

# “Head Hunters”—Herbie Hancock (1973)

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Essay by Bob Gluck (guest post) \*



*Original album*



*Original label*



*Herbie Hancock*

Herbie Hancock’s “Head Hunters” charted a new course for a musician who had come to see the entire world as his potential audience. In crafting this recording, Hancock renewed an historic idea while furthering something novel: jazz that audiences could dance to. Not since the big band era had jazz quite so successfully reached out a broad net, merging music for attentive listening with an approach that gave everybody something to hold onto. This had been the goal of late 1950’s and early 60’s “hard bop.” That music, made famous by drummer Art Blakey and pianist Horace Silver, injected widely beloved African American musical styles—gospel and the Blues—into modern jazz. By softening bebop’s blazing fast angularity, hard boppers crafted a more accessible, finger snapping, more populist style. In fact, this was the music Herbie Hancock first played as he began his professional career at the beginning of the 1960s with Donald Byrd’s band and on his own early recordings. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Hancock’s mentor, Miles Davis, began to update this concept of bridging popular Black music—R&B and funk—with jazz. Yet it was Hancock’s “Head Hunters” that most successfully reached the younger generation with this new synthesis.

Hancock first gained the attention of a wider public when his 1962 hard bop tune “Watermelon Man” became, in the hands of Mongo Santamaria, a Latin dance craze. An intriguing road connects the 1962 “Watermelon Man” and its updated version eleven years later, on “Head Hunters.” The pianist joined Miles Davis’s second great Quintet in 1963, pairing lyricism and abstraction to help guide the fragile beauty of the Davis band’s music. Beginning in 1965, the Quintet’s emphasis on improvisation that was guided by close listening and collective intuition, rather than by chord changes, broke new ground. A middle path developed between the avant-garde sensibilities of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and John Coltrane and more broadly familiar, idiomatic forms of jazz.

After five years in the Davis band, Herbie Hancock continued that ensemble’s exploratory dynamism within his own Sextet. An intense post-bop sensibility alternated with more R&B inflected tunes that had been commissioned for Bill Cosby’s “Fat Albert” television pilot. In fall 1970, the Sextet morphed into what became informally known as the Mwandishi Band, providing a vehicle for Hancock to blaze a dramatically new path. This was an ensemble fronted by three horns—Bennie Maupin on reeds, Eddie Henderson on trumpet, and Julian Priester on trombone—and a rhythm section that included Buster Williams on bass and Billy

Hart on drums. Together they grafted the principles of intuition and collective improvisation with musical flavors from funk to the avant-garde.

On the albums “Mwandishi,” “Crossings,” and “Sextant,” Hancock partnered with producer David Rubinson to use studio post-production as a compositional tool. The result was a blend of acoustic and electronic sound, an aesthetic furthered on “Crossings,” with sound design by synthesizer pioneer Patrick Gleeson. “Sextant” and a film soundtrack to “The Spook Who Sat By the Door” increasingly leveraged funk riffs while heightening the level of electronic abstraction. The use of repeating and evolving synthesizer sequences recorded and replayed as tape loops on “Sextant’s” “Rain Dance” helped pave the way towards “Head Hunters.”

In the final days of the Mwandishi band, Hancock felt a growing desire to focus more on music he termed “of the earth” and less on abstraction. His growing Nichiren Buddhist practice guided a desire to connect with audiences in a more direct manner, such as he witnessed when sharing a bill with the Pointer Sisters. The financial unsustainability of the Mwandishi band led to its dissolution and the rise of the Headhunters band, upon which Hancock placed his hopes to fulfill these new aesthetic goals. The new band and its management never anticipated the stratospheric reception with which their inaugural recording, “Head Hunters,” would be met.

The album opens with “Chameleon,” built upon a spiraling, funky riff played by Hancock on synthesizer and an infectious dance beat laid down by drummer Harvey Mason. Bassist Paul Jackson adds higher-pitched commentary while Hancock presents funky patterns on clavinet. A simple tune is played upon this cyclical foundation, which gives way to a more lyrical section. The two contrasting moods open wide space for sprawling solos by Bennie Maupin on saxophone and Hancock on Fender Rhodes electric piano and Arp synthesizer. The two musicians were the only carry-overs from the previous band. The performance finds broad middle ground between the simplicity of the opening riff and the emotional and artistic reach of the solos.

The catchy tune “Watermelon Man” begins with multi-layered rhythms, delivered using surprising timbres: percussionist Bill Summers presents the first layers, blowing across the top of a beer bottle, simulating the sounds of a Pygmy wind instrument. Next, a motif is outlined by the flute and is joined by a foot-tapping electric bass line. Hancock’s riffs on clavinet prepare the way for the entry of the theme. “Sly,” a tribute to the lead of Sly and the Family Stone, is a tune in two moods: the melody, more complex than the first two on the record, toggles between up-tempo and slower ballad sections. The pace quickens for the subsequent solos; the first is by Maupin on soprano saxophone. Its serpentine lines, angular phrasing and greater abstraction reference Maupin’s John Coltrane influences. Hancock’s solo, played on Fender Rhodes electric piano, draws upon melodic and rhythmic repetition, moving between a pentatonic tonality, chromaticism, and transposition. The album closes with “Vein Melter,” a mysterious sounding melody woven by Maupin over a dirge-like repetitive drum pattern. It is elaborated with a pentatonic Herbie Hancock solo; at the beginning, his phrases are repeated and detuned using an echo device. Periodically, synthesizer textures add orchestral color.

“Head Hunters” was followed with two additional recordings by the same band (with Mike Clark on drums) plus a live recording available in Japan. The band continued to perform

periodically without Hancock, whose work during the balance of the 1970s followed several tracks: the acoustic V.S.O.P. Quintet featuring 1960s Miles Davis Quintet personnel (with Freddie Hubbard in place of Davis), populist solo recordings, and duets with pianist Chick Corea. During the decades that followed, Herbie Hancock grew in acclaim, as a musician comfortable in multiple genres, and as a humanitarian. He has won multiple awards, served in prominent academic roles, and was honored with the appointment as a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador.

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