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When Herbie met Joni

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On his latest release, pianist Herbie Hancock reads new meaning into the music and lyrics of Joni Mitchell — and the results will surprise you.

By Larry Blumenfeld



Publisher's Note: Joni Mitchell's lyrics have had a different kind of special meaning to me. Whenever I'm looking for the right headline for a story or the cover, I will say to my editor and/or art director, "I need a Mitchell," alluding to a need for a deep, enigmatic phrase. If they're still unsure I would say, "Give me something like *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*," one of my favorite Joni albums.

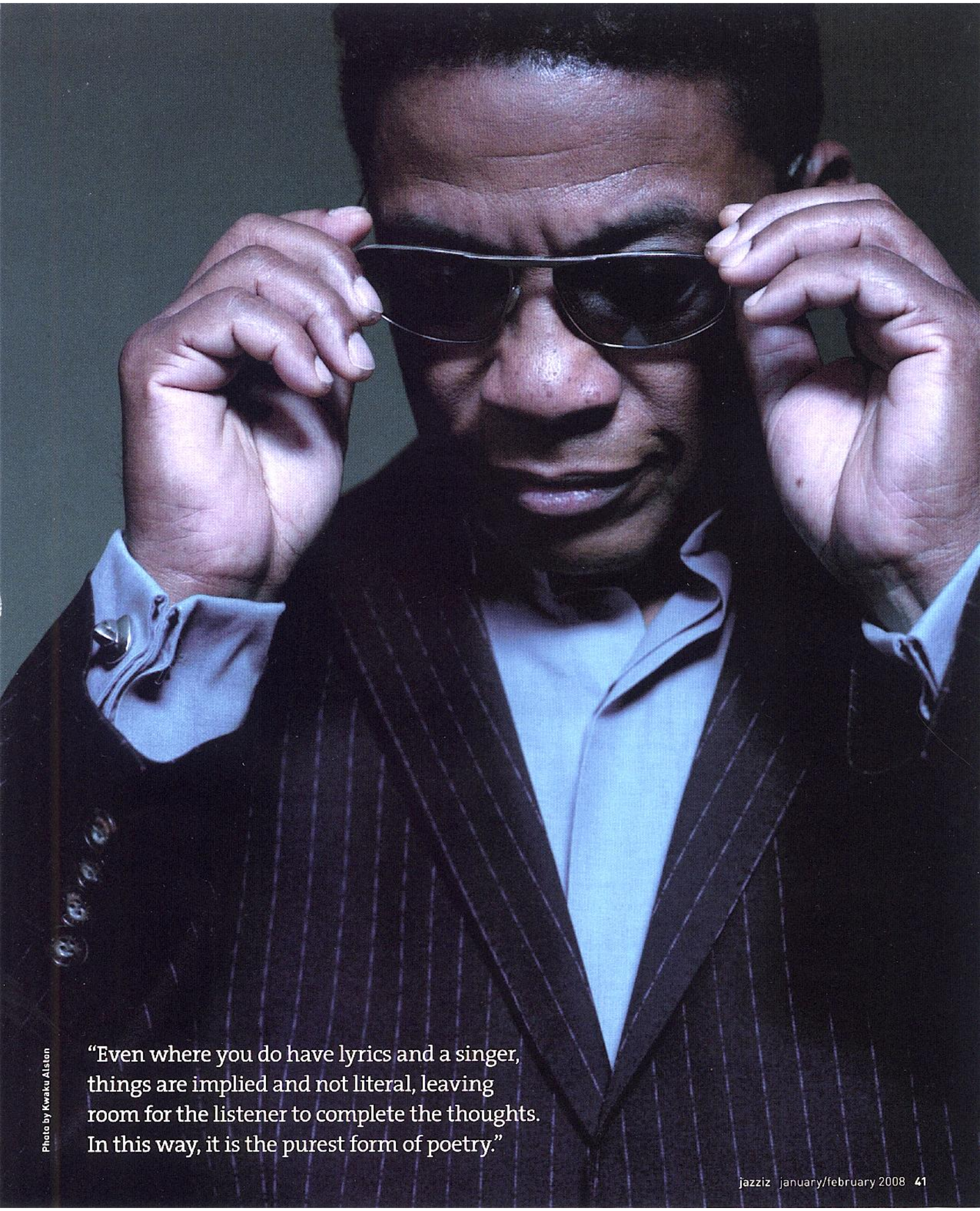


how herbie learned jon's lyrics (and made them his own)

On his latest release, Herbie Hancock tangles with the brilliance of Joni Mitchell. **By Larry Blumenfeld**



Photo by Kwaku Alston



“Even where you do have lyrics and a singer, things are implied and not literal, leaving room for the listener to complete the thoughts. In this way, it is the purest form of poetry.”

