

NICK MACLEAN QUARTET

Rites Of Ascension

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This album, the debut release from the Nick Maclean Quartet, represents a modern re-imagining of the spirit of Herbie Hancock's primordial 60's quartet. Not to be confused with a "tribute" recording, this record has a character of its own, while being homage to Hancock's influence on Maclean both as pianist and composer. The depth of the synergistic connectivity between all 4 hand-picked members of Maclean's quartet are a cornerstone to the ensemble's sound and group dynamic. Thus its completion represents Maclean's examination of the modern jazz ethos with all the intriguing challenges, opportunities and possibilities that go with it.



Having been asked in 2016 to write Nick Maclean's electric-jazz group SNAGGLE's liner notes - iconic Canadian jazz piano player, and former teacher to Maclean, the luminous David Restivo again writes this debut album's liner notes. His extreme versatility as both composer and pianist, coupled with his depth of knowledge of Maclean's artistry make him the only choice for this recording's commentary. Below, he thoughtfully dissects the album with an insightful breakdown.

Maclean's Voice Finds Inspiration In Hancock

By David Restivo

The wonderful and sadly recently departed pianist Geri Allen once said that, for her generation of improvising pianists, Herbie Hancock was their Art Tatum. A strong statement, but a hard one to argue with. Both consolidator and innovator, no other jazz pianist in the 1960s and '70s so brilliantly summarized the past while creating a blueprint for the future, having absorbed the elegant swing of Wynton Kelly, the bebop language of Bud Powell, the drive of Peterson, the modality of Tyner, and the lyricism and harmonic savvy of Evans; equal parts conservatory and Chicago South Side, he is steeped in the deep blues and funk of the African American vernacular while simultaneously indebted to the European soundworlds of Ravel, Hindemith, and others. He also is a true improviser, one of the few - a risk-taker, a tightrope walker. Finally, Hancock is one of the most important composers in modern jazz.

Pianist and composer Nick Maclean, 26 years old at the time of this recording, is not the first individual to tackle Hancock as a "tribute" subject, but he has done so in very much the spirit of Hancock, which is to say that this album is very much about Maclean's artistic voice (and those of his carefully chosen colleagues), with Hancock as inspiration/catalyst, as opposed to an imitative effort. As such, the first three tracks on this record are re-inventions of Hancock classics - an homage to the genius of this celebrated composer. The rest of the repertoire (with the exception of the final piece) are original compositions - largely Maclean's - inspired by Hancock while also presenting a highly individual and distinct evolution from the source material.

1) Cantaloupe Island (4:55) by Herbie Hancock

Solo order: trumpet, piano

The now almost overly-familiar Cantaloupe Island, starts with 4 poignant Herbie Hancock words, while Maclean's piano sets up the groove and tone of the piece as drums and bass pick up on the vigorous activity and jump in. Brownman's improvisatory entrance sets up a track full of a bubbling, infectious energy showcasing some melodic variations and chromatic side-stepping on the head, followed by some inspired solos from Brownman Ali on trumpet and Maclean on piano. Now considered a classic Hancock blend of modal jazz and funk, the tune receives a fresh treatment here.

2) Driftin' (6:39) by Herbie Hancock

Solo order: trumpet, piano

Driftin', an early offering from Hancock's debut album on Blue Note, Takin' Off, is a mid-tempo swinger in the Horace Silver vein and its treatment here stays quite true to the spirit of the original recording. The track starts with a strong band shot before immediately settling into a delicious, straight-down-the-middle swing feel. Brownman offers a melodic and playful solo, teasing the listener with some implied double time caught deftly by Goertzen on the drums. This theme is revisited in Maclean's solo. After a short, tuneful offering, the double time – this time no longer merely implied – aggressively displays itself through Maclean's energetic lines as well as the sizzling lift bass and drums bring to the track. After a restatement of the melody the tune closes with some animated trading between Maclean and Brownman.

