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Herbie Hancock: Possibilities

Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

I'm onstage at a concert hall in Stockholm, Sweden, in the mid-1960s playing piano with the Miles Davis Quintet. We're on tour, and this show is really heating up. The band is tight—we're all in sync, all on the same wavelength. The music is flowing, we're connecting with the audience, and everything feels magical, like we're weaving a spell.

Tony Williams, the drumming prodigy who joined Miles as a teenager, is on fire. Ron Carter's fingers are flying up and down the neck of his bass, and Wayne Shorter's saxophone is just screaming. The five of us have become one entity, shifting and flowing with the music. We're playing one of Miles's classics, "So What," and as we hurtle toward Miles's solo, it's the peak of the evening; the whole audience is on the edge of their seats.

Miles starts playing, building up to his solo, and just as he's about to really let loose, he takes a breath. And right then I play a chord that is just *so* wrong. I don't even know where it came from—it's the wrong chord, in the wrong place, and now it's hanging out there like a piece of rotten fruit. I think, *Oh, shit*. It's as if we've all been building this gorgeous house of sound, and I just accidentally put a match to it.

Miles pauses for a fraction of a second, and then he plays some notes that somehow, miraculously, make my chord sound right. In that moment I believe my mouth actually fell open. What kind of alchemy was this? And then Miles just took off from there, unleashing a solo that took the song in a new direction. The crowd went absolutely crazy.

I was in my early twenties and had already been with Miles for a couple of years by this time. But he always was capable of surprising me, and that night, when he somehow turned my chord from a wrong to a right, he definitely did. In the dressing room after the show I asked Miles about it. I felt a little sheepish, but Miles just winked at me, a hint of a smile on his chiseled face. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. Miles wasn't one to talk a whole lot about things when he could show us something instead.

It took me years to fully understand what happened in that moment onstage. As soon as I played that chord I judged it. In my mind it was the "wrong" chord. But Miles never judged it—he just heard it as a sound that had happened, and he instantly took it on as a challenge, a question of *How can I integrate*

that chord into everything else we're doing? And because he didn't judge it, he was able to run with it, to turn it into something amazing. Miles trusted the band, and he trusted himself, and he always encouraged us to do the same. This was just one of many lessons I learned from Miles.

We all have a natural human tendency to take the safe route—to do the thing we know will work—rather than taking a chance. But that's the antithesis of jazz, which is all about being in the present. Jazz is about being in the moment, at every moment. It's about trusting yourself to respond on the fly. If you can allow yourself to do that, you never stop exploring, you never stop learning, in music or in life.

I was lucky enough to learn this not only from playing with Miles but over the decades of playing that have followed. And I'm still learning it, every single day. It's a gift that I never could have imagined back when I first started plunking around on my friend Levester Corley's piano at the age of six.

Levester Corley lived in the same building as my family, on the corner of Forty-Fifth Street and King Drive on the South Side of Chicago. We lived in a poor neighborhood, but it wasn't the worst one in 1940s Chicago. It was probably a step up from the worst, meaning that we didn't live in the projects but they were close by.

I never thought of our neighborhood as being a "bad" one, though parts of it were rough. There were gangs, and there was a run-down house down the block we called the Big House—slang for prison. Most days there were young men hanging out in front of the Big House, and when you saw that, you knew to walk on the other side of the street. But for the most part I never felt unsafe or threatened. I just assumed that my neighborhood was pretty much like everyone else's.

I was born in 1940, and when I was really little, I thought we were rich, because we always had everything we wanted. We had clothes to wear and food to eat, and a Christmas tree and toys every year, so what did I know? I had never met anyone from outside our neighborhood, and compared to some of the other families on our block, we seemed to be doing great. In the basement of our own building, there was one family living with about ten people crammed into a single room. In comparison, we had a two-bedroom for five people—my parents, my brother, Wayman, my sister, Jean, and me—which felt like a luxury.

Levester lived on another floor in our building, and when he turned six, his parents bought him a piano. I'd always liked just hanging around with Levester, but once he got that piano, all I wanted to do was go to his apartment and play it. I loved the feel of the keys under my fingers, even though I didn't really know what I was doing. We'd plunk around on it, and I'd try to play songs, and when I went back to our apartment, I'd tell my mom about it. After a while she said to my father, "We need to get this boy a piano." And so when I was seven, they gave me a used piano they'd bought for about \$5 in a church basement.

It's not surprising that my mother, Winnie Griffin Hancock, was eager for me to have a piano. She was always anxious to instill an appreciation of culture in her children, even naming me—Herbert Jeffrey Hancock—after an African American singer and actor, Herb Jeffries. To my mother, culture meant music, so she made sure we grew up listening to Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Mozart, and Handel. She also loved

the music that came out of the black community—jazz and blues—and felt we should be connected to it as part of our heritage. But “good music” to her was classical music, so when I got my piano, she sent my brother and me to take classical lessons.

My mother’s feelings on class and culture were rooted in her unusual childhood in the South. Her mother—my grandmother Winnie Daniels—grew up poor in Americus, Georgia, in a family of sharecroppers working the property of a wealthy family called the Griffins. But when my grandmother came of age, she married one of the Griffin sons, and just like that, she went from being a sharecropper to being a landowner’s wife. So my mom and her brother, Peter, were born into a wealthier environment than most southern black kids at the time.

Growing up, I was always told that my grandfather Griffin was black, but in the few pictures I saw, he didn’t look it. Years later, my mother told me he was actually white, so to this day I couldn’t tell you which is the truth. What I do know is that sometime during the 1920s, my grandfather lost his entire fortune. He died soon after, and my grandmother picked up and moved the family to Chicago to start over.

It was a rough transition. After enjoying a life of relative privilege in Georgia, my grandmother and my mother were forced to take work as maids in Chicago. My mom cleaned houses for white families throughout high school, and understandably she hated it. She spent two years in college, which enabled her to get a job as a secretary, and eventually she became a guidance counselor for the Illinois State Department of Employment. She worked hard, carried herself with dignity, and raised all three of her children to believe we could achieve great things.