When Verve Records executive Dahlia Ambach-Caplin approached Hancock with the idea of tackling Joni Mitchell tunes, Klein was the natural choice for collaboration. "And the next call," says Hancock, "went to Wayne." A devastatingly accomplished core band was assembled: Hancock, Shorter, bassist Dave Holland, guitarist Lionel Loueke, and drummer Vinnie Colaiuta. Guest vocalists were enlisted: Norah Jones, who sings "Court and Spark" with casual ease; Tina Turner, whose worldly wise and proudly funky "Edith and the Kingpin" is among the album's highpoints; Corinne Bailey Rae, who purrs and croons through "River"; and Luciana Souza, who elegantly mines the meditative core of "Amelia." The gravelly bass voice of Leonard Cohen speaks "The Jungle Line" to Hancock's accompaniment and, on "The Tea Leaf Prophecy (Lay Down Your Arms)," Mitchell herself provides a vocal so agile in phrasing and color that it nearly steals the show.

Yet Hancock's *River* is hardly a showcase for singers. There are four instrumentals among the 10 tracks, including two songs that were early obsessions for Mitchell: Duke Ellington's "Solitude," which she experienced as a child through the Billie Holiday recording her mother favored, and Shorter's "Nefertiti," which she listened to again and again on Miles Davis' 1967 album of the same name. More to the point, the arrangements and playing here are woven so well with the words that they turn the tunes into seamless tone poems.

Time and again, Hancock and Shorter seem to complete a sung phrase. Over and over, the rhythm section adds perfect punctuation. And though this is ostensibly an album of Hancock considering Mitchell's art, it is as much about the pianist's relationship with Shorter, whose tenor- and soprano-sax playing turns out to be the most human voice in the cast. Shorter whittles "Court and Spark" into a five-note mantra, tosses out a delicate lullaby-like figure near the end of "River," and, during an instrumental version of "Both Sides Now," lands eventually on just breath.

For Hancock, the approach to this recording was both a revelation and a challenge. As Klein explains, "The big overview was that the record should emanate from the words and everything should be subservient to the poetry."

"I'm just not used to looking at words," says Hancock. "We just don't pay attention to them. We're dazzled by textures and timbres and colors and chords." Klein was Hancock's guide to Mitchell's lyrics. "Her imagery is incredible," Hancock continues, "and some of it is pretty deep and hard to get into. I'd have to ask Larry, 'What does she mean by this?' And for the most part, he knew the connections."

"It was great watching him discover," Klein says, "just like it is when you turn someone on to a great book and watch it set off sparks."

Before each session, Klein would play Mitchell's original version of a song. He'd pass out the lyrics, and the band would discuss them. "To one degree or another, I'd give



Photo by Steve Mundinger

my synopsis," says Klein, "and people would have questions of their own about what this or that meant."

Hancock was fascinated by the story behind "The Tea Leaf Prophecy," which foretold Mitchell's parents' marriage. Mitchell sang the tune for Hancock's album just one month after her mother's death, adding new drama to the lyric. He was blown away by the powerful imagery of "Amelia" — how, for instance, Mitchell conflated the vapor trails from six jet planes with the strings of her guitar. And, according to Klein, when Shorter heard the narrative of "Edith and the Kingpin," about a small-time pimp and his minions at a club, he lit up with inspiration and said, "I'm going to be the guy at the end of the bar, taking this all in."

There's a line in "Edith and the Kingpin" when Mitchell's narrator, describing the club's "sophomore jazz," says, "The band sounds like typewriters." Maybe Klein and Hancock had that in mind at their earliest meetings, as something to avoid, when they decided together another rule of thumb for the recording: less is more. "The most typical thing that people in jazz do is that they reharmonize the hell out of everything with

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[chord] substitutions, and yank out all of the main pillars of the structure," Klein explains. "Herbie knew that wasn't the right approach here. And Joni can't stand that sort of thing."

Sure enough, on "Court and Spark," the familiar four-chord pillar is intact. And there is a marvelous economy to nearly everything on *River*. Hancock and Shorter don't so much take solos as offer concise counterpoint to the vocals. On instrumental tunes, they seem to converse.

