

# **NICK MACLEAN QUARTET**

## **“Convergence”**

### **- About the Tunes -**

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#### **01 - Dolphin Dance (Herbie Hancock)**

Dolphin Dance is one of my favourite Herbie Hancock compositions (originally appearing on Herbie's 1965 release 'Maiden Voyage') and has such a lyrical melody paired with a rich and varied harmony. The Nick Maclean Quartet takes significant influences from this period of Herbie's career so this was a natural choice of repertoire for us to pay tribute to his genius. When we play this live the ending vamp often is stretched out into an extended jam over various latin grooves though we had to keep it short here to make sure it would fit on the disk!

This performance features the Nick Maclean Quartet's original bass player Jesse Dietschi (who was featured on our first record Rites of Ascension). So in some ways this opening track represents a transition similar to Miles Davis' 'Seven Steps To Heaven' (which featured two different rhythm sections, his former, and his new). Jesse has been seeing much success with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and has been able to play with this group less and less as he becomes busier in that world, so pairing him with Jacob Wutzke (drums) seemed a fitting way to pay homage to the Quartet's first era with Jesse Dietschi (bass) and Tyler Goertzen (drums) while transitioning us into our current incarnation with Ben Duff (bass) and Jacob Wutzke (drums). Note Brownman's ultra dark tone and evocative solo.

#### **02 - Road Warrior (Nick Maclean)**

This tune is inspired by the joys and the trials of touring. Touring can be extremely difficult, it comes with enormous logistical and organizational demands just to set one up, and then once you're on the road you can be faced by any number of difficulties and surprises like blizzards, vehicle breakdowns, - and during the pandemic - the ever-present threat of catching covid and having to entirely cancel the whole thing. But if you're prepared, if you have a cool head on your shoulders, and a responsible set of players with you, you'll be able to navigate those challenges. Brownman has always been at my side for all my major touring, and having his encyclopedic road wisdom right there has always been invaluable. And the rewards? You get to play on stage in front of new people night after night, while being uncompromising in your artistic output. For me this fulfils a deep sense of purpose and need, and there is a profound joy and satisfaction to be had.

We took this a little faster than normal in the studio, everyone is playing like their life depends on it with an urgency that I think captures the hectic pace of the road, but also the triumph and adventure of the journey.

You'd never know this because he's playing his ass off, but Brownman played this entire record through, what later turned out to be pneumonia-riddled lungs (he was diagnosed with "walking pneumonia" days after the sessions ended. When the doctor asked him what he'd been doing of late he replied that he played 2 twelve hour days of jazz trumpet recording – to which the doctor responded with "are you sure? That's not really possible with what you have" Road Warrior indeed).. Both he and I were sick as dogs when we hit the studio (the

engineers were giving us funny looks until we'd assured them we'd both been testing negative for covid all week) but it's especially impressive to me that Brownman played THROUGH his pneumonia. Interestingly, this tune has one of my favourite Brownmanman solos on the record – energetic, uncompromising, and fearless, very much in the ferocious spirit of one of his touchstone's Freddie Hubbard.

### **03 - Brotherhood (Nick Maclean)**

This tune takes inspiration from the powerful bonding experience that comes from sharing a stage with someone. Playing improvised, interactive music with a cat has a way of building connections and relationships in a way that can form very powerful bonds of friendship and camaraderie. I wrote this in the early days of the pandemic after multiple tours had been cancelled and live performances had ground to a complete halt. Just before the pandemic started the Quartet had just finished two lengthy touring runs across Canada and to the UK so I had a big dose of touring, and when it all shut off I found it wasn't just the music I missed, but the bonding experiences as well, so I wrote this tune to try and encapsulate those feelings.

I think Ben Duff (bass) sounds particularly great on this tune. 'Driftin' is a Herbie tune that we've play lots and was always a favourite of Ben's, so I intentionally wrote this one in a similar vibe with Ben in mind, and he absolutely tears it up in the solo with some delicious blowing.

### **04 - Why The Caged Bird Sings (Nick Maclean)**

This tune has some gospel influences and I originally wrote it for solo piano (it appears on my 2021 release 'Can You Hear Me?') but when Brownman, as my producer, heard it -- he loved it and asked if we could play it in the Quartet. At that point the tune didn't have a name yet and Brownman asked if I'd ever checked out the work of Maya Angelou. I hadn't, so Brownman hippped me to some of her work and read some of her poetry and watched her perform. She's so full of life, there is a striking optimism about Maya Angelou, and it's one that comes from a such a deep place. This is someone who has seen real darkness in their life, and not only has survived it, but has learned to find the joy in everything she does. Brownman and I both felt that her spirit and manner is well captured by this tune so we named it 'Why The Caged Bird Sings' after one of her books and poems.

