



Nick Maclean Quartet feat. Brownman Ali: Convergence

Browntasaurus Records

Canadian pianist Nick Maclean has been influenced by many a jazz artist, Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, and Brad Mehldau among them, yet clearly the preeminent one is Herbie Hancock. That's evident not only from the fact that three of the eleven tracks on his quartet's sophomore release are by the legend, but even more by the character of the quartet itself, consciously conceived by Maclean as a contemporary re-imagining of Herbie's seminal '60s quartet. To that end, trumpeter Brownman Ali takes on the Freddie Hubbard role while acoustic bassist Ben Duff and drummer Jacob Wutzke power the outfit with immense drive and finesse. Six years on from the quartet's debut, *Rites of Ascension*, *Convergence* presents the group both expertly tackling a broad range of styles—hard bop, funk, hip-hop, Latin, and Cuban, to name five—and refining its identity.

Each musician brings an impressive pedigree to the recording, laid down at Toronto's Revolution Recording in June 2022. Born in Ottawa and currently based in Toronto, Maclean's a Humber College and University of Toronto graduate who two years ago issued a double album of solo piano playing titled *Can You Hear Me?* and also fronts the electric-jazz group Snaggle. The Trinidadian-born Ali was the last touring trumpet player with Guru's *Jazzmatazz*, leads a number of ensembles of his own, and oversees the operation of Browntasaurus Records. Like Maclean, Duff and Wutzke are one-time Humber College students who've made names for themselves in the Toronto and Montreal jazz markets as in-demand sidemen. The connections shared by the four are strong, but the one between Maclean and Ali is especially close, the latter having mentored the pianist since he was twenty-two (he's now in his early thirties).

While '60s Hancock albums are cornerstones, the quartet's not stuck in the past. It's noteworthy that one of the Hancock covers, "Butterfly," comes from the 1974 *Headhunters* album *Thrust*, and the presence of hip-hop and funk (see the scorching electric sequence in "Lie of Easy Attainment") further indicates that the quartet's ears are wide open. The playing is consistently locked-in, with each participant operating at a high level and responsive to the

interactive flow. A deep rapport characterizes the group dynamic in performances that are often fierce but can also be sensitive and delicate.

At album's start, Hancock's "Dolphin Dance" (from 1965's *Maiden Voyage*) receives a lovely ballad-styled treatment, Maclean lyrical and Ali agile, and is grounded beautifully by Wutzke and guest Jesse Dietschi, the group's original bassist. Following that refined statement, "Road Warrior" charges in with bop-inflected ferocity, Ali soaring acrobatically and Maclean extemporizing inventively over the furious pulse stoked by Duff and Wutzke. Less frenetically paced, "Brotherhood" brings a bluesy swing to the proceedings, the leader's and Ali's solos steeped in the acoustic jazz tradition and the quartet nimbly shifting between relaxed lilt and uptempo episodes. Maclean's Maya Angelou tribute "Why the Caged Bird Sings" sees the quartet digging into funk, gospel, and hip-hop, Ali electrifying his horn, and Wutzke's playing reflecting a noticeable J Dilla feel.

The lightspeed cover of Hancock's "Eye of the Hurricane" (also from *Maiden Voyage*) finds Juno-winning acoustic bassist Mike Downes and drummer Mateo Mancuso sitting in and imposing themselves memorably on the performance. "Butterfly" is as enticing here as it is on *Thrust*, the version elevated by Ali's fleet, echo-drenched turn and the music's gradual transition from funk to Cuban jazz and explosive salsa. *Convergence* concludes with the Ali-penned "Wisdom of Aurelius," a steamy Latin-jazz tribute to the author of *The Meditations* that adds Luisito Orbegoso's congas to the quartet's blaze.

Maclean's an equal-opportunity employer who realizes that his music is all the better when his partners receive their share of the spotlight. Ali's as prominently featured as the pianist, and Wutzke and Duff likewise have their moments (see, for example, the terrific solos the bassist and drummer respectively contribute to "True North" and "Verboten"). Caveats? Only one: at almost seventy-four minutes and eleven tracks, *Convergence* feels long, at least in its CD presentation—a double-vinyl treatment, on the other hand, would perhaps suit the material better. Even so, a release featuring nine tracks might make for a more satisfying and, obviously, tighter listen, not inappropriately so for a band whose playing is the very definition of tight.

October 2023

Ron Schepper, Textura (Peterborough, Canada)