

**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**

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## 2

### NEXT STEPS

#### Miles, (Re)Inventions, and New Mediums

**B**y 1963, Miles Davis had already displayed a trajectory that any musician, especially any jazz musician, would fawn over. By this point, Davis had already recorded *Birth of the Cool*, *Kind of Blue*, *Miles Ahead*, and several other noteworthy albums that firmly established that he was both a force of change in jazz's trajectory as well as a guiding light to his peers.

One of Davis's most famous bands during this time was a group that included tenor saxophonist John Coltrane, pianist Red Garland, bassist Paul Chambers, and drummer Philly Joe Jones. Critics and fans have historically referred to this group as Davis's "First Great Quintet" as the group recorded the now legendary albums *'Round about Midnight*, *Relaxin' with the Miles Davis Quintet*, *Steamin' with the Miles Davis Quintet*, *Workin' with the Miles Davis Quintet*, and *Cookin' with the Miles Davis Quintet*. After the dissolution of his first quintet, Davis began the search for a new quintet and had his eye on the up-and-coming Hancock to fill the piano seat.

Hancock had first met Davis in 1962 when Byrd invited him up to Davis's house on West Seventy-Seventh Street to hear him play. Hancock was excited to meet the infamous Davis, but Davis was interested in hearing him play more than anything. Davis asked him to play something, and Hancock played the ballad "Stella by Starlight." Hancock must have impressed him as Davis would later say, "I saw right away

that he could really play. When I needed a new piano player I thought of Herbie first and called him to come over.”<sup>1</sup>

Cut to a year later, and rumors began to surface throughout the jazz community that Davis was looking to form a new quintet. Hancock’s name was floating around as a possible pianist for the new quintet, which Hancock did not put any stock into, figuring that it was purely a rumor.<sup>2</sup> However, Byrd appeared adamant that Hancock was going to receive a call from Davis. He told Hancock that when Davis called him he should tell him that he was not performing with anybody. This did not sit well with Hancock, who felt that Byrd had gone out of his way to help him with his career and felt that above anything, he had to remain loyal to Byrd. Byrd was insistent that he take Davis up on the offer as this would be a big opportunity for his career.

The next afternoon, Hancock received the phone call from Davis.

Davis asked Hancock if he was performing with anyone, which Hancock replied with “No.” Davis told him to come over his house the next day, and upon arriving at his house, Hancock was led to a practice room where he saw tenor saxophonist George Coleman, bassist Ron Carter, and drummer Tony Williams. What transpired over the next couple of days was a strange audition of sorts. From their initial meeting on that first day, Hancock, Coleman, Williams, and Carter would play through tunes, with Davis occasionally stopping by to play a few notes here and there. Hancock was a bit confused by the scenario but continued to show up and perform with Coleman, Carter, and Williams.

However, as arbitrary and informal as the scenario may have been, Davis was listening to them the whole time via an intercom system that he had set up so that he could listen to them anywhere in the house. Davis designed this on purpose as he wanted to hear them perform together without his presence, feeling that his presence would influence their performance in some way. Davis would later state that during those first few days that “they sounded too good together.”<sup>3</sup>

After a few days, Davis told them to go to CBS 30th Street Studio that Tuesday. On May 14, Hancock made his way to the studio and recorded tracks that would later appear on the album *Seven Steps to Heaven*. However, Hancock was not certain if he was officially in the group. At the end of the recording session, Hancock asked Davis if he was in the group. Davis responded with “You’re making the record with me ain’t you?”<sup>4</sup>

*Seven Steps to Heaven* is an interesting inclusion in the discography of Miles Davis as it represents Davis in a transition. Half of the album features Davis's second quintet, and half of the album features a hodge-podge gathering of musicians selected by Davis to record for the album. Davis began the sessions in Los Angeles in April 1963 with a group consisting of Coleman, Carter, pianist Victor Feldman, and drummer Frank Butler. This iteration of the Davis group recorded the songs "Basin Street Blues," "I Fall in Love Too Easily," and "Baby Won't You Please Come Home," while the group that included Herbie recorded "Seven Steps to Heaven," "So Near, So Far," and "Joshua."

The album's title track gives an understandable reason why this group is dubbed Davis's "Second Great Quintet," with a large part of this due to Hancock's acute musical display as he acts like the musical glue to the melody and rhythm. The frenetic and insistent rhythm that Hancock, Carter, and Williams anchor is beyond admirable, allowing Davis to truly fit into the pocket both when playing the melody alongside Coleman and during his solo from :43 to 2:31.

During his solo from 4:29 to 5:29, Hancock sounds eager and at certain times restrained, as if the tempo and only having a single chorus have constricted him in some way. While perfectly exemplifying the up-tempo, post-bop character of the day, it nonetheless does not portray Hancock as the talent that he was at the time.

Subsequent tracks on *Seven Steps to Heaven* showcase Hancock in a more flattering light.

"So Near, So Far" is a far superior example of Hancock's talents on *Seven Steps to Heaven*. Hancock handles the semiquirky 6/8 time signature with ease as the rhythmic sway and melodic interplay between Davis and Coleman causes a lot of harmonic traffic that the rhythm section expertly keeps from bottlenecking the song. During his solo from 4:52 to 5:51, Hancock plays against Williams's insistent ride cymbal and lies back for most of his solo, resulting in a rhythmic polarity that is both striking and against type for the song. Hancock allows for the rhythmic interplay to be the main focus, borrowing the melodic and harmonic of the song's melody to fill out the remaining character of his solo.

