



DOUGLAS KIRKLAND

HERBIE HANCOCK

The Master Keyboardist on the Culture-Bridging Power of Music

by Michael Gallant

"The time for complaining is over," states Herbie Hancock, leaning forward with emphasis as we sit in the backyard of his West Hollywood home. "Globalization isn't going to go away."

Rather than commenting on foreign policy or world trade, the jazz fusion master's assertion speaks to the rationale behind his latest project, an ambitiously collaborative and multi-lingual album entitled *The Imagine Project* in honor of the landmark John Lennon song "Imagine." Featuring such a diverse array of guest artists as Seal, Pink, Anoushka Shankar, Derek Trucks, Chaka Khan, the Chieftains, Juanes, and Dave Matthews, the song-based project carries a message of global unity, as well as one of musical experimentation, collaboration, and adventure.

After his 2008 Grammy wins (Album of the Year and Best Contemporary Jazz Album) for his genre-jumping disc *River: The Joni Letters*, Herbie's international response to the question "What next?" felt to the artist like a natural and necessary progression. "Globalization *needs* to be here and we need to be together because there are going to be some issues challenging the existence of humanity soon," he says. "We need to be together in peace in order to address these issues."

What better way to bring people together than through music? "One way to emphasize the importance of being proactive and some of the great virtues of globalization is through global collaboration," he says. "I want to play even just a tiny role in working towards that mission."

Herbie's efforts have manifested in an uplifting collection of tracks that span cultures, languages, continents, and genres. Featuring Susan Tedeschi and Derek Trucks, "Space Captain" soars over a gospel-blues vibe, while "The Song Goes On" combines the efforts of Chaka Khan and Anoushka Shankar, and features tabla and other traditional Indian instruments. Other songs host collaborations with guest artists from Mali, Colombia, the Congo, and beyond. Holding it all together is the unmistakably vibrant, brilliantly melodic piano playing of Herbie himself. Here's what the man had to say about the inspiration, composition, performance, and technology behind *The Imagine Project*.

Why did you decide to have some of the songs sung in other languages?

The impact of American music is possibly the greatest of any of the countries, and yet, all of the albums we create are in English. We still think nationally about the records we make. We think they're made for Americans, but then there are these other people who might want them, too. I wanted to make this a truly international, global record.

To be truly global, we're talking about appreciating cultures outside our own. What better way to appreciate someone else's culture than to have something in their language?

Did you travel much for this album? Or did you have your collaborators track remotely and then compile everything yourself?

The first song, "The Song Goes On," is in Hindi. Chaka Khan sings on that and we have Anoushka Shankar on sitar, Wayne Shorter on saxo-

phone, and myself playing on it as well. That one track, we recorded in Mumbai, India. We also went to Ireland to overdub "The Times They Are A-Changin'" with the Chieftains. We did vocals with Irish singer Lisa Hannigan here in L.A. at my studio.

We recorded Dave Matthews singing the [Beatles] song "Tomorrow Never Knows" at Fantasy Studios in Berkeley, California. And we were prepared to go to Mali to record Oumou Sangare for the song "Imagine." She sings in Bambara, one of the main languages of Mali. It turns out she was going to be in France and that this other group from the Congo, Konono No. 1, was going to be traveling to Europe as well. There was a window of about three days when it became possible for them to come to Paris to record, so we took advantage of that.

That must have been a helpful coincidence.

Going to the Congo would have been kind of dangerous. Mali's not

dangerous, but it would have been very expensive to make the trip there, which we were stressing over. "How're we going to make this work for a couple of tracks?" [Laughs.]

Note for note, on this album, you seem to play less than any other instrument does, but one can still tell it's a Herbie Hancock record, and the piano is still the glue.

I'm aware of this. Normally, my records are clearly jazz records and I wasn't concerned about this following that pattern. I had a bigger vision for this being more inclusive of various cultures, including aspects of the various musical realms and genres that exist in [the U.S.]. So there's no clear emphasis on instrumental improvisation on this record.

