

NICK MACLEAN

(Solo Piano 2-CD Double Album)

Can You Hear Me?

[released Oct 31, 2021 on Browntasaurus Records]

This double album, a debut SOLO PIANO release from award-winning Toronto pianist Nick Maclean, takes influences from jazz piano greats such as Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, and Brad Mehldau as it traverses jazz standards, spontaneous improvisations, and epic, original odysseys -- all suffused with courageous risk taking and musical exploration springing from Maclean's in-the-moment inspirations. Shaped by Maclean's respect and trust in producer BROWNMAN ALI's impactful, omnipresent guidance, Maclean delivers rich and prismatic performances here. Thus, this solo pianistic odyssey's completion represents Maclean's most vulnerable, personal, and intimate recordings to date.



Iconic Canadian jazz piano player, and former teacher to Nick Maclean - the luminous David Restivo was asked to write this album's liner notes. This is the third Maclean album for which he has written liner notes and his extreme versatility as both composer and pianist as well as his deep knowledge of the jazz artform made him the only choice for this recording's commentary. Below he thoughtfully dissects the album with an insightful breakdown.

Maclean Takes On The Pianistic Final Frontier

By David Restivo

One of the many joys inherent in teaching music is watching students gradually transform into peers. Another is bearing witness to the seemingly endless ways that commonalities of musical language and influences can be reinvented in the image of the creator. A case in point is Nick Maclean, whom I first encountered ten years ago as an instructor at Humber College in Toronto. In the decade that has elapsed since then, it has been fascinating to hear his voice emerge and evolve, spawned by many of the same sources of inspiration who fed my own development and that of many pianists of my generation, and yet coming to an entirely unique and individual set of conclusions. The unaccompanied solo recording is one of the most daunting undertakings for most jazz pianists. Jazz, as Miles Davis stated, is “social music”, and though we’ve all spent endless hours playing by ourselves in private, to meet this beast of an instrument strictly on its own terms and with only oneself to rely on for inspiration, not to mention that mysterious thing we call “groove”, is another matter. Nick has not only risen to that challenge, he has done so in the context of a double album. Twice the exposure and vulnerability!

CD1 (1) Dolphin Dance (7:59) by Herbie Hancock

Maclean begins this cycle with the Herbie Hancock classic Dolphin Dance. His previous 2017 release 'Rites of Ascension' featured his Herbie-inspired group – the Nick Maclean Quartet -- and this first solo performance is similarly steeped in Hancock influences while giving a nod to his quartet's live version of Dolphin Dance. The track starts with a familiar, gently-swinging rendition with some wonderfully inventive developments before giving way to a dramatic climax and a gradual winding down in the ending vamp.

CD1 (2) All Of You (8:09) by Cole Porter

Next is a drawn-out, impressionistic soundscape built around the classic Cole Porter song All of You. Dancing in and around the melody, with nods to the sonic worlds of Hancock and Jarrett, Nick generates a beautifully clear sense of pulse and forward motion without ever fully committing to a definitive tempo. This track is the first of many unplanned, single-take recordings on this album and the listener is left with the strong impression that Nick is truly exploring this composition rather than relying on the comfort of familiarity.

CD1 (3) Someday My Prince Will Come (7:05) by Frank Churchill

Someday My Prince Will Come originally appeared in the Disney film Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. Miles Davis made it a jazz standard, one of the earliest waltzes to achieve that status. The tender lyricism of Davis and Bill Evans is a point of departure for Maclean; but of course, it's 2021 and the idea of sitting around waiting for some prince to save you is a somewhat outdated concept, the ludicrousness of which seems to gradually dawn on Maclean as his improvisations escape the bonds of sentimentality into wilder territory, inspired by the unconventional instructions given to him by his producer Brownman Ali just minutes before recording. At the start of the track, we hear Ali instructing Maclean to “start with an introspective Bill Evans approach, then move to a drunk and staggering 3, and then end with a funky backbeat 4”. Maclean deftly executes exactly that with an improvisational flair unto himself.

CD1 (4) Why The Caged Bird Sings (6:19) by Nick Maclean

Why the Caged Bird Sings references the poetic masterwork of iconic African American poet/author/singer/dancer/activist Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, and it is Angelou's distinctive, wonderfully resonant voice that we hear at the beginning of the track. Tapping into Angelou's premise, Nick takes us (metaphorically) to church, worshipping at the altar of defiant joy and celebration thrown in the face of pain, oppression, and darkness.

