes, doing everything.

Amy Goodman: And you were able to kick the habit totally there?

Randy Weston: I'm sorry?

Amy Goodman: You were able to kick the habit totally?

Randy Weston: Yeah, yeah, because I needed a change of atmosphere, you see. So I was very blessed. I met great people. I met everybody from Lukas Foss to Leonard Bernstein. And I played with the—some of the members of the Symphony Orchestra, because by that time they encouraged me, when I wasn't working in the kitchen, and I became a breakfast cook after a while.

Amy Goodman: This is at the Music Inn?

Randy Weston: Yeah, at the Music Inn. And they heard me play the piano. And that's when I decided—

Amy Goodman: So you were there, hired as a dishwasher.

Randy Weston: As a breakfast cook, actually. I was a dishwasher at the resort before the Music Inn, which was called Seven Hills.

Amy Goodman: And the folks that ran either Seven Hills or Music Inn heard you when they were just coming down late at night?

Randy Weston: Exactly. In both places, actually. But Music Inn was important because Professor Marshall Stearns, he was starting his series of lectures about the history of African-American music. So because of Marshall, he brought people like Mahalia Jackson, like Dan Burleigh, like Duke Ellington, like Butterfly McQueen, Billy Taylor, Candido, Olatunji. He had a global concept of African culture. I met John Lee Hooker because of Marshall Stearns—Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry. So I saw the whole connection. Dr. Willis James from Spelman College, he specialized in field cry hollers. So I understood more about the impact of African civilization on world civilization.

Amy Goodman: Can you play a little, what inspired you at that time, what you were playing at that time?

Randy Weston: I was thinking about James Reese Europe, and—this great, great man who's been forgotten about in our history, you know?

Amy Goodman: James Reese Europe.

Randy Weston: Yeah, yeah, phenomenal individual.

Amy Goodman: Born in the 19th century.

Randy Weston: Exactly. Mobile, Alabama. He was a pianist, composer, from Washington to New York, organized what they called the Clef Club. At that time, everything was segregated. He formed the first Black union. He had a hotel in the 50s. It was called the Clef Club. Entertainers could come there. He had seven orchestras, that you could play any kind of music in these orchestras, all to musicians. Carnegie Hall 1912, with 125 musicians, with 10 pianos. And he said—this is before the word "jazz." The word "jazz" didn't happen 'til 1915. Before then, it was just Black music, or African-American music or African music.

Then, in addition to that, he joined the U.S. Army, became a lieutenant, got 60 musicians, went to Puerto Rico, got some more musicians, went to France. They were the first ones to play this music. And the French had never heard this music before. You see, because during the war, the French soldiers and the American soldiers were gassed by the Germans, so they had these cultural, spiritual, therapeutic places in France, you know, where you get the thermal water and whatnot. So, James Reese Europe played 25 cities in France after the First World War.

Amy Goodman: When he played in Carnegie Hall—

Randy Weston: Yeah.

Amy Goodman: —was it an integrated orchestra?

Randy Weston: No, no. He was strictly Black culture. He said, "We have a culture, African people."

Amy Goodman: Can you play a little that inspires you?

Randy Weston: Yeah. I'm going to play a piece—I just thought about it. It's called "In Memory Of." [playing "In Memory Of"]

Amy Goodman: I want to get to you moving to Africa. But before that, Langston Hughes. Talk about meeting him and—

Randy Weston: Wow, wow.

Amy Goodman: —how he inspired you and what you did together.

Randy Weston: So many ways. Again, Marshall Stearns.

Amy Goodman: Marshall Stearns, the—

Randy Weston: Yeah.

Amy Goodman: —White professor.

Randy Weston: Yeah, yeah.

Amy Goodman: Western Mass.

Randy Weston: Exactly. He brought Langston Hughes up to the Berkshires to the Music Inn. And I met Langston—automatic connection between the two—and I was very young. I wasn't a professional pianist now. I'm playing at night, and I'm cooking during the day, but I wasn't a professional musician. But to make a long story short, he knew my interest in Africa, knew my interest in African culture. So as it turned out, in 1961, the very first summit of African Americans going to Africa was in Nigeria. And Langston was part of that movement.