In placing the emphasis on the content and meaning of the words, the meaning of the project, the inclusiveness of the vision, my feeling was that my presence is clearly defined as you described, as the glue, the thread that connects all of the tracks. The spirit of jazz, of improvisation in the moment, is on the record, but I wasn't trying to pigeonhole it into the jazz category. In fact, I think it's difficult to pigeonhole into any category except for "music." I like that you can't put it in a box.

Even though there isn't a clear focus on improvisation, it still sounds like there's a good deal of improvising on the album.

There is improvisation, but what's more important is the music itself. While I truly wanted to make the music a result of the collaboration of cultures, I didn't want it to sound like world beat music, mainly because in countries like France and Germany, world beat records do fairly well, but in America, they do nothing. I'm an American. There's a way to do this so it doesn't sound foreign to Americans, yet it doesn't pander to American tastes. Still, [I wanted it to] have not merely a foreign flavor, but the essence of various cultures that are represented on the record.

I have no idea what the jazz public will think of this, but I don't think they'll dismiss it. I also feel it's important to stretch listeners. I know that as a jazz musician, I never used to pay any attention to lyrics, or to vocals that much. Now I do, especially from doing the last project, which was Joni Mitchell's music. For those who are primarily interested in instrumentals, maybe it can expand their horizons as well. It's not a purely vocal album, though. There's a lot of cool instrumental stuff on there, like the duet with [blues guitar phenom] Derek Trucks on the song "Space Captain."

Can you talk a little about that track?

Derek Trucks is a great musician. His wife, Susan Tedeschi, sang on it. Derek's a big jazz fan. He's got the spirit of a jazz musician coming through the sound of a blues and rock player. But he's got big ears and can hear stuff that some of the more inside-the-box players of that genre can't. His playing outside the box is well demonstrated on this record.

He plays with a pretty edgy guitar tone.

Did you find it at all difficult to make your piano playing gel with him?

As far as soloing is concerned, I never thought of it being a problem. Again, Derek's ears are huge and he made the whole thing work. In fact, he inspired me to play certain things, and he said that I inspired him. It was a fun-fest for me!

How did the call-and-response on that track come about?



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We worked out beforehand that the organ and piano would trade bars. We developed that there, which is part of the spirit of collaboration, not just bringing set arrangements for people to follow, but having the music structured by the people who play it. Pretty much every track we did that way.

There's a track we did with Juanes, a pop singer from Colombia. We knew which song we were going to do, but we made the arrangement when we were in the studio. When we did "The Song Goes On" in India, a basic arrangement was put together beforehand. It was more like a skeleton that was opened up while we were there and we all contributed to modifying it. The tracks were really shaped in the studio.

The Joni Mitchell album had an ephemeral character, while *The Imagine Project* seems to have denser arrangements. How did you approach the overdubbing process to make sure that you filled out the tracks without adding too much?

We didn't want to overshadow the vocals, but we wanted enough substance to be in the overdubs in just the right places so the music would come from somewhere, go somewhere else, and from there, go somewhere else.

I'll tell you something about what Wayne [Shorter] did. We got him in the studio and we originally wanted him on another track, but it turned out that the one we had in mind didn't resonate with him for playing a solo. But we started to play "The Song Goes On"

and he just heard a few seconds and went, "Okay, you ready?" We stopped it, he went into the booth, we rolled the tape, and Wayne responded. His first time hearing the whole thing—that's what we have on the album. It's only one take, and he nailed it. We were blown away. His intuitive sense is so keen it's unbelievable.

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How much of your piano playing was recorded live with the other musicians on each track?

The acoustic piano was almost all done live in one or two takes. Sometimes I did some basic piano in the studio [with the other musicians], but then overdubbed *my* piano on top of that, so there's actually two acoustic pianos on some of the tracks.

