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Herbie!

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STAR BREW

HERBIE HANCOCK,
LOOKING FOR A NEW
AUDIENCE, TEAMS WITH
POP ARTISTS FOR AN
ALBUM COMING TO A
STARBUCKS NEAR YOU

Herbie Hancock is elusive and ever-changing. It's almost a lifestyle. Of course, you expect to see Hancock at high-profile jazz festivals, concerts and clubs. This year, though, the 65-year-old keyboardist's list of venues has expanded into surprising new directions.

In June, Hancock was the first artist-in-residence at the jam/rock festival Bonnaroo in Tennessee, where he led the makeshift band *Headhunters 2005*, which included guitarist John Mayer, saxophonist Kenny Garrett and trumpeter Roy Hargrove on the front line. Living up to the jam imperative, Hancock also played with Widespread Panic and a group with rising star guitarist Lionel Loueke, drummer ?uestlove from The Roots and bassist Pino Palladino.

More significantly, Hancock has made his way into a Starbucks near you. Last November, Hancock started working on the all-star project *Possibilities*. Like Ray Charles' multiplatinum, Grammy-winning *Genius Loves Company*, Hancock's album is produced, distributed and marketed by Starbucks' Hear Music label.

For this project, with potential mass appeal, Hancock traveled to studios around North America and teamed up with a list of vocalists and instrumentalists, including Sting, Paul Simon, Annie Lennox, Mayer, Carlos Santana, Trey Anastasio, Christina Aguilera, Angélique Kidjo, Joss Stone, Damien Rice and Raul Midon.

Hancock sees the new project as both a first step in the world beyond jazz and, more expansively, as "something I've been wanting to do for a long time, to put something out that you can't pigeonhole."



Finding Hancock's home is no great mystery. He's one of a precious few world-renowned jazz musicians based in Los Angeles for most of his career. Through all the changes in his artistic landscape over the last few decades, he has lived with his family in the same house since 1973, a comfortable home above Sunset Boulevard. Tour buses toting visitors looking for the stars' homes pause to point out Hancock's place on their rounds. If *Possibilities* takes off with any of the commercial velocity hoped for, the tour bus action may soon get thicker.

Then again, although *Possibilities* is the most definably commercial album Hancock has ever made, Hancock's path in recent years shows that the more experimental synapses in his musical mind are still firing beautifully. In the past five years alone, Hancock's projects have included his abstract ventures with saxophonist Wayne Shorter, the ongoing cross-genre band Directions in Music, the electric *Future2Future* project, and a loose-limbed and loose-minded quartet with saxophonist Gary Thomas, bassist Scott Colley and drummer Terri Lyne Carrington. Those projects, and the open-ended live entities attached to them, may not be available in a Starbucks near you.

In Hancock's living room, a handsome Fazioli concert grand piano sits prominently, the actual and symbolic center of the space. An alcove harbors a small horde of awards accrued over the years, including several Grammy awards, an Oscar (for his music in Bernard Tavemier's film *'Round Midnight*) and an MTV award for his 1983 hit "Rockit."

Upstairs in a large office and meditation room, various tools of the trade blend in with vintage photos, dating back to his childhood in Chicago. A shrine-like nook is preserved for Buddhist chanting, in which the book *For Today And Tomorrow* by Daisaku Ikeda is found. On an early summer afternoon, Hancock cradles one of his trusty iBooks and sits on a couch in a black T-shirt emblazoned with a large "X"—not as in Malcolm, but as in Apple's X operating system.

Reflecting on his project, now that it was finally a finished entity, Hancock tries to get at the essence of his motivations. "There are many reasons for putting this record together," he says. "Behind it all is my curiosity, but that's behind a lot of records I make."

There was also a mission to bust through stereotypes of where an artist fits within the matrix of venues, idioms and cultural fashion. "Whenever an artist becomes known for a particular thing, there's a tendency to push them to do that again and to have them stay there," Hancock says. "There's a tendency to pigeonhole artists, and that applies outside of the cultural realm. Most people are pigeonholed one way or another. They limit themselves. Once they find what we call a comfort zone, they don't want to go outside of that."

"But artists have much broader aspects to themselves and their art that don't get exposure," he continues. "A pigeonhole is confining but doesn't define what an artist has to offer. It doesn't encourage the rest of what the artist has to offer. Radio is guilty of that. The labels are guilty of that. Often, the press is guilty of that. They keep people confined."

