

THE ART MUSIC LOUNGE

Maclean & Ali Channel Hancock & Hubbard

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***CONVERGENCE* / Dolphin Dance. Eye of the Hurricane. Butterfly. (Herbie Hancock). Road Warrior. Brotherhood. Why the Caged Bird Sings. True North. Verboten. Lie of Easy Attainment. Fragility of Being. (Nick Maclean). Wisdom of Aurelius (Brownman Ali) / Brownman Ali, *tp*; Nick Maclean, *pno*; Ben Duff, *bs*; Jacob Wutzke, *dm* / Browntasaurus Records NCC-1701N**

Nick Maclean, a 32-year-old pianist, formed this quartet partly in homage to Herbie Hancock's 1960s group for Blue Note, which included Freddie Hubbard, as well as the group that grew

out of it, the V.S.O.P. quintet of the 1970s. Of course there's more to the story than that. In addition to his own group, Hancock was also part of the 1968 Miles Davis quintet with Wayne Shorter and Ron Carter. In 1977, this quintet was supposed to reassemble for the 1977 Newport Jazz Festival, but at the 11th hour Miles Davis decided not to come, thus Hubbard was enlisted to fill the bill. The result was the now-classic V.S.O.P. quintet, which appeared at the festival as an opening act to Hancock's fusion band, the Headhunters, but quickly became even more popular, performing both at home and abroad (specifically in Japan).

Filling Hubbard's shoes on this release is trumpeter Brownman Ali, who has a sort of triple ethnic identity: born in Trinidad, raised in Canada, yet schooled in New York City. Fittingly, the group includes three Hancock originals, in fact leading off the album with his *Dolphin Dance*, a pretty but rather quiet tune. In recent years, I've noticed in new albums by young jazz "geniuses" that their original "tunes" aren't tuneful at all; on the contrary, they all sound alike, having a sort of generic peppy-but-modal line that just meanders and isn't even very coherent. Re-listening to Hancock's pre-fusion output, I found myself admiring the fact that he actually created tunes, albeit jazz tunes and not pop tunes, which delighted me. As Martial Solal stated in 2019, it's actually more difficult to improvise on a pre-structured melodic and harmonic structure than to improvise on nothing or these so-called "originals."

Maclean's own playing has a generally softer profile than Hancock's and, not surprisingly, is also strongly influenced by Bill Evans. Most modern pianists who are worth anything have been influenced in some degree by Evans, who of course was also a member of one of Miles' quintets (the *Kind of Blue* group of the late 1950s), and Davis openly admitted that he tried to get every pianist he used—which ostensibly also included Hancock—to use some of Evans' complex chord underpinnings.

It is in one of Maclean's originals, *Road Warrior*, where one most closely hears the spirit of the V.S.O.P. Quintet come back to life. Ali has much of Hubbard's drive and fluidity of technique but also a style of solo construction that combines his own ideas in with the kind of things Hubbard played. Indeed, as I listened to his quite extended solo on this track, I heard a musician who not only constructs logical choruses but who also continues to create further choruses that are not only different but which *build on* his previous chorus...in other words, he is truly a spontaneous composer and not just a guy who splatters notes up against the wall and hopes that some of them stick. Maclean does something of the sort in his own multi-chorus solo although he sometimes resorts here to sequences of rhythmic chords as filler material. In the final chorus, trumpet and bass play simultaneous fast lines together which tells me that this part of the arrangement was written and not improvised.

Next up is *Brotherhood*, another Maclean original and one that seems to channel some of the gospel-jazz feel of the Alfred Lion-Blue Note era. On this track, his piano solo moves somewhat away from Hancock and Evans and more towards those pianists who played in

that gospel style, like Horace Silver, but despite the shift in musical feeling Ali is still Ali, using some soul accents in his playing but still creating outstanding spontaneously-composed choruses. Bassist Ben Duff also gets to solo on this one, showing off his big, fat tone and a harmonic sense that is every bit as good as Carter's and possibly even a little better. I should also mention that drummer Jacob Wutzke, though not flashy, is superb in supporting the group and the soloists at every turn. Unlike so many modern jazz drummers I hear, who seem to be splashing their own beat around in the background while the lead players are in another tempo, Wutzke is with the band all the way. *Why the Caged Bird Sings* makes yet another shift, from gospel jazz to late '50-early '60s-styled funk. It's not one of my favorite forms of jazz but it's clearly better than the crap fusion of the 1970s and '80s, and both Ali and Maclean are in good form. So too is Duff—listen to the superb way he supports Ali's solo on an electronically modified trumpet, followed by a somewhat understated but still excellent solo. I was also happy to hear that Wutzke got a solo on this one.

