

Herbie Hancock
Cool Fusion
by Mr. Bonzai

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Both Picasso and Hancock mastered traditional forms and styles at an early age, gained critical acclaim, and went on to shock their followers with innovation and abstraction. Picasso used found objects in his collage and sculpture; Hancock uses concrete sounds and found samples in his music. The rules were broken as the rebels drew from international sources and freely mixed. Both artists make us rethink our ideas of reality and open our doors of perception, yet they both make us feel comfortable in the twilight zone between art and life.

Barely out of his teens, Herbie Hancock became a leading force in the heyday of 60's jazz. The jazz crowd is a tough audience and he won them over, in his work with Donald Byrd, Miles Davis, and the cream of the serious contenders. Compositions such as "Watermelon Man" became worldwide standards. His first film score was for Antonioni's 1967 breakthrough *Blow-Up*. Herbie came on strong, then took jazz to new levels of cool fusion. In 1973, his Headhunters album defined jazz funk, and in following years he has swung easily with his old fans and new. The Eighties earned a best original score Oscar for his *'Round Midnight* music and a best concept video MTV award for "Rockit". A master with many forms, he has consistently taken the newest technology and made it his own.

BONZAI: I couldn't find your *Harlem Nights* soundtrack album...

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HANCOCK: I don't think there is going to be an album, 'cause they usually want a soundtrack that is going to sell. The picture takes place in the late 30's, so a lot of the music is period piece music. Doesn't seem to be much of an audience for that...

BONZAI: Let's go back to that period — your beginnings. Born in Chicago. You're not sensitive about your age are you?

HANCOCK: No, not at all.

BONZAI: Born in 1940, so your life follows the decades neatly.

HANCOCK: (laughs) Funny thing actually — there is something in what you say. I haven't had a whole lot of big hits, but the few I've had seem to have happened every ten years. Pretty strange.

BONZAI: Back in Chicago, you were trained in the classics as a kid. Did you have a musical family?

HANCOCK: Not particularly. On my father's side of the family they were mostly into the visual arts — painters, sculptors, potters. Both my mother and father took piano lessons when they were kids, and they both sang in church. But as far as I knew, I was the only musician in the family. Then about five or six years ago, my father told me about "Uncle Jack", who I had never heard of. I think he was my grandfather's brother, and he used to play in brothels around the turn of the century. This was where the jazz was played in those days, but my father told me, "Oh, you could play anything for Uncle Jack — classical, jazz — he could hear it one time and play it by ear." It was a surprise for me to learn about him.

BONZAI: Was piano your instrument?

HANCOCK: Yeah, always. I started playing when I was seven.

BONZAI: But you studied engineering in college, right?

HANCOCK: For two years I was an engineering major. But I had kept up my

piano lessons, even in college. Although I was mentally geared toward music, I thought it would be impractical to assume that I could make a living as a musician. I had been playing jazz for two or three years by the time I got to college. I could play a few tunes, and improvise a bit. But I thought I would be sensible and pick a profession where I might be able to get a job and survive.

I had always liked science, and liked tinkering and taking watches apart, building model boats and planes — that sort of thing. It made sense to choose engineering, or some field of science.

BONZAI: What changed the direction of your life?

HANCOCK: At the end of my second year of college, I stopped one day and looked at myself in the mirror and said, "Who are you trying to kid?" All the while at college I had been playing solo piano every night in the women's dining hall during dinner. I went to school in Iowa — they didn't have too many jazz musicians in Iowa, and this was a small liberal arts college, Grinnell. I decided to put together a jazz concert during my second year. I took anybody who had played in a dance band, picked up a saxophone or trumpet player and put together this 16-piece jazz band.

I had to arrange, so I started listening to Count Basie and Stan Kenton records, and tried to transcribe the parts from listening. This taught me a lot about arranging, and it was also great for ear training. Then I had to teach the different sections how to phrase the stuff, because they didn't know how to do that. I wound up almost flunking all of my classes and had to cram for all the exams. It was amazing, because I got A's and B's on my exams by cramming the night before. I passed the courses with C's and D's. One of my teachers couldn't believe it — called me in to his office. It was a math course, and I'm good at math. I had been failing the class because I wasn't attending, wasn't studying. Then when I got an A on the final exam, he just couldn't believe it.

Anyway, to put on this concert, I got copies of arrangements from jazz groups at the University of Iowa, Iowa State, and Ames College. I took the whole semester to do it, and when it was done I realized I was kidding myself trying to be an engineer. I knew the only thing I wanted was to be a musician. I didn't have a choice, so I decided to quit screwing around and changed my major to music. You'll either survive or you'll die, but you have to do it. I changed my major and got my B.A. in music.