And then, later on, when the great Melba Liston, whom we did the "Freedom Africa Suite," I asked Langston would he come and write a freedom poem for me, because the African countries were just getting their independence in 1960. Seventeen African countries got their independence in 1960. So I wanted to create a work of music celebrating this freedom of Africa. So Langston wrote a freedom poem for me, and also he wrote the words, a song I call "African Lady." That song was dedicated to our mothers, our sisters, those African women who were always in the background, who always supported us, you see. And then, finally, we did—

Amy Goodman: Can you play a little?

Randy Weston: Oh, yeah. Oh, you mean, which one? "African Lady"? Sure. [playing "African Lady"]

Amy Goodman: You mentioned the freedom poem of Langston Hughes. Do you remember it?

Randy Weston: Well, it's like a—you know, what we did was this. As a boy, I was always upset with Tarzan movies, you know, because the image of African people in Hollywood was rather hard. That's putting it mildly. The image, you know. And I was always upset with what they called African languages, like African people have no language, you know? So the freedom poem, I wanted to put the freedom poem in an African language, so when people hear the music, they realize the beauty of African languages and that language began in Africa in the first place. OK? So I went to Langston, and Langston—the freedom poem was like "Afrika Uhuru," which means "freedom." Actually, my memory—

Amy Goodman: "Africa, where the great Congo flows!"

Randy Weston: "Where the great Congo flows!" "Afrika Uhuru." And "Uhuru" is Kiswahili. And I—so, I went to the United Nations. I talked to a number of diplomats at that time. I said, how could I use one African language? There's so many languages in Africa. How could I choose one? So the general consensus was, use Kiswahili. So I had this guy, his name was Tuntemeke Sanga from Tanzania—Tanganyika at that particular time. And he was a scholar of Swahili. So what he did, he took Langston's poem from English to Kiswahili. And his diction and his voice was so wonderful, we used him on the recording of *Uhuru Afrika*.

[excerpt of *Uhuru Afrika*]

Amy Goodman: Randy Weston, talk about the making of *Uhuru Afrika*, one of the great albums that you're known for.

Randy Weston: Well, Melba Liston, truly one of the greatest arrangers in the history of our music, without question.

Amy Goodman: She had worked with Dizzy Gillespie.

Randy Weston: Yes, she worked with Dizzy. I heard her with Dizzy, playing trombone, heard her arrangement of "My Reverie." And the arrangement was—

Amy Goodman: She played trombone.

Randy Weston: Yeah, she was—

Amy Goodman: Now this is rare.

Randy Weston: —a great trombonist. I know. She's the only woman I heard play a trombone. And she's with Dizzy's orchestra at Birdland. I was there this night, and she's got this big sound. I said, I never heard a woman playing trombone before.

Amy Goodman: What year is this?

Randy Weston: This had to be early '50s, early '50s, because we collaborated in '58 for the first time. So when she came off the bandstand, I said, I've got to meet this lady. You know, I shook her hand—like electricity between us. So, as it turned out, she moved to New York. She was originally from Kansas City, lived in Los Angeles. And she, like Mary Lou Williams—Mary Lou was living in Harlem. So they knew each other. These are two queens of music, these two, you know. So, I got together with her, and we had the same feeling.

You see, artistically, I guess Paul Robeson said it best: an artist is responsible to fight for freedom. An artist is responsible to change society. That's how Paul put it, very great. Not only do you have to be good at your craft, but you have to make a contribution to society, you know. And what better contribution than we make to the African people, because they're put on the bottom of the human scale, you know? No education, we've contributed nothing, blah blah blah blah.

So, I wanted to do this suite, African suite, and it was in four movements. The first movement was called "Uhuru Kwanza," which in Kiswahili means "Freedom First." The second movement was called "African Lady." The third movement was called "Bantu." And the fourth movement was named "Kucheza Blues." Where in the world recognizes the contribution of Africa to civilization, especially in art and music? We're going to celebrate. We're going to place the music in Fiji and in Brazil and Congo. We'll have a big world celebration.