With three strong soloists working together in this group, there are highlights galore to savor as well as look forward to, and once again I must congratulate Maclean on programming these pieces in an interested fashion: he knows how to alternate the slower numbers with the faster ones, thus making the entire set interesting. *Eye of the Hurricane* is a typical Hancock "flagwaver" of the era; it has a less memorable melodic line than *Dolphin Dance*, but is still stronger than much of the material we hear now. Ali is truly explosive on this one; in fact, his solo has the kind of inner logic (and drive) that one heard from Clifford Brown, one of my most highly revered jazz idols (I own every recording he ever made except the album with strings and the one with the punk "jazz" singer Helen Merrill). *True North* doesn't have quite as strong a melodic line as *Road Warrior* or *Brotherhood*, but it's still somewhat catchy and here uses shifting meters within its choruses, which I always like. The exciting brilliance of Ali's solo is, surprisingly, contracted by a somewhat subdued one by Maclean that starts off in 3 instead of 4. Even after we move into 4, it's not a "straight" four, but one broken up with stresses on different beats within the bar before returning to 3 before Ali (and Duff's excellent solo) return it to 4.

Butterfly, the third and last Hancock piece on this album, has the least interesting melodic line but still holds together well as a composition because the middle section is interesting. Here, Ali's trumpet is attached to an echo reverb that adds interest without overdoing it. More importantly, he seems to know in advance exactly what notes to play *before* the reverb, which add to the construction of the chorus. You need to have a good musical mind to plan something like this out in advance. Wutzke's drumming is much more complex in this piece than elsewhere. Sometimes I liked what he did, but in other spots I felt that it intruded on the foreground music. Once again, Maclean opts for a light, sparse piano solo. Perhaps channeling his inner Claude Thornhill, the first chorus just "laces gingerbread around the edges," as Thornhill used to say, before he suddenly takes off in the second chorus, increasing the volume and upping the tempo considerably, suddenly turning this into a Latin-

styled piece, and here Wutzke's drum support is absolutely perfect.

Butterfly, the third and last Hancock piece, opens in an abstract fashion with a bass solo before moving into the tune proper. This is more of a fusion type of piece, but it's 1960s fusion, which generally meant a somewhat recognizable melodic line and just a touch of rock beat, not the funky-wah-wah-screaming-guitars style that came into fashion later. (I pass no judgment on Hancock or anyone else who played this style; it was the hip thing to do and it made money, but, as Roy Eldridge so wisely pointed out, it was contrary to jazz because The rock beat *stays* somewhere; the jazz beat *goes* somewhere.") Maclean and Ali treat it as an adjunct of the funky school of jazz, and in fact when the trumpeter comes in the beat relaxes somewhat for a few bars, in a slightly altered meter, which adds interest to the piece.

It would almost be a spoiler for me to describe the other performances in detail, but I did notice that, in just one instance, the programming wasn't as flawless as I thought, since Maclean's own *Verboten* has the exact same kind of beat as *Butterfly*, and was, in terms of its theme, the least interesting piece (for me, at least) on the album though the solos were very good. BY contrast, *Lie of Easy Attainment* combines elements of old-time swingers with more modern elements such as contrasting moods and meters, and I found this to be the *most* interesting piece on the record.

I was happy to see that Ali subsidized this recording as its producer, leaning on his Canadian roots for funding: the Canadian Council for the Arts, Toronto Arts Council, and Ontario Arts Council. I can only hope that this quartet will make further recordings as a unit. They are splendid and complement each other in a way that is rare in today's jazz world.

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Lynn René Bayley, The Art Music Lounge (Cincinnati, USA)