Riding the High Tide

Pianist-composer Herbie Hancock is one prime embodiment of modern jazz's ongoing development, especially as it relates to contemporary audiences and crews of players.

Michael Brecker and Herbie Hancock, Geri Allen, Joe Lovano, McCoy Tyner, Wynton Marsalis

When George Wein first brought his brainstorm of a modern jazz festival from the harbor park of Newport to the port of New York in 1972, jazz was experiencing a notable dry spell. In terms of popular appeal, the music was at a low water mark, and hothouse flowers of the type cultivated in Manhattan were thirsting for exposure, opportunity and respect, while electric guitars, synthesizers and singer-songwriters were soaking up listeners' attentions.

As evidenced by this year's edition of the JVC Jazz Festival New York, there's been a sea change. In 1997, the tide is high. More than a decade ago, in the wake of Wynton Marsalis' popular impact, a wave of attractive young stars hit the scene. Such cultural beachheads as Carnegie Hall (with Wein's guidance) and Lincoln Center (with Wynton's) have established jazz ensembles in which musicians—young and old, together—reinterpret, even *reinvigorate*, the music's legacy. Some clubs are happening, and jazz album releases, a trickle in '72, have become a veritable flood. Though it slipped by without much fanfare, there was even a full hour of ABC-TV prime time commandeered last December by the Thelonious Monk Institute's "Celebration of America's Music."

The jazz horizon is far busier due to the new water level. Musicians are perhaps not so easily swept up in other commercial musical currents; they absorb influences more readily, and engage in a natural stylistic ebb and flow. In today's relative ocean of opportunity, there's room for all types of creative vehicles of jazz expression: those straightahead combo cruisers, built for endurance and power, besides speed; the lightweight pleasure craft that just hum along; large vessels capable of carrying the music's heavier freight as well as trawling its bottomless well of treasured tradition, and hybrid experimental conveyances, which may delve uncharted depths or lightly skim jazz's surfaces, barely stirring the fluid aesthetic.

All these varieties are present at this year's jazz fest, and though producer Wein may bemoan the passing of irreplaceable giants like Miles, Dizzy and Ella, the artists who survive them appear to be buoyed upon their memories. More interesting this year than how high standard-bearers can hoist their banners is how broad a range of jazz people and ideas are afloat in jazz's wider pools, how the music circles back in self-examination and simple exultation, how presumably divergent streams of past, present and future flow together as one.

Pianist-composer Herbie Hancock is a prime embodiment of modern jazz's ongoing development, especially as relates to contemporary audiences and crews of players. It's rare to hear a young pianist these days without some hint of the approach Hancock pioneered, first in Miles Davis' classic '60s quintet, and further in his own celebrated recordings, including *Maiden Voyage* and *Speak Like a Child* (Blue Note), *Head Hunters* (Columbia Jazz/Legacy) and *Future Shock* (Columbia). It's unlikely you'd sit through a full day of any jazz festival anywhere without hearing a Hancock tune that's become a standard, such as "Watermelon Man," "Dolphin Dance," "Cantaloupe Island," "Chameleon" and "Rockit." Any jazz improvisation with funk or hip-hop today owes a direct debt to Hancock's deft fusions, which have never compromised their jazz credentials.

Hancock, the defining modernist at this year's fest, returns to Avery Fisher Hall June 24 with a dynamic all-star band featuring tenor saxophonist Michael Brecker, guitarist John Scofield, bassist Dave Holland, percussionist Don Alias and drummer Jack DeJohnette. They're all qualified to establish a canon of "new standards," as Hancock bills his latest project. Yet there's little safe in what they do.

Hancock claims he deliberately chose works that appeared to defy his intent of building a new repertoire for improvisation drawing on recent pop fare—Kurt Cobain's Nirvana hit "All Apologies," Don Henley's "New York Minute," Prince's "Thieves in the Temple," among others. Yet this notion isn't radical, either, really: Miles Davis played Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time" at JVC jazz fest concerts no more than a decade ago.

Hancock is among today's marquee jazz stars—the fest is flush with them—who've anchored their music on their own individual, personal and evolving concepts, rather than tying up with ideas of "jazz" imposed from before, above or beyond. In the last 25 years, jazz has become increasingly diffuse in this way, shaping itself to each player's image and voice, absorbing myriad shifts of identities and developments, allowing for different phases in the relationships of players to their given instruments. Think Hancock: grand piano virtuoso *and* explorer-producer of high-tech keyboard missions.

