

**EXPERIENCING
HERBIE HANCOCK**

The Listener's Companion

Gregg Akkerman, Series Editor

Titles in **The Listener's Companion** provide readers with a deeper understanding of key musical genres and the work of major artists and composers. Aimed at nonspecialists, each volume explains in clear and accessible language how to *listen* to works from particular artists, composers, and genres. Looking at both the context in which the music first appeared and has since been heard, authors explore with readers the environments in which key musical works were written and performed.

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A Listener's Companion

Eric Wendell

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Rowman & Littlefield
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wendell, Eric, 1984– author.

Title: Experiencing Herbie Hancock : a listener's companion / Eric Wendell.


Description: Lanham : Rowman & Littlefield, [2018] | Series: The listener's companion | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017061127 (print) | LCCN 2017061546 (ebook) | ISBN 9781442258389 (electronic) | ISBN 9781442258372 (cloth : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Hancock, Herbie, 1940– —Criticism and interpretation.

Classification: LCC ML417.H23 (ebook) | LCC ML417.H23 W46 2018 (print) | DDC

781.65092—dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017061127>

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

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BRAVE BEGINNINGS

Chicago, Mozart, and Blue Note

Hancock's journey began on April 12, 1940, where he was born Herbert Jeffrey Hancock to Wayman Hancock Jr. and Winnie Griffin Hancock. According to Hancock, he was named after singer/actor Herb Jeffries, a powerhouse performer who performed with the Duke Ellington Orchestra and recorded for several notable record labels including RCA Victor, Coral, and Decca.

In his early childhood, Hancock and his family lived in a two-bedroom apartment on the corner of Forty-Fifth Street and King Drive on the South Side of Chicago. Hancock would later paint a picture of his neighborhood having a particularly seedy element, saying that he witnessed stabbings and that gang members and drug pushers worked his block. On one particular occasion, Hancock himself was the victim of a crime as he was robbed at gunpoint at the age of six on his newspaper delivery route.

The Hancock family included his older brother Wayman and his younger sister Jean. For Hancock's mother, it was important that her children be privy to classical music, their apartment echoing the symphonic musings of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Ludwig van Beethoven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and George Frideric Handel. While music was important in the Hancock household, Hancock did not know of anyone else in his family that performed music until much later in life

when his father mentioned that he had an uncle Jack who played jazz at the turn of the century.

In concert with their classical music education, Hancock's mother would also play jazz and blues music in the home as a way to remain connected to their African American heritage. While his parents instilled an appreciation for the arts in their children, one could say that it was a young boy named Levester Corley that would help Hancock the most in his early development as a musician.

Levester lived in their building and upon turning six years old received a piano. Once Levester acquired a piano, Herbie became a mainstay in Levester's apartment, spending many hours at the keys trying to figure out songs and generally messing around with the instrument. Hancock learned a few basic skills and forms while toiling away at the piano and eventually learned how to do the boogie-woogie with two fingers. Whenever he came back home after visiting Levester, Hancock would boast to his mother how much he loved the piano. Seeing an opportunity to foster his burgeoning curiosity, his parents bought a piano for him for his seventh birthday at the cost of \$5.

Upon receiving the piano, Herbie, along with Wayman, began to receive piano lessons in September 1947 where they were taught standard classical repertoire. As a part of his education, Hancock began to immerse himself in the vast musical literature of classical music. From the baroque music of Johann Sebastian Bach, the impressionist music of Claude Debussy, and the modern flair of Bela Bartok and Igor Stravinsky, Hancock's ears were introduced to a vast array of classical forms and structures. Hancock took to the piano with such fervor that his father would have to ask him to leave the piano alone and go outside and play with others. Herbie's father later told the *Chicago Tribune* "he was at that piano all the time; you wouldn't believe how much he loved music."¹

In terms of harmony, one of Hancock's earliest influences was arranger Clare Fischer. Fischer was a pianist, composer, and arranger who initially became known for being the pianist and arranger for the vocal group the Hi-Lo's. Fischer would later in life be known for his Latin-influenced music, composing the well-known standards "Morning" and "Pensativa" as well as working with pop mainstays such as Robert Palmer, Michael Jackson, and others. Hancock had the opportunity to meet Fischer later in life and told him that he had borrowed his

harmonies from his work with the Hi-Lo's. Hancock was taken aback when Fischer responded by stating that he had borrowed Hancock's harmonies in his work.

