

REVIEWS - Letter to Herbie

Sunday, 01 March 2009

ALL ABOUT JAZZ - Published: September 26, 2008

Letter to Herbie, John Beasley |
Resonance Records

By Jim Santella

Herbie Hancock has given the jazz world numerous song memories that linger. Through this tribute album, pianist John Beasley honors the composer with innovative arrangements of his compositions, all with the kind of interplay that Hancock has always enjoyed in performance. Here, pianist Beasley, bassist Christian McBride and drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts enjoy a thorough workout from the music.

As the pianist and his crew get on board, most of the program swings hard or drives incessantly. There's nothing like a good composition to stir the pot, and "Bedtime Voyage" blends two of Hancock's tunes for an excursion that pushes buoyantly. Using tension and repose in a fruitful balance, the quintet gives this arrangement a lovely sheen. Roy Hargrove's trumpet sounds better than it has in years.

"Diana" differs from the rest of the program with its slow, ballad air and its sensual beauty. Here, the trio goes for a pure treatment, with an emphasis on the way Hancock's music can draw from within. As McBride and Beasley announce their dreams casually with deep feeling, the song fills with a loving heart.

The pianist, for his part, tosses off arpeggios and glissandi with a casual air as he and his musical partners honor the music with respect. Quite often, it's the music that makes a session; the artists merely interpret without going too far overboard. That's the case here as Beasley and his team take on some of the best music written, and honor a legendary man through their well-crafted performance.

Track Listing: 4 A.M.; Bedtime Voyage; Chan's Song; Three Finger Snap; The Naked Camera; Eye of the Hurricane; Diana; Hear and Now; Still Time; Vein Melter.

Personnel: John Beasley: piano; Christian McBride: double bass; Jeff "Tain" Watts: drums; Roy Hargrove: trumpet (2, 5, 6, 10); Steve Tavaglione: flute (2), bass clarinet (5); Luis Conte: percussion (3); Michael O'Neal: guitar (5).

<http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=30657>

JazzWeekly.com, George W. Harris

Concert Review – John Beasley John Beasley “All-Star”Quartet @ The Jazz Bakery 12/05/08

Touring in

support of his latest cd “Letter To Herbie”, pianist John Beasley wisely resisted lording his musical prowess, and instead captured the vibe of Mr. Hancock’s music by bringing alumni Bennie Maupin/reeds and Buster Williams/b into the musical=2 0spotlight. The 70 minute paeon, adroitly driven along by the fascinatingly fiery drumming of Jeff “Tain” Watts, included snappy and volcanic 20 Hancock compositions, like “4 am” as well as band originals, like Maupin’s hypnotic “Message to Pres”. The former had Maupin delivering some blisteringly intense tenor work, with Watts, Williams and Beasley locked into a death grip groove. On the latter, Maupin’s lava rich bass clarinet conjoined with Beasley’s elegiac piano to create a hypnotic third world rivulet of rhythm. The closing “Black Thunder”mixed Beasley’s bop-to funk piano fingerings with Maupin’s assertive soprano voicings, while Watts held a workshop for the attending drummers in the crowd with some eye popping stick work. Leading the band by trusting their talents, Beasley demonstrated how by serving both the music and the musicians, the true leadership comes forth.

<http://www.jazzweekly.com/>

All Music Guide, Michael G. Nastos

Keyboardist John Beasley has enjoyed success as a commercially oriented contemporary instrumentalist, and it is not surprising that he, like so many others, owes a debt of gratitude to Herbie Hancock. Beasley has chosen to rework some of the compositions Hancock made famous in his early days as a leader, and during the time with the funk/fusion band the Headhunters. Playing mainly the acoustic piano and teamed with heavyweights Christian McBride and Jeff Watts, there's a drive, verve, and passion in the trio that matches the pianist's desire to take Hancock's music to a different level.