CD1 (5) Difficulties Of Discernment (11:47) by Nick Maclean

Difficulties of Discernment—A look within... questions asked, but are there answers to be found? Are we even listening carefully enough to hear them? This original work is but the first of several extended and poignantly introspective journeys on this record, and as in life, this one is filled with moments of tenderness, dissonance, and an injection of the Blues. This tune is Maclean's attempt to encapsulate the idea of ideological messages being misconstrued and misinterpreted via a lack of shared assumptions or common frames of reference. This phenomenon is something Maclean has been observing for many years now, and his concern for its impact catalyzed this tune.

CD1 (6) Rational Discourse (3:53) by Nick Maclean

Rational Discourse is very much Nick Maclean, yet clearly lives in the zone where Maclean's sense of heterodoxy and angularity converges with the spirit of Thelonious Monk. As if to confirm this, there is a subtle, winking reference to Monk's Well You Needn't midway through the solo. The subject matter of this piece draws inspiration from the activism of blues musician Daryl Davis, whose voice is heard book-ending this track. His conversations and friendship with KKK members have inspired hundreds of Klan members to leave that racist organization. Monk's eccentric influences are well paired here with Davis' unorthodox approach to advocacy and create an effective depiction of the erratic directions those first conversations between an intelligent black man and hood-wearing Klansmen must have gone.

CD1 (7) It Could Happen To You (8:54) by Jimmy Van Heusen

It Could Happen to You, penned by Jimmy Van Heusen and Johnny Burke in 1943, remains a favorite improvisational vehicle for jazz players. Here it is given a minimalist, impressionistic treatment, with an internalized gaze as if to ponder the deeper implications of IT happening to one. The instructions given by producer Brownman Ali at the beginning of this track – directing Maclean to alternate between right-handed melody against left-handed responses -- show the depths of spontaneity in this performance. This may be a piece Maclean knows well, but it is being given an entirely new direction as he explores and embraces his producer's spur-of-the-moment brainstormed directive.

CD1 (8) Circle of Influence (14:04) by Nick Maclean

Circle of Influence begins as a lilting waltz with a cyclical feel that mirrors its title, gradually evolving into a more ruminative feeling that builds slowly, culminating in a series of thunderous chords and then winding down before gradually building again into an improvisational return to the original feel. Upon reaching a second climax, Maclean

completes his journey with a quiet meditation on the preceding adventures. This is the second longest odyssey of this double record, and takes the listener on quite a ride... please keep your hands and feet inside the car at all times!

CD1 (9) Estratagama feat. Brownman Ali (5:22) by Nick Maclean

Estratagama concludes the 1st CD with a fiery bang, adding some new colours to Maclean's palate: a significant injection of Latin-jazz and Afro-Cuban influences, as well as a little bit of flamenco flavouring as a nod to the late, great jazz pianist Chick Corea who past only a few months before the recording of this track. Joining Maclean on this track is his producer Brownman Ali who lays down 30+ tracks of layered claves, chekere, guiro, shaker, mambo bell, campana, kata, cymbals and even drumset creating the effect that Maclean is performing alongside a full Cuban rhythm section! Maclean, about 2/3rd into the track, overdubs synth bass completing the illusion of an entire band at play. This is the only 'non' solo piano track on the record and provides an exciting and energetic close to the first disc.

CD2 begins

CD2 (1) Blackbirds (7:58) by Lennon/McCartney & Ray Henderson

As one might suspect, Blackbirds stitches together Lennon and McCartney's iconic Blackbird with the well-known Henderson-Dixon classic standard Bye Bye Blackbird. There are hints of Keith Jarrett's gospel leanings early on as well as influences from Brad Mehldau's own recorded version of Blackbird, eventually moving into some deep swinging, reminiscent of prestige-era Miles Davis, as Beatles morph more explicitly into Bye Byes.

CD2 (2) Spartacus Love Theme / Nardis (10:32) by Alex North / Miles Davis

In 1989 the legendary Bill Evans would record these 2 songs on "The Solo Sessions, Vol. 1", creating an archetypal medley of them both that now resonates through jazz history. Maclean's own extended commentary on the famous "Love Theme" from the movie Spartacus eventually gives way to a series of variations on the signature Bill Evans vehicle Nardis. Evans' influences are felt deeply in this performance, but with Maclean's own personal musings on full display.