Hancock's talents eventually made its way to his second piano teacher, a woman named Mrs. Jordan. To become her student, Hancock had to audition for Mrs. Jordan, who was smitten with the young pianist's reading abilities. Mrs. Jordan then played a Chopin piece, which moved Hancock. Hancock later told radio station KCET that he asked Mrs. Jordan, "Can you teach me how to play like that?" She said, "I can try!"²

FIRST PERFORMANCE EXPERIENCES AND INTRODUCTION TO JAZZ

Hancock's quick study of the piano inspired Mrs. Jordan to enter him in an annual competition held by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. As part of the orchestra's young people's concert series, the orchestra held a contest where they invited students to perform a movement of a concerto with the winner of the contest receiving the opportunity to perform the concerto with the orchestra.

By this point, Hancock had been playing the piano for several years and was well versed in classical repertoire. In preparation for the audition, Hancock practiced Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 18 in B-flat Major every day for a year. Stepping out onstage for his audition, Hancock performed so well that two members of the audience wept upon the conclusion of his audition.

Several months later, Hancock received a postcard stating that he had won the competition and was invited to perform with the orchestra on February 5, 1952. Unfortunately, the invitation stated that they could not find the orchestral parts for the piece he so diligently practiced and he would have to learn a new piece or forfeit his opportunity to perform. Seizing the moment, Hancock chose Mozart's Concerto no. 26 in D Major, otherwise known as the *Coronation* Concerto.

On the evening of February 5, Hancock walked out on the stage of Orchestra Hall under the baton of assistant conductor George Schick. Once Hancock began to play, every care and concern he had washed away and it was just him, the music, and the moment. Upon concluding his performance, the applause launched into an uproarious applause.

Hancock signed his first autograph to a young female fan who was around his age and felt the capacity of what music and hard work could warrant. In a strange postscript to the story, Mrs. Jordan invited Herbie to see the pianist Dame Myra Hess perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. To both of their surprise, the orchestra was performing Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 18, the piece that the orchestra originally told Hancock they could not find the parts for.

While Hancock was slowly developing his talents as a pianist, he was also displaying a bright, prodigious talent in his overall studies as a student at Hyde Park High School. Hancock was by far the youngest freshman, standing only twelve years of age at the time, having skipped a grade in elementary school. Wayman would later tell the *Chicago Tribune*, "It didn't take long before he was known as the top musician in the school." Wayman also stated, "Herbie wrote music, he played all these different instruments, he formed a doo-wop group." Wayman continued, "And with all that, he still graduated school two years ahead of time."³

The first time that Hancock was exposed to jazz was on WGES with the *Al Benson Radio Show*. Benson would normally just play R&B records but would occasionally play jazz records. The first record that piqued his interest was the standard *Moonlight in Vermont*, featuring guitarist Johnny Smith and tenor saxophonist Stan Getz. In concert with his interest in jazz, Hancock and the neighborhood kids would sing a cappella on street corners, much in the vein of many vocal groups at the time including the Orioles, the Midnighters, the Five Thrills, and the Ravens. While Hancock's interest in vocal groups was serious, he never thought that he could play anything on piano other than classical music. Hancock continued to refine his skills by helping the school orchestra during their rehearsals.

During his high school years, Hancock continued to pursue his musical education by any means necessary. One such exercise that Hancock would do was to dive into the records of notable pianists such as Oscar Peterson and George Shearing, and he would transcribe solos, analyze harmony, and take it apart to find out what made their solos tick.

In Shearing, Hancock found a pianist that he could use as a way of learning how to improvise. In high school, Hancock had a classmate named Don Goldberg who had a student jazz trio that consisted of

piano, upright bass, and drums. During a variety show, Hancock saw Goldberg's trio and realized that Goldberg was improvising. Hancock was absolutely smitten with the idea of making up a part right on the spot and spoke to Goldberg after the show. Goldberg suggested to him that if he wanted to become a good improviser, he would have to listen to some George Shearing records.