On the song "Imagine," the intro was actually done here at my home studio in Los Angeles, as an overdub. Originally, I did it in another studio, but I didn't like the piano they had, so I replaced the original piano with an overdub of me playing. When you have different tracks, you take the best parts of whatever you think is going to make the music flow the best. We have the technology, so why not use it?

What kind of pianos did you record on?

For "Space Captain," Derek Trucks' studio had a Steinway, I think, or maybe a Yamaha. Most of the album is Fazioli, though. On "Don't Give Up," there's some Steinway, but then I added some elements of my Fazioli on top of that.

Do pianos from different companies make you play differently?

When it comes to Faziolis, they inspire me to do certain things. And I don't get that coming from other brands, so that's why I like them. But my general style, I can play that on any piano.

Other than piano, what instruments did you play?

I used a real Fender Rhodes on some tracks, as well as the new Korg SV-1 for some Rhodes sounds. I also used a Yamaha Motif XS.

Did you use any software synths?

I used things like MOTU Ethno 2 and Spectrasonics Omnisphere. I used Spectrasonics *Vocal Planet* to get voice samples from different countries. There are some other elements from Native Instruments... Komplete 6.

On one song, Marcus Miller recorded a certain bass line. Later on, I changed the bass line and found something else that I wanted to do instead. I played it on a keyboard and I got the sounds from Spectrasonics Trilian. But do you know where Trilian's bass samples are from? *Marcus Miller*. So it was from him originally. In some cases, we mixed the two. Some of them would be done by Marcus live and some would be Marcus as a sample I played on a keyboard.

Do you think Marcus could tell what was you and what was him just by listening?

[Laughs.] They're both him! But he could probably tell the difference.

Overall, what was the biggest challenge you faced working on *The Imagine Project*?

This project was certainly being out on a limb. We had to walk a tightrope doing this project, having it not be too foreign—but still a little foreign at the same time. I wanted to honor the cultures that are really outside of my own and have them truly represented—not just shove them under the rug and have them peeking through.

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When we first mixed "The Song Goes On," the tablas were really low, but you could hear Vinnie Colaiuta playing drums loud and clear. [Laughs.] Well, in the final mix, the tablas are up and you can hear them. I might even bring certain things up further than what we have [for the final mix]. Some of the responses they had to either what Anoushka played, or what I played, are still hard to hear.

What advice could you offer to musicians who aspire to create something greater than a bunch of pretty notes?

Music is such a great platform for bringing people together. The main thing is that it's important to do what's in your heart, to have the courage to fight for what you believe in and not be swayed by naysayers, even if the naysayer comes from within yourself.

Sometimes *that's* the biggest and most influential naysayer of all. In Nichiren Buddhism, we call that a "function of our fundamental darkness" that tries to keep us from taking chances, from growing, from looking at compassionate possibilities. It's the voice that tries to keep us focusing on ourselves in competition with others.

The most competition we should have is *within* ourselves. And it's that battle with that nature that tries to keep us from discovering our infinite potential. It tries to push us down into feeling we're not good enough or keep us in that dark corner of not feeling adequate, not feeling that we have any real self worth. In Nichiren Buddhism, we say the heart is the most important thing. So follow your heart, you know?

Do you find yourself struggling with those same issues?

Oh yeah, absolutely! I always feel that if there isn't a challenge, I'm not working hard enough. ☐

"THE SONG GOES ON"

"[Producer] Larry Klein put together a basic melody and harmony," says Herbie Hancock of the Indian-themed album cut. "He suggested this poem by Rainer Maria Rilke that talks about music. There's a certain scale that is common to jazz players and what I've heard in Indian music, and that's the basic scale that he constructed the song on."

One way to think of this central scale is as a variation on the fifth mode of the harmonic minor scale. "It depends on whether you use the major or the minor seventh," adds Herbie. "It's good to use both." Here's the scale, starting on A:



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Audio: How to improvise on the Indian-derived scale of "The Song Goes On."



Video: The Making of *The Imagine Project*.



Video: Herbie, Pink, and Seal recording John Lennon's "Imagine."