The true standout of *Seven Steps to Heaven* is "Joshua," an up-tempo number that closes out *Seven Steps to Heaven* and the Second Great Quintet's first output as a unit. What makes "Joshua" stand out is



everyone's solos, as if the first inclination of this iteration of Davis's Second Great Quintet had finally come to surface. Hancock's solo from 5:29 to 6:12 is noteworthy as it shows more of the Hancockisms of his early career than "Seven Steps to Heaven" and "So Near, So Far" was able to show. By relying more on the melodic character that Hancock displays as a soloist, his solo on "Joshua" feels more authentic as the forty-three seconds of his solo was more than he needed to get his voice across.

### **A BROADER BRUSH FOR A BROADER PALETTE: MY POINT OF VIEW AND A LARGE HARMONIC PALETTE**

Prior to recording *Seven Steps to Heaven*, Hancock recorded his second album, titled *My Point of View*. On this album, Hancock expanded the usual melodic trademarks of the traditional jazz quintet by including three horns: trumpet, trombone, and tenor saxophone. The resulting compositions are very much in Hancock's compositional wheelhouse but with a broader sound.

Recorded less than a year after *Takin' Off*, *My Point of View* shows Hancock trying to develop his voice as a composer, arranger, and performer. With Van Gelder helming the aural aspects of the production, Hancock enlisted the talents of Byrd, Williams, trombonist Grachan Moncur III, tenor saxophonist Hank Mobley, guitarist Grant Green, and bassist Chuck Israels.

*My Point of View* begins with "Blind Man, Blind Man," which one could call the kissing cousin to "Watermelon Man" replete with the funky opening vamp that makes both of the songs infectious. One could easily call "Blind Man, Blind Man" the "single" so to speak of *My Point of View* as the words "includes his new composition 'Blind Man, Blind Man'" are cleverly festooned on the cover right under the personnel.

Such a blatant position right on the front cover must be taken into account as one could imagine that Blue Note had a lot riding on *My Point of View*, perhaps hoping that they could re-create the commercial success of "Watermelon Man." According to the liner notes, "Blind Man, Blind Man" was written based off a childhood memory that Hancock had of a blind man standing on a corner in Chicago playing guitar.

Additionally, Hancock stated that he wanted to write a song that “reflected his Negro background.”<sup>5</sup>

While one can clearly see that “Blind Man, Blind Man” is cut from the same cloth as “Watermelon Man,” the full-bodied harmonic territory of tenor saxophone, trumpet, and trombone adds a more robust quality. While the “sheets of sound” quality that the horns add makes the song exciting, it’s Green who adds the special spice to the song. During his solo from 1:21 to 3:02, Hancock sticks to the opening vamp while Green adds clever and delicate articulations that are synchronous with the upbeat vibe of the song.

Hancock’s solo from 4:44 to 6:22 shows Hancock at his most relaxed on the record, relying on simple ideas to carry the excitement. This is especially true from 5:11 to 5:37 where Hancock utilizes a repeated motif that adds weight and power to the song as well as a bit of tension. Williams, in particular, feeds off this repeated motif and aids Hancock in building the dynamics of the solo, resulting in a funky solo that portrays the song as not merely a “Watermelon Man” clone.

Hancock follows up the funk-infused feel of “Blind Man, Blind Man” with “A Tribute to Someone,” a lush, midtempo ballad in the classic sense of the word. Cowritten by his Grinnell College classmate John Scott from a practice room session when they were students, the song opens with pungent, ornamental chords by Hancock, with Williams adding glittery articulations on the cymbals, creating a harmonic environment full of sentimentality. This feeling of sentimentality is accented by Byrd, as his portrayal of the melody is warm and lyrical.

From the onset of the song, “A Tribute to Someone” could easily be viewed as a dime-store jazz ballad that follows the normal ebb and flow of the tried-and-true song form, but Hancock releases a few threads from the tapestry by picking up the tempo during the solos. As a result, “A Tribute to Someone” does not really feel like a 100 percent ballad, but more of a typical midtempo song sandwiched between the introduction and conclusion of a ballad. This is especially true during the conclusion as the ensemble finishes with a grand gesture as Hancock, Williams, and Byrd play out a bit, ending on a high, if ever so muted, note.

The subsequent track “King Cobra,” one could argue, is the most adventurous track on *My Point of View* as its persistent pulse and bold harmonic sound showcases Hancock’s skills as an arranger. The harmo-

ny that Byrd and Mobley exude is unlike anything else heard on the album, resulting in a fascinating flavor among the set of songs. In the liner notes, Hancock explains that he wanted to expand the usual trajectory of standard chord changes and instead construct a song that “would go in directions beyond the usual.”<sup>6</sup>

The heartbeat of “King Cobra” lies in the interplay between Hancock, Israels, and Williams, which goes from an insistent rhythm to a more naturalized swing beat during the solos. Herbie’s solo from 4:00 to 4:55 almost feels unfinished, which he ends by performing a few misguided trills that feel out of place. However, if the trills feel out of place, Hancock makes sure that “King Cobra” ends on an interesting note. The ending one could call an accompanied drum solo of sorts, with Hancock sticking to the rhythm that he performs throughout the song while Williams plays off said rhythm, resulting in an amusing dialogue between the two of them before the song fades out.