Hancock rushed home and, much to his delight, he realized that he already had a few Shearing records. Hancock's heart skipped a beat as he heard Shearing perform several standards including "Lullaby of Birdland," "I'll Remember April," and "A Nightingale in Berkeley Square." Hancock's first attempts at improvising were not very good, but over time his improvisational skills began to expand and soon enough he was playing and improvising with his record collection.

In the fall of 1956 at the age of sixteen, Hancock left Chicago and headed to Grinnell, Iowa, to attend Grinnell College. When it came time to pick a major, Hancock found himself at a crossroads of sorts. While Hancock's heart was clearly telling him to pursue music as his major, his head was being rational as he was not sure that he could make a living with music. Ultimately, Hancock decided to enroll at Grinnell as an engineering major.

Although he did not decide to enroll at Grinnell as a music major, Hancock took piano lessons and spent many hours of his own time studying jazz. Included in his course of study was practicing, improvising, and analyzing music. This additional education proved to get in the way of his formal coursework, and his grades were average as a result.

Although there weren't many jazz musicians at the school, Hancock found a few musicians whom he was able to play with. Included in this mix were Denmark-born drummer Bjarne Nielsen, bassist Dave Nelson, and trumpeters Bob Preston and John Scott; the latter would eventually cowrite the song "A Tribute to Someone" on Hancock's second album as a leader, *My Point of View*.

While a sophomore at Grinnell, Hancock put on the school's first jazz concert. However, Hancock was without sheet music and had to borrow some music from the University of Iowa, which was sixty miles away. In addition to these charts, Hancock transcribed several Count Basie charts and eventually rounded up an impressive group that featured five saxophones, three trombones, four trumpets, bass, drums,

and a small vocal group. Hancock was so consumed with preparing for the concert that he began to fail all of his courses.

The concert was eventually held in May 1958 in the Alumni Recitation Hall auditorium. Given the fact that expectations were low, the concert was quite successful with the audience clapping and cheering the musicians. In perhaps an act of God, Hancock hit the books after the concert and aced all of his finals, passing the semester with three Cs and a D.

RETURN TO CHICAGO: COLEMAN HAWKINS AND DONALD BYRD

Hancock's lack of formal music education came to an end in his junior year when he switched his major to music. However, his education came to an end in 1960 when Hancock decided to leave Grinnell and head back to Chicago. Hancock's musical curiosities about jazz had gotten the best of him, and he realized that staying at Grinnell was not the best course of action for him. Hancock got a job at the post office and took any late-night gig he could get.

Hancock was burning the candle at both ends by working at the post office during the day and staying out as late as five in the morning from the previous night's gig. However, this breakneck pace soon began to pay off and in the fall of 1960, Hancock received "the call," the proverbial step toward the spotlight that would put the next phase of his career in motion. Hancock was invited to perform with the legendary tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, who was performing a gig with a pickup band in Chicago. Hawkins's drummer Louis Taylor had recommended Hancock for the gig as the two had performed together before.

Hawkins hired Hancock to perform at the Cloisters club for a fourteen-day residency. The gig was daunting for the young man as the group performed four sets a night with five on Saturday. This is considerably taxing when you take into account Herbie's day job at the post office. From the get-go, the schedule got to Hancock as juggling both responsibilities was difficult. After the fourth day, Hancock came to a crossroads and had to make an important decision: continue the grueling schedule or quit his day job. The next day, Hancock went to the post office and quit. After the gig with Hawkins came to an end, Herbie

found himself unemployed and unsure if he could make a solid living playing the piano. As fate would have it, Hancock received a call.

In December 1960, Hancock received a phone call from John Cort, who was the proprietor of the Birdhouse, a small Chicago club on the North Side of the city. Cort invited Hancock to perform with trumpeter Donald Byrd and baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams at Curro's in Milwaukee as a blizzard that was hitting the area had sidelined the original pianist for the gig. Byrd and Adams's quintet was one of the premier jazz groups at the time. Both Byrd and Adams cut their teeth in the Detroit jazz scene of the 1950s, the same scene that fostered the creative characters of trumpeter Thad Jones, drummer Elvin Jones, pianist Tommy Flanagan, and others. Byrd had stints with the Jazz Messengers and drummer Max Roach's band as well as having recorded with saxophonist John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins. Adams performed in the band of saxophonist Lucky Thompson, pianist Stan Kenton, and others. In other words, quite the pedigree to call upon the young Hancock.

