

Maclean Quartet pays homage to jazz legend Hancock | Nov. 17 Waterloo

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Nick Maclean is a 26-year-old jazz pianist of rapidly increasing renown who has been described as "one of the most gifted young Toronto pianists to come along in the last few years" by Juno-winning jazz artist Adrean Farrugia.

Maclean's latest project is the Nick Maclean Quartet — featuring Brownman Ali (trumpet), Jesse Dietschi (bass), and Tyler Goertzen (drums) — whose debut album, "Rites of Ascension," is available via Ali's Browntasaurus Records label, where Maclean also works as a label manager.

The album features seven originals alongside interpretations of four songs by jazz legend Herbie Hancock, a pivotal figure in Maclean's musical development.

"Herbie is just such a towering figure in jazz history, and his compositional genius and his mastery of the piano is something that I admire enormously," he said. "He's had an enormous impact on my playing and my composition, and the Quartet generally takes a lot of influence from 1960s Herbie Hancock, that Blue Note era with the trumpet quartet with Freddie Hubbard. There were two main recordings from that era, "Maiden Voyage" and "Empyrean Isles" — the band takes a lot of influences from that. We think of ourselves almost sort of driving from that ethos, but updated, a modern jazz version of that."

The album also includes audio clips of Hancock speaking about jazz, as well as snippets from physicist Neil deGrasse Tyson and writer Christopher Hitchens. Maclean said that, although his music is largely instrumental, the communication of ideas through the spoken and written word became an essential component of the record.

"We're very much of the opinion that, while the music itself should be very developed and there should be a lot going on in that department, for it to be art it should say something as well. The record comes with 12 pages of liner notes, and some of that is me expanding upon what the tunes mean to me. The whole idea of "Rites of Ascension" — the title of the album — is it's a collection of ideas and thoughts and principles that have been guiding my life so far, and have been things that I've been thinking about in terms of larger questions and how to live one's life," he said.

Ideas such as these are something Maclean often talks about with Ali, a friend and collaborator that he met while both were playing in the wonderfully-named Chelsea McBride's Socialist Night School Big Band.

"We get into discussions about this kind of stuff all the time," said Maclean. "We'll be opening a different can of worms every week. So in many ways, this record has been an expression of some of those ideas and principles."

As well as releasing the album on Browntasaurus, Ali also wrote one of the seven originals on "Rites of Ascension" (Maclean composed the others) and produced the record at the Canterbury Music Company studio in Toronto. Maclean said their musical and personal connection grew after Ali subbed in on trumpet for a show with Maclean's electric jazz combo, Snaggle.

"Ever since then, we've practically been tied at the hip," he said. "We started spending a lot of time together, and we discovered that we have a lot of the same ethos on a lot of things, we think about things very similarly, we hold a lot of the same values, (and) we like a lot of the same music — our musical ideology's coming from a very similar place."

The Ottawa-born Maclean studied jazz at Humber College in Toronto, and pursued a Masters in Jazz Performance at the University of Toronto. His love of jazz was kindled at a young age by his grandfather, who introduced him to the genre with the gift of a Fats Waller CD. Maclean listened to the pre-1950s Big Band jazz of his grandfather's era throughout high school — Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Count Basie — before being introduced to bebop and modern jazz artists like Hancock and Chick Corea while attending Humber.

"I find jazz to be so joyous in many ways," he said. "My favourite jazz is so spontaneous and it's very in the moment. I love the depth of communication, the depth of synergy that goes on. It's a level of communication that transcends words and can take you to some really interesting places, and can express things that I find words can't, so it's the depth of interaction that can happen through spontaneity and improvisation — that's what really makes me excited about the music."

The CD release party for "Rites of Ascension" will take place at The Jazz Room in Waterloo tonight, though you can also catch the Quartet's Guelph release show at Manhattans on Saturday, Nov. 25, starting at 7 p.m.

Nick Maclean Quartet featuring Brownman Ali

The Jazz Room

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