The most peculiar track on *My Point of View* is “The Pleasure Is Mine,” the album’s second ballad and the shortest track on the album, clocking in at 4:03. “The Pleasure Is Mine” covers similar if not more standardized terrain than “A Tribute to Someone,” which already does so much so that one might suspect that the song was somewhat of a filler. Nevertheless, Hancock’s solo from 1:34 to 2:51 provides ample melodic characteristics that seamlessly flows into the denouement of the song.

While “The Pleasure Is Mine” does not cover any particularly new or exotic ground, it does act as the perfect interstitial music to the album’s most pleasurable track, “And What If I Don’t,” an upbeat blues number where the group lets down their collective hair so to speak. The toe tapper shows the group at their most relaxed and free spirited with the sway-in-the-breeze tempo locking the group into a celebratory groove and ending the album on a high note.

While critics were quick to point out the prodigious efforts of Hancock’s first record, reviews for *My Point of View* ran the gamut of good to tepid. In his review for *DownBeat*, Harvey Pekar was quick to single out “Blind Man, Blind Man” and “And What If I Don’t” as the weaker tracks on the album, saying that they “lower the value of the album.”<sup>7</sup> However, Pekar points out that “A Tribute to Someone,” “King Cobra,” and “The Pleasure Is Mine” are “worthwhile with ‘The Pleasure Is Mine’ has a pretty melody, features a good, thick arrangement [*sic*].”<sup>8</sup>

*Billboard Magazine*, in its brief review, was more outwardly positive, stating that Hancock was “back again with another fine LP” and “there’s a sales-ringing message to be heard in ‘Blind Man Blind Man.’”<sup>9</sup>

### A STRIPPED-DOWN SOUND: *INVENTIONS & DIMENSIONS*

While *My Point of View* showcased a talent on an upward trajectory to expand the harmonic palette of modern jazz, *Inventions & Dimensions* shows a different kind of expansion, albeit not necessarily of the harmonic kind. While his previous records featured typical post-bop rhythms and melodies, *Inventions & Dimensions* does not feature a single horn or typical melodic instrument that one would find in a usual Blue Note session. Rather, Hancock pared down his ensemble to just piano, bass, drums, and percussion and called upon the talents of bassist Paul Chambers, drummer Willie Bobo, and percussionist Osvaldo “Chihuahua” Martinez to realize his ideas.

For *Inventions & Dimensions*, Hancock came to the session at Van Gelder Studios on August 30, 1963, with next to nothing prepared, except for chord changes to one song (“Mimosa”). No other chords were written, no melodies whatsoever were composed; everything was going to be improvised right there on the spot. However, Hancock did tell the musicians that there would be a set of rules to each song with each song having a different set of rules than the previous song, resulting in a controlled storm of sorts that changed from song to song.

If *Takin’ Off* and *My Point of View* suggest a young artist dipping his foot into the waters of the jazz language, *Inventions & Dimensions* shows an artist trying to destroy expectations by trying something new and outside the box. In the liner notes, Hancock reflects this by stating, “We’re at the point at which more and more leaders and sidemen are really getting into this challenge of doing away with more of the old assumptions and rules.”<sup>10</sup>

The resulting five compositions do just that, making the album one of the most peculiar additions to Hancock’s discography. Additionally, the Latin feel of the compositions is largely due to the talents of Bobo and Martinez, who bring out a looser, more open style to Hancock. The group doesn’t waste time trying to achieve this, with the album’s opener “Succotash” being a prime example. “Succotash” begins with Bobo per-

forming an airy shuffle on the snare drum with brushes, which is suggestive of a locomotive picking us up for a new adventure.

Hancock enters at :16, performing a minimal, repetitive figure, creating a trancelike atmosphere with just the slightest bit of abstraction. Hancock breaks up the tension during his solo from 1:11 to 3:43 where he employs more bop-like articulations before ending his solo with a play on the repetitive motif from the beginning. Hancock's solo also maintains this sense of urgency and atmosphere, which is aided by the static yet exciting performance from Bobo and Martinez.

Hancock follows up with "Triangle," perhaps one of the more straight-ahead songs on the album, eschewing the Latin-jazz-from-Mars fervor that "Succotash" brilliantly executed. While Martinez takes a backseat in "Triangle," Hancock, Chambers, and Bobo seamlessly execute the breezy flavor of the song with ease, resulting in a song that is modal in its blood, bop in its brain, and bluesy in its heart. During his solo beginning at 4:22, Hancock switches the feel of the song from a rather typical swing pattern to a more rhythmically dense piece, which Bobo and Chambers immediately respond to, turning what could have been a run-of-the-mill swing tune into a dramatic rhythmic display.