So, Melba, thanks to her, she got some of the great musicians in the orchestra, incredible musicians. Trumpet section: Freddie Hubbard, Richard Williams, Benny Bailey, Clark Terry. Trombone section: Slide Hampton, Jimmy Cleveland, Quentin Jackson. Julius Watkins on French horn. Saxophone section: Yusef Lateef, Sahib Shihab, Cecil Payne, Gigi Gryce, Jerome Richardson, OK? Kenny Burrell, guitar. Les Spann on guitar and also flute. Now, the rhythm section was powerful. Ron Carter on bass. George Duvivier on bass. Percussion: Candido, Armando Peraza—

Amy Goodman: Candido, the Cuban musician.

Randy Weston: Yeah, him and Armando Peraza, the great bongo player from Cuba. Olatunji from Nigeria. We had Charlie Persip coming out of upper Massachusetts. You know, but the whole idea—and we had two singers: Al Minns and Leon James. And Max Roach played marimba.

Amy Goodman: Can you play some more?

Randy Weston: Yeah, sure. Which one do you want to hear?

Amy Goodman: You choose.

Randy Weston: OK. This is "Kucheza Blues," the last movement of *Uhuru*. [playing "Kucheza Blues"]

Amy Goodman: 1960, you finish *Uhuru Afrika*. We're talking about—this is after Rosa Parks sits down on the bus, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, also Africa, what is happening throughout the countries in Africa, the independence movements.

Randy Weston: Sure.

Amy Goodman: You want to get this produced, this album. Do you have trouble?

Randy Weston: Yeah, because at that time, you know, the whole idea is separation, separating our people, to say Africa has no history, so don't look back. But see, I had a great mother and father, because that generation, they only told you a few words. And my father always said, he said, "They tell you 'don't look back.'" He said, "Always look back." So what he meant is that my ancient ancestors go back to the great civilizations of Egypt and Songhai and Ghana. He said, "We come from royalty." You see, I was so lucky. That was with my dad, you see? So, for me, it's always been that way of thinking. Who was Louis Armstrong's grandmother and his grandfather? Where did that music come from? So I had to go to Africa to understand that music was created in Africa. And music was created from the universe, because our ancient ancestors, they knew that music came from the universe. It was the Creator's way of giving the people on earth some healing, some beauty—music, you see. So, you know, I got all that incredible history, but it came from Mom and Pop, remembering certain things that they told me.

Amy Goodman: Can you talk a little about *African Cookbook* and how you came to make that album?

Randy Weston: Well, again, that was during my period of wanting to write music about Africa, and I found out—

Amy Goodman: Before you moved there?

Randy Weston: Yeah, yeah, absolutely, yeah. I found out that the—I heard the African six-eight rhythm, you know. And when I found out that rhythm—

Amy Goodman: What does that mean?

Randy Weston: One, two, three, four, five, six, one, two, three, four, five, six. So that rhythm, you can dance if you're two years old or if you're 90. OK? So that rhythm, I wanted to have that rhythm, which represents the southern part of Africa. [plays in 6/8] So I wanted to do that. I wanted the melody to represent the northern part of Africa. [plays northern African melody] So the melody would represent the north, you see. So that's how it was. And we had—I had a great group. The great Mr. Big Black, one of our greatest, greatest percussionists, came originally from the South, South Carolina, close to the Geechee people, the people outside of South Carolina, very close to Africa. And Bill Wood was on bass. And that's how I created *African Cookbook*. And it was partly named for Booker Ervin, too, because he was such a great saxophonist, and sometimes he would play so good, we would say, "Cook, Book! Cook!" You know. So it was a combination of those things at the time.

Amy Goodman: Legendary jazz musician, Randy Weston, here on *Democracy Now!*

[break]

Amy Goodman: This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org, *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman, as we continue with the great Jazz Master, Randy Weston, as we sat together on the stage of the Tribeca Performing Arts Center, where he's performing on Saturday night.

Amy Goodman: So you go to Africa, 1961?

Randy Weston: Yes.

Amy Goodman: Where did you go?

