

HERBIE HANCOCK

Depending on the day, Herbie Hancock might perform any number of roles. He's the nation's first-call jazz ambassador, a futuristic technology advocate, a dedicated educator, and of course, an American music luminary. Most of all, like all great artists he makes things new again. He did it for us with *The New Standard*, when he found the swing and the meaning in pop classics. He did it with his kaleidoscopic take on Gershwin's *World*—and took home three Grammy® awards for it.

Yet for all Hancock's accomplishments both in and out of music, there's one thing he'd never done. "I had never thought about lyrics before," he says. "Never."

River: The Joni Letters is Hancock's journey into the world of words, his initiation as a man of letters. "I wanted the lyrics to be the foundation for this whole project, for everything to stem from the lyrics and their meaning."

"What I have done before in projects is to take someone else's song that I like and re-harmonize it," says Hancock, who helped pioneer post-bop jazz, in which lyrics are usually a creative point of departure. "Before I set out to do that on this record, I figured I better find out what Joni did and why Joni did what she did with the melodies. Because if the melodies took a certain direction, knowing her, she took those twists and turns and used certain devices based on what's happening in the lyrics. She's a master at that."

To understand the richly allusive connection among melody, harmony and poetry in Mitchell's work, Hancock enlisted the help of producer Larry Klein, Mitchell's long-time collaborator. "We sat together for a long time, months before we actually recorded the record," Klein says. "We just listened to the songs and looked at the lyrics together. We would discuss song origins, allegorical stuff Joni had told me or in other cases leave the interpretation nebulous, as it was meant to be. This was a whole new world for Herbie to be thinking in."

Hancock then assembled a group of the world's top musicians, including the incomparable Wayne Shorter on soprano and tenor sax, the brilliant bassist and composer Dave Holland, (a musical cohort of Hancock and Shorter's who shares their adventurousness, as well as the Miles Davis imprimatur), drummer Vinnie Colaiuta (a recent member of Hancock's band as well as having played extensively with Mitchell and Sting), and Benin-born guitarist Lionel Loueke, also a member of Hancock's band.

When they got to the studio Hancock and Klein led another literary seminar. "Before we recorded any of the songs, we gave a copy of the lyrics to each guy in the band," Hancock says. "We sat in the engineer's booth and discussed the meaning of the lyrics word by word, phrase by phrase, and got into the nuances of the lyrics." Applying such advanced musical minds to Mitchell's poetry and casting vocal selections with some of the music world's strongest singers, *River: The Joni Letters* turned out to be no ordinary tribute record. In appreciation of Mitchell's gifts, the musicians created a third entity in which sound conveys word, word conveys sound, and listening is a happy confusion of the two.

A haunting chromaticism marks Hancock's piano intro on River's opening song, "Court and Spark," the title track from Mitchell's bestselling album. In this musical setting, Mitchell's familiar "Court and Spark" lyrics register new poetic impact, especially with the nuanced ambivalence of Norah Jones's vocal. You hear as much imagery in Hancock's picturesque keyboard phrases on "Amelia"—especially when he paints the "747s over geometric farms" that singer Luciana Souza darkly intones.

Still, Hancock was careful not to take lyrical adaptation too literally. "One thing that we all agreed on was to be cinematic and dramatic in our interpretation of the lyrics," he explained. "Sort of like we were doing a movie score in many ways. Because when you're writing a movie score, you don't write every single nuance that goes on onscreen. If you do that it's kind of 'cartoony.' So sometimes we decided to just let the lyric be. The music should be the cushion, if anything, under the lyric, that supports it, so the lyric is the focus."

The musicians certainly "let the lyric be" when they support Corinne Bailey Rae's optimistic vocal on "River." Elsewhere, capturing a tune's mood leads the band to altogether different perspectives. While Tina Turner channels the noirish nightlife characters of "Edith and the Kingpin," Wayne Shorter responds on tenor saxophone from a more peripheral vantage point. Hancock explains how Shorter found new character in the tune:

"When we were talking about the tune, Wayne said, 'I'm going to be like one of the cats at the bar who's talking to some of the chicks or something, or be part of the hubbub going on over at the bar at the club.' Now, that's not in the lyrics but I realized that's a brilliant part to play. Because the song is not just about the characters in the lyric—Edith and the Kingpin. It's also about the characters that are there in the environment or scene that the lyric is based off of."

