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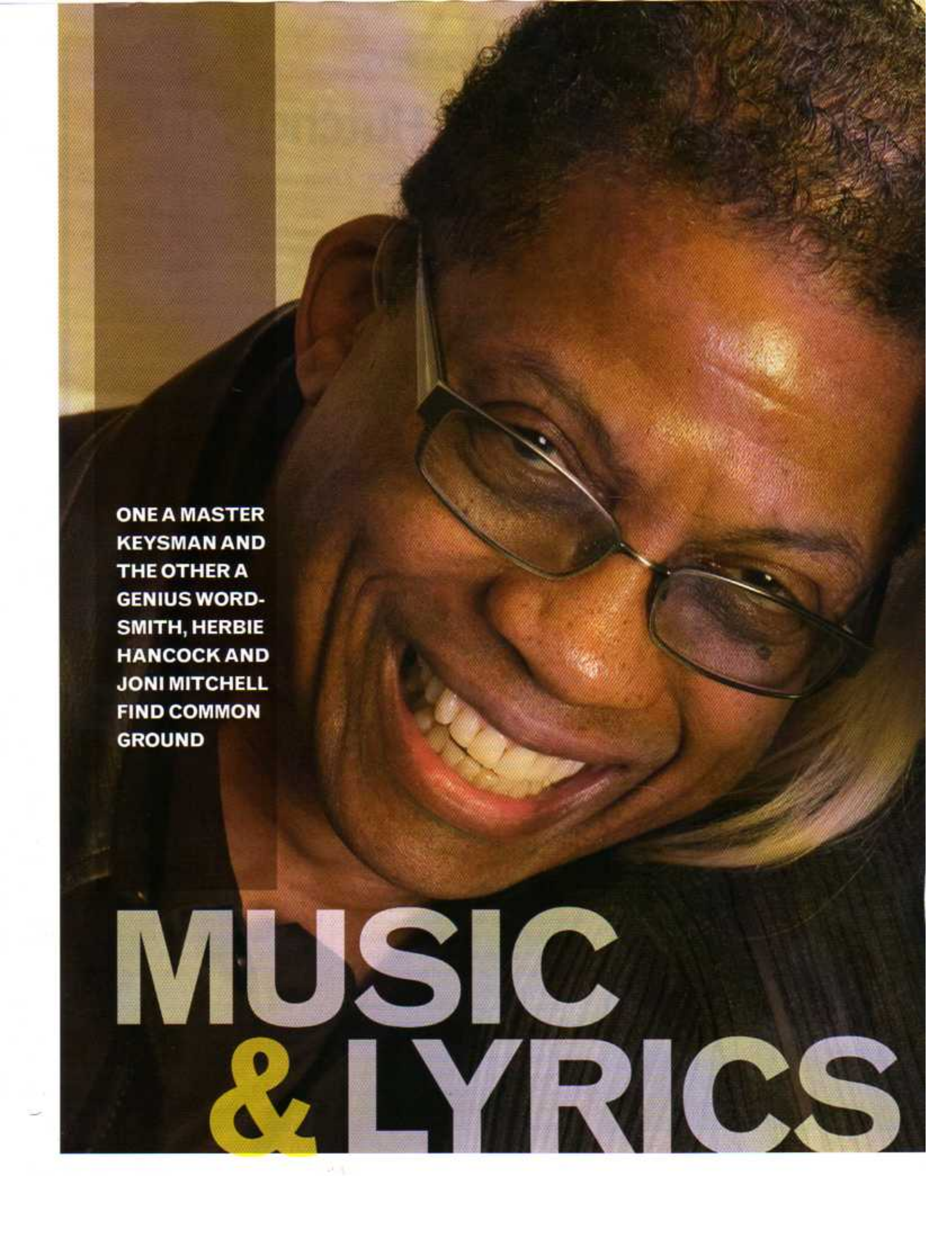
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MUSIC & LYRICS



BY GEOFFREY HIMES PHOTO BY JAMES PATRICK COOPER

Herbie Hancock has a confession to make: For the longest time, he ignored the lyrics of the songs he played on. Asked if he considered the lyrics when he assembled his poll-topping *Gershwin's World* album, he says, "Not at all," and spreads his hands before his face as if he were pushing the words aside so he could focus on the music.

What's peculiar about this confession is that the veteran pianist makes it in a midtown Manhattan hotel while sitting next to one of the great American lyricists of the late 20th century, Joni Mitchell. Mitchell, wearing a black jacket over a low-cut black dress and balancing an omnipresent cigarette between her long fingers, doesn't seem offended. In fact, she seems amused that her longtime friend and collaborator approaches music so differently. Hancock, wearing a black shirt beneath a black jacket with a leather collar, tries to articulate just what that approach is.