That was my mother’s good side. But there was another side, too. She was bipolar, though we didn’t know what that was—in those days people just used words like “headstrong” and “high-strung.” She’d get into fights with family members, big screaming arguments where she’d shout and cry and argue until her neck veins popped out. In our house, it was my mother’s way or the highway, but my dad tried to dismiss her rages as “just Winnie being Winnie.” He loved her, and he tended to put her on a pedestal, because she carried herself in that dignified manner. But he also knew better than to get in her way. Whenever we asked him for something, he was quick to say, “Go ask your mother.”

My father was a sweet, easygoing man, the guy cracking jokes in any group. He was raised by my grandmother and grandfather Hancock, but what very few people know is that at birth he wasn’t actually a Hancock at all. He was born during my grandmother’s first marriage, to a man with the last name of Pace. I don’t know anything about my grandfather Pace, except that my grandmother always said he was a bad guy. She left him and married Louis Hancock, who adopted my father and gave him his—and now my—name.

Growing up, my dad wanted to be a doctor. But for a poor black family from Georgia in the 1930s, that was completely out of the question. In fact, he didn’t even get to finish high school, dropping out after his sophomore year following a family discussion about finances. By then the family had moved to Chicago, and my dad knew that if he worked hard enough, his two younger brothers could go to college, so he sacrificed his own education to make that happen. From the time he was a teenager, my dad

worked in the grocery business, and although he never went back to school, he eventually managed to buy his own store.

Unfortunately, he was too giving to be a good businessman. He was always extending people credit, and then he had a hard time pressing them for money. Or he'd buy cuts of meat from the stockyards for other mom-and-pop stores, acting as the middleman, and then it was the same story: He let them pay on credit, and then he could never ask them for the money. Dad's generosity threatened to bankrupt his business, and he ultimately sold his store. He worked a lot of different jobs while I was growing up, unskilled positions like cabdriver and bus driver, since he had just two years of high school. Eventually he became a government meat inspector at the Chicago stockyards.

My uncles thought of my dad as a hero for having sacrificed his own education for them. But my mother, sharp-tongued and opinionated, would sometimes tease him cruelly about his lack of education, calling him dumb or worse. She didn't do it often, and it was most likely because of her illness, but she knew how to use words to wound him.

I knew that my parents loved each other, and I watched as my dad tried to be patient with my mom, even when she got into a "headstrong" state. But every once in a while, her rages got physical. One afternoon I happened to see my dad in his undershirt, and I could see scratch marks all down his back. He never talked about it, and in fact I never heard him say a single bad word about my mother. No matter how mercurial she might be, he was always steady, which is probably a big reason why I remember my childhood as a stable, happy time.

But there's another reason for that, too: From the time I was very young, I've always tended to see the good in situations rather than the bad. Not because I was trying to be a Goody Two-Shoes or make a point to anyone else—I just somehow never really noticed or paid attention to the bad things. I'm an optimist at heart, always have been.

Years after my sister, Jean, grew up and moved away from Chicago, she wrote a short autobiography for a class. This was how she described the neighborhood where we grew up:

Girls became pregnant upon puberty, boys worshipped and eventually copied the habits of heroin dealers, and kitchen gossip chronicled the purchase of stolen goods, weekend knife fights, and the "turning out" of a young lady with a nice body. Our area of commerce was heavily weighted with liquor stores, smelly groceries, well-fortressed currency exchanges, and tawdry five-and-dimes.

Was this all true? I suppose it was. But whenever I think of our neighborhood, I think of shooting marbles with my brother, or getting Goldenrod ice cream down at my dad's store, or standing on a corner with friends and singing R&B songs by groups like the Five Thrills and the Ravens. Ever since I can remember, I've tended to focus on the good rather than the bad. It's a trait I feel lucky to have.

Some older brothers don't want anything to do with their younger siblings, but my brother, Wayman, wasn't like that. Even though he was three years older, he took me everywhere with him.

He loved playing games and sports, so he'd bring me along to shoot marbles or play softball even though I was terrible at it. I was small for my age and had no interest in sports, but he still seemed to like having me there.

He remembers one softball game in which his team was up by about twenty runs and they encouraged me to take a turn pitching. I was probably about six years old, and they put me right up close to the plate, but I just couldn't pitch strikes. I walked the first five batters, and when I finally got one over the plate, the whole team erupted into cheers.

My relationship with my sister wasn't as easy. Jean was the only girl, and she was the youngest, so she sometimes felt left out. She'd get so frustrated because she just wanted to be one of the boys. One time we even caught her in the bathroom trying to pee standing up, which we never let her forget.

Jean was three years younger than me, but she could be smart and sharp-tongued like my mother. Because she was so smart, she could talk her way through anything, and once she had an opinion, she held tight to it like a bulldog. She could have been a debate champion, because she knew exactly how to manipulate an argument. She and I got along really well, but when we did argue, she'd somehow get me backed into a corner. Once I got so frustrated I just wanted to hit her. But for the most part, during our early childhood anyway, we got along.

Even though Jean was younger than me, she could be intimidating. She could be fierce, and both she and my mother knew how to hurt someone verbally. Maybe because they were so similar in that way, my mom and sister used to have confrontations. My mother's bipolar illness escalated during my sister's childhood, so as Jean got older, she bore the brunt of it in ways that my brother and I hadn't.

In many ways, that was the story of my sister's life—that through no fault of her own, she often got the short end of the stick. She was absolutely brilliant, skipping grades in school, teaching herself to play the guitar, playing sports. She could do just about anything better than most people. But as a young black woman growing up in the '50s and '60s, there were few expectations, and even fewer opportunities, for her. She had to scratch and claw for everything she got, which was something I never really thought about until years later, after her too-short life had ended.

The other thing I didn't realize until much later was how badly my sister wanted my approval. Jean was a deeply passionate human being, much more passionate than I am. She was emotional, whereas I've always been a more rational, reasoning kind of person. She would sometimes try to provoke responses out of me, but I never saw that for what it was: a need on her part, rather than just a provocation. As with so many things that didn't directly affect me, I just never really thought about it. I've always tended to focus on whatever is right in front of me, which causes me to miss the nuances of what's happening to others.

From the time I was very young, I had the ability—the compulsion, really—to get completely absorbed in whatever I was doing. I was obsessed with mechanical things, and I'd spend hours taking apart clocks and watches, poking around inside. I just had a driving need to understand how a thing worked, and if I couldn't figure it out, I'd block out everything else and focus obsessively until I got it. At first I was just

messing around with whatever gadgets I could find in the house. But when my parents bought me the piano, I turned the same kind of obsessive focus to learning how to play it.