Hancock quickly made his way to the Birdhouse and piled into a car with Byrd and Adams to make their way to Milwaukee. However, the blizzard that had sidelined the original pianist sidelined them as well. Hancock was disappointed, but Byrd suggested that they find a jam session to attend so at the very least he could hear Hancock perform. Hancock suddenly found himself with a gig that was to become an audition of sorts . . . the pressure was on.

When it came time for Hancock to perform with a pickup band at a jam session, his nerves got the best of him, and he felt that he did not live up to the best of his abilities. Hancock was thinking that Byrd and Adams would fire him right there, but Byrd assured him that he knew he was nervous and that he would see him the next day for their gig. With that, Hancock knew that he had another opportunity to make a great first impression.

The next day in Milwaukee, Hancock performed way better than the night before and clearly impressed Byrd. Recalling years later, Byrd stated, "I completely freaked out when I heard this kid. He was already trying to get into new things, new sounds, new chords. I was amazed by how precocious he was, how much intelligence he had, how much integrity."⁴

Hancock proved himself to be an inspired player—so much so that Byrd was keen on having him join the band. Byrd asked Hancock to join the band, but in a perhaps naïve showing of humility he told Byrd that he would have to ask his mother if it was okay. Byrd called his mother, and with a bit of smooth talking and assuring her that he would take care of him, Hancock's mother gave Hancock her blessing. In January 1961, Hancock made his way to New York with a few hundred dollars in his pocket.

With a new city and a new group, Hancock began the official first phase of his musical career. Times were lean for the wide-eyed young man from Chicago, but Hancock saw New York for all of its jazz glory and the opportunity that New York could provide him. Hancock's first gig with Byrd in New York City was at the famed Five Spot in Cooper Square. Hancock impressed the audience and soon after was getting side work with several noted luminaries such as Jackie McLean, Kenny Dorham, and Lou Donaldson.

FIRST RECORDINGS: *OUT OF THIS WORLD* AND *ROYAL FLUSH*

By the end of 1961, Hancock would make his recording debut with Byrd and Adams on the album *Out of This World* and with Byrd on *Royal Flush*. Hancock's early recorded efforts show crumbs of the stylistic inclinations that Hancock would develop. On the title track to *Out of This World*, Hancock showcases the mix of funk and hard bop that would prove to be a paramount sound throughout his career, especially on his initial recordings on Blue Note Records. The track is also a great example of Hancock's eagerness to prove himself, with his solo from 5:52 to 7:28 showing a great amount of aggression, perhaps in an effort to show what he was capable of achieving or perhaps showing a bit of nerves as this was one of his first times recording, and with such a notable group of musicians. But while aggressive, you can see the seedlings of Hancock trying to develop an idea over the course of time, a skill that any soloist in jazz has to keep practicing over time to truly hone.

Subsequent cuts on *Out of This World* show the underpinnings of what he would be capable of achieving but still shows a mere twenty-

one-year-old trying to hold his own among players above his talent grade. “Curro’s,” with its midtempo arc, has Hancock getting a bit lost in the instrumentation trying to nail down the bluesy lick that shows the creative dynamics of Byrd and Adams. “Theme from Mr. Lucky” shows Hancock more loose but adhering to a firmly established stock bin of themes and motifs. It’s apparent that while his melodic vocabulary is in its infancy, he has an adaptive ear that plays especially well off of Byrd.

Ballads, at this time, portray themselves as being more up Hancock’s alley as the tempo and themes allow Hancock the time to establish and execute ideas. “It’s a Beautiful Evening” is a prime example of Hancock’s capabilities on *Out of This World*, with the song’s sway-in-the-wind tempo and lush instrumentation being the perfect formula with which Hancock to excel. Hancock’s tender performance beautifully supports Byrd and Adams; he is already showing growth as a more than able accompanist. His solo from 2:43 to 3:51 gives him the time to establish a melodic arc, allowing him to execute a fully realized solo complete with a beginning, middle, and end.