The one substantially reharmonized treatment is "Both Sides Now," the first tune that Hancock worked on, and one performed *sans* vocal. That was the only arrangement that he wrote out. (Klein did most of the others, which were more sketched than composed.) "I had all these chords in my head," says Hancock, "all these tonalities that the lyric suggested to me." When he played a fragment of his treatment at a meeting, Klein nodded. The song is about changing perceptions and evolution. With that in mind, Hancock reasoned, the chords could also change.

For Hancock, the recurring musical cycle of "Amelia" presented a particularly vexing challenge. "How do you make musical variety with six or seven verses, where each one has the same shape? Lyrically, Joni did it. Musically, I wasn't sure how."

Luciana Souza, who sang the tune, believes Hancock not only met the song's challenge, but also understood its essence. "I felt myself very calm, trusting that we were all telling that story together, all in the 23-measure cycle of her song," she says. "I felt like we were fishermen who trust the tide that rises and empties out." Souza, who has mined the poems of Pablo Neruda and Elizabeth Bishop for her own repertoire, appreciates *River* on a deep, extra-musical level. "Herbie's record translates Mitchell's music very well to a more abstract context. Even where you do have lyrics and a singer, things are implied and not literal, leaving room for the listener to complete the thoughts. In this way, it is the purest form of poetry."

When the album was completed, Klein played it for Mitchell, who loved it. "I told her we wanted to make a record that was a conversation about the poetry. She said, 'That's what I was trying to do on *Mingus*.'"

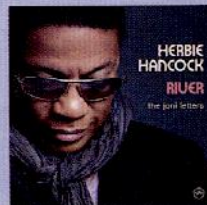
Hancock, who's known Mitchell for decades and has long recognized the poetic qualities in even her everyday conversation, feels that through this newest project he's discovered his friend's art anew. "Now that I've had a chance to study these lyrics, to live with them, I have to ask myself: 'How could I have missed out on all this? Where was I when all this was happening?'" ▲

Herbie Hancock

River: The Joni Letters

(Verve)

Herbie Hancock, a musical shape-shifter if there ever was one,



has been changing his colors for two generations now, from his early days as a prodigy of the piano trafficking in the hard-bop Blue Note heyday to his more recent associations with rock and pop figures (reinventing the funk genre along the way).

Likewise, Joni Mitchell began her career as a folk singer, investing that music with a bittersweet, feminine poetics it never really had before. Eventually, she worked with jazz talents — Charles Mingus among them — as she broadened her musical palette to embrace the improvisation native to the form. The doyenne of Woodstock gravitated to the supper club.

Sooner or later, you just knew they had to meet up. In *River: The Joni Letters*, Hancock's spirited love letter to Mitchell and her music, Mitchell's melodies are refigured, often brilliantly, by Hancock and a host of talents whose vocal range speaks well of Mitchell's own.

This release recalls *Possibilities*, the 2005 album that found Hancock working with disparate vocal talents (Christina Aguilera, Joss Stone, Annie Lennox) in a survey of songs by other popular contemporary artists. The songs on *River* — ranging from Norah Jones' torchy rendition of "Court and Spark" to Tina Turner's treatment of "Edith and the Kingpin" to Corinne Bailey Rae's sweetly expressive version of the title track, and more — gain a fresh interpretation under the guidance of Hancock the master.

Working with longtime fellow traveler Wayne Shorter and bandmates Dave Holland, Vinnie Colaiuta and Lionel Loueke, Hancock breaks down Joni Mitchell songs you only thought you knew, with interpretations you probably never imagined. Get your ears around the world-weary rasp of Leonard Cohen on "The Jungle Line," for instance.

"River," Mitchell's evocative tale of a melancholy Christmas, is especially affecting. Bailey Rae, voice almost childlike, is ably supported by the band, whose nuances (and Shorter's subtle sax shadings) lift the recognizable melody into a realm of thoughtfulness the original only hinted at. And "Amelia," Mitchell's tribute to the vanished aviator Amelia Earhart and what Mitchell once described as "the sweet loneliness of solitary travel," gains a moving interpretation by Brazilian singer Luciana Souza.

Hearing these other powerful voices in tribute to Joni Mitchell, it's a little startling when, on "Tea Leaf Prophecy," there's Joni herself: The singular timeless voice, rueful and wise and ever romantic, revealing her knack for gently crowding a lyric into a passage in a way that perfectly reflects the pace of a private conversation, a poem between two people.

This is the voice many grew up with in their days of patchouli and incense. This is music — translated by singers for our time and a pianist for all time — that promises to leave today's listeners spellbound. — **Michael E. Ross**