Once we got that piano, all I wanted to do was play music. My brother and I both took lessons from the same teacher, Mrs. Jordan, who taught about a dozen primarily black students. We all studied classical, which is what any black person who took piano at the time would study—there weren't lessons in blues or R&B or anything like that. Studying piano meant studying classical music, which suited my mother just fine.

Mrs. Jordan put on recitals and competitions, and it wasn't long before I decided I wanted to be a concert pianist. From that point on, music was my life. I spent every spare moment at the piano, picking out chords and melodies, learning to read music, training my hands. No matter how much I learned, there was always more to learn, and I loved that. I still do.

I also loved playing piano because, unlike sports, I was good at it. I always felt inferior at sports, because I was small and uncoordinated, but here was an activity where I could be as good as my brother and his friends. Wayman was a pretty good piano player, but he didn't have the same single-minded focus on it that I did, so before long I could actually play better than he could. Once we got that piano, I never went back to playing sports with my brother and his friends.

Also, playing piano was considered cool in our neighborhood. Because I was small, other kids would occasionally mess with me—including one time, in front of the Big House, when a couple of kids jumped me. But once word got out that I could play piano, I found myself in a different category. Playing music changed everything about my life. It gave me purpose, it changed others' perceptions of me, but most important, it changed the way I felt about myself.

When I was eleven years old, Mrs. Jordan entered me in an annual competition held by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. As part of its young people's series, the CSO invited students to play a movement of a concerto, and the winner of the competition would get to play it live, onstage, with the CSO.

By that point I'd been taking lessons for four years, and playing piano was pretty much all I did. I practiced Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 18 in B-flat Major, K. 456, every day for nearly a year, and when my audition came, I was ready. The audition was held at Orchestra Hall (now called Symphony Center), and each student was required to play alone, onstage, in front of the assistant conductor, George Schick.

I walked onto the stage, sat down at the piano, and looked out into the seats. Mrs. Jordan was there, and I saw two other ladies come in and sit in the back, near her. Then I turned my attention to the piano, and from the moment I played the first notes, the rest of the world might as well have not existed. I played the first movement, and only when the final notes had faded did I look up again.

Well, that was pretty good, I thought. When I came offstage and saw Mrs. Jordan, she gave me a hug and told me that, yes, I had done well. In fact, she told me that the two women I'd seen coming in were also piano teachers, and that after I'd finished playing, the two of them were crying. That was pretty heady stuff for an eleven-year-old.

A few months later, I got a postcard in the mail saying, “Congratulations!” I had won the competition and was invited to play with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on February 5, 1952. Unfortunately, the postcard also said that the CSO had been unable to locate the orchestral parts to that particular concerto, so I would have to either learn a new piece or forfeit my chance to play.

I stared at the postcard in shock. How could this be? Over the past year, I had learned that concerto cold, and now I’d only have a couple of months to learn a brand-new one. And this wasn’t for just any recital—it was my debut onstage with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra! But there was no way I was letting my big opportunity slip away. We chose another Mozart concerto—no. 26 in D Major—and I began feverishly practicing. I played that piece for hours upon hours, and as the date of the concert approached, I knew it, though not as well as I knew no. 18.

Finally the big night arrived. I wasn’t at the top of the program, so I waited nervously in the wings while the orchestra played its first piece. There was an elevator platform near the conductor’s podium, and just before I was to play, a big grand piano came up through the floor into position. I took a deep breath and walked onto the stage to take my seat at that massive piano.

I must have looked pretty funny walking out there, because at age eleven I was a short, spindly little kid who could barely reach the piano pedals. I don’t remember exactly what I was wearing, but I think it was a jacket, short pants, and knee socks. I was small for my age, so I can’t imagine what was going through the minds of people in the audience. But just as at the audition, the moment I started playing, everything else faded away—it was just me and the music.

When I finished, the audience exploded into applause, and after the concert a few people even asked me for my autograph. I signed one for a girl my age, writing out “Herbert Hancock” in my most careful cursive. I felt proud of myself, and relieved that I’d been able to learn the new concerto in so little time.

A week or two later, as a congratulatory gift, Mrs. Jordan invited me to see the British pianist Dame Myra Hess perform with the Chicago Symphony. We were both stunned when we saw what was on the program: Mozart’s Piano Concerto no. 18! Somehow they’d managed to find all the orchestra music. Or perhaps it was never really lost? It would have been easy to feel suspicious, to wonder whether someone at the CSO just wanted to discourage the young African American kid who’d surprised everyone and won their prestigious competition. For a black person growing up in ’40s and ’50s America, small acts of racism were simply a fact of life. But even at age eleven, I tended to ignore possible racial slights rather than give them any weight. It was just my nature.

CHAPTER TWO

The first time I ever met a white kid was in high school. At my elementary school, Forestville, all the students were black (though some of our teachers were white). No white families lived in my neighborhood, and I never really went anywhere else, so I just never met any. In our part of Chicago, the only white people we saw were the ones coming to collect money—the insurance man, or the landlord.

The only thing I knew about white kids came from the stories my dad told me from his childhood. He'd spent his first years in the segregated South, then went to a mixed elementary school after he moved to Chicago, and often had gotten into fights. So when I was about to start my freshman year at Hyde Park High School, where three-quarters of the students were white, I was definitely wary.

I had skipped a grade in elementary school, so I was young for a freshman—just twelve when I first set foot in the halls of Hyde Park. We weren't really supposed to go to school there, since we didn't live in Hyde Park's district, but it was better academically than the high school in our district, so my mother was determined to send us there. We had an aunt and uncle who lived in the right district, so my parents used their address when they enrolled us.

My head was full of the stories my dad had told me, so when I went to school on the first day of freshman year, I fully expected something to go down. I was primed for a fight, but to my surprise, the white kids turned out to be . . . just kids. I went running home after that first day of school, and as I burst through the door to our apartment, I yelled, "Mama! Mama! They're just like us!" It sounds funny now, but that really was a big surprise to me.