BONZAI: How did you get from college in Iowa to joining Donald Byrd in New York, 1960?

HANCOCK: Well, during the summer after school I used to work in the post office as a mailman. After I graduated, I was a mailman again, except when September came along I wasn't going back to college. I didn't go for my Masters right away — I think it was probably because my sister was starting college and money was tight. My folks could barely put me through school, so now it was time for my sister.

I worked as a mailman and played piano at night. The first international musician I played with was Coleman Hawkins. He came through Chicago and always hired a pickup rhythm section. The guy he normally hired, the best piano player in Chicago, was Jodie Christian. Jodie had a gig with somebody else, so I was suggested, and got to play with him.

BONZAI: All the while being a mailman?

HANCOCK: Yes, but I have to tell you the hours for a Chicago musician are the longest in the world. We played from nine in the evening to four in the morning, every day except Saturday, when we played from nine in the evening to *five* in the morning. We would also work 14 straight nights, which was against the musicians union rules. You're supposed to have a night off, unless it's billed like a Broadway show. Hawkins would bill the show like this, and we also

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made more money, but after the third day, I was getting sick. I'd get off at four in the morning and have to be at the Post Office at eight — you don't get much sleep. I could do it now [laughs] — here I am almost 50 —but back then I couldn't handle hours like that. I was used to sleeping eight hours a night.

I had to choose between the gigs, so I quit the post Office. And everybody in the Post Office said, "You'll be back."

BONZAI: Did you ever go back?

HANCOCK: No, but you know what happened? I was in Chicago three or four years ago playing a big festival and I ran into a maintenance man sweeping up near the dressing room. He came up to me and said, "You're Herbie Hancock, right?" I said, "Yeah," and he shook my hand. He says, "You know, I knew you before — at the Post Office. You never came back." I said, "Yeah, you're right," and we both laughed.

Anyway, I quit the Post Office. Then I'm stuck, right? I was living with my folks and I would just wait around the house for the phone to ring for gigs. I got some work and there was no real problem. December came around and I got a call from this club owner that I knew. Donald Byrd was coming through, and as usual in Chicago there was a blizzard. His piano player had gotten stranded somewhere and Donald needed a replacement for the weekend to play in Milwaukee. The club owner suggested me and I put on the one maroon jacket that I owned and went down to meet them — Donald Byrd, Pepper Adams. We got in the car and started to drive to Milwaukee, except we didn't get very far because of the snowstorm. We came back to Chicago and they wanted to hear me play, so I took them to this place where they had jam sessions. I was so nervous, and thought I sounded terrible.

BONZAI: You were only a teenager, right?

HANCOCK: I was twenty. So, I came off the stage after playing, and said,

"Thanks so much for the opportunity, I guess you'll be looking for somebody else." Donald says, "No, are you kidding? You're going out tomorrow with us." I couldn't believe it. So we made it to Milwaukee and played for the weekend, and the next day he said he had talked it over with the band and they liked the way I played. They asked if I wanted to stay on with them and go to New York and be a permanent member. I called my folks and told them what I wanted to do. They said they were behind me all the way, even though they didn't really want me to do it. So, that's what I did.

BONZAI: Were your first records with Blue Note?

HANCOCK: No, the first was with a label called Warwick, which came and went. I think the label was around for about six months. A vibes player named Teddy Charles was one of the owners. He was a friend of Donald Byrd, who had a contract with Blue Note. I don't know how he managed to do a record with Warwick, but Donald was always a good talker [laughs]. He worked something out, but I don't even have a copy of that record I made. I wish I had one — maybe one of the readers has one. I have the jacket, but no record. Anyway, that was the beginning. I went to New York, January 18th, 1961.

BONZAI: Blue Note has such stature, such class — what was so special about that record company?

HANCOCK: So many of the serious, young leaders in the forefront of jazz were on Blue Note — people like Lee Morgan, Wayne Shorter, Donald Byrd, Art Blakey's group, Horace Silver. Blue Note and Prestige were the hot jazz labels, but Blue Note was number one, because of the people and the reputation.

BONZAI: Was it because of the treatment of the artists, the recording situation?

HANCOCK: Actually, both Blue Note and Prestige used the same studio. Rudy Van Gelder was the engineer. Miles also recorded on Blue Note.

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BONZAI: You started with him in 1963 — what did that do to your life?