Randy Weston: Nigeria, yeah. There were 29 of us, the first pilgrimage to go home to the motherland. And some of the people were Geoffrey Holder, Brock Peters, myself, eight members of Lionel Hampton's band, Natalie Hinderas, great concert pianist.

Amy Goodman: You were on a State Department tour.

Randy Weston: No, this wasn't the State Department.

Amy Goodman: No.

Randy Weston: No, no. This was an organization called the American Society of African Culture. And they used to bring African artists to New York, Ethiopian painters, singers from Nigeria. So they already had that organization. And they had a base in Lagos. So we—I had Al Minns and Leon James, two of the great jazz dancers from the Savoy Ballroom. Dr. Willis James was there. Dr. Horace Bond was there. So there were 29. Nina Simone was there, Ahmed Abdul-Malik—

Amy Goodman: Nina Simone was there.

Randy Weston: Yeah. We all—

Amy Goodman: You knew Nina Simone well.

Randy Weston: We all went together. Yeah. And we spent 10 wonderful days to see what was the relationship of African-American culture and African-Nigerian culture. So we'd have two jazz dancers on this side of the stage, have some traditional dancers on this side of the stage, because we wanted to know where these rhythms come from. And they all come from Africa, all come from Africa, you know. And so, I would hang out at night in the clubs. That's where I met the great Bobby Benson. Bobby Benson owned a club called the Caban Bamboo in Lagos. He played incredible guitar, and he also was a drummer. And because of him, I'd be there every night, and I heard all the young West African musicians. And I played with Fela in 1963, when he played trumpet.

Amy Goodman: Fela Kuti.

Randy Weston: Yeah.

Amy Goodman: Nigeria.

Randy Weston: Yeah, Nigeria in the '60s, before he played saxophone, you see. And so, I came in contact, but what was more important, on the weekend, he would bring the traditional people from Nigeria. It was my first live contact with African traditional music. And when you hear the traditional music of Africa, you go to school, for they do things with music we cannot do. Why? Because their music captured the spirit of the continent itself. And the continent itself was swinging before man ever arrived, you know. You watch the way the crocodiles and the elephants—everything is in rhythm. Everything is in rhythm. The birds, everything is in rhythm. So early man listened to the nature of Mother Africa, and that's the foundation of world music, you see. So it was a wonderful trip, because it was my first introduction to Africa.

And when we arrived about 11:00 at night, myself and Geoffrey Holder and Brock Peters, we were the tallest of the group. And they must have had about 50 African drummers, and we smelled that air of the continent, and I said, "Wow! My ancestors were taken away from Africa in slavery. And how blessed we are we're coming back to Africa in an airplane, and we hear all these drums, you know." So some of us kissed the ground, yeah, because we know that's our ancestral home, yeah.

Amy Goodman: Randy Weston, so you've taken us through your first journey in Africa. You come back home, and you decide to fight discrimination against Black musicians, African-American musicians.

Randy Weston: Yes, yeah.

Amy Goodman: Talk about forming this organization.

Randy Weston: Well, it was Ray Bryant, the great pianist. We had Louis Brown, the saxophonist. Nadi Qamar, he played piano and also kalimba, African music. We had John Handy and Sadik Hakim. And we had a three-day conference at the Reverend Weston's church in Harlem, three days. And the whole idea, we were the first ones to get anti-discrimination clauses in union contracts, because you have to remember, during the time of James Reese Europe, it was separate unions, completely separate, you see. James was the first one to organize African-American musicians, and we had musicians' clubs in Brooklyn, Harlem. The last one now is in Buffalo, New York, of all places. It's called the Last Musicians Colored Club; it's called, in Buffalo, yeah. So, we had a three-day conference. And we had the women come and cook all the food. So we invited A. Philip Randolph.

Amy Goodman: A. Philip Randolph—

Randy Weston: Yes.

Amy Goodman: —the organizer of the Sleeping Car Porters.

Randy Weston: Exactly.

Amy Goodman: The organizer of the—what? 1963 March on Washington?

Randy Weston: Exactly.

Amy Goodman: Was this the same time?