For this record we added some hip hop influences to the bridge section and some hip hop phrasing – something this group has been experimenting with under Brownman's knowledgeable tutelage. This is also the first time on this record that Brownman pulls out some electronic effects pedals for his trumpet – something he is well known for with the Brownman Electryc Trio, and he pulls them out in a few places on this record, something he didn't do on 'Rites of Ascension', which – or me – marks an evolution in the sound of the ensemble.

### **05 - Eye Of The Hurricane (Herbie Hancock)**

Showing off some more of our roots, this is another cut from Herbie's 1965 release Maiden Voyage, and this one is a burner with all kinds of weird, angular movements in the melody which has made it another of my favourite Herbie tunes.

This track features a different rhythm section from the rest of the record.

On bass is the renowned and multi-Juno winning bassist Mike Downes. Mike Downes has long been an idol of mine and I first got to play with him in 2015 as part of Brownman's 'Miles Davis Eras' show. A few years later I asked Mike to sub into the Quartet for our Toronto CD release show and was overjoyed when he agreed. I can remember we all watched in bug-eyed admiration when he showed up to rehearsal and slayed on challenging originals the rest of us had been sweating for a solid year to learn. I'm very honoured to be able to feature him on this tune and his contributions here are absolutely sublime.

On drums is Mateo Mancuso, a young, rising star on Toronto's scene. Mateo subbed into the ensemble a number of times during the summer of 2021 and almost immediately gelled with the group while injecting compelling colours of his own playing personality. Because Jacob Wutzke (our usual drummer) lives in Montreal and can't make the journey for everything we do, I knew that I'd be asking Mateo to play with us lots more and very badly wanted to feature him somewhere on the record. He does an incredible job on this tune, particularly with his sublime cymbal work, and his solo at the end very much embodies hurricane in this tune's title.

## **06 - True North (Nick Maclean)**

This tune was inspired by a geographical metaphor for moral theory. True North is a fixed geographic location on the Earth, whereas Magnetic North (what our compass' use) shifts – mostly by minute amounts – as the Earth's magnetic poles shift. Every now and again (give or take 50,000 years) we get what's called a 'Geomagnetic Reversal' where the poles swap places and completely fuck up navigation for any dinosaurs still navigating by compass.

So here's where I think this becomes an apt metaphor for ethics – whenever you take an ethical stand, fighting against an injustice, it is so important to understand the foundational, principled bedrock of that which you're fighting for. Otherwise your own moral sense will be guided by a moving target leading you to eventually become a different flavour of the same injustice you fought against. That principled ethical bedrock – to me – is True North.

I wrote this tune to feel like it shifts and wavers while still being tethered or anchored to an immovable point and I feel that the band does an excellent job of highlighting that by making much of this one feel like it's 'floating' in places – contrasting with the parts of the melody that firmly swing in more of an Art Blakey kind of way. Again note how Brownman pushes his tone to ultra-dark and almost “lilting” for this composition. It always amazes me how he's capable of shifting his tone and “intent” around per tune.

## **07 - Butterfly (Herbie Hancock)**

This is the final Herbie Hancock tune on this record and this one is taken from Herbie's electric period with the Headhunters and his 1974 release 'Thrust' (his electric period is another touchstone influence for me). We start this one spiritually in a similar place as the original recording (though somewhat more energized) before leaning more into our own interpretations.

Brownman's horn has some heavy delay on it which he uses to great effect in his solo, creating a well textured space before soaring into some triumphant melodies while the rhythm section smolders underneath him.

We come way down for the start of the piano solo which starts delicate and a little forboding. After exploring that space a bit we gradually build and build before busting out in an energetic cuban groove punctuated by piano montunos, with Brownman joining us on the cowbell for the climax of the track.

Cuban jazz is something I've been studying and exploring the last number of years, with Brownman's help (his extensive work in the Latin-jazz community is well know and his expertise has been invaluable to my development). It's a style I find very challenging to play and I have developped a deep respect for the immense rhythmic intricacy and complexity of the artform. I'm thrilled that I'm able to use this tune to explore the concepts I've been studying!

## **08 - Verboten (Nick Maclean)**

This tune was written with some inspiration from Freddie Hubbard's 'Red Clay' and takes it's ideological inspiration from the overly sensitive and censorious culture we live in today which often tries to shield us from things that are otherwise funny/truthful/productive out of fear of causing offense or transgressing some hard-to-quantify social taboo. The end result – in my opinion – is that people are becoming less equiped to actually deal with reality and so I offer this as something of an inoculation.

