

MUSICIAN



Dan Steinberg

HERBIE HANCOCK

Imagining the future with a plan, a piano and a vision of peace

By Jeff Tamarkin

LEGENDARY JAZZ KEYBOARDIST HERBIE HANCOCK MINCES no words when it comes to explaining his longevity. "The quickest way to death, as far as your career is concerned," he says, "is to stay in one place." Even now, at age 70, the Chicago-born jazz legend refuses to remain sedentary. Having nabbed an Album of the Year Grammy (the first jazz artist to win in that category in 43 years) as well as Best Contemporary Jazz Album for his 2007 release *River: The Joni Letters*, which paid tribute to his friend Joni Mitchell, this tireless seeker has now chosen to up the ante. *The Imagine Project* finds Hancock working with a who's-who of pop, rock, jazz and world music artists, including John Legend, Jeff Beck, Dave Matthews, Pink, Marcus Miller, Anoushka Shankar, the Chieftains and Los Lobos.

Hancock had a greater purpose in mind than simply gathering marquee names, however. He and his all-star crew tackle such socially minded anthems as John Lennon's "Imagine," Bob Marley's

"Exodus," Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'" and Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come," as well as a number of foreign-language tracks. It's an album about finding commonalities among cultures and people, and the desire to find a way to make peace among them.

Ambitious? No doubt. But Hancock has always gone about his work with a fearless spirit. Classically trained, he was recruited by Miles Davis for the trumpet giant's quintet in 1963, the same year that Hancock's composition "Watermelon Man" became a Top 10 hit for Cuban artist Mongo Santamaria. After his five-year stint with Davis he never looked back, embracing and quite often spearheading new directions in music—electronics, fusion, funk, hip-hop and more—on such landmark albums as *Maiden Voyage*, *Mwandishi*, *Head Hunters* and *Future Shock*. All the while he has explored new avenues with his first love, the acoustic piano. Hancock discussed with us his longevity, legacy and ongoing commitment to pushing musical boundaries.



'I chose a long time ago to have the freedom to go in various directions.'

What did you set out to do with this record?

I wanted to make a global record. Although I've recorded with artists from other countries at various times, this truly was about emphasizing global collaboration as a path toward peace. I started thinking about America basically being an immigrant country. Most of us have ancestors who were not from these shores. So we have these issues that are happening now about immigration and closing the borders and locking things down. I understand the motivation—the fear from 9/11 and terrorists. If you couple that with the insecurity that has come about because of the economic downturn, it's drawing people into a state of chaos. They're trying to find ways to blame

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something, to put it on somebody. I think it's time to stop looking outside for who to blame. Rather than try to cover up and hunker down and lock everything down and put walls around ourselves, now is the time to proactively begin the process of creating the kind of future we want for our children and for our children's children.

How did you translate those ideals into music?

The first thing you have to do is be willing to be open and to embrace cultures outside of our own. The second thing is respecting the cultures and the people of those cultures. What other ways can we show our respect for other cultures? One of them is through language. It's why I decided that if I truly wanted a global record, the record couldn't just be in English; it had to be in multiple languages. Those are certain considerations I made before we even recorded the first song.

Some songs speak to interpersonal peace rather than world peace.

The idea of peace, as opposed to conflict, is not just one that happens between nations.

It also happens in families and among friends. Look what happens to families when someone dies. Suddenly they all become mortal enemies. Everybody's trying to claim something for themselves. That's just one example. Even within a single person's life, we often become conflicted. We choose to pursue a certain direction, say for economic reasons or potential economic reasons, where in our hearts there is something else we really would like to do, a decision-making process, trying to figure out which way to go.

Were you familiar with all of the artists beforehand?

I wasn't. It was a process of investigating a lot of artists and suggestions that were made and research that we did. We made a list of people that we'd like to work with. We were really fortunate to get great people with big hearts who are all for the vision that this record is about.

With so many artists involved, were the logistics difficult?

Oh, yeah! (*laughs*) That was another consideration that we really had to think about at first, how we were going to accomplish this.

Why haven't you been composing much lately?

Well, obviously the last record was more about an appreciation of Joni Mitchell's imagery and poetry and lyrics. But with this one, because we're recording with groups from different countries—top artists from America, from England, from India, various locations—it was hard enough to get the scheduling to work in this one-year framework. To ask them to learn a new song that they knew nothing about, it would have taken a lot longer. But they know many of Dylan's songs, the Beatles' songs, Peter Gabriel's songs, and it was easier to ask them to do something they already know and love. When it came to working with some of the artists from other countries, you take a group like Konono N° 1 from Congo—I couldn't ask them to learn a new piece. I don't even know how they'd learn it. I'd never worked with them before, and I don't know how they work together. So it made more sense to take something that I had already heard them do ["Imagine"] and then retrofit that to a new recording of it with a new kind of environment.