Randy Weston: The same time. This was 1960 or '61, one of the two. And he came, and he spoke to us about about labor conditions, what we can do to better our rights as musicians. It was hard to get gigs. Racism was as usual, you know. And on the second day, we had Professor John Henrik Clarke. And John Henrik Clarke told us our history as an African people, because you have to know your history, you have to know Africa when Africa was great, because you're not going to get it in the school system, and you're not going to get it in Hollywood. OK? So we had a three-day conference, and we formed the organization. But, you know, we were frustrated musicians. I'm not an organizer. But we kept together one year. We invited recording companies. We tried to help musicians, tried to help these great musicians. We were working in clubs with terrible conditions, no dressing rooms. You see people like Monk, like Dexter Gordon, these giants, working in clubs with no place to even change their clothes, you see.

Amy Goodman: Very different from White musicians?

Randy Weston: Yeah, you see. Well, sometimes White musicians have the same conditions, but they could go back home.

Amy Goodman: Right before you move to Africa, your now-close friend Langston Hughes dies.

Randy Weston: Yes.

Amy Goodman: He requests, when he was still alive, that you would perform at his funeral.

Randy Weston: Exactly.

Amy Goodman: What did you perform?

Randy Weston: All blues. Langston's secretary called me on the phone. He said, "Langston has passed away, and he wants you to play his funeral." I said, "What?" With a trio. OK? I knew Langston loved the blues with a passion. So we got to the funeral home, and Langston is laying in the coffin, you know, and we were on this side. And about 200 people. Dr. Ralph Bunche was there. Lena Horne was there.

Amy Goodman: Dr. Ralph Bunche of the United Nations.

Randy Weston: Yes, yeah. Lena Horne was there. You know, all the heavyweights. Arna Bontemps was there. So, he said, "You start it." So what I did was I played one hour of blues for Langston. And he was such an incredible human being, Langston Hughes, that the secretary called me about two weeks later. He said, "Make sure the musicians get union scale." So he was putting us on even when he passed away.

But he was a great man, because he was—he knew the importance of African-American music. He knew that the spirituals and the blues was revolutionary music. He knew that without this music, we would never have survived anything, you see? But the music has always been put in the background, but if it wasn't for that music, we would have gone nowhere. But with those songs of Billie Holiday and Duke and Basie and Louis Jordan, they lift our spirits as a people. So Langston was incredible.

Amy Goodman: Can you play a little of what you played that day?

Randy Weston: Well, I'll play the blues. [playing blues]

Amy Goodman: Randy Weston, blues for Langston Hughes. 1967—

Randy Weston: Yeah.

Amy Goodman: Langston Hughes dies in May.

Randy Weston: Right.

Amy Goodman: And before the end of the year, you've moved to Africa.

Randy Weston: Yeah.

Amy Goodman: Talk about that decision and where you went.

Randy Weston: Well, I'm sure it's because of Marshall Stearns. He was on the State Department board. That's for sure. Unfortunately, Marshall died before I had a chance to thank him. But I was chosen to do a State Department tour of 14 countries in 1967 of North Africa and West Africa and Beirut and Lebanon. And I put together a great band: Clifford Jordan on tenor saxophone, Ray Copeland on trumpet, Bill Wood on bass, and Ed Blackwell on drums, and Chief Bey on African drum. And I took my son with me, as a teen—he was 15, Niles, at that particular time. And we had a wonderful, wonderful tour. And I requested, whatever country we went to, I would like to be in touch with the traditional music of that country.

And so, we spent three months in Africa. And it was a good test for me, because, you know, you can write music about Africa in New York, but the test is when you play that music on the continent itself.

When I play music in Africa, I tell the people, "This is your music. You may not recognize it, because it came in contact with European languages, it came in contact with European instruments, you see. But it's your music, you know." And I always had Chief Bey, because Chief Bey always had the African traditional drum. So we had a big success in Africa, because it was not only a concert, but having the people understand the impact of African rhythms in world music, whether it's Brazil or Cuba or Mississippi or Brooklyn, whatever. If you don't have that African pulse, nothing is happening.