This is usually how I introduce this one onstage when we perform:

*Has anyone else noticed that no one's wrong anymore? I don't mean to say that we've all attained a heightened sense of clarity and understanding... but no one's ever 'simply' wrong anymore. Society today is so sensitive that you're either 'correct'... or you are an existential threat to everyone around you. I don't know about you, but between Covid, and Russia, (and what's this about Monkeypox?), we've more than filled our quota of existential crisis' and I think we could all benefit from just a little bit more 'wrongness' in all of our lives... just to desensitize us a bit.*

*So in that spirit I wrote this tune... and the lyrics are just... well they're fucking filthy... Now some of you might have noticed that we don't have a singer with us today, in truth I wasn't able to find someone who was willing to sing these lyrics... so instead, while we're playing, please just imagine the most hateful, deplorable, and offensive subject matter that you can possibly think of... and you'll get the idea.*

The group plays this with an intensity and an irreverent attitude with solos that are muscular and unapologetic, Brownman snaking through the changes with Brecker-like aplomb and Jacob Wutzke (drums) opens up at the end for some bombastic drum blowing.

## **09 - Lie Of Easy Attainment (Nick Maclean)**

Lie of Easy Attainment borrows stylistic influences from Miles Davis' 2nd great quintet and their 'Live at the Plugged Nickel' performances which would frequently shift textures/tempo at the drop of a hat. This tune ideologically has a few things to say about social media and the 'facade of ease and success' that it can erect. It's very easy to go on social media and come away with the impression that everyone else is doing better than you. This is only natural because we're more likely to want to share things that are going well for us – vacations,

accomplishments, awards, etc. But what's not visible is all the work, sweat, and the day to day drudgery that is necessary for any of those things to happen. But even if you can't see past the rose-tinted digital perfection of someone else's life I think it's healthy to remember that there is always something on the other side of that veneer, and anything that's worth doing isn't easy to do. This tune is meant to encapsulate all sides of that process – the hard work, the payoff, and then the growing restlessness of needing to move onto whatever the next thing is and start the process over again.

Brownman's solo here is a wonderful, swirling, chaotic, dance, his adept and colourful playing punctuated by some excellent trumpet effects and some apt production choices in the drums and bass. His time with Brecker seems apparent here in his approach.

The piano solo on this track is my personal favourite of the record. I feel the ideas in this one are some of my freshest and the storytelling arc it takes is, I hope, compelling to the listener. This is all heightened by the deep interaction by Jacob Wutzke (drums) and Ben Duff (bass).

## **IO - Fragility Of Being (Nick Maclean)**

This tune began as something else entirely, but when Brown commented it sounded more like the soundtrack to a medical drama, it re-focuses my intentions. The tune now tells the story of someone being given the news that they have a debilitation and possibly fatal illness. It follows the person through the ups and downs of treatments and encouraging medical interventions, as well as sobering contemplations on the finality of death. This is a story that has played out countless times and in countless ways over the last few years as people have contracted covid, or had necessary medical treatment delayed or deferred due to the pandemic. I have had - for as long as I can remember - a deep seated fear of death and tried to capture that stomach-clenching pit of existential dread in the post-solo section (5:43) that I get whenever I stop and think a little too hard about nothingness. And because I don't want to depress anyone, this story has a happy ending and ends in recovery with a cautiously optimistic, and then finally, a rousing joyful ending. Brown's tone is again shifted towards warm and rich, as Ben's deep bass tone.

## **II - Wisdom Of Aurelius (Brownman Ali)**

Brown reads an enormous amount, consuming on average 3 books a week, and believes firmly in the transformative power of literature. Around the time Nick Maclean Quartet was working on our first record 'Rites of Ascension' he became obsessed with reading about Roman Emperors. For that first record he wrote a tune about the despotic roman emperor Nero called the 'Madness of Nero' (which would go on to win several awards and be a finalist in the American Song Writing Competition's jazz category). His tune depicted Nero's descent into insanity and destruction and was flavoured with earthy hip hop grooves. So for this record Brown decided to follow up with a second installment to what he believes will become a series of tunes about Roman Emperors (Brownman's "Emperor Series" perhaps?), this time with Nero's antithesis – the wise Marcus Aurelius, one of the greatest emperors Rome has ever known, and a foundational thinker for the philosophy of stoicism. For this piece Brownman chose to incorporate the joyful flavours of salsa and cuban jazz. The tune doesn't start there, and begins camouflaged in what feels like a 3/4 waltz (but isn't!), but it gradually works its way to a exuberant, and intricate Latin-jazz space that is an apt representation for the brilliance of this great man. This tune, like 'Madness of Nero' is a true odyssey, taking the listener on a rich journey as melodies and ideas are developed in fresh and interesting ways

over the course of its 8 min run time, the second longest tune on the record (as was Madness of Nero on our 1st recording).