Trumpeter Roy Hargrove is teamed with flute player Steve Tavaglione for the most intriguing idea, combining the bass and piano underpinning of "Tell Me a Bedtime Story" under the lead line of "Maiden Voyage" and creating "Bedtime Voyage." The two songs fit beautifully in the same key. "Eye of the Hurricane" is rearranged, hinting at the original but incorporating some complex rhythm changes, with Hargrove extrapolating on the original theme played by Freddie Hubbard. "4 A.M." goes into alternating phases from funky to hard bop to staggered phrasings, a very busy and fun alteration. McBride and Watts are enjoying adapting these tunes they also deem precious, using pedal points, complex and driven rhythm devices on

the elongated version of Hancock's "One Finger Snap" that Beasley has written as "Three Finger Snap." The pianist himself is a worthy foil for his acclaimed workmates, and in fact has never sounded better. More than up to the task, he is able to push and pull the bass and drums seemingly at will, and possesses impressive chops and witty ideas that flow throughout. This is a credible and laudable effort.

<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:gxfuxzwjldde>

Beasley's new Letter to Herbie is a knockout. — Jazz Critic, Brick Wahl, LA Weekly

JAZZ IMPROV — APRIL 2008
ISSUE - Page 45

By Bill Donaldson

John Beasley, recorded a tribute to one of his primary influences, Herbie Hancock, thereby indicating how Resonance will promote the work of jazz talent deserving a larger audience.

True to Resonance Records's goal of showcasing deserving under-appreciated—though in this case, not struggling—jazz talent, John Beasley's Letter to Herbie applies top-shelf resources to his tribute to one of his primary inspirations, Herbie Hancock. The quality of Resonance's presentations of artists is evident in the recording. The sound engineering by George Klabin and Pierre Paul through sonic clarity emphasizes the warmth of Beasley's sound as he indeed does adapt Hancock's style to an interpretation of some of his music without being imitative. Beasley was more aware than anyone else of the need not simply to replay some of Hancock's music, which of course no one but Hancock could play as well. Instead, Beasley takes a fresh look at some of the music. Rather than personalizing or re-harmonizing the classic "Maiden Voyage," Beasley, noting the similarity of feeling between the two songs, combines it, subtly and invitingly, with "Tell Me a Bedtime Story." Beasley weaves in phrases from each to create his own "Bedtime Voyage" with the assistance of top-shelf talent like Roy Hargrove, Steve Tavaglione, Christian McBride and Jeff "Tain" Watts.

Obviously very familiar with the breadth of Hancock's works, rather than just a single favorite period, Beasley chooses some of the less obvious Hancock compositions for exploration, such as a segment of his sound track for Michelangelo Antonioni's Blow Up. Funky and infectious, Beasley's version recalls "Comin' Home Baby" while allowing for improvisational space, unforced and flowing, particularly with Beasley on Fender Rhodes. One of my favorite Hancock compositions, but one that is played too infrequently, is "Chan's Song" from Round Midnight, the rousing concert conclusion to that movie, and Beasley takes it as a relaxed piano trio piece for repeated choruses of improvisation. Head Hunters, another of Hancock's innovative and commercial successes, is represented by "Vein Melter," allowing McBride to provide his

booming electric bass throb and Hargrove to play freely over the mixture of electronic effects and rhythm before the shimmering final fade-out.

Though Beasley has established a busy career working most recently as musical director for Queen Latifah or with the "American Idol" band— not to mention his earlier work with Miles Davis, James Brown, Dianne Reeves or Freddie Hubbard— his reverence for Hancock's distinctive style and groundbreaking albums led to his writing of two new pieces for Letter to Herbie. Beasley's "3 Finger Snap," though not intentionally at first, recalls Hancock's "One Finger Snap." Beasley's bright chords, shimmering arpeggios and bristling accents leave no doubt about his debt to Hancock. Nor do Beasley's splashes of color and syncopated rhythms and pinwheeling phrases and recurring swing of "4AM." Beasley's other original composition is "Hear and Now," which he modeled after Hancock's "Dolphin Dance," providing blocked-chord ascents and flowing lines to complement the stroll of his theme.

Midwest Record Review — June 15, 2008

So what happens when a keyboard player for Miles Davis rounds up Chris McBride, Jeff Watts and Roy Hargrove to pay tribute to Herbie Hancock from before he got soft? What happens is you get a mother of a session, even if there are no nods to tent poles like "Watermelon Man" or "Rockit." The kind of mind blowing date contemporary jazzbos are always on the lookout for, this set is also a sly tour de force of Beasley's own talents as you can hear the echoes of the piano players that shaped him along the way as well. Certainly, a welcome ear opening set that can be enjoyed by all.