Amy Goodman: So you move, Randy Weston, to Morocco. Why Morocco?

Randy Weston: Morocco was the very last country, and that's when I wanted to live in Africa, because I wanted to be closer to the traditional people. And when you do a State Department tour, you have to make a report: what you like, what you didn't like, etc., etc., etc. So I stayed in Rabat for one week working on this report. And so, I went back to New York. About one month later, I got these letters from Morocco saying the Moroccan people are crazy about your music, and they want you to come back. So I had no idea I was going to be in Morocco, because, number one, the languages spoken are Arabic, Berber, French, Spanish—very little English, you see. But the power of music is the original language, is music, right? So I went back and ended up staying seven years. And that's when I discovered the Africans who were taken in slavery who had to cross the Sahara Desert. I discovered these [inaudible]. I discovered their music, the Gnawa people in particular in Morocco. So that really enriched my life.

Amy Goodman: Talk about the Gnawa people.

Randy Weston: Yeah, the Gnawa people, they're originally from the great kingdoms of Songhai, Ghana, Mali, you know. And during the invasion from the north, they were taken as slaves and soldiers up to the north. But they created a very powerful spiritual music. And so, I first met them in 1967, and we've been together up until this day, because when you hear this music, you hear the origin of blues, of jazz, of Black church, all at the same time. You realize that. In other words, what has Mother Africa contributed to America? What has African people brought with them? Because when they were taken away, they had no instruments, no language, no nothing. How did they take these European instruments and create music? But when you hear the traditional people, you realize, music began in Africa in the first place. And the music is so diverse, because the continent itself is so diverse. So if you go to the Sahara, you're going to have music of the Sahara. You go to the mountains; you're going to have the music, because African people create music based upon where they live, their environment. So I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, so I was influenced by the Palladium, by the Black church, by the blues, Mississippi. So where you—you know, it is the foundation of what you do.

Amy Goodman: Can you play "Blue Moses" a little bit?

Randy Weston: Of course. [playing "Blue Moses"]

Amy Goodman: Randy Weston, you often quote the Somali poet Moussa.

Randy Weston: Yes. Yeah, he said—Moussa, I met him in Nigeria in 1977. He said, "Randy," he said, "I'm going to tell you one thing." He said, "The first thing that changes is the music, because music is the voice of God, is music." He said, "Music is our first language." We think French or English or Arabic or Spanish is our language. There was a time we didn't have those languages. The language was music, because we listened to the music of the birds. We listened to the music of Mother Nature. We listened to the wind, the sound of thunder. So, he says, "When you have ordinary music, you're going to have ordinary times." Yeah, and I'll never forget that, yeah. And when you have creative music, you have creative times, because music—you can't see music. You can't touch music. Music is the king of the arts, you see. And so, music is everywhere. But we tend to take music for granted. But imagine our planet without music. It would be dead, because all people have their music, you see.

Amy Goodman: Back in Nigeria, music is also a means of political expression.

Randy Weston: Of course.

Amy Goodman: You saw Fela Kuti perform two weeks before the Nigerian military raided the shrine—

Randy Weston: Yes.

Amy Goodman: —in his home, threw his mother out the window.

Randy Weston: Right.

Amy Goodman: Can you talk about what that moment was like, when you saw him perform, and what he was performing?

Randy Weston: He was the most courageous musician I ever met in my life, Fela. He wanted to be the—Africa to be free. He wanted Africa to have its own everything, because, see, Africa is so rich. That's why everybody's there taking something, you know. Way before slavery, they were taking from Africa, because everything is there. Everything is there. So he—symbolically, spiritually, the president of Africa. But what he meant was, for Africa, African unity, you see. And sometimes, the powers that be don't like that kind of freedom. And he was fearless, you know.

Yeah, and I'll never forget the last time I saw him, you know, and I was so proud of Fela. I was so proud, because he demonstrated, which Paul demonstrated, an artist just playing your instrument is not enough. You have this talent for a reason. And you always got to serve the community, got to serve humanity, one way or the other. Then you are a true artist, you see? And that's what Fela, that's what Paul, that's what all these people were like.