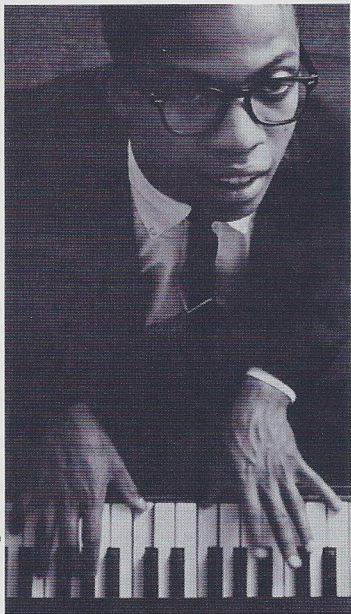


HERBIE
HANCOCK
TAKIN'
OFF



FREDDIE HUBBARD
DEXTER GORDON
BUTCH WARREN
BILLY HIGGINS

STEREO
THE FINEST IN JAZZ SINCE 1939

92757

BLUE NOTE.

HERBIE HANCOCK

FREDDIE HUBBARD, trumpet, flugelhorn; DEXTER GORDON, tenor sax;
HERBIE HANCOCK, piano; BUTCH WARREN, bass; BILLY HIGGINS, drums

As the first solo album by Herbie Hancock, this record will serve for many listeners as an introduction to the talents of a young and unmistakably promising artist who recently signed an exclusive Blue Note contract.

Herbie cannot be considered a complete unknown, for as a close friend and roommate of Donald Byrd he has spent much of the past year or two gigging with Donald's group. He has also recorded with Donald for Blue Note (*Royal Flush*, BLP 4101). Since records are virtually the only means of national exposure for a new artist (how often do you hear of a jazz star discovered on a festival, TV, or radio show?), his Blue Note solo debut is the first break of any consequence.

Running down his biographical background, Herbie opened

with the statement: "I was born in Chicago April 12, 1940," reminding me with a start that at that time Teddy Wilson had his big band, Jess Stacy was winning all the polls, and Blue Note was already a year old. "My parents are not professional musicians, but my father is a bathtub singer and my mother tinkles around on piano. I was always interested in music as a very young child, and began music lessons at seven. Four years later I performed with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra."

While attending Hyde Park High School the young prodigy formed his own jazz band, which played around town. He attended Grinnell College, majoring in engineering for two years, then changed his major to music. He graduated

in June 1960 with a major in music composition.

"During my last two years at Grinnell," Herbie recalls, "I won an award for the best musical composition with a suite for six woodwinds." He has done nothing further with the work, but hopes to record it some day.

His education also included music courses at Roosevelt U. in Chicago. Currently he is working on his master's degree at the Manhattan School of Music, studying with Vittorio Giannini.

Herbie's professional experience in jazz goes back just two years, but the start was auspicious: "My first gig with a name group was a two-week engagement in Chicago with Coleman Hawkins." In December of that year, Donald Byrd called him to fill in for one night, subsequently taking him

TAKIN' OFF

**WATERMELON MAN
THREE BAGS FULL
EMPTY POCKETS
THE MAZE
DRTIN'**

**ALONE AND I
WATERMELON MAN (ALTERNATE TAKE)
THREE BAGS FULL (ALTERNATE TAKE)
EMPTY POCKETS (ALTERNATE TAKE)**

to New York as a permanent member of the combo.

Since then, in addition to the jobs with Byrd, he has worked with Phil Woods and Oliver Nelson, has dabbled in television, and accompanied some singers. Though his career has not yet taken shape firmly, he is gaining experience in various areas and stockpiling the knowledge that must go into the making of a mature musician today.

For this maiden voyage as captain of a team, Herbie did not stint himself in the selection of crew members. Rather than limit his role to that of piano soloist with rhythm accompaniment, he agreed with Alfred Lion on a small orchestral format that gave him a fuller chance to display his gifts both as pianist and composer.