<http://www.midwestrecord.com/2008/06/15/061508-have-a-rocking-fathers-day/>

NEW JERSEY STAR LEDGER - Friday August 15, 2008, 1:13 PM

PERSUASIVE TRIBUTE - "Letter to Herbie" - John Beasley - (Resonance)

by Star-Ledger Staff

Los Angeles-based contemporary jazz pianist and composer John Beasley has long deserved some widespread attention beyond his hometown. This resourceful, deeply musical CD might just do the trick. Befitting the title, Beasley surveys numerous Herbie Hancock compositions with a personal thrust -- plus one of Wayne Shorter's and two of his own. Potent rhythm from bassist Christian McBride and drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts buoy the proceedings. "Chan's Song" moves along at a modest groove, Beasley mixing song-like remarks with those funky modern, Watts and conga drummer Luis Conte adding percussive heat. "Bedtime Voyage" blends the theme of "Maiden Voyage" with the rhythmic undercurrent of "Tell Me a Bedtime Story," and boasts sizzling Roy Hargrove trumpet. "The Naked Camera" finds Steve Tavaglione's bass clarinet and Hargrove's trumpet in the frontline, riding a pliable beat from Beasley's electric piano, McBride's electric bass, and Watts'

thumping drums. The leader's solo is very Hancock-esque. "Eye of the Hurricane" deftly mixes modest and blazing tempos.

Download this: "Bedtime Voyage"

http://www.nj.com/entertainment/music/index.ssf/2008/08/squirminducing_subjects_on_new.html

NEW YORK SUN - August 15, 2008

From Herbie to Herwig and Back
Again

By WILL FRIEDWALD

It's little wonder that one of Herbie Hancock's most famous tunes is called "Chameleon": Any newcomer who listens to one of his more abstract piano solos with Eric Dolphy, then to one of his complex compositions of the mid-'60s, which incorporate elements of modal jazz and free jazz, and then to "Headhunters" or another of his funky fusion works of the 1970s (including "Chameleon") will swear that he is listening to the work of two or three different and equally ingenious musicians.

Mr. Hancock has a pop side, highly accessible and user-friendly, and an avant-garde side, which produces richly complex music that rewards deep and repeated listening; perhaps the reason that his latest album, the Grammy-winning "The Joni Letters," is such a smash hit is because he has never incorporated both spheres of his musical personality into the same project more skillfully.

To quote the title of Mr. Hancock's third album (from 1963), there are ever more "Inventions and Dimensions" to the work of this increasingly iconic pianist, composer, and bandleader. Currently, two of Mr. Hancock's admirers are reworking his signature compositions in much the same way Mr. Hancock has done in recent years for the music of George Gershwin and Joni Mitchell. This week, the trombonist Conrad Herwig is presenting "The Latin Side of Herbie Hancock" at the Blue Note, and earlier this year, the pianist John Beasley released his album "Letter to Herbie."

Mr. Herwig's engagement at the Blue Note is the latest in his series of Latinate reimaginings of the works of central jazz figures, which have included two figures very close to Mr. Hancock: Miles Davis and Wayne Shorter. In every instance, he has combined famous and lesser-known works by his subject — in Mr. Hancock's case, from "Maiden Voyage" to "Oliloqui Valley" — and reworked them with a vigorous Havana-style salsa, utilizing a tight Cubop band that's equal parts Art Blakey and Ray Barretto. Mr. Herwig features a three-horn frontline (himself plus Craig Handy on reeds and Mike Rodriguez on trumpet) and a Latin-inflected rhythm section (Bill O'Connell on piano, Ruben Rodriguez on Fender bass, Robbie Ameen on drums, and Pedro Martinez on percussion), plus two special guests, the trumpet headliner Randy Brecker and veteran Puerto Rican pianist Eddie Palmieri.

The effect is to make Mr. Hancock's abstract melodies more distinct and his fusion-y tunes more fundamentally boppish. When you listen to Miles Davis's

original 1967 recording of Mr. Hancock's abstract "The Sorcerer," for instance, you're never really cognizant of the melody — the main thing is the individual solos and the sorcery, as it were, of the extended trade of phrases between Davis and Mr. Shorter. Mr. Herwig's arrangement of "Sorcerer," which he performed at the Blue Note, includes the chase chorus, restaged as a brass battle between himself and Mr. Brecker, but there's also a lot more of what you might call the melody. The more fusion-oriented "Oliloqui Valley," meanwhile, becomes a compelling exercise in jazz repertory, climaxing in a tutti passage whereby Mr. Herwig transcribed the original 1964 Hancock piano solo (from "Empyrean Isles") and arranged it for three horns — trumpet, trombone, and tenor — playing in tight harmony without the benefit of piano.