CD2 (3) Tell Me Something I Don't Know (13:37) by Nick Maclean

The initial driving urgency of Tell Me Something I Don't Know hurtles us along accompanied by a strident statement about freedom of speech from the late Christopher Hitchens until we breathlessly arrive at a more pensive, quiet place of inquiry. Jordan Peterson makes a vocal appearance with a statement on the importance of listening. This highlights the duality of this composition's philosophical inspirations -

unencumbered expression and active listening being vital ingredients for negotiating difficult or contentious subjects. From here, things build again in a free, rambling fashion before dissolving but never quite resolving.

CD2 (4) Footprints (6:22) by Wayne Shorter

When asked how often he rehearsed his band, composer and saxophonist Wayne Shorter famously responded, “How do you rehearse the unknown?”. Shorter’s best-known composition, *Footprints*, is a romping excursion in Maclean’s hands. Encouraged by his producer Brownman’s suggestion that he explore a Brad Mehldau-inspired static left hand texture, the tune serves as a launching pad for some truly spontaneous exploration.

CD2 (5) Things Ain't What They Used To Be (5:52) by Mercer Ellington

The Blues is a common denominator, the folk form at the root of jazz and all other branches of the African American music tree. It is perpetually a blank canvas we can return to again and again, always finding fresh shades. One of the most sophisticated sonic painters for whom the Blues was never far from the surface was Duke Ellington, and here the template for Maclean’s Blues adventuring is Ellington’s *Things Ain’t What They Used to Be*

CD2 (6) Variations On A Pork Pie Hat (6:52) by Nick Maclean

This was performed after producer Brownman Ali gave Nick a collection of seemingly random chords and told him to improvise. Nick soon uncovered that the professedly arbitrary harmony was in actual fact loosely based on the changes of a well known jazz classic. What has resulted is a thoughtful and lyrical trip through moving chords, rippling textures, and pointillistic blues abstractions which eventually gives way to a deconstruction of Charles Mingus’s *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat*, soaked in the waters of the Ellington-Monk-Mingus-Cecil Taylor continuum.

CD2 (7) The Truth Of It (15:17) by Nick Maclean

Truth of It is another of Maclean’s studies in contrast, moving from whirling dance to quiet meditation to modal excavations overturning jagged stones of clustered atonality, with a return to quiet introspection and a final long build that is almost symphonic in scope. Folded into these textures the listener can feel the uncomfortable doubts of ignorance, the meticulous combing of information, the dissonance of prejudice clashing with reality, and mind-expanding paradigm shifts that result from genuine discovery. It is clear that the *Truth of It* is not proclaiming truth, but rather is on a quest for it – and, as the longest track on this album, the listener is taken on an expansively epic journey. Once again, the performance is peppered with thought-

provoking voiceovers, this time from some of the greatest thinkers of this generation -- Richard Dawkins, Jordan Peterson, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris.

CD2 (8) Message To My Unborn Child (0:53) by Nick Maclean

A brief “duet” of sorts in which Maclean’s piano underscores spoken word by Maclean himself who movingly and humorously welcomes his soon-to-be-born daughter into the world.

CD2 (9) Zion (6:34) by Nick Maclean

Zion is the final offering in this musical odyssey and is a spontaneous improvisation catalyzed by producer Brownman Ali first giving Maclean four chords (Ema7, F#mi7, G#7, and C#mi7), then having him listen for the first time to Lauryn Hill’s quintessential 'To Zion' from the 1998 release 'The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill'. This impromptu performance gives a sunny ray of hopeful optimism that says that maybe, despite everything, we’ll be alright after all. A fitting conclusion to 18 tracks of a swirlingly expansive journey into Maclean’s beliefs, hopes, and dreams.

Nick Maclean is a searcher, a thinker, and a feeler. Listening to this sprawling set, it becomes obvious that for Maclean music is much more than a collection of pleasing sounds; it is a conduit through which one can access deeper truths and abstract emotions, a tool for divining meaning in a world where it’s often hard to come by. In sharing his musical excursions, he is giving us a glimpse inside his mind and spirit, extending a hand and inviting us to join him in this quest. Keeping in mind that it is the journey that is important, not the destination, I encourage you to take that hand.