Hyde Park was a liberal school, so we students thought of ourselves as progressive, racially and otherwise. But as progressive as we thought we were, it was the 1950s, so a lot of people frowned on blacks and whites dating each other. Still, I probably experienced more overt racism from members of my own extended family than I did from my high school friends. I had darker skin than most of my relatives, and in black families, that's an easy target. Sometimes, when I was bad, I'd get called "a black, evil rascal." But to the best of my recollection, nobody in high school ever called me names based on my color.

Even if they had, I'd have done my best to ignore it, because I made a conscious decision in high school not to focus on race at all if I could help it. Racism existed, of course; in the 1950s casual racism was woven into the fabric of American life. You didn't have to go searching for it, because it was omnipresent, everything from whites getting preferential treatment for loans, employment, and housing to white people addressing a black man as "boy." But early on, I realized I had a choice: The easy road was to sit back and expect racist acts to happen—to see injustice and ill intent at every turn, to essentially say, *I'm black and will never get a fair shake*, and to live life accordingly. I made a choice to do the opposite.

Some black people look for racism, but I made a point of *not* looking for it, because looking for it feeds a victim mentality, which doesn't help anyone. That victim mentality was rampant in our neighborhood, but somehow I managed to find my way out of it. This was partly thanks to my parents, who raised all three of us to believe we could achieve anything we put our minds to. But it also had a lot to do with my own curiosity. When I started high school, for the first time in my life I found myself surrounded by many different kinds of people. And rather than feeling like I was an outsider or being judged by them, I wanted to know everything about them.

After growing up exclusively around black people, I suddenly had friends who were Jewish, Italian, Asian—and I didn't know anything about their cultures. I wanted to hear how they talked, see how they

lived, learn about their beliefs. Most ethnic groups stuck together at Hyde Park, but I knew I didn't want to stay in the black-kids group.

One of my first girlfriends was white, a girl named Barbara Laves, who played violin with the orchestra. She was a petite brunette with amazing light blue eyes, and I used to walk her home after school each day. Barbara and I didn't stay together all that long, and I dated black girls, too, including my prom date, Peggy Milton. But I never really worried about anybody's race. If I liked a girl, I asked her out. And if other people had a problem with that, I either didn't know about it or, more likely, didn't pay attention to it.

My parents tried for a while to turn us into churchgoers, but it didn't stick. The first church they took us to was Ebenezer Baptist, one of dozens of Baptist churches sprinkled throughout our South Side neighborhood. The music was fantastic. There was a young people's gospel choir and an adult gospel choir, and I liked the part of the service when they sang. But the sermons were all fire and brimstone, which didn't really speak to me, or to my mother. There just didn't seem to be much to learn from listening to someone talk about hell and damnation all the time.

Next, my parents took us to an African Methodist Episcopal church a few blocks away. Their choirs were good, too, but I didn't love the hymns, and I still didn't love the message—I just never responded to the notion of heaven and hell and retribution and punishment. Apparently my parents didn't, either, because the next church we went to was Unitarian, which didn't preach any kind of fire and brimstone at all. My mother liked this church, as it was more open and seemed to have an intellectual, rather than emotional, basis. But even so, we didn't go to this one for very long, either.

None of the churches really spoke to me, yet from the time I was very small, I was always curious about the big questions of existence. At night, after my brother went to sleep, I'd sit on the windowsill of our bedroom looking up at the stars, wondering about life and death and the universe. At some point, I figured out for myself that life never ends, and I came early to the belief that even when we die, we reemerge later as another being. Years later, I would learn that these were core beliefs of Buddhism.

The notion of heaven and hell just never made sense to me. I couldn't imagine that, when you die, you just pop out and disappear to some unknown place. I didn't see anything else in the world just disappearing like that; matter and energy transform, but they don't disappear. A seed becomes a tree, a tree becomes a chair, a chair becomes ash, and the cycle continues. It just wasn't logical to me that the way we live and die could be so different from that.

This was how my brain worked, by seeking out the logical sequence of things. As a kid, I loved mechanics and science, and I spent hours taking apart clocks and toasters because I had a driving need to know how things worked. I was drawn to the rational order of these systems, enraptured by the way that taking apart an object could lead to a complete understanding of that object.

One day in high school, I decided to apply that same kind of logic to other parts of my life. I'd done something that got me in trouble with my parents, and they decided to punish me by not letting me go to a party I was looking forward to. The punishment didn't seem fair, and I was really angry. I didn't get

mad often, but this seemed so undeserved that I was furious. It was a barrier I couldn't get around—I felt helpless, almost victimized, by the injustice of it all. I stewed about it for days.

Sulking in my room on the afternoon of the party, I finally thought, *Okay, let me examine rationally what's going on here.* I decided to take apart the situation just as I'd take apart a mechanical object. The party started at ten, and because of my curfew, I would have had to leave at midnight. That was two hours of my life; once those two hours were done, I'd be on to the next thing, whether I went to the party or not. Suddenly everything became clear: *All I have to do is get through those two hours, and then life will go on as usual.*

So that's what I did. From ten until midnight, I read books and hung out in my room, and once midnight had passed, that was the end of it. I didn't feel like a victim anymore; in fact, I was proud of myself. I had taken control of my emotions and figured out a way to get past my anger. From that point on, there was no way I could be punished, because I knew I could choose how to respond to any given situation. I had learned how to keep my emotions under control.

This felt like a great development: I would never again feel victimized by external factors, because I could control how they affected me emotionally. In many ways this was a useful trait, but over time, I carried it to an extreme, desensitizing myself. I had never been a particularly emotional kid, but from high school onward I really kept my emotions in check; I almost never cried, no matter how sad or upset I felt. If something started to upset me, I'd shut myself down rather than feel those negative emotions.

There was one glaring exception, and it happened just as I was starting my senior year in high school: the murder of Emmett Till.

Emmett Till was fourteen, just one year younger than me, and he was also from the South Side of Chicago. In August of 1955, he went to Mississippi to visit relatives. His mother warned him before going that the South was different from the North and he needed to behave accordingly. But when Till and some friends went into a convenience store to buy some candy, one of the other boys dared him to talk to the twenty-one-year-old white woman working at the store, Carolyn Bryant. He apparently wolf-whistled at her, showing off for his friends, and when Bryant told her husband, Roy, about it, he decided to take action.