Throughout the recording of *Possibilities*, Hancock operated from the idea of bringing different genres to the table. "In each case, they brought what they bring to the table and I brought what I bring," he says. "Sometimes, a third thing would happen that neither of us could do alone. I tried to find an approach that would work, and one that wouldn't alienate the fans of the artists who agreed to be on my record."

"I'd been thinking about doing a collaboration record with people from the pop world for awhile," Hancock continues. "My attorney thought that I'd find a lot of artists might want to do a project like this. I had already worked with Santana. We were friends. I'd worked with [Stevie Wonder] before, and Joni Mitchell worked with me on *Gershwin's World*, and I thought they might say. But outside of that, I had no idea. I was surprised when John Mayer agreed and they got

NEW HEADHUNTERS STILL CONNECT

More than three decades after stunning the jazz world with the incredible success of his fusion/funk band Headhunters, keyboardist Herbie Hancock is back with a new version of the group. The crowd-pleasing performance turned in by Headhunters 2005 at its debut concert at the Pageant in St. Louis on June 8 underscored Hancock's uncanny ability to connect with an audience made up of several generations of stylistically diverse music fans.

Backed by a lineup that included Kenny Garrett on saxes, Roy Hargrove on trumpet, bassist Marcus Miller, drummer Terri Lyne Carrington, guitarist Lionel Loueke, percussionist Munyungo Jackson, and pop star John Mayer on guitar and vocals, Hancock pulled a cohesive sound from the band by focusing on his skill as a leader rather than as a soloist.

That's not to say Hancock didn't contribute some interesting solo turns throughout the evening. Surrounded by a grand piano and a battery of synthesizers, Hancock built on the percussive groove laid down by Jackson on the opening tune, "Watermelon Man," with some concise, funky chording. Hancock even strapped on a "keytar" MIDI controller during a lengthy version of "Spider" and strolled center stage to engage in a brief duel with Mayer on electric guitar.

But for the most part, Hancock was content to direct the musical flow from his keyboard fortress, letting the members of the band take the spotlight. Miller fingerpopped and strutted his way through Edgar

Winter's "Frankenstein." Loueke performed solo later in the set, giving the rest of the band a break as he played hypnotic West African guitar rhythms before being joined by Carrington and Jackson.

Garrett and Hargrove—sharing a raised platform behind Hancock—

burned through exciting solos throughout the evening. Working as a backing horn section seemed to create a relaxed atmosphere that brought out their best in solo after solo. Garrett, primarily on soprano sax, was incandescent on "Spider," kicking the band to another level with his powerhouse solo. And Garrett's solo on "Rockit" inspired Hargrove to take off his hat and wave it at Garrett's sax.

Was Mayer able to stay on the same level with this high-powered pack of jazz stars? Although the guitarist looked like a rookie pitcher making his first start in the majors, Hancock judiciously used him only in contexts that fit his strengths. After easing into

the set by playing acoustic rhythm guitar on "Watermelon Man," Mayer switched to electric guitar on a new tune from the new album *Possibilities*, playing a few Carlos Santana-style licks and turning in a suitable solo.

Mayer then took the spotlight as a vocalist on "Stitch Me Up," a *Possibilities* tune he co-wrote with Hancock. The legion of young Mayer fans crowding the front of the stage were in ecstasy at that turn of events; whether those fans absorbed or appreciated the virtuosity of Garrett, Hargrove, Loueke and the rest of the band is up for debate.

—Terry Perkins



Sting. Later, we got Annie Lennox. Paul Simon said yes, and Christina Aguilera. I was amazed."

He shouldn't have been: Hancock's position in music may be akin to Woody Allen's in film, as a revered artist with whom many would be honored to work.

In setting up an infrastructure for the project, and one falling outside of Hancock's deal with Verve Records—for his jazz projects—Hancock and his attorney called in Vector Management, which also runs a label. Vector approached Hear Music about working together. As a result, *Possibilities* was released Aug. 30 in a partnership between Hancock Music, Vector and Hear Music.

Ken Lombard, president of Starbucks Entertainment, says that Hear Music took off meteorically with the success of the Charles album, which won eight Grammys and has sold more than 750,000 copies in Starbucks locations. After the *Genius Loves Company* phenomenon, "artists, labels and their management began recognizing the strength of the Starbucks platform, from a distribution perspective. And all of our discussions just started heating up," Lombard says.