The most improvisational and spontaneous example of the quartet's output is felt on "Jack Rabbit," which feels loose, frenetic, and constructed on the spot. The engine of the song is Chambers, who provides the ensemble with a consistent, never changing bass line that he plays throughout the song, which keeps Hancock in check as he freely improvises throughout the song. Bobo lies back for most of the song by keeping a firm beat on the ride cymbal, which feeds into the free-form feel of the piece. Bobo does have a moment to shine as well during his timbales solo from 3:12 to 4:19, which adds a solid spice to the song and plays into the frenetic feel of the song.

"Mimosa" is the only composition on *Inventions & Dimensions* that features any wholly composed material prior to its recording. The chords and Chambers's opening arco part were composed, but the remainder of the song was improvised. What is most striking about "Mimosa" is that it has one of the best fake-outs in jazz history with Hancock's opening vamp suggesting a ballad, which is aided by Chamber's arco part. However, once you think you are about to hear a ballad, Hancock and the ensemble dissolve the feel into a slow, groove-oriented song that shares the tenderness of a ballad, but with a deeper groove.

The highlight of the song is Chambers's pizzicato solo from 5:50 to 7:02 where he exhibits a colorful and tasteful timbre. Chambers's solo segues back into the verse as Hancock's ornamental chords slowly melt away, leaving Chambers's groove and Bobo's subtle performance to quietly end the track. The deep groove lived on after *Inventions & Dimensions* as the hip-hop group "Ugly Duckling" sampled the bass line and piano part on their song "Visions" from their 2001 album *Journey to Anywhere*.

The album ends with the song "A Jump Ahead," a fairly straight-ahead post-bop song that sounds like it could have been an outtake from either *Takin' Off* or *My Point of View*. The song's title comes from the rule that Hancock set forth for Chambers. Hancock had Chambers improvise a 4-bar pedal tone, which would influence the harmony that Hancock would use for the subsequent sixteen bars. After the 16-bar measure, Chambers would improvise another 4-bar pedal tone with Hancock improvising based off that improvisation. The round-robin aspect creates a brilliant dynamic between Hancock and Chambers and ends the album on an exciting note.

Reviews for *Inventions & Dimensions* were quick to point out the departure in sound from Hancock's previous two records. In his review in *DownBeat*, Pete Welding mentioned how this was Hancock's "free" album but that perhaps the album did not truly benefit from being so. Welding stated, "Hancock's playing, I feel, needs the stimulus of a harmonic and rhythmic framework for its most fruitful employment."<sup>11</sup> In a review for the rerelease of *Inventions & Dimensions* in 2005, Norman Weinstein from *All about Jazz* praised Hancock's inventiveness in the Latin jazz genre, stating, "The four original compositions by Hancock are far from catchy, more like sketches than his most famous pieces. Yet from these patchy and meandering tunes Hancock works up a completely mesmerizing series of colors and textures and riffs, with mutated montunos dominant in the mix."<sup>12</sup>

**FIRE, FUNK, AND FERVOR: MY FUNNY VALENTINE: MILES DAVIS IN CONCERT, FOUR & MORE: RECORDED LIVE IN CONCERT, AND EMPYREAN ISLES**

In February 1964, the Davis group performed one of their most important concert dates. Taking place at Philharmonic Hall in New York City, the concert was cosponsored by the NAACP, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Student Non-Violent Co-coordinating Committee and was a benefit for voter registration in Mississippi and Louisiana.

Hancock was especially nervous playing the prestigious venue, stating, “Just from the prestige standpoint, I really wanted to play good—the whole band really wanted to play good because that was the whole band’s first time playing there.”<sup>13</sup> And the band certainly rises to the occasion, with Hancock’s performance being beautifully emotive and full of heart. The group is especially strong on the now classic standard “My Funny Valentine,” which Hancock begins with a few subtle, gentle chords, stewing the audience’s hearts with the powerful sensation of the song.

The output from the evening is reflected on the albums *My Funny Valentine: Miles Davis in Concert* and *Four & More: Recorded Live in Concert*. The difference between the two is that *My Funny Valentine* captures the slower numbers the band performed and *Four & More: Recorded Live in Concert* shows the more fast tunes from that evening. Hancock’s best performance on *Four & More* is on “There Is No Greater Love,” where he is perfectly in sync with Davis, which in turn allows Davis greater melodic freedom. During his solo from 7:20 to 9:21, Hancock keeps straight to the chord changes and sounds light on his fingers, creating an insouciant and ever-flowing performance that delights and inspires.

Not long after, Hancock journeyed back to the studio to work on his next album. *Takin’ Off*, *My Point of View*, and *Inventions & Dimensions* portrayed Hancock as being more than willing and able to experiment with harmony, melody, improvisation, and instrumentation. Furthermore, it shows a young musician trying to find his voice, a bandleader trying to mold an original sound, and a young person trying to find his footing in the world. If this is the case, Hancock’s fourth album, *Empyrean Isles*, sealed Hancock’s control of his musical voice, narrowed in on



his sound, and displayed the beautiful butterfly that morphed from the cocoon of modern jazz.

On June 17, 1964, Hancock—alongside Carter, Williams, and trumpeter Freddie Hubbard—journeyed to Rudy Van Gelder’s studio to record a set of tunes that showed the continued compositional growth of Hancock. *Empyrean Isles*, in terms of instrumentation, is the most standard of Hancock’s early efforts, featuring the standard jazz quartet of piano, bass, cornet, and drums.