Several days later Roy Bryant and a number of other men kidnapped Till and pistol-whipped him. They put the bleeding boy in the back of a pickup truck, covered him with a tarp, and drove him to a cotton gin, where they picked up a seventy-pound fan. Then they drove Till to the banks of the Tallahatchie River, shot him in the head, and tied the fan around his neck to weigh down his body before throwing it into the river.

Three days after that, kids fishing in the river found Till's corpse. His grieving mother insisted that his body be put into a pine coffin and sent by train back to Chicago, rather than being buried in Mississippi. The coffin arrived at the A. A. Rayner funeral home in early September, and when Till's mother looked in and saw her son's horribly mutilated face, she decided to have an open casket at his funeral, so the whole world could see what those men in Mississippi had done to him.

The day Till's body arrived back in Chicago, we happened to drive past the Rayner funeral home, which wasn't far from our apartment on the South Side. I could see people stumbling out the door, weeping, and I watched in shock as one man came out sobbing, uttering gibberish as he waved his hands in the air. I had never seen people unhinged like that, and it scared me.

Jet magazine published a full-page close-up photo of Emmett Till's swollen, destroyed face, and although my parents tried to shield us from seeing it, curiosity got the better of me. When I picked up the magazine and flipped to the photo, fear and horror shot right through me. No matter how much control I thought I had over my emotions, nothing could have prepared me for seeing the cruelly disfigured face of a boy my age, from my own neighborhood, who'd been brutally murdered for nothing at all. I had nightmares for weeks afterward.

My earliest exposure to jazz was on WGES deejay Al Benson's radio show. Known as the Godfather of Chicago Black Radio, Benson spun records all day, mostly blues or R&B but with the occasional jazz cut thrown in. The first jazz performance I took notice of was "Moonlight in Vermont," played by the guitarist Johnny Smith, with Stan Getz on tenor sax. It was a ballad, just a pretty song that I liked, rather than some kind of big epiphany about jazz. At the time it came out, in 1952, I mostly listened to R&B music, like the rest of the kids in my neighborhood.

We used to stand around on street corners and sing, imitating our favorite groups—the Orioles, the Midnighters, the Five Thrills, the Ravens. Later I heard the Four Freshmen, a vocal quartet that gained fame in the mid-'50s with songs like "Mood Indigo" and "Day by Day."

The Four Freshmen sang harmonies that were beyond the four-part barbershop harmonies that had been popular in the '30s. They sang more jazzlike harmonies, with major sevenths and even a few ninth chords, which mesmerized me and made me want to learn how to sing them myself. I also loved the Hi-Lo's, another vocal group, whose piano player, Clare Fischer, arranged many of their songs. Fischer's arrangements had a tremendous influence on my understanding of harmony.

I loved this type of singing so much that I even put together my own vocal group at Hyde Park. But even though I was interested in R&B and other musical genres, it never really occurred to me that I could play anything other than classical music on the piano.

I used to play for the high school orchestra's rehearsals, to help guide the violinists and others who were struggling to learn parts. But the orchestra never performed with a piano, so in concerts I played cymbals and percussion instead. Hyde Park did have a dance band, but their piano player was a guy named Don Goldberg, who was in my class, though I hadn't yet met him. Don was also in a student jazz trio, and when I finally saw them play one afternoon during my sophomore year, he did something that changed my life.

Every semester the senior class at Hyde Park put on a variety show for all grades. Don's trio—piano, upright bass, and drums—took the stage, and as they started playing, I was of course watching Don. His performance absolutely floored me: He was improvising! I had no idea people our age could do that; I

thought it was something only older players did. Mind you, “older” to me at age fourteen meant nineteen or twenty.

I had been playing classical music since I was seven, so I was pretty good at reading music, but Don could do something on my instrument that I couldn’t. He was creating the music himself, in the moment, rather than reading it off a page. My heart started beating like crazy, and as soon as the trio finished their three songs, I hurried backstage and found him. I quickly introduced myself, and then I couldn’t hold back.

“Man, how did you learn to play like that?” I asked him. “I don’t really understand what you did, but I liked it. I want to learn how to do it, too—how to play jazz.”

Don laughed and said, “Well, if you like what I did, the first thing you need to do is get yourself some George Shearing records.” He told me to listen to how Shearing played and then try to imitate the parts I liked. That was how he’d learned, and at age fifteen he was already pretty good at improvising.

As soon as the school bus dropped me off that afternoon, I ran home, burst through the front door, and said, “Mama! We’ve got to get some George Shearing records!” She looked at me like I had three heads. “Herbie,” she said, “you already have some.”

“No, Mama,” I said. “You don’t understand. We need *George Shearing* records. Not just any records.”

“Herbie,” she said, “do you remember last year when I brought you home some records, and you got mad at me because you wanted some other ones and said I’d gotten the wrong things? Those were George Shearing records. Go look in the cabinet.”

I crossed the living room to the cabinet, which was filled with 78s, and sure enough, there they were: a few albums by George Shearing and his quintet. I had never even listened to them. I’d always thought of jazz as older people’s music, something that had no relevance to me. But now that I’d seen someone my age improvising, making that kind of music exciting, I just wanted to do it myself.

I slid a record out of its sleeve and put it on the turntable. Don’s trio had performed three songs that the George Shearing Quintet played: “Lullaby of Birdland,” “I’ll Remember April,” and “A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square.” I laid the needle down on “I Remember April,” and as I listened to Shearing play, it sounded like Don! That was it for me—if Don could do it, why couldn’t I? That afternoon I started trying to learn how.

My first attempts were terrible. I sounded exactly like what I was, a classical musician learning how to improvise. But then my love of science and mechanics kicked in, and I decided to approach improvising the same way I approached taking a clock apart: analytically. I’d find a phrase I liked, and then try to pick out the notes by listening to it over and over—even just to find a single-note improvisation on the right hand. I tried to listen past the melody to the improvised parts to figure out the individual notes I needed to play.

Once I found the right notes, I'd try to play along with the record, but in the beginning I couldn't seem to make it sound the same. So I'd go past that phrase to get to the next one, learning longer and longer phrases until I could play them the way they sounded on the record.