ESSENTIAL HANCOCK



Maiden Voyage

(Blue Note, 1965)

By 1965 Hancock had already indicated through his work with Miles Davis and as a composer ("Watermelon Man") that he had a gift. But this breakthrough LP—cut with fellow virtuosos Ron Carter (bass), George Coleman (saxophone), Freddie Hubbard (trumpet) and Tony Williams (drums)—with its five sweetly melodic, contemplative, sea-themed tunes, established Hancock as an innovative giant.



Mwandishi—The Complete Warner Bros. Recordings

(Warner Archives, 1994)

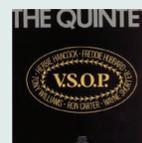
After leaving Davis' employ in 1968, Hancock took many of the lessons he'd learned and applied them to his own new sextet. With electronics now firmly at the fore, the keyboardist cut three albums for Warner Bros., all collected on this two-CD anthology. *Mwandishi*, released in 1971, is the gem—an epic work that deftly traverses multiple moods, textures and sonic vistas.



Head Hunters

(Columbia, 1973)

It's nearly impossible to fathom today the impact that *Head Hunters* had on the world of jazz upon its release in 1973. Having explored the outer reaches of the music on his previous few albums, Hancock—tuned in closely to the seismic changes in contemporary R&B—got earthier and funkier here. (There's a reason one track is called "Sly.") Hip-hoppers have often mined its rhythmic grooves for samples.



V.S.O.P.: The Quintet

(Columbia, 1977)

Four of the five players—Hancock, saxophonist Wayne Shorter, Carter and Williams—had played together in Davis' second great quintet and helped to invent fusion. Reorganizing here, with Hubbard added to their ranks, the group reverted to the familiar acoustic format—but there was nothing retro about the music they produced.

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Paul Drinkwater/NEOU Photo Bank

On *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*, February 2008

All of the *Imagine* sessions were video-recorded. What plans do you have for those?

We want to make a movie, and we're also going to use them for our live performances. The plan is to have a multimedia presentation. This is something I've never done before, and very few artists have done—to actually take some of the artists with me on video and to sync with the video. Especially being a jazz musician, I want to have room to stretch out and play along.

After 50 years, how do you keep coming up with new ideas and staying current?

Not being afraid of trying new things. Some people have refined the same thing over the years, but refining it is not really staying in the same place; at least there's an evolution going on. I chose a long time ago to have the freedom to go in various directions. That's why I've never had a permanent, long-standing band.

What is your attitude today toward playing piano?

When I play the piano, I don't want people to hear the piano. I want them to hear the

music. I want them to hear me. When I say "me," I don't mean specifically Herbie himself, but I want them to hear my expression or the creativity that's involved, not the instrument. But of course you have to go through developing a sound on the instrument, developing a character or a personality on the instrument, in order to achieve that next step.

Where do you see jazz going now?

They've got some good things coming along. I just came back from working in China, which was really great. We were there playing for the World Expo in Shanghai. [Jazz singer] Dee Dee Bridgewater and I were guest artists of a student band, a collegiate band, from the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz college program. That whole band was amazing. You have no trouble hearing the potential.

Is there a jazz scene in China?

There is. I didn't get a chance to hear any while I was there, but I met some musicians. It's an exciting time in the development of jazz. It's happening in a lot of places. It's global in a new sense.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

We asked Hancock to share some of the instruments and equipment he's using these days.

"The acoustic piano I play is a Fazioli. I think they make the best pianos in the world, hands down. It's the only piano in my contract. In some cases—fortunately, only a few—I'm not able to get it, but I request it everywhere I go. I also have a Korg OASYS that's my main instrument. Unfortunately, they don't make them anymore, but I got two of them just in case. I use that as a master keyboard.

"Softsynths—software synthesizers—have gotten so good, and sampling has gotten so good. There's so much that I get through plug-ins and the computer that gives me a tremendous amount of flexibility. It's really too *much* flexibility. It's hard to decide what to use and hard to find the time to tweak sounds. The manuals are so big now they look like a phone book! (*laughs*) You almost have to decide whether you're gonna be a player or a programmer.

"The Muse [Research] Receptor is another device I use. I also have instruments from Ableton Live and Arturia. I have a Yamaha Motif XS, and one called Hollywood Strings from EastWest. I have several of their instruments. I have a lot of stuff. I'm buying a lot of technology."