3) One Finger Snap (4:31) by Herbie Hancock

Solo order: piano, trumpet, drums

One Finger Snap, like Cantaloupe Island, first appeared on Hancock's 1964 release, *Empyrean Isles*, which interestingly features the same relatively uncommon instrumentation, trumpet quartet with rhythm section and no reed player. The explosive opening 4-bar statement is actually the only part of the now-universally-accepted melody that Hancock wrote, the remaining 16 having been improvised by trumpeter Freddie Hubbard. Already being an infamously difficult tune – due in large part to the speed at which it is performed, Maclean and the quartet play the piece slightly faster than the original (!) giving the track a ferocious, take-no-prisoners attitude. Maclean takes the first solo, engaging in some dancing rhythmic interplay with drummer Tyler Goertzen, while bassist Jesse Dietschi lays out a firm, driving foundation. Brownman takes over with a fiery, Hubbard-esque excursion before passing the baton to Goertzen, whose concluding statements are both virtuosic and melodic.

4) Temptation of the Crossroads: Blue vs Brown (7:15) by Nick Maclean

Solo order: trumpet, melodica, bass, drums

The first of the non-Hancock originals, Temptation of the Crossroads: Blue vs Brown, invokes the classic blues mythology in which the master musician (Robert Johnson, self-mythologized in his song Crossroads, being the classic example, though similar tales have followed artists from Paganini to Led Zeppelin) gives his soul to Satan in exchange for his other-worldly virtuosity. Sometimes the tale manifests as a battle royale between good and evil, and here the Dark Lord is taken on by a plunger-wielding Brownman as the band explores the deep blues feeling that would inevitably have been part of the soundtrack of Hancock's Chicago upbringing. After an appropriately emotionally grimy solo by Brownman the track features a raunchy, blues-harp inspired melodica solo by Maclean as well as a thoughtful bass solo by Dietschi. Interestingly the subtitle "Blue Vs. Brown" comes from Maclean's delight in discovering his trumpet player's disdain for playing in 3. "The only thing I hate more than waltzes, are slow blues", Brownman once proclaimed -- resulting in this slow-blues-in-3's subtitle being immediately dedicated to its composer's colleague. The tune closes with another Maclean-Brownman exchange, likely over the fate that their souls shared at the crossroads.

5) Goldberg Machine (4:57) by Nick Maclean

Solo order: trumpet, piano, bass, drums

Goertzen kicks off Goldberg Machine with a gentle but insistent groove that sets up a 6/8 pattern across a 5-bar phrase, which is soon affirmed by the entry of Dietschi's cyclical bassline. While the meter fluctuations place this piece in jazz's postmodern mainstream, it also has a feeling that is reminiscent of trumpet great Woody Shaw's 1970s recordings, and Shaw's influence can be clearly heard in Brownman's solo work here. The angular and unusual rhythmic pushes in this piece gives one the feeling of a delightfully askew domino effect. There is no doubt of Maclean's intentions as the title references cartoonist and engineer Rube Goldberg, creator of the Goldberg Machine: a contraption designed to accomplish a simple task through a series of deliberately complicated chain reactions – an apt description of this track.

6) Nation's Unrest: A Tribal Conflict (5:56) by Nick Maclean

Solo order: trumpet, piano

Nation's Unrest: A Tribal Conflict, is an angular uptempo swinger which contains shades of Hancock's work with Miles Davis' "Second Great Quintet". Hancock's own wise words on openness of mind starts the tune. After a powerfully punctuated melodic statement, Brownman's solo starts with a brief, introspective development of a few small cells before diving into an intense line-driven narrative, replete with all the bluster and authority of Freddie Hubbard's indomitable character heard during his Blue Note

years. Similarly, the rhythmic drive, abandon, and slippery chromaticism of Maclean's solo, while clearly in his own voice, is also true to Miles' and Hancock's spirit of adventure and freedom within structure. Not to be overlooked, Dietschi and Goertzen's unwavering undercurrent of rhythmic potency -- reminiscent of Tony William's and Ron Carter's functions in Miles' 60's band -- serves as the all important bedrock for this tune's blazing offerings. This composition was born from Maclean's observations of the western world's ever growing political polarization. The related rising emphasis of 'group identity' has been placing the individual in danger of being lost among warring tribal factions (Hancock's final words on turning "challenge into inspiration" is a reminder of the power of the individual). Representing this multi-national conflict, this piece embodies the unrest and confusion wrought from a battle whose front lines are not physical, but ideological.