I kept working to find the phrases I liked, and then I'd transcribe them onto music paper. I didn't know it at the time, but I was also doing ear training—I was sharpening my relative pitch at the same time I was learning the phrases. I did this for hours each day, branching beyond George Shearing into other piano players, like Erroll Garner and Oscar Peterson. The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn.

Because of the way my mind works, I noticed patterns. I'd play a phrase, write it down, and think, *Wait a minute—he just used those same notes in another phrase earlier in the song.* I didn't know how jazz was constructed, so I had to figure it out as I went along. To me, improvisation sounded like stream of consciousness. But at the same time I knew it couldn't be, because it was so organized.

Despite the fact that I could play classical music well, my knowledge of other musical forms was pretty limited. I knew major chords and minor chords, but everything else I had to teach myself. I began to spend a lot of time talking to the few other kids at school who were into jazz, including Don Goldberg and a French horn player named Ted Harley. They were both good musicians; Don went on to become a professional composer and arranger, changing his name to Don James and working on big shows, such as the Ice Capades and *Baryshnikov on Broadway*. Talking with Don and Ted helped me to figure out more of the theory and structure behind improvisation.

Whenever people ask me how to learn to improvise, I tell them the same thing Don told me: Find a player you like, and then copy what he or she is doing. That analytical, mechanical approach will enable you to learn the basics, but then the trick will be to figure out how not to get stuck in copying. You have to start creating your own lines, to find your own voice.

If you're playing a particular form—say, on a thirty-two-bar song—you're playing the melody, the head of the tune, and then you improvise off that form's particular chord structure. There's a lot of freedom within that structure—space, rhythm, chords, shadings. Whatever you decide to play, whatever comes out moment to moment, is an expression that's shaped by a combination of elements, which includes, if you're in a group, what the other musicians are playing. You have to be fully present, because there's a lot going on, and it's happening so rapidly that you can't get slowed down by thinking about it.

Improvisation—truly being in the moment—means exploring what you don't know. It means going into that dark room where you don't recognize things. It means operating on the recall part of your brain, a sort of muscle memory, and allowing your gut to take precedence over your brain. This is something I still work on every day: learning to get out of my own way. It's not easy, but the times when you can do that are truly magical. Improvising is like opening a wonderful box where everything you take out is always new. You'll never get bored, because what that box contains is different every single time.

Jazz is not something you can ever completely master, because it is in the moment, and every moment is unique, demanding that you reach inside yourself. Classical music seemed more cerebral, but jazz was both cerebral and intuitive. It pulled me like a magnet, and I couldn't wait to learn more about it.

CHAPTER THREE

In the fall of 1956, I headed off to Grinnell College. Grinnell was a small liberal-arts school in Iowa, of all places, so it wasn't the most obvious choice for me. But one of my parents' closest friends, our South Side neighbor Mrs. Smith, had gone there, so I decided to apply. I won a Pullman scholarship and set out for Iowa at age sixteen, and what I found when I got there was a warm, welcoming campus with students from all over the world. Going to Hyde Park High School had opened my eyes to people from different walks of life, and my time at Grinnell would broaden my horizons even more.

Even before I set foot on campus, I started examining my options analytically. Should I major in music? Or in science? I loved them both, but I wanted to make the smart choice. So I asked myself: *What are the chances you can make a living from jazz? Questionable. Now, what are the chances you can make a living from science? Probably really good.* As much as I loved jazz, I decided to take the pragmatic path and major in engineering. I even promised my mother, who wanted me to get a degree in something useful, that I wouldn't major in music.

I didn't sign up for any music courses my freshman year, but I did take piano lessons and spent hours on my own studying jazz. My grades were just average, because I never buckled down that much to study my engineering classwork. Although there weren't many other jazz musicians at the school, I did find a couple of guys who were pretty good, so I spent time playing and talking about music with them. There was a drummer from Denmark named Bjarne Nielsen, a bass player named Dave Kelsen, and two trumpet players who could play pretty well—John Scott and Bob Preston. John became a close friend; we even wrote a song together that I would later record for my second album, *My Point of View*.

Some professional classical musicians practice for eight or so hours a day, but not me. I never actually practiced at the piano for more than about an hour a day—but I spent untold hours studying, learning, and analyzing music. I'd talk endlessly with the other guys about structure, theory, and improvisation, and we'd swap notes until late into the night. I never got tired of it, and the more I learned, the more excited I got.

I continued to be fascinated by improvisation. When I'd listen to Oscar Peterson records, I'd think, *How'd he do that?* I loved playing and jamming, because it was a blank slate for expressing yourself. You didn't have to just read the music someone else wrote; you could express yourself by creating your own music in the moment.

In my sophomore year I decided to put together Grinnell's first jazz concert. How hard could it be, right? I'd just listen to a few big-band recordings, figure out what the other instruments were playing, and transcribe all the arrangements myself. Then I'd just have to find enough musicians who could play the various parts, show them how to phrase and use dynamics, and get them concert-ready. Somehow, in my seventeen-year-old head, this seemed an achievable goal.

Grinnell had only about twelve hundred students total, and it was smack in the middle of Iowa. Where was I going to find enough jazz musicians for a whole concert? I put up notices on bulletin boards all over school, seeking out anyone who had experience playing and especially anyone who'd been in a high

school dance band. I knew that the University of Iowa, about sixty miles east of Grinnell, actually had a jazz band, so I borrowed some arrangements from them and from Iowa State. Somehow I managed to cobble together five saxes, three trombones, four trumpets, bass, drums, and a small vocal group.

Then I started figuring out the arrangements from a few Count Basie records, just as I'd worked out those George Shearing songs: by listening to the record, then writing down the various instrumental parts on blank music paper. This was complicated and time consuming, but I learned a lot doing it.

Once the parts were ready, I started section rehearsals for each instrument of the band. What I discovered was that while everybody could play the notes, only two people knew anything about jazz phrasing. I didn't want to go through all this trouble to put on a mediocre concert, so I personally conducted every section rehearsal—the saxophone players, the trombone players, the trumpet players. And because nobody knew how to solo, I had to write those parts out, too. For the whole semester I spent all my time teaching these players, trying to get them ready for the show. I was so consumed by preparing for the concert that there was no room for anything else in my mind, and I began flunking all my courses.