-- *David Restivo* | Oct 2021, 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", has appeared on dozens of JUNO winning recordings, and is listed in the current edition of Canadian Who's Who. He is best known for his work with Rob McConnell's Boss Brass and Tentet, the Mike Murley Quintet, and legendary songwriter Marc Jordan.

ABOUT: MACLEAN’S Solo Piano Project

This introspective and contemplative solo piano project started in 2019. Maclean's solo piano work delves into his reflective and soul-searching realm of expression, taking influences from jazz piano legends like Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, and Brad Mehldau, as well as that of his two divergent ensembles. Maclean, who's groups have frequently been lauded for the strength of their collective improvisatory vision, continues in that

unconstrained spirit of spontaneous and courageous personal exploration in order to perform rich and prismatic interpretations of originals, standards, and other contemplations delivered in the moment. His debut 18-track, double disk solo album "Can You Hear Me?" features 7 Maclean-penned compositions, 8 standards and 2 spontaneous improvisations, all recorded at the renowned Chalet Studio in Uxbridge. Produced by the highly decorated trumpet player & producer BROWNMAN ALI, this new double album was released on Oct 31, 2021 on Browntasauras Records. www.NicholasMaclean.com for more info.

ABOUT: Nick Maclean – pianist / composer

Based in Toronto NICK MACLEAN is the winner of 6 'Gold' Global Music Awards, a Toronto Independent Music Award, 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 also holds a Masters in Jazz Performance from 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 especially as it relates to solo piano performance. Maclean has also studied and performed with "Canada's pre-eminent jazz trumpet player" (NYC Village Voice), the highly decorated Brownman Ali who signed Maclean to his Brooklyn-based jazz label Browntasauras Records in 2016 and later brought him on board as a label manager. Additional musical influences include Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Brad Mehldau, Weather Report, Branford Marsalis Quartet, Hiromi Uehara, Art Tatum, Miles Davis, Avishai Cohen (bass), Vijay Iyer, and Brian Blade. Maclean leads two award-winning groups who've received international critical acclaim - the groove-based, all-original, eclectic electric-jazz project SNAGGLE, who's 2016 release THE LONG SLOG received multiple awards; as well as the exploratory, Herbie Hancock influenced modern jazz ensemble NICK MACLEAN QUARTET who's 2017 release RITES OF ASCENSION shot to the top of jazz charts internationally & has toured both across Canada and abroad. The future is bright for this young visionary as he continues his upward ascent in jazz artforms of all shapes and sizes. www.NicholasMaclean.com



ABOUT: Brownman Ali – producer (all percussion on “Estrategema”)

Trinidadian-born, NYC-schooled & heralded as “Canada’s preeminent Jazz trumpeter” by NYC’s Village Voice, though multi-award winning trumpet player Brownman Ali stands at the forefront of innovation in the Canadian jazz community, he is also a producer in high demand. A protégé to his teacher, Grammy-winning trumpet legend, Randy Brecker, he tirelessly leads 8 unique ensembles of his own including the internationally acclaimed, Miles Davis influenced, BROWNMAN ELECTRYC TRIO. In 2009 he launched his own record label: BROWNTASOURAS RECORDS, which saw the Electryc Trio's two now celebrated recordings garner substantial accolades and



press. This is the first label in the world to give 100% of all its proceeds back to its Artists. The label is now a home to all his ensembles as well as many newly signed artists, the majority of which he sits in the producer's chair for. 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. www.Brownman.com & www.Browntasauras.com

Words from Nick Maclean

As of this writing I'm a few short months away from welcoming my daughter into the world – my first child. I've been thinking deeply about the things that I want to pass on to her, things I want to teach her. Music is such an integral part of my life that values and lessons I cherish inevitably bleed into it. So I'm looking to that music to crystalize thoughts I previously have had trouble putting to words.