Like an expert travel agent, Mr. Herwig, with the aid of Mr. Palmieri, redirected the famous "Maiden Voyage" from a vaguely Caribbean destination into a sea cruise to San Juan. But Mr. Herwig is also smart enough not to look a gift horse in the mouth: Where a Hancock classic already has a Latin component, he's not about to let it go to waste. The tune that originally established Mr. Hancock's bona fides as a composer was 1962's "Watermelon Man," an early example of Latin funk that was a hit for Mongo Santamaria. At the Blue Note, "Watermelon Man" also climaxed in a trade of riffs and licks, doled out on the principle of diminishing returns: The four horns (including both trumpeters) traded eight-bar phrases, then fours, then twos, until they were challenging each other to see who could stuff the most notes into a couple of beats.

The opening set on Tuesday closed with what could be called the second half of the Herbie Hancock fruit medley, from "Watermelon Man" to "Cantaloupe Island." This much-sampled tune, one of the definitive 6/8 Afro-Latin jazz vamps, provided a high-energy climax, with the horns charging like bulls down the streets of Pamplona. Or maybe, since Mr. Handy quoted "The Mexican Hat Dance," it was the streets of Guadalajara.

Likewise, there's some genre-hopping at play on John Beasley's "Letter to Herbie." "4 AM," which Mr. Hancock originally played on a 1980 fusionista album ("Mr. Hands"), is here done as a straight-ahead acoustic trio number with bassist Christian McBride and drummer Jeff Watts. But revisionism isn't exactly the point; the guiding idea is to revisit a variety of tunes from all over the pianist's career in formats that include the trio as well as the trumpeter Roy Hargrove, who performed with Mr. Hancock on the famous "Directions in Music" album.

Mr. Beasley, who, like Mr. Hancock, also toured with Miles Davis and is well known in both pop and "commercial" music (whatever that means) as well as jazz, is at his most creative when combining several lines in original and arresting ways. On "Letter to Herbie," rather than playing "Maiden Voyage" straight, he juxtaposes it with the somewhat similar "Tell Me a Bedtime Story" from 1969, placing both tunes in a copacetic key and titling the result "Bedtime Voyage." He also takes one of Mr. Hancock's boppier classics, "One Finger Snap," and stretches it out to the point where two more fingers are necessary — hence the "Three Finger Snap."

But the money track, for me, is "The Naked Camera," which was a somewhat dark and somber 3/4 on Mr. Hancock's "Blow Up" soundtrack in 1966, but here becomes a much more cheerful Afro-Caribbean excursion, with light electronics and pop flavoring evoking Carlos Santana and Bob Marley.

Messrs. Herwig and Beasley serve to increase our anticipation for Mr. Hancock's albums and voyages to come, maiden or otherwise.

<http://www.nysun.com/arts/from-herbie-to-herwig-and-back-again/83917/>

Jazz Week's Jazzproglis - Jae Sinett's E-newsletter

Speaking of re-harmonizations...whew! I've always been a fan of John's work and it's good to hear him again. Thoughtful interpretations of Herbie's compositions with his own touch..which is the way it should be. The twist on "Maiden Voyage"...."Bedtime Voyage" is the standout...along with "Eye Of the Hurricane."

JAZZ.COM

Chan's
Song - Reviewer: Walter
Kolosky - July 15

Rating: 88/100

With the exception of a reworking of sorts of "Maiden Voyage," John Beasley stayed away from the most iconic of Herbie Hancock's pieces on this tribute recording. This is both a wise and brave thing to do. Beasley gets points for this approach.

"Chan's Song" was written by Hancock for the soundtrack of Round Midnight, and though Stevie Wonder ended up writing lyrics for it and some jazz players have covered it, it still remains outside of iconic status. In the liner notes Beasley says he approached the tune as if Hancock's "Head Hunters" were playing it." This can best be heard in McBride's ever-so-slightly funk electric bassline. Though to this listener, the piece comes off sounding more like what you might hear from Lonnie Liston Smith's "Quiet Moments" period without the strings. I like that Lonnie Liston Smith period, so that is a good thing to these ears.