Freddie Hubbard, of course, is an old Blue Note friend, familiar through his work with Blakey and other groups, including his own. Writing of his work on *Open Sesame* (4040), John Tynan called him "an emerging soloist of great promise, with a big, strongly assertive tone, mature ideas, and forthrightness of conviction; moreover, he is thoroughly in command of his horn."

Dexter Gordon is enjoying a major renaissance since his emergence during the past year via the Manhattan jazz clubs and his own Blue Note LPs. His work on this Hancock set includes some of the best performances he has offered since his return to the scene. With the first-rate rhythmic support of Billy Higgins (who impressed me a couple of

years ago with the Joe Castro-Teddy Edwards Quartet in Hollywood) and of Butch Warren, Herbie was assured of "takin' off" in style.

"Watermelon Man" (remember the 1938 Ellington record by that name? No connection.) is a strongly gospel-infused, 16-bar theme. Herbie establishes the mood immediately with his opening vamp: quarter-note rest, two eighths, followed by eighth and dotted quarter — rhythmically a typical gospel figure after which the horns state the theme, mainly in unison. Freddie's solo stays firmly in the mood of the piece: despite the occasional unpredictable excursions into sixteenth notes, the overall feeling is basic and earthy. After Dexter has successfully ploughed another part of the

same field, Herbie takes over for a solo in which, interestingly, one hears the echo of sounds that were a part of the Blue Note scene around the time of his birth — men like Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis.

Speaking of the composition, Herbie says: "In reflecting on my childhood I recalled the cry of the watermelon man making his rounds through the back streets and alleys of Chicago's south side. The wheels of his wagon beat out the rhythm on the cobblestones."

"Three Bags Full" was so named because, says Herbie, "Each of the three soloists plays out of a different bag. Also, this is a line from 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' that makes you think of a shepherd, and in a way, the tune does have something of the sound of a shepherd maybe way off in Baghdad or somewhere." The tune, a waltz, suggests some-

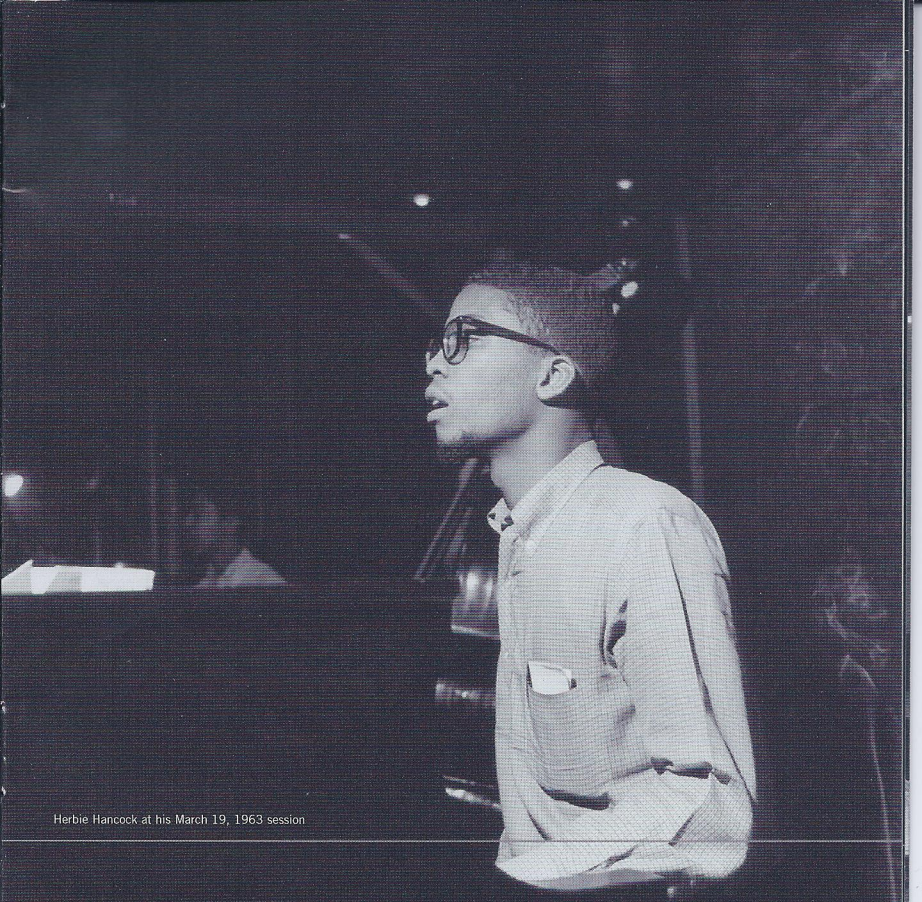
thing of the mood of Miles's group with Coltrane in the late-1950s, with Dexter's long, flat tones (flat in terms of vibrato, not intonation) evocative of the earlier Trane. Herbie's solo here is beautifully executed in right-hand single note lines, later easing into a chorded passage, with a left hand that is supplementary and never perfunctory.

