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Herbie Hancock: Possibilities



HERBIE HANCOCK

POSSIBILITIES

WITH LISA DICKEY

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Synopsis

The long-awaited memoir by one of the most influential and beloved musicians of our timeIn Herbie Hancock the legendary jazz musician and composer reflects on a life and a thriving career that has spanned seven decades. A true innovator, Hancock has had an enormous influence on both acoustic and electric jazz, R&B and hip-hop, with his ongoing exploration of different musical genres, winning fourteen Grammy awards along the way.From his beginnings as a child prodigy to his work in Miles Davisâ™s second great quintet; from his innovations as the leader of his own groundbreaking sextet to his collaborations with everyone from Wayne Shorter to Joni Mitchell and Stevie Wonder; Herbie Hancock reveals the method behind Hancockâ™s undeniable musical genius.Hancock shares his musical influences, colorful behind-the-scenes stories, his long and happy marriage, and how Buddhism inspires him creatively and personally. Honest, enlightening, and as electrifyingly vital as the man who wrote it, Herbie Hancock promises to be an invaluable contribution to jazz literature and a must-read for fans and music lovers.

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Customer Reviews

This memoir by Hancock (with Lisa Dickey) covers roughly seven decades up to the present in Hancock's life, both in and out of music. There's 16 pages of b&w photos from across Hancock's life. There's no contents page, but the book is broken into twenty-four chapters which explore his life and the changes in his music over the years. Included is an Index.Beginning as a child prodigy, to his classic Blues Note Records work, to his change from acoustic jazz to electronic jazz/funk/r&b, to

his collaborations with many different artists, to winning many Grammy awards, Hancock has played with many of the very best (mostly) jazz musicians of the Twentieth Century. For me that, and his musical influences, are what I wanted to read about and Hancock doesn't disappoint. Also included is his long time marriage which influenced his life greatly, and how the Buddhist religion inspired him on all levels of life and music. Beginning with his childhood, Hancock talks in some detail about his early life and the people around him. He says his neighborhood wasn't a "bad" place but it was a rough area. The first time he "met a white kid was in high school." His mother was bipolar and his father "was a sweet, easygoing man", who wanted to be a doctor. And once his family got a piano all Hancock wanted to do was play music, teaching himself the rudiments of the instrument. At eleven years of age he played with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and as Hancock says, "Then I turned my attention to the piano, and from the moment I played the first few notes, the rest of the world might as well have not existed." His earliest jazz exposure was on WGES radio, with the first jazz tune he really noticed was "Moonlight In Vermont" by guitarist Johnny Smith and tenor sax player Stan Getz. Heading off to college Hancock was torn between receiving an education in science or music. It's interesting that Hancock never practices more than an hour a day, but spends many hours analyzing music. He listened to Oscar Peterson and tried to emulate some of his style during this time. He left college one credit shy of graduating because he wanted to play jazz seriously. In 1966 he got the chance to play with Coleman Hawkins and from that point never really looked back. He next played with Pepper Adams and Donald Byrd before moving to New York, where he again played with Byrd at the Five Spot. It's from Byrd that Hancock approached Blue Note Records, which began a string of some of the best jazz albums of the period, beginning with "Takin' Off". And after that period of acoustic music, including playing with Miles Davis, he began exploring more electronic ways of playing music. "Miles, am I in the band?""You makin' a record m###a#####r!". Hancock to Davis. "I never understood how he could play so brilliantly while being stone drunk." Hancock on Wayne Shorter in Miles Davis' band. "Herbie, that post office job is interfering with the music. You've got to quit." Drummer Louis Taylor to Hancock. Hancock talks about his many and different gigs, songs he's written, and recording sessions over the first years as a serious musician. Playing with Miles Davis in his mid-twenties, Hancock was living the good life, and around this time he met his future wife Gigi. It's also during this period that Hancock tried LSD. Plus, he reveals he was addicted to crack cocaine for a number of years. From this point Hancock delves into his life in music with some great details about his music (both acoustic and electronic) and recording with different musicians. Hancock is a storehouse of information about that whole era of jazz and his stories and observations are laid out in an easy to read, you-are-there style of