7) Feral Serenity (5:50) by Nick Maclean

Solo order: bass, piano

The beautiful ballad Feral Serenity, inspired by a series of panic attacks, takes the perspective of the part of one's mind that acts as the detached observer. The observer represents the last bastion of a quiet calm when the body loses itself to an assault of physiological ferocity. The tempestuous conflict is represented by the piece's dense and shifting harmonies while the slow and resonant introspection of the melody embodies the state of tranquility reached upon finding one's observer at the eye of the hurricane. This haunting tune continues in the vein of the Davis group, with a spirit that owes as much to Hancock's long-time collaborator, the great saxophonist/composer Wayne Shorter, as to Hancock himself. It provides a framework for a lyrical outing by Dietschi, followed by some expansive solo work from Maclean before Brownman re-states the melody.

8) Elasticity of Time and Space (4:34) by Nick Maclean

Solo order: trumpet, piano, drums

Maclean's wit and musical intelligence are in full flower on Elasticity of Time and Space, which is a bit like a collage of several facets of Hancock's influence as well as some unexpected urban influences. The tune shifts from burning-swing to hip-hop with metric modulations and tempo changes which were a hallmark of the Davis rhythm section (bassist Ron Carter and drummer Tony Williams), but presented in a way that Hancock would likely never do himself. After a percolating melody whose Blue Note era resemblances are clear, -- the band suddenly shifts from uptempo swing to a much slower, groove-infused hip-hop framing -- stretching the time before snapping back to the original tempo and feel. Brownman takes a blistering swing solo -- his mastery of line construction on energetic display. After a full-band melodic statement the group settles into earthy hip-hop space for a soulful solo by Maclean, this time on Rhodes,

punctuated by an appropriately cosmological statement by the illustrious physicist Neil deGrass Tyson. Goertzen increases the tempo with insistence, building intensity and urgency before launching into a bombastic solo of his own, punctuated by band shots. The dramatic shifts and varied influences feel as though they snap between markedly different points in our musical history – a true journey through Time and Space.

9) Madness of Nero (7:53) by Brownman Ali

Solo order: piano, trumpet

Written specifically for this group, Madness of Nero is pure Brownman. This original piece by award-winning composer Brownman Ali draws inspiration from the infamously tyrannical ruler of Rome, Emperor Nero. This long-form odyssey, the longest tune on this recording, charts Nero's historical descent into insanity and explores some of the darkest impulses of his damaged and deranged psyche via radical theme variations and oscillating tempos. Herbie's influence (and possibly Chick Corea's!) is an underlying inspiration felt more spiritually than literally. Again, the funk and swing elements are blended together, this time in a more seamlessly integrated way. Maclean's solo is full of fickleness and invention, while Ali's subsequent one provides a kind of tightly controlled excitement. Some brooding chords from Maclean, and a terrifyingly poignant statement from philosopher Christopher Hitchens, sets up a slow-building interlude, which eventually leads back to the twisting and turning melody of madness.

10) One (6:32) by Nick Maclean

Solo order: piano

One begins as a moody, rubato ballad, before easing into a broad 3/4, with Maclean weaving serpentine lines freely and evocatively around a brief Herbie Hancock statement on "music as connection", before the band returns to the opening rubato for Brownman's dark reiteration of the main theme. This track is very clearly an homage to Hancock's 'Little One' featured on the 1966 release Maiden Voyage, one of his most prominent albums. Broadly speaking One follows a very similar form and aesthetic but with an identity of its own. This performance is a very different offering from the rest of the record and showcases the depth and breadth this group is capable of.