Hancock was the next logical artist on their roster, which had previously issued only archival compilations. *Possibilities* is one of the titles in the small but slowly expanding catalog available in Starbucks, as well as its Hear Music web site and at traditional retail outlets. "When you think about the Starbucks platform and the assets we're attempting to leverage to the industry, it starts with more than 9,200 stores worldwide," Lombard says. "Our customer rate is over 33 million customers worldwide. As important as anything is the frequency. When you think about that loyal Starbucks customer who comes in up to 18 times a month, no other retailer can provide that type of visibility to the music consumer that we can.

"Our customers come in with a tremendous amount of passion and trust for the brand. A music consumer can come in and be provided opportunities that go beyond limited formats that you see in most big box retailers today, along with radio."

The Starbucks deal also affords Hancock ownership of his masters and a more equitable handling of money, a sticking point in the long-standing conflict between artists and the conventional music industry. "Mainstream labels have done a lot to expose artists to the public, but I'm glad I'm making a relationship with Starbucks rather than with another label," Hancock says. "There needs to be a new industry, handled in a different and more humanistic way. There needs to be more of a sense of responsibility."

Though *Possibilities* seems like a new and uncharted direction in Hancock's musical life, it logically followed suit with his most recent projects under his name. He also worked with pop and non-original material on 1996's *The New Standard*, attempting to transform modern-day pop tunes into improvisation vehicles for a band that included guitarist John Scofield, bassist Dave Holland and drummer Jack DeJohnette. His Grammy-winning 1998 album, *Gershwin's World*, dealt with Gershwin material in multiple incarnations, with a guest list including Mitchell, Wonder and Kathleen Battle. His more electronic-textured 2001 album *Future2Future* includes a cameo by Chaka Khan.

Asked about similarities between his recent albums, Hancock can't discern any. "I hadn't thought of them coming from a similar place, other than that I'm a similar place," he says with a cryptic laugh. "In the case of *The New Standard*, I was trying to make jazz pieces out of pop pieces. In this case, I wasn't trying to make jazz pieces. The only thing

that's similar is that people from the pop world are involved. As far as the material is concerned, the approach is decidedly different.

"I was trying to avoid making a jazz record. With *Gershwin's World*, even though it's an open record and there are pieces that are not jazz, it's still primarily a jazz record. But I believe in the spirit of jazz, which was important in putting [*Possibilities*] together.

"My approach to improvising on the album is jazz, but it's not bebop. On 'When Love Comes To Town' (a track featuring singer Stone and guitarist Jonny Lang), the track is primarily a combination of country and blues with a funky clavinet track. Jonny Lang plays this rock 'n' roll, bluesy guitar solo and then I come in. I play on top of the same structure, but more of a jazz solo, but it worked.

"One of the most jazz-like, but exotic songs is the Paul Simon track 'I Do It For Your Love,'" he continues. "But it's hard to clearly define that as jazz, although when I do solo, it's definitely an improvised approach that comes from jazz."

During the process of making the album, Hancock kept in mind the balance of pop craft and jazz esthetics. Jazz hums in the margins, in some of the harmonic colors, the improvisational moments and a calculated ambiguity of creative will in the planning stages. Hancock was never one to keep on a strict time schedule or predetermined creative course.

It's a non-pattern pattern familiar to Hancock and those who have worked with him. On *Possibilities*, he says, "you may have a certain idea that gets you started, but over time it has a life of its own. It begins to direct you, if you're open to it. It's a mistake not to be open to it, because there's an organic flow."

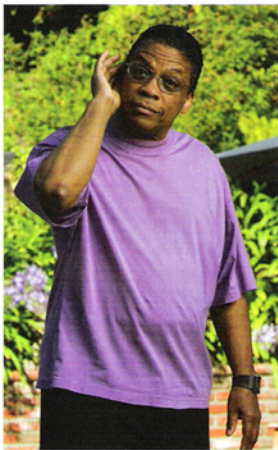
Hancock often settled into the musical part of the collaboration only after hanging and conversing with his partners, getting toward a more "humanistic" approach to music. "As an approach, it's one that is closer to a jazz approach than a pop music approach," he says. "I thought if we'd get to know each other, we could form an affinity and find a common bond. It had to do with religion, politics and social justice. And I found that we had more in common than I might have thought."

From a musical standpoint, Hancock says, "I wanted to keep certain things loose." A prime example of that attitude is on the Mayer track, a friendly groover and potentially radio-friendly number "Stitched Up." "John had a fragment of an idea that we developed in the studio," Hancock says. "In the studio, he made up some words that had the melody and the general tone of the direction he wanted to go in. He wrote the words and put the final vocal on later. We put it together right in the studio, like I used to do when I was on Blue Note."