Joni Mitchell herself sings "Tea Leaf Prophecy," an autobiographical song based on the story of her parents' courtship. The recent passing of Mitchell's mother made for a moving performance. "This is a song of her parents meeting and it's kind of a WWII love story, but because of the timing it is also a prayer," Klein says. "She approached it vocally as sending something up to her Mom."

Other songs needed to be instrumentals, Klein says, and none more than "Both Sides Now": "That song was in our in-pile from the beginning because it's been such a lynchpin song of Joni's. And I was really set that we had to do that instrumentally. There's no reason to introduce another vocal version of that into the world, really, since there are so many already existing."

Hancock gives Mitchell's most covered song his most far-reaching interpretation, making space for his own harmonic invention: "There are places I decided would be resting places before I went to the next phrase, which Joni doesn't have on her recording of the song," he says. But again, mindfulness of Mitchell's poetic themes guided his impressionistic approach: "Completely reharmonizing 'Both Sides Now' seemed appropriate to the lyrics."

Mitchell's lyrical perspective broadens verse by verse as she moves allegorically from looking at clouds "from both sides" to considering love and finally all of life "that way." Hancock's instrumental develops parallel to the lyric, gaining dimension with each pass at the melody. "The

melody is there,” Klein explains, “but the band is completely recontextualizing the melody each time through—in the same way Joni recontextualizes experience with each new verse. It builds up to the last verse’s majestic Copland-esque rendering.”

Musical symbolism of this order requires a group of musicians who not only speak the language of metaphor but also give themselves over to Mitchell’s poetic subjectivity with what Klein calls “perfect humility.”

“Lionel has an uncanny sense of placement,” Hancock says. “On ‘Sweet Bird’ he accents the melody with these quiet, long, sustained notes that float up and vanish. You may not hear them the first time you listen, but it creeps up on you.”

“Playing what’s appropriate is also playing minimally,” Hancock adds. “Dave Holland is such a giving and open person and his music reflects it, so when he’s in an environment his instinct is to contribute to that environment.”

“Vinnie Colaiuta’s keeping the time and doing these out of meter things against it,” Hancock says. “He’s playing almost like two different people, dividing himself in half.”

The final strokes in Hancock’s portrait of Mitchell’s world include two compositions that weren’t actually written by Mitchell but were important to her musical development. Duke Ellington’s “Solitude” made it onto the record, Hancock says, because Billie Holiday’s version “went right to Joni’s heart, even at age nine, which is when she first heard it. You can really hear how Joni’s influenced by Billie, in her phrasing and even in the sound of her voice—just check out that little vibrato thing at the end of Joni’s notes.”

Wayne Shorter’s asymmetrical masterpiece “Nefertiti” was first recorded by Hancock and Shorter on Miles Davis’ classic album of the same name. On *River: The Joni Letters*, these musicians generously recreate their own composition in the thrilling way Mitchell first experienced it—as though they’re hearing the tune through the prism of her idiosyncratic imagination.

With such astute musicianship the band wasn’t limited to playing Mitchell’s work song by song—these musicians improvise liberally on her complete oeuvre. Throughout the record Loueke’s African guitar inflection recalls Mitchell’s experiments with “world music” back before the term had even been coined—in 1975, for example, she used Burundi Drummers on *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*’ “The Jungle Line.” In Hancock’s version of “The Jungle Line,” however, he reduces Mitchell’s instrumentation to lone piano, with an incantatory recitation by Leonard Cohen illuminating the surrealism of Mitchell’s lyrics.

“Hopefully you’ve found a new landscape in which to set these great songs so that they can pierce the heart of the listener,” Klein says. “We wanted to stretch these things out and give more room for the lyric to be taken in by people, to soak in with them. Herbie’s the kind of artist who always asks himself, ‘Can I make myself feel something really intensely by making a record?’ And then if he can feel it that intensely, hopefully some other people will as well and it will actually help people walk around with a little more of a feeling of their heart.”

Mitchell's songwriting has given many listeners their most vivid and visceral sense of the relationship between words and music. Freely adapting Mitchell's entire body of work and expanding her musical and lyrical conversation, Hancock creates fresh metaphorical associations in her music and brings renewed life to her words. Hancock not only pays tribute to Mitchell's genius. He offers us the gift of hearing her songs reborn.

Herbie Hancock the ceaseless innovator has produced an original kind of homage: *River: The Joni Letters* is a musical passion play on Joni Mitchell's total artistry.