However, if *Out of This World* shows a wet-behind-the-ears Hancock, *Royal Flush* shows that Hancock was a quick study and that his formative years proved to be fruitful for his burgeoning talents. In the short time between *Out of This World* and *Royal Flush*, Hancock’s skills as both an accompanist and a soloist grew to new heights. This is apparent from the get-go of *Royal Flush* with the album’s opener “Hush” showing a clear expansion in his confidence. The song’s midtempo swing and bluesy character is a perfect fit for Hancock, who releases some of the tight reins that *Out of This World* can’t help but show. Hancock’s solo from 3:41 to 4:56 shows a certain swagger, a swagger that one can argue doesn’t necessarily show back up until an album or two into his career as a leader.

Byrd must have also seen that his progeny was ready to take center stage, as much of the music, especially the originals composed by Byrd, show his confidence in Hancock. “Jorgie’s” is a sullen display that features Hancock moving between a B-flat pedal point and atonal fragments that stays firm as the tender melody is played. It’s an interesting tune for the time, initially not really swinging, not really grooving, but rather contemplative. Byrd and Co. break this up, eventually introducing a swing beat, but always returning to the uncertain, atonal introduction. For the sessions of *Royal Flush*, Hancock composed the song

“Requiem,” which not only closes the album but also is undoubtedly the most interesting song on the record. Not only does it show a clear understanding of theme, but it builds its strengths by shifting dynamics in tone and clarity.

TIME TO LEAD: TAKIN' OFF AND THE BLUE NOTE YEARS

Byrd had such confidence in the young man's abilities that he suggested that Hancock record his first album as a leader. Byrd had an in with Blue Note Records, the premier jazz label of the time that had a who's who of now legendary artists on its roster including pianist Thelonious Monk, saxophonist John Coltrane, and drummer Art Blakey, to name a few.

Blue Note Records, while being able to boast about the sheer talent that festooned their records, was also a business and was a bit apprehensive about signing new artists, as they wanted artists that could sell records. Byrd, ever the mentor, devised a rather strange plan to get Hancock under the auspices of Alfred Lion and Frank Wolff, the founders of Blue Note Records.

First, Byrd suggested to Hancock that he tell Lion and Wolff that he had just been drafted and that he wanted to record an album before he went to join the armed services. Second, he told him to mention that half the album would be originals and half the album would be covers of popular standards. Lastly, and most importantly, Byrd advised him to start his own publishing company to house his works under, a practice that was not typical at that time but could mean a lot of extra money for artists. By doing so, Hancock would effectively own his work and have more control of it and how it was used.

To prepare for his meeting with Lion and Wolff, Hancock wanted to write a song that could both showcase his prowess as a composer and show his ability to write a catchy song that could sell records. Hancock came up with the song “Watermelon Man,” a hip song with a solid groove that had a broad, commercial appeal. While excited about his new song, Hancock was also keenly aware that being an African American man with a song titled “Watermelon Man” could be viewed as stereotypical and feeding into an ugly, racial design. Hancock decided that naming the song “Watermelon Man” and having it being fun and

upbeat could challenge that stereotype and work to have that stigma lifted.

With Byrd's blessing and a great new song ready to go, Hancock took a meeting with Lion and Wolff at the offices of Blue Note Records. Hancock did as Byrd had advised him and told them that he was going to be drafted and that he had three originals ready to show them. When Hancock performed the three originals, which included "Watermelon Man," Lion and Wolff must have been impressed as they asked Hancock if he could write three more originals, meaning that the twosome were clearly more interested in his work as a composer than with any standards that he might have been thinking of recording.

Hancock was happy to say the least. He went into the meeting hoping at the very minimum that he would get a record deal. Not only were they offering him a record deal, but also, he would have the opportunity to record his own music and not rely on a mix of originals and interpretations of popular standards. However, one thing came up that could have derailed the entire deal.

Lion told Hancock that his songs would be published under Blue Note's publishing, resulting in more money for Blue Note and not for Hancock. Taking Byrd's advice, Hancock told them that he could not do that as he had already published them under his own company. The mere saying of this made Hancock more than nervous as he felt that he was already jeopardizing his future by saying so. Wolff told him that unfortunately if they could not publish his songs, that he could not record for Blue Note. Feeling dejected, Hancock got up to leave when Lion suddenly told him that he could keep the publishing to his songs and could record under Blue Note Records. The next day, Hancock created his own publishing company that he would title Hancock Music.