This was the second semester of my sophomore year, and the concert was scheduled just before finals. As the date drew near I stopped going to classes altogether—there was too much to do! I was working with the musicians day and night, hardly sleeping at all. But when the big day arrived, we were ready. Or as ready as we'd ever be, anyway.

The concert was held in May of 1958 in the Alumni Recitation Hall auditorium. People had never thought they'd get to hear a jazz concert in Grinnell, Iowa, so, given everyone's low expectations, we sounded fantastic. With every song, the audience was clapping and cheering like crazy. I loved being onstage improvising with a group of jazz musicians, just letting loose in whatever direction I felt like playing. The whole night felt magical.

But then came the nasty wake-up call: I had ignored my classes so completely that, unless I aced my finals, I was in danger of flunking out of school. For the next week, all I did was study. I crammed everything I could into my brain, and when I showed up for the finals, some of my professors—who hadn't seen me in weeks—seemed surprised. I knew how crushed my parents would be if I failed, so I was desperate to do at least well enough to stay in school.

And somehow I did. I aced all my finals, which enabled me to pass the semester with three Cs and a D. One professor was so shocked that he even thought I had cheated. He called me into his office and demanded to know how I could have been failing all semester, only to come in and do so well on the final exam. He began firing questions at me, trying to see if I really knew the material or not. When I was able to answer all his questions, he had to back down.

After that I went back to my dorm room, completely exhausted, and stared at myself in the mirror. My eyes were bloodshot, and I looked like hell. "Who are you trying to kid?" I asked the face in the mirror. I'd tried very hard to fit myself into the engineering box, but it was obvious where my passion was. At that point it was no longer even a choice. That day I decided to switch my major to music.

When I started taking music classes my junior year, I was happy to find that I already knew a lot of the material we were covering. I'd spent so much time studying theory and harmony and structure that I was able to skip most of my classes and just show up for tests.

To bring in extra money, I had a job at the restaurant in the student union, taking orders and serving food. But one weekend I got a gig playing piano in Des Moines, and to my shock I got paid more for that one night than I did for a week of working at the union. That realization just turned me upside down: The idea of logging all those hours slinging food in a restaurant when I could make so much more doing something I loved made it impossible for me to keep doing that job. So I quit.

The funny thing was, the Des Moines trip wasn't actually all that pleasant. The gig was okay—but a strange thing happened afterward.

I was only eighteen or so at the time, but somehow these guys who were playing at a nightclub had heard about me. I had agreed to go to Des Moines to play with them, and then, to save money, I was planning to go right back to Grinnell in the early-morning hours instead of paying for a hotel room. But one of the musicians told me I could just stay at his house with him and his wife. I thought, *Cool! An adventure!* This guy was a real working musician, and I was going to get to hang with him.

The gig wrapped up at about two in the morning, and as the guy and I walked to his car, he said, "I gotta make a couple of stops before we get to my place." I said, "I don't mind!" I didn't care where we went—I was just happy to be along for the ride.

Another couple of people were waiting at the car, and we all piled in. The guy pulled out of the parking lot, and after driving for a while we ended up outside a house. As soon as we pulled up, all the lights in the house went off. I thought that was a little weird—were they not expecting us?—but someone hopped out and went up to the front door, and then came back to the car with a little paper bag. We then drove to another house and picked up the guy's wife, and I noticed with bewilderment that even though it was pretty warm out, she was shivering.

We made a few more stops to drop off the other people in the car, and then it was just the musician, his wife, and me. He drove us to their building, and we climbed some back steps to get into their apartment. When he opened the door, my mouth fell open: It was one tiny room, with one bed in it. The guy and his wife lay down on the bed and gestured for me to join them.

"Do you want to get high?" he asked me, and then emptied the contents of the paper bag onto the bed. I looked at the hypodermic needle that had tumbled out, and the baggie of powder, and said, "No, thank you." I had never gotten high before, on anything, and I had no intention of getting into that stuff. But I was curious, so I said, "Can I watch?" As long as I was there, I wanted to see how it was done.

I observed him as he put the powder in a spoon with a little water, lit the lighter, and heated the bottom. The powder turned into a black liquid, which he then poured into the syringe. He wrapped his arm with a piece of rubber and tapped his vein, just like in the movies, and then he shot up. His wife was shivering because she was coming down from a high, but when he offered her the syringe, she took it,

too. I could hardly believe I was sitting here watching them shoot up; watching their faces to see if anything changed, I started feeling nervous. Were they about to get weird? There was only one bed, after all. But evidently they didn't think much of the heroin, so after complaining for a little bit, the guy said, "We're just gonna go to sleep." And I thought, *Okay, but where the hell am I supposed to sleep?*

I ended up lying on one side of the bed, with the guy in the middle and his wife on the other side, and I was so nervous I don't think I closed my eyes the entire night. They didn't seem all that high to me, but I'd never been with people shooting up heroin, so what did I know? I was a complete novice when it came to any kind of drug use, though I had recently started drinking. But this was a completely foreign world to me. I hadn't been tempted by drugs at all, though that would change.

In 1960 I left Grinnell and returned to Chicago, one credit shy of graduating because I had flunked a course in my junior year. I wanted to get my degree, but I wanted even more to start playing jazz seriously, and Grinnell wasn't the place to do that.

So I moved back in with my parents and took a job with the post office while I sought out work as a pianist. I delivered mail five days a week, and whenever I had gigs, I'd play music from nine p.m. until four or five in the morning. The hours were just brutal—I had almost no time left over to sleep. And I often had to take the train to and from the gigs, so I'd be slumped over in exhaustion on the "L" as it shuddered down to the South Side in the early-morning hours.

But until I could make enough money playing piano, I needed that post office job, so I was still delivering mail in the fall of 1960 when I got a call to play with Coleman Hawkins. Hawkins was a legendary saxophonist, the man who brought the tenor sax to prominence in jazz. He'd been playing since the early 1920s, when he started with Mamie Smith's Jazz Hounds, and in the four decades since then he'd played with all the big names: Louis Armstrong, Django Reinhardt, Miles Davis, Benny Goodman, Thelonious Monk, and Oscar Peterson. I mean, I would have been excited just to be in the same room with a player like Coleman Hawkins, much less actually get to play with him.

