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The Nick Maclean Quartet Breaks Through

Here's a hot CD by a Canadian-based jazz group playing four pieces by Herbie Hancock mixed in with a plethora of original tunes by the leader and trumpeter Brownman Ali. Although Maclean is the nominal leader of this quartet, and drives the rhythm section brilliantly, I hear the band more as a collaborative and particularly as a showcase for trumpeter Brownman Ali, clearly one of the more arresting and individual players I've heard in a long time. He and Maclean are the first two soloists up on the opener, *Cantaloupe Island*, one of many "funky" tunes written by Hancock, and they bring it to vivid life. In addition to his great ideas, I was really impressed by Ali's pure, round tone, reminiscent (to me, at least) of the late, great Fats Navarro. Maclean and the rhythm section fall into a nice groove on *Driftin'*, one of Hancock's more attractive songs, while Ali hovers overhead with more great playing. Although Hancock was noted as a virtuoso pianist (he had solid classical training before moving into jazz), I seldom enjoyed his solos from a purely musical standpoint because, to my ears, they were musically static with little real invention, falling back on repeated licks and motifs. Maclean is, for me, far more interesting, taking a less complex, almost Dave Brubeck-like approach to his instrument. In the latter part of this tune they ramp up the tempo to double time and really cook as a unit.

Next up is Hancock's *One Finger Snap*, a fine bebop composition with the opening bars reminding me of Thelonious Monk. Maclean really swings his rear off here, playing a series of rapid eighths that fall through the harmonic trap chromatically, dragging his left hand along with them. Ali really does sound a bit like Navarro on this one, his big butter tone easily able to negotiate the brilliant, flying figures he plays. This band is like a tonic; they wake you up and put some pep in your step! This tune also includes a nice drum solo by Tyler Goertzen in which he splits the time brilliantly.

Maclean's original piece *Temptation of the Crossroads: Blue vs. Brown* follows, a slow number featuring Ali with a plunger mute, smearing certain notes as he meanders his way through the piece, clearly dominating it. Maclean surprises with his solo on a little electronic keyboard which he almost makes sound like a harmonica. Jesse Dietschi's bass solo is relaxed and sparse by comparison, riding the wave of the music until Ali returns to ride the band out (with a short interlude by the leader). *Goldberg Machine* is a more innovative piece in terms of its rhythmic construction, mixing a 6/8 beat with a five-bar phrase. The liner notes indicate that the piece is reminiscent of some of Woody Shaw's recordings, with Ali sounding a little like Shaw. I will concede that point, and also point out

the superb manner in which Dietschi's bass solo picks up from where pianist Maclean left off, completing his musical thoughts. Great work!

Nation's Unrest: A Tribal Conflict opens with some spoken folderol about growing by having a mind open enough to experience things as they are (well, duh!), but thankfully moves into some nice bebop lines that occasionally relax in tempo only to move back towards the opening tempo. Ali is excellent on this one, and the rhythm section really drives hard. On this one, for sure, Maclean is channeling his inner Herbie Hancock, playing similar licks and phrases, which is appropriate since the band is clearly paying tribute here to Miles Davis' quintet with Hancock. *Feral Serenity*, another Maclean original, is described in the notes as "inspired by a series of panic attacks," yet the music is relaxed and rather genial-sounding despite some shifting chords. At the work's "calm center" is a nice bass solo.

The band reclaims its more energetic mojo in *Exploration of Time and Space*, a piece with a whimsical time shift in the break. Without warning, the piece suddenly drops into a slower groove while a narrator gives us information about the sun and how long it takes light to reach us from the sun (eight minutes, if you're interested), so if the sun ever blows up and disappears we won't know about it until eight minutes later. (There will be a pop quiz on the narrations at the end of this review.) Then we return to the peppy bop pace for the rideout, driven by Goertzen's drums.

Brownman Ali's *Madness of Nero* has a certain hip-hop feel that is undermined by the complex metric divisions. The composer's statements on trumpet sound more like composed music, so logical and orderly are they, but when the tempo suddenly falls into a swinging groove Maclean's piano gives out with some truly relaxed yet innovative improvisation. But the highlight of this track is Ali's blistering solo that follows, one of his finest on the album. What a player he is!

Maclean's *One* begins its life as a warm, moody ballad, played to perfection in suspended time by Ali over bowed bass and piano with light cymbal washes from Goertzen, but moves into a slow waltz while another voice-over talks about affecting things in a positive way. It's a great tune, however, completely "owned" by the composer on piano who plays one of his finest and most attractive solos here. After a pause Ali returns, repeating the suspended-time ballad theme as the outro. In the very opening and closing of the finale, Hancock's *Tell Me a Bedtime Story*, there is the simulation of the crackle of an LP before the music begins. Both the piece as such and its performance have a certain wistful quality about it, explained in the notes by its dedication to Ali's beloved cat, Kiwi-3, who died of cancer while this CD was being recorded. It's a nice, relaxed finish to an outstanding album, one that should put the Maclean Quartet firmly on the musical map.

No two ways about it, the Nick Maclean Quartet has staked out its claim in the jazz world and intends to stick around.

Lynn Bayley