With his first record *Takin' Off*, Hancock began a trajectory that was hell-bent on trying something new with every record. With the seven records that Hancock recorded for Blue Note Records (excluding his score to the movie *Blow-Up* in 1966 as it was released by MGM), Hancock used every opportunity he had to develop his sound and experiment with harmony, melody, and instrumentation.

For *Takin' Off*, Hancock recorded his songs at Rudy Van Gelder's studio in Englewood, New Jersey. Van Gelder was the sonic guru of Blue Note, recording dozens of albums that would almost immediately

become part of the jazz canon. To bring Hancock's songs to life, the session featured some of the best jazz musicians of the day including tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon, trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, bassist Butch Warren, and drummer Billy Higgins.

While seemingly conventional in its design, the instrumentation of piano, tenor saxophone, trumpet, bass, and drums perfectly suited Hancock's compositional prowess and expertly conveyed Hancock's blend of hard bop, blues, and groove-oriented jazz. With the band that Hancock assembled, Hancock not only constructed a quartet of the hottest players of the time but four individuals that each came with their own musical tool kit that only served to bring Hancock's compositions to life as best as they could.

From the opening passages of *Takin' Off*, Hancock was able to prove that he wasn't merely a wet-behind-the-ears prodigy but rather a seasoned player that showcased a sound beyond his years. *Takin' Off* shows a young man who was ready to set sail on a new trajectory, a trajectory that would help shape the jazz canon and what the consummate jazz musician is capable of achieving.

On May 28, 1962, Hancock and Co. ventured to Van Gelder's studio and recorded six Hancock originals: "Watermelon Man," "Three Bags Full," "Empty Pockets," "The Maze," "Driftin'," and "Alone and I." In a year that featured the recording or release of several big albums including tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins's *The Bridge*, pianist Cecil Taylor's *Nefertiti*, as well as Gordon's *Go* and Hubbard's *The Artistry of Freddie Hubbard*, Hancock had a lot to prove. Luckily, he had the talent and the tunes to prove himself and not merely stand on the shoulders of the prime jazz luminaries of the day but rather stand tall among them.

Hancock begins *Takin' Off* with "Watermelon Man," one of the songs that secured him a record deal with Blue Note and the confidence of Blue Note founders Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff. "Watermelon Man" is a tasty blues in F major that has a strong rhythmic foundation, courtesy of the concrete performance of Warren and Higgins.

Just who was the "Watermelon Man"? you may be asking yourself. Hancock wanted to use "Watermelon Man" as a way to write about the black experience as he experienced it. As a young black man coming from Chicago, what could he speak about musically that spoke to him? In conversation with singer-songwriter Elvis Costello, Hancock stated,

“What can I write honestly about the black experience . . . my own personal black experience? The funky sound really comes from the black experience.”⁵

In the liner notes to *Takin’ Off*, skillfully penned by jazz journalist Leonard Feather, Feather includes a quote of Hancock’s where he states that the “Watermelon Man” harkens back to a memory in his childhood. Hancock stated, “In reflecting on my childhood I recalled the cry of the watermelon man making his round through the back alleys of Chicago’s south side. The wheels of his wagon beat out the rhythm on the cobblestones.”⁶ Furthermore, Hancock stated in the *Chicago Tribune* that the Watermelon Man would sing “Wateh-meh-LONE, wateh-meh-LONE,” Hancock says. “And the melody came from the women calling out from the porches: ‘Hey, watermelon man,’ and from the watermelon man’s song.”⁷

The strength of “Watermelon Man” comes from showcasing the talents of Hubbard and Gordon, who provide *Takin’ Off* with its fair share of melodic delight. Hancock and Higgins begin the song by vamping for four measures before Hubbard and Gordon come into the arrangement in unison, adding strength to the rhythm-and-blues character of the song. During his solo from 4:43 to 5:38, Hancock sticks to the blues foundation and does not shy from employing playful trills and ornamentations. While Hubbard and Gordon are the shining stars of the song with the juicy melody, Hancock delights with a mature, boogie-woogie-esque solo that brings a firm melodic personality to the song.