One thing that is not quite fair, and Beasley alludes to this in his notes, is to be compared to the original performance. Unluckily for Beasley, I have the Round Midnight soundtrack. My rating is thus delineated: Beasley and crew receive 88 points for a fine arrangement and professional performance. Three

points are removed because of Bobby McFerrin's wonderful trumpet-like vocalese on the original Herbie Hancock performance. It would have been nice to hear Roy Hargrove, who is also on Letter to Herbie, give that a whirl. I know that is unfair. Life is unfair.

Upon some further reflection, I have decided that life should be fair after all. Right here and now I give the three points back.

Bedtime Voyage - Reviewer: Ted Gioia, July 9

Rating: 88/100

Everybody from Ayler to Zappa has a tribute band. We love to pay our respects to the masters of the past. But how do you get traction on a Herbie Hancock tribute recording, when Herbie is still active and just released one of the finest CDs of his career? Beasley starts with ambitious plans for personnel. Christian McBride and Jeff 'Tain' Watts electrify the rhythm section, and Roy Hargrove shines on trumpet. Clever arrangements help too. Hancock never wrote a song called "Bedtime Voyage," but Beasley does a 'mash-up' of "Maiden Voyage" and "Tell Me A Bedtime Story," two of Herbie's finest compositions. This mash is a real banger, and I would go back for second helpings. Beasley is quite effective, especially as a rhythm section pianist, and has mastered a number of Hancock's signature devices. Some of his most interesting work here comes in easily missed passages tossed off while comping. All in all, this is a strong performance and a notch above your typical tribute project.

POPMATTERS.COM - 30 July 2008

by Brendon Griffin

It's one of the quirks of an aging music business that even as Herbie Hancock basks in acclaim for his Joni Mitchell tribute, someone is releasing a tribute to him in turn. And as a veteran who's worked with Miles Davis and Freddie Hubbard, as well as the likes of James Brown and Steely Dan, pianist John Beasley is a natural for the lesser heard back pages of a man forever at the interface of jazz and popular music. Herbie's mod-jazz soundtrack to Michelangelo Antonioni's Blow Up is more often remembered for "Bring Down the Birds"; but Beasley brings down an entirely unexpected, subterranean-deep cover of "The Naked Camera" instead (with a fade-out reverie echoing Miles' Dingo OST). While he likewise goes electric for a brief, dub-centric take on Headhunters booty, "Vein Melter", this is in large part an acoustic salute. Flying with the likes of Roy Hargrove and a club class rhythm section (Christian McBride and Jeff Watts), he simply lets Herbie's spirit wash over him, channelling that chordal aggregate and lyrical fizz into elegantly conceived quasi-covers, redefinitions and Hancock-ian originals.

<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/61467/john-beasley-letter-to-herbie/>

DOWN BEAT JAZZ – May Issue -
Posted 12/20/2007

Rising Jazz Stars Foundation Launches Resonance Label

The March release includes a previously unreleased quartet recording made in London by pianist Gene Harris. The first Resonance CD is a tribute to Herbie Hancock by pianist/composer John Beasley who will be joined by Roy Hargrove, Christian McBride and Jeff "Tain" Watts.

Floodwatchmusic.com - MP3 Blog - Monday March 10th 2008

Five Upcoming Jazz Platters Worth Checking Out

Jazz tribute albums have always been notoriously riddled with subtexts: contract filler, creative slump, unabashed eye on the Grammys. So it was with a deep sigh of relief when I neared the end of pianist John Beasley's latest *Letter to Herbie* (2008) and concluded that it was none of the above. Beasley's résumé is far too extensive to detail here, but notables include film and television work, tours with everyone from Miles Davis to Queen Latifah, and recent musical director for *American Idol*. A set devoted to nothing but Herbie Hancock tunes would appear to have "bored in the studio one afternoon"; written across it in capital letters, but what emerges here are ten exciting interpretations of an artist's music whose influence is so far-reaching it simply cannot be measured. Wisely, Beasley eschews obvious run-throughs of "Chameleon" and "Cantaloupe Island"; for overlooked gems like "The Naked Camera" (from Hancock's underrated score for *Blow Up* [1967]) and "Vein Melter," transformed here into a hazy, blunted-out dub. The one standard, "Maiden Voyage" is given a fresh and intriguing makeover through a clever reharmonization. …fun listen.