writing. At times because of his conversational style of writing, you have the feeling that he's catching you up on different parts of his career in music--like the gig after his surgery--and finally getting use of all ten fingers ("I could hardly believe the irony--that my own cancer scare would find it's ultimate resolution in playing for a friend who was fighting cancer.") the night before his concert. Hancock talks briefly about the V.S.O.P. band that recorded albums in the 70's to good acclaim, and his duo with Chick Corea playing acoustic music--in addition to his work with the Headhunters during the same period."I knew I needed to quit, but I still didn't realize quite how bad it had gotten." Herbie Hancock on his crack cocaine addiction."Soon the walls started moving, and creatures started appearing on the ceiling. And then the apartment somehow became a train...." Hancock describing his first LSD trip."At some point I bought a van from the saxophonist Cannonball Adderley, and all of us would cram into it for out-of-town gigs." Herbie Hancock."For me, Miles never went away." Herbie Hancock."Tony Williams burned through life like the brightest flame." Herbie Hancock. He also talks about his Buddhist religion and how that has been a continuing foundation in his life, along with his long, happy marriage. And while those areas are certainly important to really have a fuller picture of Hancock, and his life would certainly have turned out differently without his wife and Buddhism, it's when he talks with some detail about music that the book (for me) really becomes interesting and informative. Hancock has played with and/or witnessed some of the greatest jazz musicians in the history of the music. And this book sheds light on the inner workings of both Hancock and other musicians like Miles Davis ("When asked by a journalist about reuniting the quintet with Ron, Tony, Wayne, and myself, he said, 'No. That would be like making love to the first woman over again.'"), and jazz in general during perhaps the greatest era for the music."But what few people realize is that Miles was actually influenced by Tony's band, Tony Williams Lifetime," Herbie Hancock."When Miles heard what Tony was doing he said,"This is the s##t, and he followed in Tony's footsteps with Bitches Brew." Herbie Hancock."Lifetime was the cornerstone band of jazz-rock fusion--and it's also the reason I wear a hearing aid now." Herbie Hancock."Back in 1965, when I turned that Yardley cologne jingle into the song "Maiden Voyage", I discovered something about writing music." Herbie Hancock."With each new record I wanted to jump off the cliff in a different spot." Herbie Hancock.If you're either a Hancock fan or a jazz fan in general, this book will give you some insight into that whole era of music-making. This book is worth adding to your shelf of jazz/music books.

This is the best book about being a working musician I have ever read. (Disclaimer - I shared a taxi with Herbie in NYC after his Blue Note set around 1995. I wanted to talk jazz piano with him - but he

was looking for sushi)A very interesting take about what the role of the musician is. A lot of self-doubt along the way... Herbie studied engineering and had a secure job with the post office which he had to give up in order to take his first professional gigs.Fascinating stories about the everyday conflicts between the need to make music and the desire to have it sell.It's not necessary to understand jazz to appreciate this book - this is the story of an unlikely star, who by dint of love of music, and unrelenting intelligence, has transformed the aural universe.

Herbie Hancock's Possibilities-Reviewed by Anthony SmithLegendary pianist/composer/producer Herbie Hancock's fascinating new autobiography, *Possibilities*, reads like a stylistic amalgam of Miles (with Quincy Troupe), Scar Tissue (Anthony Kiedis), the Mahayana Sutras, and, well... Dr. Frankenstein (Mary Shelley). What's long been common knowledge to music aficionados is Hancock's unparalleled career as the preeminent jazz pianist of his generation, with appearances on literally hundreds of albums, including some of the most important offerings from the Blue Note catalog (and hence, some of the most important jazz recordings in history); and also his high-profile, polarizing forays into the realm of commercial/pop music. What's not common knowledge, but is thoroughly illuminated within the pages of this new autobiography, is the extent to which Hancock has occupied the cutting edge of music technology from the very infancy of synthesizers, personal computers, and even basic amplification. If the book is accurate, the pianist was not merely a witness to new technologies, but a bona fide innovator of them. Also, the bespectacled musical giant is painfully candid about his excesses, most notably his mid-life addiction to crack cocaine, and also what he describes as a selfish, empathy-lacking nature (which he has spent much of his adult life attempting to overcome).If the book has one central theme, as it wends its way through not only the history of modern jazz but also the pop music/cultural landscape of the eighties, nineties, and early years of the new millennium, it is Hancock's devotion to Buddhism, which he discovered in the early seventies and has faithfully practiced ever since. Through chanting and adherence to the basic tenets of eastern spirituality, Hancock navigates the minefields of a life in music, with varying degrees of success. He grapples with the often conditional love of audiences, critics and suits (who weren't always receptive to his forward-looking aesthetic), and also his own demons. Hancock, apparently, has always had a blind spot when it comes to understanding why the rest of the world is not as intellectually, scientifically, and technologically curious as he is, and why it doesn't always share his spirit of adventure and artistic risk-taking.Another important element of *Possibilities* is the great influence of trumpet icon Miles Davis, who not only put Hancock on the map by offering him a coveted spot in his seminal quintet of the sixties (when the native Chicagoan was barely twenty