"Empty Pockets" ("I was in a sad financial state when I wrote this.") is a moderate blues with long pick-up phrases leading to an eighth and a quarter note. Herbie returns here to the simple, funky groove of "Watermelon Man," but this time with a straight blues rather than a gospel feel.

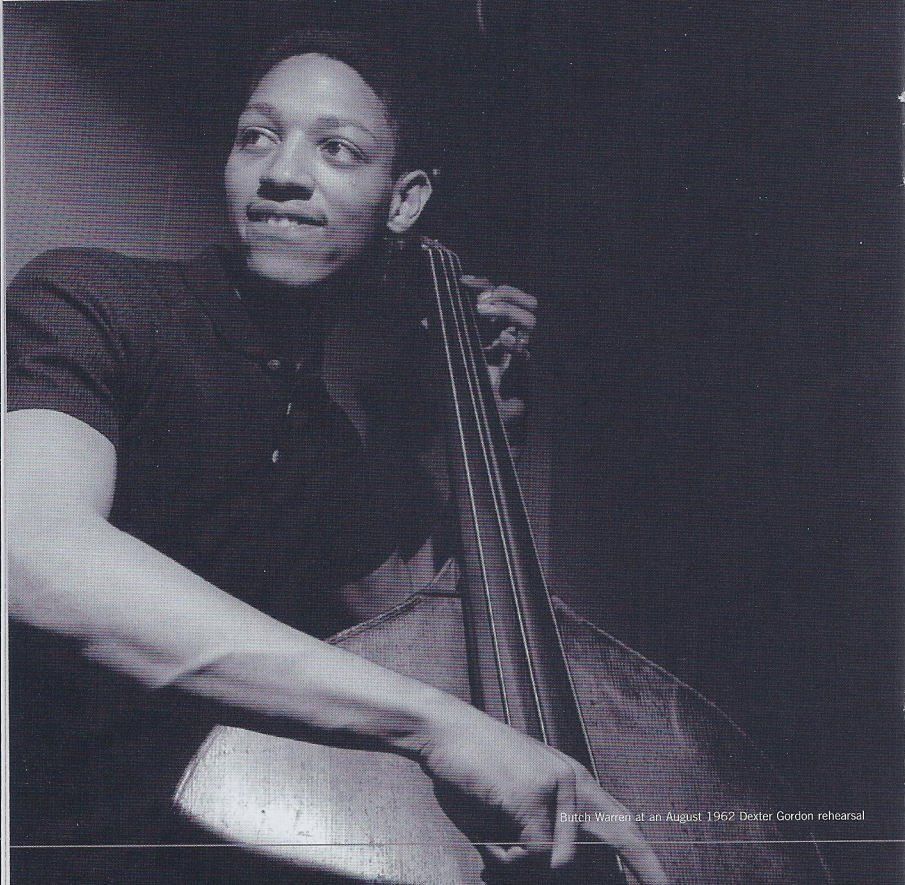
"The Maze" is an ear-catching minor theme with one noteworthy point: during the first two of Herbie's three solo appearances (the one after the opening ensemble, and one

between the trumpet and tenor solos), Butch and Billy improvise freely instead of playing time. "To me," says Herbie, "this not only added interest, but allowed more rhythmic freedom." The tune, he points out, "seems to go along the bent paths of a maze, to which the final solution is never reached — notice that the performance doesn't have a real tonic ending."