11) Tell Me A Bedtime Story (7:24) by Herbie Hancock

Solo order: piano, trumpet, bass, drums

Finally, the lovely Tell Me a Bedtime Story brings us full-circle back to the pen of Hancock himself, in a reading that, aside from some fun rhythmic variations, stays fairly true to the original 1970 version by Hancock's Mwandishi band, which served as a kind of transitional group between his earlier, more acoustic groups and the more electric Headhunters band (although that description does little justice to the visionary brilliance

of the Mwandishi band, however short-lived its existence may have been). Maclean dedicates this performance to Kiwi-3 -- a loving and cherished feline member of Brownman's family who was tragically lost to cancer during the making of this record. The track has a melancholy quality to it capturing the playful joy of her life, the sadness of her passing, and the fond memories held by all whose lives she touched. Evemember of the quartet gets a chance to shine here, and it brings the album to an elegant close – finishing, as the album started, with a wistful closing phrase from Maclean before handing it off to Hancock for one final sage statement on our human capacity for enlightenment and potential.

This recording is everything a true “tribute” should be – homage to the inspiration and influence the towering figure of Herbie Hancock has provided to this young pianist, expressed through a voice that is very much one’s own. Nick Maclean’s is a voice we should all look forward to hearing more from.

-- David Restivo | Aug 2017, Toronto

One of Canada's most respected and influential jazz artists, Dave Restivo is a pianist, percussionist and composer. He is a 3-time winner of the National Jazz Awards' “Keyboardist of the Year Award”, and is listed in the current edition of Canadian Who's Who. He is well known for his work with Rob McConnell's Boss Brass and Tentet, the Mike Murley Quintet, and legendary songwriter Marc Jordan.

About NICK MACLEAN QUARTET

This contemplative and often thrilling quartet's explorations of modern, original repertoire is led by a fast-rising star in Toronto's jazz piano community, 26 year old NICK MACLEAN. Formed in 2016, Maclean's foursome delivers jazz between the two poles of thoughtful introspection and powerhouse conveyance, taking influences from Herbie Hancock's primordial 1960's Blue Note era recordings, while paying tribute to some of the greatest improvisers in jazz history.

Repeatedly regarded as a modern take on the ferocious and hard-swinging post-bop era, the group is frequently lauded for the strength of their collective improvisatory vision and features one of Canada's most provocative improvising trumpet-playing iconoclasts Brownman Ali, standing shoulder to shoulder with Maclean & two of Toronto's top-tier rhythm section 20-somethings: Jesse Dietschi on bass and Tyler Goertzen on drums. The synergy of the 4 is always palpable in concert.



www.NicholasMaclean.com/nickmacleanquartet for more info.

NICK MACLEAN QUARTET is:

Nick Maclean - keys, Brownman Ali - trumpet, Jesse Dietschi - bass, Tyler Goertzen - drums

Nick Maclean – bandleader / pianist / composer

Born in Ottawa, NICK MACLEAN is “one of the most gifted young Toronto pianists to come along in the last few years ” (Adrean Farrugia, Juno winning jazz pianist) and has quickly become one of the most in demand 20-something piano players in that city’s bustling jazz scene. Nick received his Bachelors of Music from Humber College in 2013, having studied with David Restivo, Bernie Senensky and Nancy Walker. He then went on to do a Masters in Jazz Performance at the University of Toronto researching synthesizer pedagogy while studying under David Occhipinti, Andrew Downing, Chris Donnelly and David Braid. Braid in particular had an enormous influence on how Maclean approaches playing and composing. From Miles & Hancock to Weather Report & Snarky Puppy, Maclean’s musical influences are diverse. Aside from the NICK MACLEAN QUARTET Maclean also leads the award-winning, groove-based, electric-jazz project SNAGGLE, who’s latest release THE LONG SLOG was awarded a Gold-Standard Global Music Award and has received international critical acclaim. The future is bright for this young visionary as he continues his upward ascent in jazz artforms of all shapes and sizes.