And with this instrumentation, and the amazing talents of the musicians on the record, Hancock succeeds in trying to get the most out of his musicians and the expectations of the listener. According to the liner notes, Hancock was cognizant of this and wrote the songs “to sound more like improvisations than ensemble questions, so that the warmth and fullness of supporting instrument would not be missed.”<sup>14</sup> As a result, the songs were not thoroughly written, but rather written as sketches in order for each instrument in the ensemble to be given “great flexibility of interpretation.”<sup>15</sup> Beyond that, many of the songs did not have a melody but rather just a set of chords behind any melody that Hubbard wished to improvise at the given time.<sup>16</sup>

What is most striking about the material on *Empyrean Isles* are the many subgenres of jazz that the album touches upon. From the up-tempo hard bop of “One Finger Snap,” to the fun-pop trajectory of “Cantaloupe Island,” to the experimental character of “The Egg,” Hancock aims to get the most out of the four songs that the album provides and prove that he was always forward thinking and a force to be reckoned with.

*Empyrean Isles* begins with “One Finger Snap,” perhaps the most conventional hard bop offering on the record. However, the improvisational spirit that is touched upon in the liner notes is heard immediately, with the main melody being so brief that it feels more like a brief tag than a proper melody. This becomes especially apparent as the melody comes back between everybody’s solo later in the song as if the melody is acting like a return to home base before the next soloist takes his turn. By having the band playing the melody in unison, it creates a powerful standing among the ensemble that the length almost is irrelevant as the sheer brawn makes up for it.

Hubbard takes the first solo from :24 to 2:42 where he takes the power that the unison melody has and easily translates that to his solo,



displaying a melodic warmth and robustness that was not as prevalent by the other horns on Hancock's earlier albums. Hancock's solo from 2:43 to 5:34 is solid and forthcoming, but truly shows off the top-notch accompanying skills of Carter and Williams, who never waver or falter.

After Hubbard comes back in for a brief solo from 5:40 to 5:52 (if one could even call this a "solo"), Williams takes the final solo and masterfully shows not only the range of his abilities, but the timbral qualities of his technique, with his drum set acting like an ensemble unto itself. While Carter doesn't solo on "One Finger Snap," the subsequent track "Oliloqui Valley" is a master class on the classic Carter technique, a technique that is able to groove, swing, sustain, and carry an ensemble to new heights.

Carter sets the stage on "Oliloqui Valley" with an accompanied groove before Williams enters the arrangement, playing lightly on the snare drum with a hushed nuance adding an air of mystery that hangs beautifully over the song. As the rest of the ensemble comes in, Carter plays pedal points and then swings, adding a multitude of melodic and rhythmic variance right off the bat.

Hancock adds to this color palette during his solo from :49 to 3:13, where he takes the loose feel of the song and expands it to new and exciting terrain. However, the centerpiece of the song belongs to Carter, whose solo from 5:36 to 6:51 glistens and glides and is aided by double-stops that are beautifully clear and concise. The legacy of "Oliloqui Valley" can be heard as samples in subsequent recordings by rap and hip-hop artists. In 1990, rapper duo Eric B. & Rakim sampled parts of the song on their song "Untouchable" off their album *Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em*. Four years later, rapper Simple E would sample the song for her song "Play My Funk" from her album *Colouz Uv Sound*.

Perhaps what *Empyrean Isles* is most known for is the song "Cantaloupe Island," with its toe-tapping funky beat and memorable melody feeling more like a genuine pop song of its time than a jazz song. One can argue that "Cantaloupe Island" is a spiritual brother to "Watermelon Man," with both songs having a firm rhythmic foundation and funky overtones.

Hubbard and Hancock trade off on solos with Hubbard playing more into the funky feel of the song by employing different squeals and squeaks that have a more playful feel to them than Hancock's efforts. What is perhaps most known about "Cantaloupe Island" is the amazing

public relations it brought Hancock in the early 1990s when the British acid jazz group Us3 sampled the song for their song “Cantaloup (Flip Fantasia)” on their 1993 album *Hand on the Torch*. The song proved to be a huge hit, reaching number 9 on the Billboard Top 100, introducing Hancock to a new audience.

*Empyrean Isles* ends with “The Egg,” a fourteen-minute opus that feels both peculiar and adventurous. As a whole, it feels a bit aimless, but everyone is on board in trying to set sail on new territory. Hancock begins the song with a static chordal passage with his right hand almost involved in a call-and-response with his left hand. Williams adds flourishes on the snare drum and ride cymbal, not deviating but rather adding to the static feel. Hubbard plays a minor-keyed melody that acts as a perfect counterpoint to Hancock’s staid part.

Around 1:44, Hancock begins to free up the harmony, ultimately freeing the rhythm at 2:02. The group goes on an extended free-form frenzy around 3:20, with Hancock sharing a brief albeit fun call-and-response with Hubbard at 3:43. What is perhaps the most captivating part of the song occurs at 5:02 where everyone drops out except Carter, who begins to play beautiful arco passages while Williams semi-improvises with a cowbell and other auxiliary percussion with Hancock adding the occasional flourish here and there. Carter is keen to use his time wisely, allowing himself to cover the full range of the bass in what is the cornerstone of the song.