"Driftn'," as Herbie observes, has something of a loping quality in the whole performance. A 32-bar theme, it is stated by the ensemble except for the second eight, on which Herbie takes over. If Freddie's sound is softer and less brash on this track, there is a reason: he is playing fluegelhorn. Herbie stretches out for two choruses, again blending ideas and execution skillfully; notice especially the run at bar 14 of his first chorus, and



Herbie Hancock at his March 19, 1963 session



Butch Warren at an August 1962 Dexter Gordon rehearsal

the increased blues-consciousness of the second chorus.

"Alone and I" is a ballad, in A. "I am very much interested in chord color in music," says Herbie, "and this tune displays much of what I have been working on in that vein." Dexter's pretty mood is well served by the attractive melody. Herbie rightly considers that this is the most interesting tune in the album and that it includes his best solo.

Summing up his feeling about the session, Herbie concludes: "I was happy with the way the fellows worked with each other, and with me. I particularly like Dexter Gordon's solos on 'Maze' and 'Watermelon Man,' and Freddie Hubbard's work on 'Empty Pockets' and 'Driftin'."

Much has been written in the past couple of years about the overcrowded condition of the jazz record market, and

of the tendency of record companies to introduce too many new talents too soon. At times, I must admit, I have been one of the plaintiffs. But this is a generalization, and as soon as someone like Herbie Hancock comes along and contributes, both as writer and player, music that is valid in its own terms regardless of the age or unfamiliarity of the performer, you realize that room must be made for artists who will be important to the growth of jazz. If you are young, eager, and gifted, you are entitled to a hearing; and these three adjectives certainly apply to Herbie Hancock.

— Leonard Feather
original liner notes

A NEW LOOK AT TAKIN' OFF

This album marked roughly the midpoint of Herbie Hancock's relatively brief and unquestionably successful period as a dues-paying young jazz musician in New York. He had arrived the previous spring after having been discovered in Chicago by Donald Byrd, and spent much of his first year rooming with the trumpeter, working and recording with the Byrd/Pepper Adams Quintet and other Byrd units, and taking odd gigs with other co-leader bands, including Al Grey/Billy Mitchell and Phil Woods/Gene Quill. Prior to this debut as a leader, Hancock had participated in five studio sessions, all but one of which involved Byrd, who had advised the budding composer to create his own publishing company and suggested strategies when the time came to approach Blue Note for his own date.

As recounted by producer Bob Belden in the notes to *The Complete Blue Note Sixties Sessions*, Byrd had counseled Hancock to present producer Alfred Lion with a program where half of the material displayed popular potential. One of the originals presented in the ensuing audition was "Watermelon Man." Hancock had struggled with the piece until a night earlier in 1962 when he was working with Mongo Santamaria and, at Byrd's suggestion, played the work-in-progress for the great conguero. Lion immediately heard the potential in the modified blues and the other Hancock originals, and urged the pianist to complete the program with more of his own music instead of standards. There is no question but that Santamaria's own more commercially successful version of "Watermelon Man," recorded for the Riverside subsidiary Battle without Hancock at year's end, gave a boost to the composer's own debut effort; but listeners who checked out *Takin' Off* for "Watermelon Man" found five other gems as well.

