

HERBIE HANCOCK

On River: The Joni Letters, Herbie Hancock renews an association with the great singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell, who he first worked with on her celebrated album with Charles Mingus. With producer Larry Klein, he selected thirteen songs, and as Klein has explained, "we used the words to guide us. All of the music emanated from the poetry." They assembled an all-start band to interpret them – Wayne Shorter, Dave Holland, drummer Vinnie Colaiuta, and guitarist Lionel Loueke. Characteristically for Universal, these instrumentalists support a clutch of vocalists, from Corinne Bailey Rae and Norah Jones on "River" and "Court and Spark" respectively, to poet-songwriter Leonard Cohen who recites the dark, surreal lyric to "The Jungle Line" as Hancock freely improvises a solo piano accompaniment. Tina Turner appears on "Edith and the Kingpin," while Brazilian singer Luciana Souza offers "Amelia." Mitchell herself jazzily interprets the autobiographical childhood musings of "Tea Leaf Prophecy".

Two purely instrumental tracks, "Sweet Bird" and "Both Sides Now", from the classic The Hissing of Summer Lawns, are suffused with the pianist's essential lyricism. Two non-Mitchell songs were included because they were important to her musical development – Wayne Shorter's "Nefertiti" and Duke Ellington's "Solitude".

Following the chart success of "Watermelon Man" from his 1963 debut album, Takin' Off, and the call from Miles Davis later that year, Hancock has kept all-star company. On Verve he formed an all-star band to record 1996's The New Standard, which adapted rock and R&B numbers to a jazz format. By the time of Possibilities from 2005, that approach had embraced the wide range of sounds and styles of Sting, Annie Lennox, John Mayer, Christina Aguilera, Paul Simon, Carlos Santana and Joss Stone. I'd argue that The New Standard was Hancock's last unqualified artistic if not commercial success, and I was interested to hear if River could match it.

I spoke to Herbie Hancock on a transatlantic phone-line, and began by asking about his previous interaction with Joni Mitchell, through Mingus and various other projects. How had River come about? "It was actually at the suggestion Dalia Embarco, the head of A & R at Verve Records", he explains. "She knew I was a really good friend of Joni's and really admired her". When I first heard that collaboration with Mingus, nearly 30 years ago, I had never thought of Joni Mitchell in a jazz connection. "People don't know that jazz is very much a part of her history," Herbie agrees. "When she was young, she got turned on to jazz. One of the pieces on River is 'Solitude'. The reason it's there is because when Joni was about nine years old, she heard the Billie Holiday recording, and she was really moved by it. Today, you can really hear the influence of Billie Holiday in her singing".

It's great to hear Herbie again with Wayne Shorter, who he agrees is playing better than ever now, in his group with Danilo Perez – "That's my favourite", he adds. "Wayne is full of fire, and still has wonder about life. He's totally into fantasy, reads a lot of science fiction books, and he's a movie buff. At the same time, at the core of his life, is Buddhism. He's been practising it now for close to 35 years." My comment that Wayne is not known as someone who accompanies singers, in fact reveals my ignorance of Joni Mitchell. "Actually, a lot of Joni's later records have Wayne Shorter on – about six or seven", the pianist tells me. "I didn't know myself until I started doing research for River". Certainly on this album, Shorter inhabits Mitchell's unique soundworld, offering his instinctively sympathetic insights.

I presume it was hard to get hooked up with Wayne Shorter and the other band-members? "Oh yes, almost everyone's a band leader on that record", Herbie explains. "The guitar player Lionel Loueke has his own band, Dave Holland has his own band, and all the singers have their own groups". The bassist's role turned out to be central but not virtuosic: "The sound that Dave gets is so warm, and giving. He's a very open person. Technically there aren't

major things to do for this record [for the bassist] – it's not one that depends on technique per se, we use a more minimalist approach, it's more about feel and heart".

Joni Mitchell's songs are a resource that's not been much-exploited by jazz players. But then again, the lyrics are absolutely central and that's another neglected resource, according to Herbie Hancock: "One thing I noticed is that jazz musicians don't usually pay attention to words – and I'm a perfect example of that! I never paid attention to words until I did this record. One song I love, because the words are amazing, is 'Lush Life'. But apart from that song, I'm usually looking at harmony and melody, and band textures. But with this record we used a whole different approach. I felt if I was going to do justice to Joni's music, I was going to have to use the words as the springboard or source. We gave a copy of each of lyrics to each of the musicians, and sat in the engineer's booth and discussed their meaning. Then the discussion would kind of marinate within us...That really helped us in our performance. None of us had ever done that before."