This record is a product born of deep levels of communication, cooperation, and trust between myself and my producer Brownman Ali. Behind the scenes if Brown hadn't taken great pains to explain and explore concepts, ideas, and headspaces fully... if I hadn't been open to letting go of preconceptions to internalize new and sometimes paradigm-shifting abstractions. If Brown hadn't created a permissive environment for exploration... or I hadn't the courage to risk error and probe undiscovered territory while that red recording light was on... these recordings wouldn't sound the way that they do. There are lessons there, not just about music, but about how to live life, and these are things I want to pass on to my daughter:

- 1) Look at the world and people around you with curiosity and humility. None of us will ever know everything, but the more we explore and expand our horizons the more we will understand and be capable of.
- 2) Take risks with your expression and allow others to do the same. The best thinking is done out loud and in an environment where the search for truth, beauty, and nobility is a never-ending exploration permissive of error rather than a recitation requiring perfection.
- 3) Don't forget to have fun and to not take things too seriously. Be quick to laughter and slow to take offense. This is an easy one to forget about but can be a great source of joy in life.

I don't think these values are anything new or groundbreaking but they seem to me like a possible beacon that may lead us out of so many of the divisions we see in our society today. They've made a lasting impression on me and my music and they are some of many things I'm eager to share with my daughter.

I can't wait for her to get here.

If you enjoyed this album, I hope that you will allow the values that made its creation so special to me, to have a lasting impression on you too.

THANK YOU!

Nick Maclean wants to thank his producer, label head, and overall partner-in-crime Brownman Ali. Your guidance and inspiration is felt all over this album and I - now and always - count myself supremely lucky for our continued collaborations and our deep friendship. I continue to see myself grow enormously while receiving ongoing inspiration under your wise mentorship. Working with you on such an intensely personal project as this solo album has been an especially rich experience that words cannot quite capture... but I hope that these suffice. Dave Chester (owner) and Justin Meli (recording engineer) at Chalet Studio - you both were such wonderful hosts and collaborators who helped make the recording experience an inspiring and positive one. Josh Bowman who's unparalleled engineering ability created such beautifully rich and detailed piano mixes. Luisito Orbegoso for his generosity and who's legendary expertise created a truly stunning percussion mix for 'Estratagema'. Justin Gray for his generosity and mastering brilliance. Neil Padaloy who's creative visual prowess made album art that is truly out of this world. Dave Restivo for writing my liner notes - this is the third album on which I've been lucky enough to print the thoughts of one of Canada's greats (and my former mentor) and it is a deep honour each time. Bill Evans, Brad Mehldau, Keith Jarrett for being such inspirations. Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Jordan Peterson, Richard Dawkins, Maya Angelou, and Daryl Davis for their thought-provoking brilliance. Mum and Dad who continue to be an overwhelmingly supportive force in my life - I love you both dearly. To my brother, the now 'Dr' Adrian Maclean (I'm very proud) and his partner Allena (welcome to the family!). To my wife Erin who of this writing is 30 weeks pregnant with our firstborn - I love you so much and I'm so excited to be on this new adventure with you. To Olivia, welcome to the world my dear daughter, I can't wait to meet you in just a few short months. Andrew 'Nickel' Nicholson for his sage advice and hard work on behalf of me and other Browntasauras artists. Brianne Carey for being such a firm friend and supporter. The Loft Cinema, Drom Taberna, La Rev, the Jazz Bistro and all the other clubs, venues, and festivals who've supported my growth and development. To my colleagues and students at Elite and Lippert music as well as my private students for helping to give me the means to pay for this album. 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.

- Nick Maclean

CREDITS

Piano by Nick Maclean

Produced by Brownman Ali

Percussion on Estratagema by Brownman Ali, Toronto, ON

Recorded March, 2021 by Justin Meli at Chalet Studio, Uxbridge, ON

Mixed Sept, 2021 by Josh Bowman at Bowman Sound, Toronto, ON

Percussion Mix (Estratagema) by Luisito Orbegoso, Toronto, ON

Mastered Oct, 2021 by Justin Gray at Immersive Mastering, Toronto, ON

Cover Art by Neil Padaloy, Toronto, ON

Liner notes by David Restivo, Toronto, ON

CD COVER



TRAY CARD

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NICK MACLEAN • Can You Hear Me?

NCC-1701M

NICK MACLEAN

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NICK MACLEAN
piano

BROWNMEN ALI
producer



TOTAL RUN TIME: 2h:27m:42s

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Catalog# NCC-1701M

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Catalog# NCC-1701M
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CD 1 – Face



CD 2 – Face



PICS







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