They also found a pickup group as talented as any in Blue Note's history. The Hancock/Butch Warren/Billy Higgins rhythm section had proven its inspired mettle on two Donald Byrd albums, *Royal Flush* (Hancock's first issued Blue Note appearance) and *Free Form*. This would be the unit's final "pure" appearance on record, as Grant Green's *Feel'n' the Spirit* from later in '62 finds them joined by Garvin Masseaux on tambourine. Freddie Hubbard, the sideman here who would enjoy the most extended working relationship with Hancock over

THE



EDITION



HERBIE HANCOCK
BLUE NOTE

the succeeding decades on numerous recording sessions and in the V.S.O.P. Quintet, was a bit older than the pianist and had experienced a similar apprentice period slightly earlier. At this point, Hubbard was approaching his first anniversary as an Art Blakey Jazz Messenger, had issued four of his own Blue Note albums, and in six weeks would cut his first for Impulse!

Dexter Gordon, in the midst of one of his many comebacks, had hooked up with Blue Note on a visit from his native California a year earlier, and was in the midst of a second extended East Coast stay that preceded his expatriation to Europe. Gordon participated in seven recordings during this trip, and his exceptional playing here was only matched by his *Gol/A Swingin' Affair* twin peaks three months later. Hancock, who has frequently credited Gordon for making his debut truly special, would reunite with the Long Tall One most famously in the 1985 film *'Round Midnight*, which also featured Hubbard and Higgins.

The program represented Hancock quite accurately as one of the most versatile new voices in jazz, a player and writer capable of swinging hard, stretching convention, moments of quiet personal introspection, and an undeniable common touch. Byrd had advised that his first album include "three for the company and three for you," a balance of the accessible and challenging that Hancock has in effect maintained throughout his career. "Empty Pockets," "Watermelon Man," and "Driftn'" are the populist titles, and the first two are heard in alternate takes, as is the turbulent waltz "Three Bags Full." While none of the alternates is superior to the master takes, all have strong solos and were clearly worthy of release when the album was reissued on compact disc in the 1980s. It is too bad that the challenging "The Maze" and "Alone and I" did not also yield additional versions worthy of release.

The album title turned out to be prophetic. Hancock's star rose so quickly in the wake of its success (and Santamaria's even greater success) that he was able to purchase a sports car, acknowledged in his composition "King Cobra" on Hancock's next album, *My Point of View*. And two weeks shy of a year after the present music was recorded, Hancock entered a studio with Miles Davis for the first time, which ended the pianist's apprentice phase and situated Hancock solidly within the orbit of innovators.

— Bob Blumenthal, 2007

- 1 WATERMELON MAN 7:05
- 2 THREE BAGS FULL 5:22
- 3 EMPTY POCKETS 6:08
- 4 THE MAZE 6:45
- 5 DRIFTIN' 6:53
- 6 ALONE AND I 6:25
- 7 WATERMELON MAN
(ALTERNATE TAKE) 6:31 *
- 8 THREE BAGS FULL
(ALTERNATE TAKE) 5:29 *
- 9 EMPTY POCKETS
(ALTERNATE TAKE) 6:27 *

*bonus tracks, not part of original album

All compositions by Herbie Hancock

Billy Higgins at a September 21, 1961 Donald Byrd session



HERBIE HANCOCK

TAKIN' OFF



Produced by Alfred Lion

Originally recorded on May 28, 1962 at the
Van Gelder Studio, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey

Remastered in 2007 by Rudy Van Gelder

All transfers from analog to digital made at 24-bit resolution
Reissue produced by Michael Cuscuna

Cover photograph and design by Reid Miles
Liner photographs by Francis Wolff © Mosaic Images

Tracks 1–6 originally issued in 1962 on Blue Note BST 84109
Tracks 7–9 originally issued on the 1996 CD edition
of this album

Reissue creative direction by Gordon H Jee
Reissue design by Amanda Wray

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THE RUDY VAN GELDER EDITION

Freddie Hubbard and Dexter Gordon at a May 6, 1961 Gordon session

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BLUE

TAKIN' OFF
HERBIE HANCOCK



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