Hancock follows with “Three Bags Full,” a title that Hancock states in the liner notes as referring to how each of the soloists play out of a different “bag.”⁸ Additionally, Hancock states in the liner notes that the title is “a line from Baa Baa Black Sheep, which makes you think of a shepherd, and in a way the tune does have something of the sound of a shepherd maybe way off in Baghdad or somewhere.”⁹

The minor-keyed “Three Bags Full” does wonders to showcase the intense magnificence that is Gordon and Hubbard, with Gordon demonstrating a well-bodied tone that is stripped of any ornamentation and instead is fueled by sheer controlled power. Hubbard displays a bright and dynamic tone, which is the perfect counterpoint to Gordon. Herbie’s solo from 3:06 to 4:30 shows an eager sound wanting to be unbridled, which slowly drips out via fervent right-hand passages.

Hancock follows up with “Empty Pockets,” a blues-drenched number simple in its execution yet addictive in its quality and character. Steadfast in tempo, “Empty Pockets” is more of a showcase for Hubbard, who displays a punchy and provocative tone full of hooks and swagger. Hancock’s solo from 3:59 to 5:30 is rudimentary in its melodic form but nonetheless provides a lively voice, a voice that “Empty Pockets” clearly indicates is ready to expand and develop.

For the majority of *Takin’ Off*, Hancock is reserved yet balanced, which you can chalk up to being so young and still developing his style. Up to this point in the record, Hancock adheres to a fairly familiar group of blues riffs and motifs. It’s with the song “The Maze” that *Takin’ Off* truly shows the listener the legend that he will soon become. During his brief solo from 2:31 to 2:51, Hancock releases himself from the blues underpinning that defined the melodic character of the previous songs and allows himself to play with space more. From his second solo from 5:26 to 6:18, one could even argue that he throws in a few free jazz clusters, which at this point in his career is truly out of the box.

“Driftin’” shows Hancock at his most compositionally playful on *Takin’ Off*, with the sultry blend of Gordon’s horn and Hubbard on flugelhorn adding a faint but noticeable spice to the ensemble. For his two-chorus solo from 3:16 to 5:24, Hancock employs playful, bluesy tactics that he uses to great effect, with the added chorus allowing to build his ideas and allowing for his personality to truly shine through.

Hancock and Co. end *Takin’ Off* with “Alone and I,” the album’s one lone ballad. In the liner notes, Feather denotes that Hancock felt that his solo on “Alone and I” was his best on the record,¹⁰ which is easy to see as it is lush in its design and soulful in its execution. From 2:21 to 4:15, Hancock digs deep within himself and brings out a tender touch that is far beyond his then twenty-two years of life. What is equally appealing about Hancock’s performance on “Alone and I” is his warm accompaniment style, especially with Hubbard during his solo from 4:14 to 5:28 where he never gets in the way and just lets Hubbard’s melodic trajectory cut through the instrumentation.

Released in October 1962, *Takin’ Off* proved to be a successful first outing for the young man ultimately reaching number 84 on *Billboard Magazine*’s Top 100, which was aided by the unexpected radio success of “Watermelon Man.” Critics both nationally and internationally took note of the young Hancock’s prodigious talents. Critic Horst Lippmann

of Germany's *Jazz Podium* likened his sound at the time to Hank Jones and Barry Harris and said that he was "one of the finely nuanced, sophisticated pianists in modern jazz."¹¹ *Billboard Magazine's* review was particularly impressed, stating, "This is an imposing first album for pianist Hancock. The lad is making his first set as leader and his work at the keyboard is impressive as are his talents as a writer."¹²

Contemporary reviews of *Takin' Off* are less impressed with Hancock's output and instead rope *Takin' Off* into the barrage of 1960s Blue Note releases that aren't especially noteworthy. Perhaps the most scathing comes from Tony Harrington in a review in the *Wire* from August 1986. Harrington lumps *Takin' Off* into the mediocre void on 1960s Blue Note releases and is especially critical of Hancock's talents as a soloist, stating, "He lacks both the intuitive genius of Horace Silver and the earthy drive of Bobby Timmons, and though his comping is good enough, in solo his tendency towards a vague impressionism means he glides through changes that demand a rough hand."¹³

What is perhaps *Takin' Off's* biggest legacy is how "Watermelon Man" proved to have a life well beyond the album itself. In late 1962, Hancock received a gig with a Latin group where he replaced their pianist at the time, a fellow named Chick Corea who would, in an odd twist of events, ultimately replace him in the Miles Davis group. The group's leader was a Cuban conga player by the name of Mongo Santamaria, who would go on to be most noted for having composed the jazz standard "Afro Blue."