HANCOCK: I was with Miles from the age of 23 to 28 and those were my real formative years. Years when I learned to develop as an individual musically. I couldn't have been in a better band, a better position. Miles was a guy who developed people, and I found my own style of playing during that time, developed things of my own, even developed things that influenced piano players in subsequent years. It was a very important period in my life. Also, I did my first film score during that time, for *Blow-Up*. And I did my first jingle for a television commercial: Yardley's Men's Cologne.

BONZAI: Can you still hum it?

HANCOCK: Yeah [laughs]. Da-de-da...It's "Maiden Voyage," but originally the music was for the commercial.

BONZAI: Wasn't Victor Feldman playing with Miles at this time?

HANCOCK: Miles came out to the West Coast and hired Victor to play with him, but I guess Victor was doing real well with his studio work and didn't want to stay with Miles. That's what I heard. He was a great musician — had such a great touch, and great conceptions. Miles did record with Victor out here and the first record I was on with Miles had both of us on different cuts. An album called Seven Steps to Heaven.

BONZAI: What happened after Miles?

HANCOCK: I recorded an album called Mwandishi, the Swahili name that was given to me. I had been thinking about moving on, because when I played with Miles, all the tunes were geared for Miles and that group. I had a contract with Blue Note which started in 1962 and I continued to record for the label as a leader during the time I was with Miles. But I never got to perform any of the tunes I recorded. So "Maiden Voyage" never got played until after I left Miles'

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band. All those tunes, "Dolphin Dance," the tunes that a lot of people now know me for...

BONZAI: "Watermelon Man"...

HANCOCK: I wrote that in 1962 and recorded it on my first album. I recorded it again in '73 for the Headhunters album. It was interesting because when I joined Miles' band, "Watermelon Man" was a hit by Mongo Santamaria. It got into the Top Ten of the Pop charts, and I was the writer. Many times you don't even know who the writer is, but because I was a piano player working with Miles and a sideman on other albums, people were aware of me as the writer. With that record, I didn't have to depend on my salary with Miles to sustain myself. I was getting some nice money from "Watermelon Man" because everybody was recording it.

One difference between today and then, is that today everybody writes their own tunes. If you get one or two cover records, you're really lucky. In those days, nobody wrote their own tunes — jazz musicians did, but in the Pop world, people were always covering somebody else's songs. When something hit the Top Ten, you had cover records everywhere. I had about 250 covers of "Watermelon Man" — everybody from the Andrew Sisters, Julie London, Trini Lopez, to Count Basie. Even Woody Herman recorded it, and Lionel Hampton, Xavier Cugat.

BONZAI: Did you get copies of all those versions?

HANCOCK: No, I didn't [laughs].

BONZAI: You're probably still making money from that song...

HANCOCK: Yeah, I get checks, because it's played on television. It was recorded all over the world — five versions in Spain alone, and that's not a huge country. France, Germany. There were instrumental versions, but there were also vocal versions — vocal chants.

BONZAI: In the late 70's you had some big hits in England with the Vocorder. You're probably more well known for Vocorder work than anyone else.

HANCOCK: I was at the time. People still use them, and there are new Vocorders being built. From what I understand, I think I was the second person in the world to record with a Vocorder. The first guy was French, Henri Salvador, but he was a singer. I'm not a singer, and I didn't use it that way. I hadn't done any vocal albums, and I started thinking about my voice as an instrument. I was working on a new album called Sunlight and I had written lyrics to one of the songs. Then I saw an ad for the Vocorder, and I thought I might be able to plug my synthesizer into it. The ad said something about replacing the voice, or making the voice sound like a machine. I thought I might be able to use it for singing.

We called the Sennheiser people and went to a recording studio for a demonstration. They had the lamest demo I ever saw. I brought one synthesizer, and there weren't many at the time, around '75. I think I was using a Mini-Moog, or a Prophet V. I also had the multitrack tape for my album and asked if I could try something. I plugged my synthesizer into it, with a mike, and then played the album and started scat-singing.

They almost jumped out of their seats. They couldn't believe what they were hearing — I went way beyond my vocal range in both directions. I was goin' to town with this thing. I had them eating out of my hand, and that thing was expensive — about \$15,000.

I started singing the song with the lyrics and using the vibrato of the synthesizer, which gave me perfect vibrato. When I started singing the lyrics they really flipped out. Henri Salvador had sung normally and then put the Vocorder track way under his regular voice. I wasn't using my vocal at all, it was all Vocorder.

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BONZAI: It's this kind of thing that has separated you from other musicians...

HANCOCK: And I usually get flack for it — I get rapped on the knuckles for it.