The rhythm section comes back in at 8:00, playing a slightly off-kilter passage that slowly irons the wrinkles out to reveal a seemingly standard hard bop song replete with a swinging bass line, an easygoing drum part, and improvisational piano line. This is of note because at 9:00, there is a breakdown of sorts between rhythmic devices as the tempo suddenly slows and Hancock, Carter, and Williams freely improvise, throwing the listener off completely. “The Egg” ends beautifully with Williams semi-reprising his part from the introduction as a solo part with Hancock reprising the introduction toward the end as well, beautifully encapsulating the adventurous spirit of the song.

In a review of the reissue of *Empyrean Isles* in 2012, critic Greg Simmons of *All about Jazz* had the astute observation that one of the strengths of the album is the fact that it balances having a hit song in “Cantaloupe Island” and a myriad of different tastes and textures to surround it. Simmons contextualized this by stating that *Empyrean Isles*

“remains one of the most diverse and often challenging records of the pianist’s tenure with Blue Note Records. It’s a rare jazz record that offers both a hugely popular hit, as well as an outré masterwork of rhythmic repetition and angular melodies.”<sup>17</sup>

### SETTING SAIL: *E.S.P.* AND *MAIDEN VOYAGE*

In January 1965, the Davis group recorded the album *E.S.P.* For the session, Hancock contributed the song “Little One,” which he would rerecord mere weeks afterward for his album *Maiden Voyage*. The song is a keen example of Hancock’s use of atmosphere to create a haunting and uneasy mood. During his solo from 4:53 to 5:53, Hancock maintains this mood but also tries to open up the sound with a few pungent notes. What results is a haunting midtempo song that plays perfectly into the quintet’s sound and capabilities.

While Hancock continued to juggle his functions as both a sideman and a leader, he was clearly continuing to grow as a performer. *E.S.P.* truly displays his maturation as a pianist as well as how strong the dynamics of the Davis quintet were. As a leader, Hancock’s steady commitment to trying something new with each album was all the more apparent, with *Empyrean Isles* being his strongest yet. If *Empyrean Isles* helped to solidify Hancock’s voice, *Maiden Voyage* was the album that took him from being Herbie Hancock the Miles Davis sideman and Blue Note leader to the singular “Herbie” we now know him to be.

*Maiden Voyage* is a concept album of sorts, with the song titles taking on an oceanic theme. According to the album’s original liner notes, Hancock sought to compose music that reflected the mystery of the sea. Hancock states, “This music attempts to capture its vastness and majesty, the splendor of a sea-going vessel on its maiden voyage, the graceful beauty of the playful dolphins, the constant struggle for survival of even the tiniest sea creatures, and the awesome destructive power of the hurricane, nemesis of seamen.”<sup>18</sup>

To actualize the sounds of the sea swimming in his head, Hancock called upon Hubbard, Coleman, Carter, and Williams, essentially pulling the Davis rhythm section and replacing Miles with Hubbard. By Coleman’s admission, the band did not have sufficient time to fully engross themselves, only having a few hours of rehearsal time before

heading to Van Gelder's studio to track the music. Coleman states, "In retrospect, there were tempo issues [with this rhythm section], but they had such a groove and a feeling that it didn't really matter. Jimmy Heath asked me 'Man, how could you play behind that stuff?' I said that I had to lay back and wait sometimes. They were missing the beat on some of that fast stuff. It wasn't precise choruses but it came off."<sup>19</sup>

*Maiden Voyage* begins with the title track, an elegantly beautiful piece that evokes the spirit of the vast ocean before embarking on a journey. "Maiden Voyage" has an interesting history behind it as Herbie originally wrote it as an advertising jingle for Yardley cologne. Even after the tune had been recorded, it was yet to be named and was listed on the master track list as "TV Jingle." It wasn't until Herbie's sister Jean said that the song sounded like a "maiden voyage" did the light-bulb strike to call the song what it is now.

What makes "Maiden Voyage" such a rewarding aural experience is it seemingly blends several styles. One could call it a ballad, but it's a bit too haunting. One could call it modal, but it's a bit too structured. The musicians allow the music that Herbie wrote and their performances guide them through the gentle and subtle aural waves that the song displays. Even during their solos, Coleman, Hubbard, and Hancock allow the organic and subtle feel of the tune to glisten and glide, never sounding forced or contrived.

The calm composure that is introduced with the album's title track is quickly dismantled with the subsequent track "The Eye of the Hurricane." While naming a song after the most destructive component of a hurricane may warrant a sound that is free and without structure, "The Eye of the Hurricane" is anything but. However, its unbridled and heightened tempo is in stark contrast to the tempos displayed on the other songs from *Maiden Voyage*. "Eye of the Hurricane" is the group at their most energetic with Williams and Carter acting as the pivotal forces of nature to be reckoned with. Both navigate the open waters of the song with nuance and flow, allowing Hubbard, Coleman, and Hancock a solid rhythmic foundation to swing and sway.