SMOOTHJAZZ-E-NEWS - April 15, 2008, Issue Number: 265

Host: Steve Bauer

This is one of the very first releases for the new jazz label Resonance Records, and puts in the

spotlight a pianist with an impressive list of credentials. Beasley has performed or recorded with Miles Davis, Freddie Hubbard, Lee Ritenour, Steely Dan, James Brown and Hubert Laws. He

was recently Queen Latifah's music director on her jazz tour, leading a big band, and was for two years the arranger for *American Idol*.

Herbie Hancock's music has been an inspiration to John for some time. By accident he stumbled on a clever medley of Hancock's *Maiden Voyage* with his *Tell Me a Bedtime Story*. This stimulated him to do something special with Herbie's music. After picking the songs, he thought not about how Hancock would play them but how he would do the tunes on the tribute album. I'd forgotten

that Hancock created the soundtrack for Antonioni's *Blow Up* back in 1967, and Beasley chose a cue titled *The Naked Camera*. He gives a wild Afro-Cuban arrangement to Hancock's *Eye of the Hurricane*, and a dub-inspired twist to a tune from Hancock's funk-fusion classic album *Headhunters*. Beasley included two of his own compositions which show the influence of Hancock. His *Hear and Now* has a feel like Hancock's *Dolphin Dance*. Another aspect of Hancock's work is his wide-ranging musical exploration, and Beasley gets into that as well. The unique contributions of his guest performers on selected tracks is just one example. One radio station has Beasley categorized under Smooth Jazz, but I wouldn't agree with that at all; these new views of Hancock's musical world have just as much depth and density as the originals - only not quite as much hard swing.

<http://www.jazznotes.net>

URBAN NETWORK - June 2008

Jazz pianist John Beasley embarks upon a supremely inspired effort, taking its cues from both the philosophies and compositions of recent Grammy-winner Herbie Hancock. The 10-song album features Beasley reshaping classic works from across several decades of Hancock's catalog while also contributing originals that bear the stamp of his ideologies. Beasley is primarily showcased in a trio format flanked by bassist Christian McBride and drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts, with special guest trumpeter Roy Hargrove sitting in on a few numbers. The instant classic is Beasley's intuitive juxtaposition of Hancock's chordal classics "Maiden Voyage" and "Tell Me a Bedtime Story," which he calls "Bedtime Voyage." Elsewhere, Beasley flipped Hancock's slickly winding 1980 fusion composition "4AM into an accelerated and swingin' straight ahead whirl. He took the boogaloo cue "The Naked Camera" from Hancock's score to "Blow Up" (1967) and transformed it into something that – thanks to McBride's bass line – sounds like Eddie Harris' "Listen Here…Gone Reggae." And the trance-inducing "Vein Melter" from Hancock's funk-jazz fusion classic *Headhunters* (1973) gets a dub-inspired makeover.

<http://www.urbannetwork.com/SECTIONS/MAR08/reviews.html>

Audiophile Audition, John Henry - Copyright 2008

This is one of the very first releases for the new jazz label Resonance Records, and puts in the spotlight a pianist with an impressive list of credentials. Beasley has performed or recorded with Miles Davis, Freddie Hubbard, Lee Ritenour, Steely Dan, James Brown and Hubert Laws. He was recently Queen Latifah’s music director on her jazz tour, leading a big band, and was for two years the arranger for *American Idol*.

Herbie Hancock’s music has been an inspiration to John for some time. By

accident he stumbled on a clever medley of Hancock's Maiden Voyage with his Tell Me a Bedtime Story. This stimulated him to do something special with Herbie's music. After picking the songs, he thought not about how Hancock would play them but how he would do the tunes on the tribute album. I'd forgotten that Hancock created the soundtrack for Antonioni's Blow Up back in 1967, and Beasley chose a cue titled The Naked Camera. He gives a wild Afro-Cuban arrangement to Hancock's Eye of the Hurricane, and a dub-inspired twist to a tune from Hancock's funk-fusion classic album Headhunters.