Featured on this track is Luisito Orbegoso – the conga player from CRUZAO & widely regarded as one of Canada's greatest living latin percussionists. He overdubbed congas, and a variety of latin percussion instruments overtop of the track, elevating it with his brilliance. Both Ben and Jacob did admirably, neither considering themselves Latin-jazz experts – but after months of workshops with Brown, I think they sound fantastic and I'm hoping Latins will agree once the track is heard.

## **Overall Thoughts/Background**

The thing I'm most proud about through this record is the group concept. All of the players deeply understand each of the tunes to the point where each member was able to inject lots of themselves into each track while also respecting the underlying spirit and inspiration behind each composition. The group interaction is really strong and I really feel as though we were all inside of each other's heads having a real musical, conversational give and take.

This was hard won, Brownman and I have been playing together constantly for the last 8 years and this particular incarnation of the ensemble has played together a lot. Before the pandemic we did a month and a half of road together going across Canada and right before we went into the studio we did two long, intensive days of rehearsal (while poor Brown was recovering from Covid – he rehearsed facing away from us, 15 feet away and into a mic!) and then spent two weeks on the road, touring together and workshopping all of the tunes onstage. I personally think that this work and time spent can be heard on the record in the depth of the group interactivity.

You've probably already gotten this impression from Brown, but just so you know what the full dynamics of our relationship: I've known Brownman for just over 8 years. We met in a big band in Toronto called the Socialist Night School (also signed to Browntasauras Records), and soon after I left that group (I prefer small combos to big bands – more room to stretch and interact when you haven't got 14 horns to make room for) I asked if Brownman would produce my electric-jazz group's second record (SNAGGLE – “The Long Slog”). The Brownman Electryc Trio was a big influence on me growing up and I was very honoured to be able to work with one of my musical influences. We discovered much of our work ethics are the same, that we're like-minded about many things, and as a result we worked extraordinarily well together on that recording. That led to many hangs, book trades, movie excursions and working together on other projects. I've since, gratefully become Brownman's first call piano player for a number of his projects. So when I put together my Herbie Hancock influenced Nick Maclean Quartet I asked/begged Brown if he would be my Freddie Hubbard. He agreed and is now part of the core sound of this group. Brown brought me onboard Browntasauras Records as a label manager shortly after that and we've worked very closely ever since to together propagate his label's main ideologue – to catalyze the creation of new jazz art. Whether it's my projects, his own, or some young 20-something he has his eye on – that's always at the cruz of his intentions : to create (or inspire the creation of) new jazz art.

Brownman has produced every release I've had since 'The Long Slog' including a double disc solo piano release that came out in 2021. We've become very close friends over the years,

but in addition to that I very much view Brown as a mentor. He's done a lot to help shape my trajectory over the last 8 years and has guided my development into areas I'd previously had very little experience with including hip hop and Latin jazz just to name two of countless musical arenas we've explored together in depth, as well as other non-musical aspects of the music business. He is also an armchair film expert and we spend a lot of our social time discussing film, movies and tv series (we consume much while on tour and Brown enjoys making lists with titles like "Mankind's greatest sci-fi TV Series, according to Brownman", that I invariably am almost always in agreed with).

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Ben Duff is the bassist on this record and is 24 years old. He and I have been playing together in a few different contexts for about 4 years. He can be a quiet cat but also has a very quirky and odd sense of humour that can come out in unexpected ways. He's got a heart of gold, a keen intellect (that's often sublimated until he finally speaks on a subject he's knowledgeable about) and just as at home being the immovable rock as he is diving down the rabbit hole and seeing where a tune goes. All of this stuff I feel comes out in his playing which is deeply melodic. He is in high demand in Toronto and among the 20-something in the scene, revered.

Jacob Wutzke is a powerhouse behind the drums and now, at only 25 years old, has a large international following on Instagram. He has incredible work ethic, is highly studied and is the kind of cat who makes sure he's got all of his bases covered and the foundations laid firmly, before he lets it all go and reinterprets it all, letting the foundation guide his musical choices organically. He's one of the most interactive drummers I've played with and has done a lot to shape the sound of the ensemble. He is also Brown's 1st call for hard-swinging tunes, has written 3 drum method books and is the drummer for Juno winning vocalist Caity Gyorgy.

Both of them are good friends who play together often, so there's a rapport and trust between them similar to what Brown and I have.