The energy that is portrayed on "The Eye of the Hurricane" can be felt on the solos by Hubbard, Coleman, and Hancock as they reflect the frenetic and frenzied tempo. Hubbard takes the first solo at :32 and starts slow with long passages before amplifying his timbre with aggressive and energetic rumbles before handing it off at 1:59 to Coleman,

who continues to build the melodic structure of the tune before handing it off to Hancock at 3:06 to finish the musical race as it goes. “The Eye of the Hurricane” has since become a popular jazz standard with everyone from the Mel Lewis Big Band to Christian McBride having recorded a version of it.

After the power of “Eye of the Hurricane” subsides, we get the soft and confidential tones of “Little One.” The first iteration of this tune was recorded on Davis’s album *E.S.P.*, with both versions aiming for hushed ambience and atmosphere, with the latter version on *Maiden Voyage* breaking said ambience at certain moments. One crucial difference between the two versions is that on the Davis recording, Wayne Shorter is the tenor saxophonist, and Coleman is the tenor saxophonist on the *Maiden Voyage* version.

On the *Maiden Voyage* version, Williams begins the song with an understated drum roll before Hancock offers brief, contemplative chords that usher Hubbard and Coleman into the fold. The dialogue between Hubbard and Coleman is especially noteworthy as they play off each other, both sounding vast and sonorous. While the solos taken during “Little One” showcase each of the players and their melodic personalities, it’s Carter’s solo from 6:00 to 7:12 that best serves the emotional brevity of the song. Carter’s nuanced pizzicato best reflects the song’s theme of reflection and the sentiment of being a “little one” in the vast ocean.

Much in the way that *Maiden Voyage* aims to represent the ebb and flow of the ocean, the peaks and valleys of the sea, and the duality of nature’s calm and violent tendencies, the midtempo tapestry of “Little One” is followed by the lengthy and uninhibited “Survival of the Fittest,” another example of man versus nature that feels like a strewn-together pastiche of styles.

Clearly hard bop in its design, the run time of ten minutes allows “Survival of the Fittest” a lot of creative freedom among the ensemble. Hancock begins the song with a few dissonant clusters before the rhythm section enters. Coleman and Hubbard jump in together for a musical pile-on before Williams performs a brief solo that segues beautifully into Hubbard’s solo.

Hubbard’s solo from :57 to 2:54 is notable for showing the playfulness between himself and Hancock. At around 1:44, Hubbard plays a rhythmic figure that Hancock mirrors, showing a type of musical kismet

that only keen observation within an ensemble can display. This kismet is further dictated from 2:44 to 2:54, where the band drops out and it's just Hancock and Hubbard who take their musical volley from before and briefly expand on it.

What is most noteworthy about "Survival of the Fittest" is Hancock's solo from 6:12 to 9:34, which showcases Hancock mostly unaccompanied except from Williams's improvisatory cymbal and tom-tom work. While Hancock's solos have a flair of classical music that one can pinpoint from time to time, Hancock during his solo plays a cadenza at 8:49 that sounds like it could be from a piano concerto, adding an unusual feel to the song and to *Maiden Voyage* overall that stands as a highlight of the album.

Hancock concludes *Maiden Voyage* with "Dolphin Dance," an easy-going song that ends the album with a bright and lively shimmer. After the onslaught of "Survival of the Fittest," which clearly pitted man against nature in a battle of wills, the tranquility established by "Dolphin Dance" secures the notion that the battle is over and everything will be okay. Lush in its execution and calm in its demeanor, "Dolphin Dance" shows the group at their most relaxed, as if to reflect the tension and release feel of *Maiden Voyage's* carefully constructed track listing.

Of particular note on "Dolphin Dance" are Hubbard and Coleman, who as melodists are at their best on this song with their unified timbre carrying the melody with ease throughout the verses. Additionally, Carter and Hancock's synergistic accompaniment style allows for a firm yet bouncy style that beautifully carries *Maiden Voyage's* final track to completion.

Critics were hip to how Hancock tried to translate the sounds of the sea to his work. In his review in *DownBeat*, Michael Zwerin mentioned the flowing and cohesive nature of the album and succinctly stated that the album is "about the sea, and the feeling comes through."<sup>20</sup> In a subsequent review in *DownBeat* in September 1989, critic Owen Cordle praised *Maiden Voyage* for "being the perfect symbol of the '60s." Additionally, Cordle viewed *Maiden Voyage* and the subsequent Hancock albums *Speak Like a Child* and *The Prisoner* as "transition albums for Blue Note—from hard pop to the new impressionism defined by Herbie Hancock."<sup>21</sup>

History has shown that *Maiden Voyage* was not only a musical milestone for Hancock, but also an important work for the jazz canon. The title track and “Dolphin Dance” have since become influential standards of the jazz language with the title track having been covered by everyone from rock groups Toto and Phish to jazz-rock staples Blood, Sweat & Tears. *Maiden Voyage*’s influence is felt to this day, as on the fiftieth anniversary of the album’s release, the Manhattan School of Music’s Concert Jazz Band performed the album in its entirety.