[laughs]

BONZAI: What about your "Rockit" video? Didn't that odd approach help you to reach a new audience?

HANCOCK: Well, it was the biggest seller I ever had. I've been very fortunate to have been in a position to be a part of some innovative technology in my life.

BONZAI: I think it's your ability to absorb new technology and use it beyond just a gimmick. Who gives you flack, the jazz crowd?

HANCOCK: No, it's usually the critics. People aren't like that — they just buy what they like, and they don't buy what they don't like. I make jazz records and the jazz crowd buys them. I make pop records and the pop crowd buys them.

Nobody complains, but sometimes people ask me when I'm going to do another jazz record. People think that I don't do jazz anymore, and want to hear my old stuff. But that's all I've been doing for the past four or five years. I tell them they haven't heard me because they haven't been in Europe or Japan. I haven't been doing tours here. In Europe, I can do festivals and draw a decent crowd. In Japan, I can get even bigger audiences. Come to America, and the crowd is small. If they're not going to come out and hear the music, then I'll play in Europe and Japan. [laughs]

BONZAI: I was talking with Brian Bell this weekend, someone who worked with you for many years as an inventor satisfying your many technical requests. He said that he could give you a strange sound, like a dish breaking, and you could turn it into a symphony. What did he mean by that?

HANCOCK: Did he say that? [laughs] I guess what he meant had to do with the fact that I've been involved with so many different types of music in my life, and I had a taste of the *avant garde* in jazz with the Mwandishi band. I was very

much into listening to music as sound and organizing it as sound, and playing things because of the quality of the sound and not just because of the notes. That is not foreign to me at all. I hear a sound that interests me and find a way to use it. It doesn't have to be a musical sound.

For example, I just made some samples in my studio using the springs that elevate a stairway so it can be closed up when I'm recording. It's a big spring, and I hit it, scraping it with metal, wood, my thumb, and snapping it. I used it to make a rhythm track and for the bass drum I sampled hitting a piece of cardboard. I do things like this because of the way I hear.

BONZAI: Do you work alone a lot of the time now?

HANCOCK: Yes, I've been doing that for a few years now.

BONZAI: How do you compare that with the incredible symbiotic jazz relationships you've had?

HANCOCK: Well, you can't replace that synergy that happens between musicians. When I make records by myself, I don't even try to do that, but I do have the advantage of being able to realize all the ideas that I have, much like an orchestrator who is arranging for a symphony, or a chamber group. They are supposed to read the music you wrote. When you're playing with a jazz group, the tendency will be to use the creative powers of the other members of the group and write something that is minimal so you can get right into the improvising.

BONZAI: In performance, have you ever gotten lost while improvising?

HANCOCK: Sure, because I always challenge myself and push myself to my musical limits. I try things, and experiment. I get lost — a lot of people get lost — but the other guys in the group can tell if you're lost and one of them will establish something to let you know where you are. I've gotten lost with the time, turned the beat around so that where I thought beat four was actually beat

one. The drummer can usually flip me back around by playing certain things, maybe a crash at the beginning of a phrase. If it's a matter of form, and I can't remember exactly what bar I am on, the bass player can usually straighten me out by certain standard approaches to the chord structure and I'll hear it right away and know where I am. And I'll know where they are. [laughs]

BONZAI: I first met you at the Esquire Show Bar in Montreal, around 1972, and we've run into each other through the years. I know that your time is in incredible demand, but how have you managed to keep your cool? I see strangers come up to you who would normally get the "Get out of here, buddy, I'm busy." How have you maintained that composure, that openness in your life?

HANCOCK: For one thing, I really love people. Even though I've had a lot of great fortune in my life and my career, and gained a degree of popularity, I think most people would say my personality hasn't changed that much. It's just basically the way I am.

The other thing — had I not started practicing Buddhism back in 1972, I would probably have become a lot more selfish. The more popular you get, the more frustrating it is when several people bombard you at the same time. If that happens a lot, it can really get on your nerves, 'cause you're just a human being. After a while, you don't want to be bothered with it. You need a little peace, and you might get snappy with people.

Buddhism has affected my perspective about the importance of human beings and everyone's life. It's made me automatically feel compelled to acknowledge another human being if someone taps me on the shoulder, or stretches out his hand to shake my hand.

You must respect people, and I realize that my popularity came about because people bought my records. The least I can do is shake their hand.

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They paid for this house, and all the food, and all my synthesizers. They even brought you out. If it wasn't for them, you wouldn't be interviewing me. They pay all our salaries.

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