Don Byron's music flows from just such spirit, too. An accomplished all-around reedsman who leads his band as part of the festival's free afternoon programming June 28 in Bryant Park, Byron has raised a truly significant profile on clarinet, an instrument often neglected in modern jazz. Byron's ambition goes beyond hot soloing; he's a composer with a powerful social conscience as well as a musical one, as evidenced on albums such as *Tuskegee Experiments* (Nonesuch), and he has a smart sense of humor, demonstrated by his fairly orthodox reads of the Borscht Belt music of Mickey Katz. Byron's *Bug Music* ensemble (Nonesuch) milks the '20s-'30s compositions of Ellington, Strayhorn and less-celebrated Raymond Scott and John Kirby—music, Byron feels, that's been relegated to jazz history's margins due to its direct linking of African-American styles and European classical traditions.

Thomas Chapin, another leading light of uncontainable '90s jazz with a band at Bryant Park, first earned critical attention as a fire-breathing downtown improvisor (mostly on alto sax and flute), though his most recent disc, *I've Got Your Number* (Arabesque Jazz) relates more to his early career stints with mainstream bands led by Lionel Hampton and Chico Hamilton. Now, when fans may expect some takeoff on Ornette Coleman's free jazz, Chapin's as likely to give up a Cy Coleman melody. Tin Pan Alley ain't necessarily so far from Tribeca, it seems, or from the park behind the public library at 42nd and Sixth.

Pianist James Williams, who brings his Intensive Care Unit to Bryant Park, will talk your ear off—but less about his past two decades of outstanding achievements from his base in Manhattan than about his hometown, Memphis, and his mentor, one Phineas (he pronounces it "FINE-as") Newborn Jr. Williams represents a musical eddy unto himself, yet he honors the long-standing musical currents of blues and gospel as much as he does swing and bop. His ICU includes tenor saxophonist Billy Pierce (with whom he played in Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers) and vocalists Miles Griffith and Roger Holland, alumni of the celebrated Harlem Boys Choir, singing both scat-style and lyrics.

When vocalist Cassandra Wilson (headlining Blue Note Records' "Sings and Swings" night number two at Carnegie Hall June 24) wraps her smoky alto around songs like Van Morrison's "Tupelo Honey" or even the Monkees' "Last Train to Clarksville," she taps a stylistic vein that draws from Betty Carter and Billie Holiday, and also forges new tributaries connecting jazz and pop-music consciousness (witness the remarkable crossover success of her last two albums, *Blue Light 'Til Dawn* and *New Moon Daughter* for Blue Note). Even more threatening to some jazzers (for a singer!) is her preference for guitar rather than piano accompaniment. Again, there's a precedent: Remember Ella and Joe Pass! As Wilson's explained in interviews, the now-omnipresent guitar was the first, and most natural, chord-voicing instrument she ever picked up.

Last year, Wilson's labelmate Geri Allen (Carnegie, June 24) was the first pianist regularly employed by iconoclastic saxophonist Ornette Coleman for a small-group acoustic ensemble since he banished the piano from his quartets nearly 40 years ago. Perhaps Allen was able to function with distinction in Coleman's famously free "harmolodic" context because she has established her own voice and presence so forcefully over the past two decades, and also because she came of age in Detroit, a notoriously fertile and open-minded musical community. Something in the water there?

As general interest in jazz crests, tribute albums come a-gushing, and saxophonist Joe Lovano's reconsideration of music made famous by Frank Sinatra could easily look like one on-the-rise Italian-American making his way in the wash of another of infinitely greater renown. Burly machismo aside, Lovano's link is much closer. About as complete a jazz player as one can find, Lovano (on the 24th Carnegie-Blue Note bill) is as cool with the work of Ben Webster or Woody Herman as he is with John Coltrane and Charlie Haden. His collaboration *Rush Hour* (Blue Note) with conductor/composer Gunther Schuller topped many a critic's poll for enfolding mainstream impulses into the "Third Stream," and when he celebrates Sinatra, it's not to attempt definitive or sing-along reads of "All the Way" and "I've Got You Under My Skin" but rather to steer (with the help of arranger Manny Alban) ol' Blue Eyes' cargo down his own charted path.

At JVC Jazz, saxophonist Ronnie Laws will likely celebrate the life and legacy of the late Eddie Harris June 21 at Carnegie Hall, as on his new *Tribute* CD (Blue Note), thus revisiting his own roots—like the sound of *Pressure Sensitive*, his earlier recording which bubbled with r&b and soul influ-

By Larry Blumenfeld

BRECKER/HANCOCK BY JUDY SCHILLER. ALLEN BY ALAN NAHIGIAN, LOVANO BY KEN FRANCKLING, TYNER AND MARSALIS BY JACK VARTOOGIAN