years old), but remained Hancock's mentor until his death in the early nineties. Many of Hancock's most fundamental epiphanies about music and improvisation were bestowed upon him by Davis, a man of few words who liked to present lessons as cryptic puzzles, for the student to solve in his own personal way; and thus it is no surprise that Hancock, more than any other artist of his generation, would build a storied career that--in terms of stylistic variety, musical innovation and commercial success--closely mirrored that of the great trumpeter/bandleader himself. In other words, it can strongly be argued, and *Possibilities* further makes the case, that Herbie Hancock represents the Miles Davis of his generation. The author is quick to point out the moments in his career when circumstances beyond his control have worked in his favor, catapulting him to greater popularity as both a performer and composer. In one interesting passage, Hancock explains how his greatest commercial triumph, the single *Rockit* (and accompanying video), was largely the work of others, both musically and visually. Hancock had virtually no role in the making of the video, which would go on to become one of the most ground-breaking, influential music videos of all time. In fact, upon viewing the video for the first time, he admits he didn't even get it; he was unsure that anyone else would, either. There are numerous similar moments in Hancock's story--times when he took a chance on a new style, veering off in an unexpected direction with his music and creative vision. On a few occasions, these experiments (always subsidized by major record labels, luckily) fell completely flat; but Hancock threw a lot more strikes than gutter balls through the decades, and more times than not his gambles paid off famously. The book is well-organized, moving logically from one period of Hancock's life (and its subsequent musical era) to the next, beginning with a very insightful description of his early days in New York City, when he was a young, broke jazz upstart, immensely talented but still searching for an identity, both as a musician and a man. As aficionados know, the pianist worked with many of the legends of jazz, and each member of the classic sixties Davis quintet (Hancock, Ron Carter, Tony Williams, Wayne Shorter, and of course Davis) would eventually establish himself as a musical icon. Hancock offers great insights into his own creative process as a pianist, composer and improviser, as also those of his famous contemporaries. Jazz pianists will find much of interest here, as the man widely considered the most important of all the post-Bud Powell/Bill Evans pianists humbly explains how he advanced the art of jazz piano through trial and error, while performing and experimenting with the Davis quintet and other groups (including his own). Experimentation is an integral component of Hancock's journey. Like most great artists, he has an eternally restless creative spirit and intellectual curiosity. His early aptitudes in math and science would serve him well in the long run, when he tired of the limitations of acoustic instruments and began exploring the burgeoning world of electronic music in the early seventies.

His first foray into electric keyboards and amplified music led to the formation of the Mwandishi Band, a wild, free-form collective in which Hancock, bassist Buster Williams and company all assumed African names, donned traditional African garb, embraced Buddhist principles and began touring the globe, playing music with no boundaries. This sometimes led to inspired, out-of-body experiences for both the band and its audience; and other times, it resulted in musical chaos and confusion. Hancock describes how the boundless nature of such a project ultimately was its own demise--the creative standard set on nights when the band was at its best made it impossible to weather less inspired efforts. Also, Hancock explains the realities of keeping a group of musicians on the road (both home and abroad) happy and paid. If it wasn't for the royalties he was steadily receiving for early hits like Watermelon Man, he would never have been able to do it. Perhaps more than any other jazz artist of any generation, Hancock managed to keep one foot planted in the jazz world while exploring a staggering array of other musical genres, including film scoring. He would win an Oscar for his original score for Round Midnight, the ground-breaking Hollywood film for which the tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon also received a Best Actor nomination. Later, he would win the Grammy award for Album of the Year for his Joni Mitchell tribute--the first time that a jazz artist had won the award since Stan Getz did so decades earlier. Through it all, the reader is mesmerized by Hancock's refusal to revisit the past, to dwell on previous accomplishments or in any way rest on his laurels. The pianist can be described as a futurist, who has spent his life looking forward, imagining what is possible and stubbornly refusing to accept that anything is impossible. In fact, Hancock seems to be perpetually driven to outdo himself with each new project, or as he explains it, to do something that's "never been done before." There is never an expense Hancock is unwilling to absorb (or in many cases, have others absorb) in order to pursue his futuristic visions of music, technology, and the merging of the two. At times, his saga reads like a passage from the journals of Dr. Frankenstein, as he finds himself amidst a tangle of wires, electronic gizmos and devices, early synthesizers, makeshift patch bays and primitive computer rigs. This is quite a high standard to set--to incessantly occupy the cutting edge--and one wonders what has compelled the artist to remain so creatively restless after all this time. Finally, Hancock writes with considerable emotional depth about his family, his close friendships, and his personal battles and failings. His shocking plummet to the depths of crack addiction and near death--during mid-life, nonetheless--are a real eye-opener. One particularly poignant chapter deals with the tragic loss of his sister, a bright, talented woman who never enjoyed the success of her brother, and with whom the musician had a complicated relationship. Also, Hancock writes lovingly and also at times critically about many of the men and women with whom he has made music over the years. Jazz musicians and fans will find

his anecdotes about trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, drummer Tony Williams and numerous others quite interesting. Despite his self-described narcissism, Hancock also apparently possessed undeniable charisma and leadership abilities, which enabled him to inspire the passion and devotion of great musicians, producers, engineers, technicians, industry executives, computer geniuses and visionaries who helped him to realize his unparalleled artistic ambitions. The author writes about his own life and career with a sense of honesty and humility that is very impressive, given that he is inarguably one of the great talents and visionaries in the history of not only jazz, but modern music itself. Simply put, nobody has had greater impact on both the jazz legacy and the world of popular music, in the twentieth century and new millennium than Herbie Hancock... not even Hancock's greatest mentor, Miles Davis himself. *The Lizard Stays in the Cage: Music, Art, Sex, Screenplays, Booze & Basketball*

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