Brownman Ali – trumpet / producer

Trinidadian-born, NYC-schooled & heralded as “Canada’s preeminent Jazz trumpeter” by NYC’s Village Voice, multi-award winning trumpet player Brownman Ali stands at the forefront of innovation in the Canadian jazz community. A protégé to his teacher, Grammy-winning trumpet legend, Randy Brecker, he tirelessly leads 7 unique ensembles of his own including the internationally acclaimed, Miles Davis influenced, BROWNMAN ELECTRYC TRIO. In 2009 he launched his own record label: Browntasauras Records, which is now a home to all his ensembles as well as the newly signed NICK MACLEAN QUARTET. Now, using the label as a breeding ground for new and visionary talent in the modern jazz realm, Browntasauras and Brownman himself are widely regarded as vanguards for the evolution of Jazz in Canada.

Jesse Dietschi – acoustic bass

Born in Winnipeg, Jesse obtained his Masters in Composition from Brandon University and a Masters in Jazz Performance from the University of Toronto. An accomplished jazz and classical bassist, he currently holds the principal bass chair for the Markham Kindred Spirits Orchestra and leads & composes for his chamber-jazz group Catalyst Ensemble.

Tyler Goertzen - drums

Born in Port Elgin, Tyler holds a B.A. in Music from Humber College and has quickly become one of the most in demand jazz drummers in Toronto, under the guidance of Mark Kelso, Paul Delong, Barry Romberg & Jim Blackley. Performing with groups like Koopa Troop, Skirt Check & Brownman Akoustic Trio, his deft versatility is always on display.

Words from Nick Maclean on Rites of Ascension

Dave's wonderful liner notes delve deeply into the tunes themselves from a pragmatic listener standpoint. BUT, I would like to take a minute to discuss some of the larger principles (for me) at work behind the creation & execution of these collected works and the titling of this recording. Please forgive the fortune-cookie meets "Confucius says" resulting output. :)

The word 'ascension' often alludes to the shedding of earthly bonds in order to take one's place in some version of an afterlife utopia. As a non-believer I take very little meaning from this definition. For me 'ascension' is not a destination or an achievement, it is a process - a path filled with twists and turns, conflict and confusion... but also joy, meaning and purpose for those who walk well. The path of ascension is different for all of us: we all have different desires, different drives and different values. But, those I have called truly 'ascendent' - those that I admire - led examined lives, continually forging values and thoughts from the crucible of scrutiny and self reflection. They discovered which path was truly their's and then gave everything to follow it as authentically and as thoroughly as possible.

Listed below is what I feel happens musically on this recording tied to the above ideals and expressed as my own Rites of Ascension: a collection of lessons, thoughts and principles that have been re-occurring themes in my personal search for purpose, fulfillment, and understanding.

CANTALOUPE ISLAND

Wisdom and knowledge are essential tools for ascension and both are offered freely by our progenitors for those who look and listen. This music stands upon the shoulders of giants, on which I am - at present - but a tiny flea.

DRIFTIN'

Tradition is a fundamental part of education and sometimes you must demonstrate deep proficiency in it for any deviations or innovations to hold weight. But never forget the ultimate goal is to find your voice so you can tell your story, your way - informed by tradition but not bound by it.

ONE FINGER SNAP

Art involves mastering an enormous number of foundational elements that enable flexibility on one's medium of expression. This is the process of mastering the craft. But take care not to lose sight of the bigger picture - for an artist, craft is but a means to an end and the end is unencumbered self-expression.

TEMPTATION OF THE CROSSROADS: BLUE VS BROWN

Spirituality and subjectivity can be at the heart of expressions of experiences and concepts that cannot truly be captured with empirical data alone. But take care not

to lose the empirical foundation on which an intuition lies - lest one be suppressed by suppositions or hypotheses given special, sacred significance.