In 1999, *Maiden Voyage* was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame and to this day remains Blue Note Records’ third most popular legacy album and is Herbie’s second-best-selling album after 1973’s *Head Hunters*. On the eve of *Maiden Voyage*’s fiftieth anniversary, critic Marc Myers astutely compared the album to another landmark album by stating, “The recording combined the freer, modal jazz popular at the time with a fresh romantic lyricism and vulnerability. The result is a timeless, career-defining opus of emotional uncertainty and guarded optimism—an album that would become his equivalent to the Beach Boys’ ‘Pet Sounds.’”<sup>22</sup>

## A NEW CAREER: BLOW-UP AND MILES SMILES

*Maiden Voyage* was another example of Hancock showcasing a musical arc that proved that he was more than willing and able to try something different with each project. With five albums under his belt as a leader and a high-profile gig in Davis’s band, Hancock was receiving a suitable amount of acclaim, and people began to notice. In 1966 after completing *Maiden Voyage*, Hancock received a phone call that would end up turning into a completely new facet in his creative process.

Hancock received a phone call from 3M Publishing asking if he was interested in composing the score to an upcoming movie by director Michael Antonioni.<sup>23</sup> Antonioni was a celebrated director of his time, receiving acclaim for the movies *Story of a Love Affair* (1950), *L’Avventura* (1960), and *Red Desert* (1964), among others. Additionally, Antonioni was a big fan of jazz, with the avant-garde luminary saxophonist Albert Ayler being one of his favorites.

The movie that Antonioni was working on would become the classic film *Blow-Up*. The movie tells the story of a hip, London-based photog-



rapher named Thomas who may have unintentionally captured a murder on film. Starring David Henning and Vanessa Redgrave, the story is told behind the veil of the 1960s British counterculture movement. Hancock flew to London to meet with Antonioni and to screen a cut of the film to get a feel for the project. At first, Hancock did not know what to make of the movie. Told through a series of montages and hyperstylized edits, *Blow-Up* at times feels abstract and voyeuristic, with scenes open to interpretation. Seeing a challenge, Hancock accepted the gig and spent the next few weeks working on the score.

As this was the first time that Hancock was composing a film score, he was a bit apprehensive about what it was that Antonioni was trying to capture. Antonioni asked Hancock for natural-sounding music or, as Hancock states in the liner notes of the soundtrack, “he basically needed tunes, jazz tunes.”<sup>24</sup> In order to capture this natural feel that Antonioni had in mind, Hancock scored diegetic cues, meaning that Antonioni would be using Hancock’s score whenever a character turned on a radio or otherwise experienced music in real time. In doing so, Antonioni and Hancock created a world where music was more than just background, but a through-line that is experienced with importance equal to the rest of the components of the film.

After a few weeks of working on the score and asking different crew members about their perspective on the movie, Hancock was finally able to have a meeting with Antonioni to speak about the film and to get his viewpoint of the film. Antonioni stated that the movie was just a series of events and it was up to the viewer to interpret what the movie was about. Hancock respected Antonioni’s vision of letting the viewer decide, or not decide, what the movie was about and what it meant to the viewer. At this moment, Hancock learned a lesson from Antonioni: art was not meant to be a dictatorship or something that had to guide the viewer to experience. Antonioni was simply allowing inspiration to guide him and using elements for people to interpret.

When it came time to record the music, Hancock had been using London-based musicians, who were good but not up to the caliber that Hancock needed in order to see his vision through. Hancock was forced to abandon those recordings and instead rerecorded the music in New York with a slew of musicians including Carter, Williams, Hubbard, and numerous others.



The movie's main theme is a prime example of Hancock successfully mirroring the movie's backdrop of 1960s London. The blues-infused theme's upbeat vibe easily allows the viewer and listener to see the music as part of a hip, swinging party. Jim Hall's kinetic guitar work adds to the fun and fury of the theme with brief punches on the organ adding a subtle spice to the mix. The group then seamlessly segues into a post-bop, swing vibe that easily shakes off the blues feel of the beginning part of the theme. Hancock deliberately gave the drums a double-time feel and the bass line a slower feel as he wanted to capture "that churning feeling, an undercurrent."<sup>25</sup>

*Blow-Up* has since gone on to become a classic movie that is cited as being a firm example of the 1960s London counterculture. Upon its release, *Blow-Up* was nominated for several awards, winning several, including the prestigious Grand Prix at the 1967 Cannes Film Festival.

In October 1966, Hancock began sessions with the Davis group for what would be the album *Miles Smiles*. The album showcases the group in a looser fashion while still steeped in the design of hard bop. For the sessions, Davis asked Hancock to do something that he had never even thought to do, and that was to stop using his left hand, which would in turn not allow Hancock to apply or underscore any harmony. While disconcerting at first, Hancock found the suggestion liberating and subsequently experimented playing right-handed only at performances.<sup>26</sup>

With his first five albums, Hancock showed the jazz establishment that he was willing to take chances, try new things, and experiment with instrumentation. For the remainder of the 1960s into the early 1970s, Hancock would show the world that not only was he willing to take chances, but he was willing to subvert the notion of jazz as a genre and what jazz meant in the modern musical landscape.

## RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Herbie Hancock: "Blind Man, Blind Man"

Herbie Hancock: "Mimosa"

Miles Davis: "My Funny Valentine"

Herbie Hancock: "Cantaloupe Island"

Miles Davis: "Little One"

Herbie Hancock: "Maiden Voyage"

Herbie Hancock: “Main Title from *Blow-Up*”