Beasley included two of his own compositions which show the influence of Hancock. His Hear and Now has a feel like Hancock's Dolphin Dance. Another aspect of Hancock's work is his wide-ranging musical exploration, and Beasley gets into that as well. The unique contributions of his guest performers on selected tracks is just one example. One radio station has Beasley categorized under Smooth Jazz, but I wouldn't agree with that at all; these new views of Hancock's musical world have just as much depth and density as the originals - only not quite as much hard swing.

MUSIC CONNECTION -May 2008 issue

Special Issue featuring keyboardists:

JOHN BEASLEY

You know how people say, He's the real McGyver? Well John Beasley is, having played keyboards for that show and a host of other television and movie hits (from Cheers to Godfather III). Today he's the musical director of the Pussycat Dolls show, as well as the arranger and musical director of American Idol. And while he knows all about making amateurs look good, he's also Queen Latifah's musical director and has toured and recorded with the legendary Miles Davis. Now Beasley's got a tribute CD to one of his biggest influences, called Letter to Herbie.

HERBIE HANCOCK

For the tribute CD I didn't want to try to recreate Herbie Hancock, because that would be impossible and it's not in his spirit. My idea was to find tunes and to be able to flip them and change them up, and put my harmonic and rhythm sense to it. I've taken some of his more straight ahead songs, like Eye of the Hurricane, and I put in a little Afro-Cuban thing. Then I combine Tell Me A Bedtime Story and Maiden Voyage so it's kind of a mash-up. The reason why I felt comfortable doing it was because he really set it up for me and my generation to come from a jazz background and play with funk, rock, and electronics, and not just staying in one place. We have to give him a lot of praise for that.

CURRENT RIG

My home studio is pretty well equipped. I have a Yamaha T7, a Fender Rhodes 73 suitcase that I've had since 1978, and it has been tricked out by Ken Rich. I have a Wurlitzer Blacktop, the Nord Lead 2, a Nord Stage 88, a Roland Juno 6, and I still have my Mini-moog. I'm really crazy about the Kurzweil PC3. What a great axe that is: they've got the organ thing down, and they've finally got

the Rhodes samples together where you can dig in and make them growl. Then, of course, the orchestral stuff is great. I'm endorsed by Native Instruments and I love Reaktor, Kontakt, Massive, and Absynth its all really great. So basically now it's mostly in the box. I go out there with one keyboard and one laptop.

TODAY'S SESSION MAN

Now [my work is] all built around songwriting and producing tracks, because [the session work era] is mostly over. Nowadays a lot of composers have already done the bulk of the synth work using their keyboards, so you need to be able to play stuff that they can't play. I get a lot of piano work, Rhodes work, and B3 stuff. You make less money in the studio nowadays than you do on the road, but in both situations you need to have a real feel for the music. In the film world you still need to be able to sight read, and if you get a classical piece you need to be able to nail it pretty soon, because no one wants to pay you to learn it.

PLAYING WITH MILES

In 1989 I spent a year with Miles Davis. I'm on Live In Europe and Time After Time. It was fantastic! I had my Kurzweil, my Korg M1s or M2s, and the Roland D-50. Miles was way into Prince and R&B. For the most part we start out with a groove and then he'd ask people to make their solos short and funky. I think one of the reasons he hired me is because he liked my harmonic concept, where I play off the pocket. Some nights I just didn't know if I had the stuff, and he was like, I'm going to feed you. He started feeding me riffs from an OBX, or even with his horn; he'd look at me and start playing a rhythm and I'd pick up on it, or he'd play some riffs and I'd answer. I really learned how to listen to everyone in the band, and my timing got better because I ended up leaving more space I learned to be fearless of that space.

FAVORITE SCALES

I love the triple-diminished, but in my right hand I'd go up a minor third, or a half-step, and I learned how to play on top of it to create stress. You can also play a hexatonic scale over anything. Then there's polychords, where you have all the scales under your fingertips.

IDOL ACCOMPANIST

The art of it is trying to break down those songs into a minute-and-30-seconds, and that's a craft in itself. You want to stay out of the way of an amateur vocalist, and you have to remember to watch what you play because a professional singer may be able to handle some things that would be totally distracting to an amateur. It's great for young musicians to back up singers, because you learn how to follow instead of leading. It's great to know the lyrics and the melody, not just the chord changes, because then you can voice a chord around the melody instead of stepping on it.

<http://musicconnection.com/store/2008-back-issues/>