When I suggest that River, like New Standard, shows how non-jazz material can be channelled in a genuine jazz direction, Herbie demurs slightly: "In spirit, definitely. But I don't think that it's a typical jazz album... The essence of it is, yes". But isn't it a problem that so much jazz is based on standards and the audience don't know them – so by using non-standard material you're showing how to connect with a contemporary audience? "Well, I think they know many of the songs, from their parents or grandparents...I agree, it's not the pop music of today. But I wasn't thinking about that when I did this record", the pianist continues. "I was really focussing on the idea of a more cinematic approach to the words that Joni wrote – just as elements of jazz are found in movie scores. One of the great things about jazz is that it opens up more possibilities for directions in performance – from jazz you can touch any kind of genre, it's just a wonderful foundation to have. Jazz has that openness, that respects other genres, and also is cognisant of the fact that it grew out of various influences itself, European and African".

Herbie Hancock is known as highly technologically clued-in, and I ask for his view of the changing jazz market, in this uncertain age. Do albums such as River, with a major label, have a future in the era of downloads? "I do realise that the idea of albums is not a given any more, because people can download and create any compilation they want", he responds. "That doesn't mean it makes no sense to do an album with a concept". Something is being lost, though? "Who are we creating art for? If taste changes, through natural evolution, it's important to recognise it and to embrace what's good and what's not so good, to try to help shape it in a way that can lead towards something positive", Herbie replies. "There are a lot of people today who are locked into a 20th century way of thinking... But a lot of the changes of the information age carries with it really severe problems for the human spirit."

In the era of file-sharing, he asks, "How can you maintain the lives of artists? Why would anyone want to be an artist if they can't survive creating art? There must be other ways of approaching this, other revenue streams." Joni Mitchell has just released an album with Starbucks, and he's hoping to make his own deal with them. "It's a new day, and now it's possible to create new contractual relationships with record labels – or can sell the record on your own website". He agrees that albums are becoming more like demos, and artists are having to rely even more on live performance. Doesn't that make things harder? "Maybe harder...But right now, I'd settle for 'different'! It makes it harder the older you get, because being on the road is hard. If you have to depend solely on that, at a time in your life when your health might be more challenged, that's difficult. Then it's time to get out the old brain and try and create a new pathway...The people who made horse-shoes, a lot of them are out of a job!"

When Herbie explains why "Nefertiti" is on the album, it's an opportunity to slip in a few questions about his great mentor: "Joni Mitchell loved the original recording we did with

Miles, and it influenced her writing. She loved the idea of Nefertiti, the Queen of Egypt." It's hard to avoid Davis' musical presence, yet the pianist seems not to mind discussing it yet again. "I have a great nostalgia for the time I worked with Miles", he explains. "That was a period of learning for me, that had a profound effect on the way I looked at music, and beyond music. The experience of working with the whole Miles Davis band, not just Miles – Tony Williams, Ron Carter and Wayne Shorter – and before Wayne, George Coleman. Those were my formative years". He was only 23 when he joined Miles: "So many of the lessons that I learned, and attitudes that I assumed during that time, shaped the rest of my life. Miles picked us, and he himself was such a great teacher. In a sense, Miles's overview is found somewhere in all of my work. I always somehow give it the Miles Davis Test – if it passes that, I'll let it happen!"

There's one thing I'm curious to know – what did it feel like, having Miles open for you in the 70s? We have his own view – presumably! – in his autobiography. But it must have felt strange for the former sideman. "Yes, it felt very strange to me, but I had to get rid of that feeling in order to perform", Herbie explains. "I had to figure out the logic of it. I felt bad. But then when I thought about it, I happened to have a really big record at the time, and we were drawing a pretty big crowd, and so we were the headliners, and Miles was more the opening act. But he was getting a crowd that didn't necessarily come from the jazz tradition, and was getting exposure to a new audience – so in a way it was a win-win situation. I just had to put out of my mind, this idea of feeling bad. Everyone was gaining from it. I remember thinking, I don't care what the posters say, Miles is not an opening act for me! We're sharing."

For this listener, it's the Miles Davis connection that helps to make River such an enjoyable listen. The galaxy-of-stars approach is something we've grown used to both with Universal and with Herbie Hancock, but the consistency of this band of Davis alumni, and the distinctiveness of Joni Mitchell's songwriting, make the album a real success in the genre. It's a joy to hear Wayne Shorter in this thoroughly sympathetic company, with a pianist who doesn't raise the question-marks that Danilo Perez does, even given the current Shorter Quartet's undoubted artistic success. The vocalists produce some compelling interpretations, even if I could live without some of Corinne Bailey Rae's mannered articulations. And on the four instrumental tracks, two of them with material unfamiliar as jazz vehicles, the band achieves a poetry in motion that's totally beguiling.

* River is out now on Universal