One night, the group was performing at a supper club in the Bronx where the dance floor was empty. Between sets, Byrd stopped by and began talking to Santamaria, who voiced his concern that one of the main focal points he was trying to achieve with his music was trying to bridge the gap between Afro-Cuban music and African American jazz. Byrd had an idea and suggested that the group perform Hancock's "Watermelon Man."

Hancock began to play "Watermelon Man" with Santamaria providing a beat on the congas and the band joining in on a Latin-tinged version of the song. Suddenly this dead supper club in the Bronx was reinvigorated, and all the patrons got up and began to dance. Santamaria recorded a version of the song in early 1963, which would become a humongous hit, eventually reaching number 11 on the Billboard charts.

The song would eventually be covered more than two hundred times and would become an important standard of the jazz canon.

The success of *Takin' Off* and “Watermelon Man” helped to increase Hancock’s profile within the jazz community. As a result, many of Hancock’s contemporaries sought him out for live dates and recording sessions. The same year that Hancock recorded *Takin' Off*, Hancock performed on Hubbard’s album *Hubtones* as well as multi-instrumentalist Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s *Domino*. The next stage of Hancock’s musical education came shortly after when he performed alongside avant-garde multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy.

At this time, Eric Dolphy was considered a rising talent in the avant-garde jazz community. Dolphy most notably cut his teeth in the bands of bassist/composer Charles Mingus and in addition to playing the alto saxophone was considered one of the originators in bringing the bass clarinet and the flute to modern jazz performance practices.

Dolphy’s first two releases as a leader, *Outward Bound* and *Out There*, showcased a burgeoning talent that sought to blend elements of hard bop, avant-garde textures, and modern classical music into a wholly original form. In the fall of 1962, Dolphy invited Hancock to go on a European tour. However, Hancock was a bit apprehensive as he was unsure if he could adapt to Dolphy’s more free musical expressions. However, Hancock rose to the occasion and saw this as an opportunity to try something new and to expand his viewpoint on what was possible with jazz. Two releases exist showing Hancock’s work with Dolphy: *Eric Dolphy Quintet Featuring Herbie Hancock: Complete Recordings* and *The Illinois Concert*.

The Illinois Concert is perhaps the most complete snapshot we will ever have of Hancock’s work with Dolphy. Recorded on March 10, 1963, at the University of Champaign, the album didn’t surface until 1999 when the concert was mentioned in an internet chat room and eventually got into the hands of noted producer Michael Cuscuna.

Hancock’s performance on the record is a clear indication that he was open to deconstructing much of what he had learned, which one could only assume he would take with him to the Miles Davis Group and eventually to his groundbreaking work with his band Mwandishi. Highlights of his work on *The Illinois Concert* include the album’s opening number, “Softly as in a Morning Sunrise,” where during his solo from 7:30 to 12:37 Hancock shows a clever arc by slowly over the

course of the five minutes that he has, he starts linear and carefully deconstructs his harmonic palette, ending the song on sparse, slightly atonal tones.

With Dolphy, Hancock learned the importance of trusting your instincts, to break rules and to dig deep within yourself to find the truth. As Hancock states in his autobiography *Possibilities*, “When I played with Eric, I purposefully broke rhythmic rules, harmonic rules, the rules of playing solo improvisatory lines. I just decided to go for it, extending myself into a way of playing that I’d never considered before.”¹⁴ As Hancock continued to perform with Byrd, his profile continued to increase within the jazz community. The ears of the jazz scene were big, and Hancock’s evolving technique was causing big blips on the radar of the jazz establishment. One such person to notice said blip was trumpeter Miles Davis.

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Pepper Adams/Donald Byrd: “Out of This World”

Donald Byrd: “Hush”

Herbie Hancock: “Watermelon Man”

Herbie Hancock: “Alone and I”

Eric Dolphy: “Softly as in a Morning Sunrise.”