To keep his costs down, Hawkins usually worked with pickup bands, which meant he hired local musicians—a pianist, drummer, and bass player—in each city he played. For this gig in Chicago, the first-choice pianist, a guy named Jodie Christian, wasn't available, so Hawkins's drummer, Louis Taylor, suggested he give me a try. I was pretty green at that point, but I'd played with Taylor a few times, and he thought I deserved a chance.

Coleman hired me to play with him at the Cloisters nightclub for a fourteen-day stand. He was the first internationally known musician I had ever worked with, and his recording of "Body and Soul" was considered the ultimate saxophone solo of that classic song. I felt honored to share the stage with him and excited at the thought of what I might learn, but I was also nervous, hoping I could hold up my end of the bargain. He encouraged me and tried to make me feel comfortable onstage, and I think he was pleased with how I played.

I never got much of a chance to talk to Coleman, because I always had to hurry home after the last set. The hours were crazy—four sets a night, and five on Saturdays, with no days off—so I was playing music

into the wee hours every night and then trying to deliver mail all day. By the third day I was a complete wreck. That morning I was standing in front of somebody's apartment, thumbing through the mail, and I actually fell asleep standing up—which wasn't good, because the apartment was at the top of a concrete staircase. I was really dragging, and not surprisingly, I got sick, too.

Louis Taylor, the drummer who had gotten me the gig, said, "Herbie, that post office job is interfering with the music. You've got to quit." I knew there was no way for me to keep doing both, but I was scared to quit the post office, since it offered me stability and a steady income.

But on the fourth day, dragging myself home at four a.m. from that night's gig, I knew I had no choice. That morning I told some of the guys at the post office that I was going to quit. A lot of them were musicians themselves, and they urged me not to do it. More than one guy said, "Man, you're going to lose your health insurance!" I knew that if I did leave, I'd never get hired back there if music didn't work out, but that was a chance I had to take. So I walked into my supervisor's office and told him I was done.

After I finished that two-week gig with Coleman Hawkins, I just waited by the phone, hoping someone would call with another one. It was strange not to have a steady job, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to make enough money playing piano. But my parents took care of me, letting me live at home rent-free and feeding me dinner every night. I felt very lucky to have their support as I kept trying to make my dream of being a professional jazz musician come true.

In December of 1960, a couple of months after the Coleman Hawkins gig, I got a call from John Cort, the owner of the Birdhouse, a small club in a second-floor walkup on Dearborn Street, on the North Side. "Donald Byrd and Pepper Adams are playing in Milwaukee this weekend," he told me. "You want to play with them?"

"Are you kidding?" I said. "Yeah, I want to play with them!" I couldn't believe it—I'd just been invited to gig with one of the best jazz trumpeters around. Donald Byrd was a veteran of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, and he'd earned a master's degree at the Manhattan School of Music. He'd performed with many of the jazz greats over the years, including John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk, and in 1958 he'd started a quintet with the baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams. That was the group I was being invited to play with.

"Well," John said, "put on your maroon jacket and get on down here!" I'd played several times before at his club, so he knew my maroon jacket—the only jacket I had for playing gigs. I hurried down to the Birdhouse as quickly as I could get there.

As it turned out, Donald had hired another piano player, but a blizzard was blowing through the Midwest and the pianist had gotten stranded. So they just needed me to fill in for the weekend gig at Curro's in Milwaukee, and then on Monday they'd have their regular guy back. I met Donald and Pepper and the other guys at the Birdhouse, and we all went downstairs to pile into a car for the drive. But by now the blizzard was howling, and we didn't get very far before realizing there was no way we could make it to Milwaukee in time for the gig.

I was disappointed, but then Donald said, “Well, are there any jam sessions happening in Chicago tonight? Maybe we could at least hear you play.” I knew of one, a loose gathering led by the trumpet and sax player Ira Sullivan, so I gave Donald directions, and we made our way there. As we walked into the club all I could think was *Herbie, don’t screw this up!* This was my big chance, an audition of sorts for Donald Byrd. He was sharply dressed, highly educated, and a really charming guy, and I wanted so badly to impress him that my hands were shaking when I went up onstage to take my turn with the other musicians.

And I guess they never really stopped shaking, because I sounded terrible. I was so nervous that I couldn’t play anything right. After struggling through one tune, I knew I was done. I slumped off the stage and back to the table where the guys were sitting, my head hanging down in embarrassment.

I turned to Donald and said, “Well, I want to thank you for this opportunity. I’m sure after that you’re not going to want me now, but I appreciate the fact that you gave me a chance.” Donald just started laughing and clapped me on the back. “Come on, Herbie!” he said. “We’re taking you to Milwaukee tomorrow. I figured you’d be nervous—don’t worry about it!” Relief flooded through me. I hadn’t blown it after all, and I’d have a chance to show Donald what I really could do.

We drove to Milwaukee the next day, and that evening I played a lot better than at the jam session. But I did have trouble with one song, a jazz standard from the ’30s called “Cherokee.” I knew the chord structure, but Donald’s quintet played it really fast, and although I usually did pretty well with ballads and medium-tempo songs, I always struggled with soloing on faster songs.

After the gig I decided to bring it up with Donald. “I know I didn’t do so well on ‘Cherokee,’” I told him. “I always have a hard time with fast tempos. Do you have any tips that might help me out?”

“Barry Harris gave me a tip a long time ago,” Donald said, referring to a piano player from his hometown of Detroit. “He told me, ‘The reason you can’t play fast is ’cause you never heard yourself play fast.’” And then he explained to me how Barry suggested overcoming that problem.

Barry’s tip was to start with a particular form—either a twelve-bar blues or a rhythm form (based on the chord structure of Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm”), which are the only two true traditional forms in jazz—and then work out choruses. If it’s a blues form, you write out the twelve-bar structure and then an improvised solo on that structure for several choruses. Then, once you’ve written out the whole structure, you just practice what you’ve written on the page, playing it over and over again, and then doing it faster.

The next day I did exactly what Donald had told me. I didn’t worry about playing the piece exactly as it was written; the important thing was just getting used to playing and hearing myself do it quickly. That night at the second gig in Milwaukee, when Donald called “Cherokee,” I played it fast! This was the first time I’d been able to solo really well on a fast song, and it was amazing to feel my fingers flying over the keys like that.