"I never paid attention to lyrics," he says, "because I wasn't used to doing it. That's very typical of jazz instrumentalists; we're so dazzled by melody, harmony, textures, all those kinds of nuances, that when we hear a vocal in English it might as well be in Polish. I can't understand the lyrics as they're sung by anybody. I have to shove the music out to understand that it's English, and I have a hard time doing that because the music pulls me in like a magnet."



lyrics have ever been an issue with me."

Oddly enough, Hancock's breakthrough came not on one of his new album's six vocal numbers, which showcase the singers Norah Jones, Tina Turner, Corinne Bailey Rae, Luciana Souza, Leonard Cohen and Mitchell herself. Instead, it came on one of the four instrumental numbers, his arrangement of "Both Sides Now." It begins with two minutes of spare, impressionistic solo piano before Dave Holland's bass and Vinnie Colaiuta's brushes join in. The familiar melody isn't heard until five minutes into the piece, when Wayne Shorter's tenor sax finally voices it, but the whole piece radiates the feeling of looking at every musical phrase, every feeling, from at least two sides.

"Something happened when I was trying to figure out what to do with that song," he explains. He demonstrates by spreading his fingers and pounding them on the white tablecloth as if looking for a new chord. "I started following what I was feeling, and it was getting more and more interesting. I said, 'It would naturally go here, but I want it to go somewhere it's not expected to go.' I

tried something and I said, 'Oh, wow, that's a surprise.'

"But then I thought, 'Wait a minute, these are Joni's words. I haven't really looked at them to see if what I'm doing makes sense in terms of the words.' So I went back and looked at the words. I'd read two lines and I'd have to stop. I'd go, 'She didn't say that, did she? How could she come up with that?' Finally, I said, 'The meaning as I feel it seems to say it's OK for me to do this.'

"Yeah," Mitchell agrees enthusiastically, "because it's a discourse on fantasy and reality."

Mitchell, who still wears her signature blonde bangs and shoulder-length hair, has just released *Shine*, her first album of new songs in nearly 10 years. Like all of her recordings, this one is word-drunk, a torrent of metaphor, imagery and run-on verse. She even adapts other literary sources—Rudyard Kipling's poem "If" and Tennessee Williams' play "The Night of the Iguana"—into song. Several songs make angry denunciations of the ecological damage inflicted on our planet.

The title track, though, offers a somber prayer for the planet's healing by asking the sun to shine down on everything from "Frankenstein technologies" to "fertile farmland." Singing over Brian Blade's rumbling drums, James Taylor's patient acoustic guitar and her own atmospheric synth, Mitchell begins with evenly counted lines. But by the second verse she has so much to say that she bursts the bounds of meter to get it all in, relying on Blade's flexibility to make it work. Words are still that important to her. Yet after a long career during which the press and fans have focused obsessively on her lyrics and ignored her music, she seems flattered that Hancock has the exact opposite take on her songs.

For all his willful obliviousness to the words, Hancock has repeatedly worked with this most literary of songwriters. The keyboardist first played with Mitchell on her 1979 project *Mingus*, which combined her lyrics with Charles Mingus' music. Hancock rejoined her for the two orchestral albums, 2000's *Both Sides Now* and 2002's *Travelogue*, and invited her to sing two songs on 1998's *Gershwin's World*. But it wasn't until he devoted his new album, *River: The Joni Letters*, to her music that he sat down and came to terms with her lyrics.

"With *Gershwin's World*," confesses Hancock, sporting purple shades and a trim Afro, "I didn't pay attention to any of the lyrics. In that sense it was business as usual for me. There were other challenges, but that was never an issue. Even with Joni's earlier albums, what attracted me was all the other stuff: the melody, the harmony, the texture. This is the first time

IF MITCHELL SEEMS CHARMED that Hancock thinks of her as a musician first and as a lyricist second, he seems equally charmed that she doesn't care whether he sticks to the jazz tradition or not. They have wound up side by side in the no man's land between jazz and modern pop, even though they arrived from vastly different starting points.

She was born 64 years ago as Roberta Joan Anderson on Canada's western prairie. She got her start singing solo with her acoustic guitar in folk coffeehouses and had her debut album produced by California rock star David Crosby. But in 1975, after six studio albums had established her as the leading female singer-songwriter in the folk-rock scene, she challenged her audience—and subsequently lost many in it—by recording jazz-influenced arrangements with jazz musicians.

Hancock was born 67 years ago in urban Chicago; he was a classical-piano prodigy who was playing with such jazz figures as Donald Byrd and Phil Woods while he was still in college. He was only 23 when he was invited into the Miles Davis Quintet. But after playing a prominent role on some of Davis' most enduring records and releasing his own solo projects such as 1965's *Maiden Voyage*, Hancock left Blue Note Records in 1969 and risked his reputation as the best jazz pianist of his