Perhaps ironically, the album's one tune taken from the general vicinity of jazz standards, "Don't Explain," is given a moody version by emerging Irish pop sensation Rice. Rice joined Hancock in a studio in Hollywood one night, from 9 p.m. to 4 a.m., with his band. Rice sang in a duet with his vocalist Lisa Hannigan, who had brought the tune to the table inspired by Nina Simone's rendition.

"We didn't know what was going to come of it," says Rice, who had not met Hancock before working on the track. "Herbie is a wonderful improviser, and it was gorgeous to watch his hands move over the piano. We recorded the song a few times, and each time we played it, it got a new life, and each time Herbie's performance was quite different, which felt a little dangerous at first, but inspiring at the same time.

"At around 4 a.m. we were all getting tired, and in that slightly altered state where dizziness settles in. We decided to play the song one more time, and that's the version that was used for the recording."



For Sting's "Sister Moon," Hancock wanted something to distinguish the track from other existing recordings of the song. He called on the young Benin-born guitarist Loueke, who plays in Terence Blanchard's band, to arrange the song and sing with Sting. "I wanted him to add an African spice, but for it not to be too foreign to American ears," Hancock says. "I didn't want to frighten Sting's fan base, and Sting loved the arrangement. It has a little bit of African flavor, a little bit of a funky flavor. Some of the harmonies are jazz harmonies, but all are carefully done."

Benin-born singer Kidjo sang on the Santana collaboration, "Safiatou," recorded at Fantasy Studios in Berkeley, Calif., with members of Santana's band. After getting the call from Hancock, Santana picked out a couple of song options, including "Safiatou" by Malian musician Mama Sissoko, here played in the Cuban rhythmic pulse of the guajira. The lyric is a blend of French and an African dialect passionately sung by Kidjo, and provides a ripe vehicle for Hancock and Santana's soloing. Structurally, says Santana, their version "didn't have what you call intro-verse-chorus-bridge. It was basically like a snakeskin hide. Once you have that, you can make shoes or a purse or a coat. We left it kind of raw. It just went on."

Aside from his personal musical collaborations with Hancock over the years, including a soon-to-be-released CD recorded live in Japan, Santana's reverence for Hancock runs deep in his musical heritage. "Herbie's been making hits since before I started with my band," says Santana, a Tijuana, Mexico, native who came to the United States in 1963. "I was washing dishes when 'Watermelon Man' was a hit with Mongo Santamaria."

The philosophy presented on *Possibilities*, Santana says, "is not new for Herbie. He has willingness, which is one of the most sacred things that a musician should have. He's open. With those two things, you can reach grandparents, parents, teenagers and little children—and all the

Stravinsky and Miles and jazz snobs. But if you're not willing and open-minded, then you're going to be a real cookie-cutter type.

"Miles wanted the same thing. He knew that it was important to work with new people. Wet your finger, point it at the sky and then the angels kiss it and you hear the new music that is relevant with the pulse of the times. I'm not interested, and neither is Herbie, in becoming a relic, getting caught in the jukebox of a certain era. It's more important to be in the fullness of the moment."

It's tempting to cite Hancock's '70s hit "Chameleon" as his theme song, but it's too funky to get at the sophistication of his grand concept. In fact, no specific musical piece or project sums up the essence of Hancock's wandering, nameless music.

At the moment, Hancock is in a wait-and-see game, testing the public response to his venture. "When we first discussed this record," he says, "we said if this catches on, why do we have to limit it to one record? Why don't we make it a project and keep doing it?"

The list of unfulfilled collaborations includes Brian Eno, Black Eyed Peas, Aretha Franklin, Yo-Yo Ma and even Justin Timberlake.

Will the subtle jazz ingredients on *Possibilities* have a Trojan Horse-like effect on unsuspecting pop listeners, luring them into jazz?

"Of the many side effects of approaching music with this type of variety, that's a positive side effect," Hancock says. "It's not necessarily the initial purpose of putting a record like this together. When I did *Headhunters* back in the '70s, a lot of people told me that they got into jazz through first listening to *Headhunters* and then being curious about what I had done prior to that. Then when I did 'Rockit' in the '80s, people said the same thing."

As he speaks, Hancock's gears of invention turn, sizing up new possibilities of musical collaboration. However well his virgin voyage with Starbucks goes, and whatever the future of that creative franchise, expect more of the unexpected from Hancock. **DB**

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