GOLDBERG MACHINE

Our technological advancements have improved our society in so many ways, but with them has come greater complications, distractions, and abilities for which we are not yet advanced enough to handle responsibly. Without further philosophical and ethical progress the tools of our advancement may end up being the tools of our destruction.

NATION'S UNREST: A TRIBAL CONFLICT

The process of aligning thoughts and beliefs with reality is an ongoing struggle at the core of which lies the principle that all ideas are meant to be challenged, questioned and examined. Unquestionable truths represent a failure to recognize this principle and inevitably creates tribal divisions between incompatible ideologies leading ultimately to alienation and conflict.

FERAL SERENITY

Our greatest tool for critical thinking and self reflection is our observer - the part of our minds that can step back and examine our thoughts dispassionately. To ignore your observer is to be ruled by your emotions.

ELASTICITY OF TIME AND SPACE

We can stretch our understanding outside of our miniscule piece of time and space in order to make sense of the magnificent workings of the universe. With this comes the liberating realization that there is likely no reason behind our existence, no ordained purpose or manifest destiny - we are free to find our own purpose, our own sense of self.

MADNESS OF NERO

The surest route to building a secure and stable sense of self is skepticism and investigation. These are also the best tools against those who've chosen destructive paths and wish to drag you down the same road.

ONE

The fragile and temporary nature of our existence means that eventually we all face an inevitable and permanent end to our individuality. Finding peace in that knowledge is a constant struggle for me, but it is one I believe to be of special significance for a life well lived.

TELL ME A BEDTIME STORY

Savour the joys that come into your life, take the time to experience and revel in the moment - you have no destination so don't rush the journey.

THANK YOU!

Band leader Nick Maclean wants to thank Jesse Dietschi and Tyler Goertzen - bass and drums of the Nick Maclean Quartet. You both are monstrous players and such marvellous people. It is a privilege and an absolute joy to play with you and the synergy that you both bring to the group is a rare thing which I cherish immensely. Brownman Ali, trumpeter of the Nick Maclean Quartet and producer of this record, you are a dear and treasured friend. I have grown so much under your mentorship and am constantly inspired by your thoughtful, philosophical intellect and your ceaseless drive. Your playing on this disk is bold, courageous, and unmistakably you. You have put so many hours of love and sweat into every aspect of this album and I am incredibly thankful to have you with me on this journey - my life is all the richer for it. Jeremy Darby and Julian Decorte of Canterbury Studios, who's recording expertise is simply beyond compare. Josh Bowman who's sharp ears and deep flexibility created some truly sublime mixes. Nick Blagona for his generosity and mastering brilliance. Dave Restivo for writing our liner notes – it is an absolute honour to have the thoughts of this titanic pianist and my former mentor on this album. Dean Shu for his photo-manipulative artistry in the creation of our album art. To my colleagues and students at Elite and Lippert music for helping to give me the means to pay for this album. Mum and Dad who have always been an unwaveringly supportive force in my life - I owe the core of many of my values and convictions to you. To my brother, Adrian, who's well on his way to earning his doctorate in chemistry, I'm very proud and looking forward to seeing you whenever that may be! To my wife Erin who is my best friend, my partner in crime and my life-long companion - I love you so very much. Andrew 'Nickel' Nicholson for his sage advice and hard work on behalf of us and other Browntasauras artists. Brianne Carey, Jeremiah Cashore, and Kaelin Murphy for running the door and being such firm supporters of the band. May Cafe, the Jazz Bistro and all the other clubs, venues, and festivals who've supported the Quartet's growth and development. Finally, a huge thanks to YOU for having this record and reading what I have to say. I hope you dig it and that you'll stick around for the rest of our journey, wherever that takes us. My deepest thanks... Cheers!

- Nick Maclean

CREDITS

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