



**Herbie Hancock is forward motion.** Over his nearly six-decade career, Hancock has never stopped improvising. His discography reads like an anthology of modern American music, from the Miles Davis Quintet to “Rockit” to his genre-defying collaborations with everyone from Joni Mitchell to Flying Lotus. Since 2010, he has held the William Powers and Carolyn Powers Creative Chair for Jazz with the LA Phil. With a restless mind and open spirit, Hancock is proof positive that visionaries never age, they just keep moving ahead.

Tenor saxophonist and composer Kamasi Washington grew up in the musical world influenced by Hancock’s boundless imagination. His 2015 tour de force triple album, *The Epic*, combined jazz with elements of hip hop, classical music, and R&B to produce an extravagant, soulful cure for the anxieties of our modern moment. Washington and his West Coast Get Down brethren have been hailed as the writers of jazz’s next chapter. As they make their mark, they’ll have Hancock as a guide to making it last.

In August 2017, Hancock and Washington shared the stage at the Hollywood Bowl for a concert in front of a near-capacity crowd. They came together again a few months later, this time in conversation with the LA Phil’s Vice President of Presentations Laura Connelly to discuss the future of jazz and the musical cross-pollinations to come.

**Laura Connelly** Herbie, you’ve been on the cutting edge of every musical development of the last forty years, but you maintain a relationship to jazz’s past. What do you think the place of tradition is in jazz today?

**Herbie Hancock** Tradition continues to be the lifeblood of music, but specific elements of tradition don’t have to continue. If there’s too much from the past then there’s no growth, there’s no development. And jazz has never been guilty of that. It has always continued to grow. It sounds so different from what jazz was at the turn of the century, from the 1800s to 1900s, and starting again in the 2000s. Although, there are people like Kamasi that, at least in my ears, I hear a strong reference to tradition, but with a new kind of spirit that is definitely of his generation.

**Kamasi Washington** I’ve always looked at tradition as the foundation of a building. It’s not the structure of what you are; it’s the foundation that you build your structure on top of. You start where the last generation stopped and then you try to see what you have inside yourself because you don’t want to start over. You don’t want to go back and try to figure out what a chromatic scale is or try to figure out a seventh chord. You take all that has been done, and you try to say “Okay, now,

how do I speak to who I am and what I've experienced?" Because that's what I feel like music really is. It's you expressing your experience and who you are and putting it into sound.

I don't know what it feels like to be on a train tour. You don't get on a train like Duke Ellington did and ride around the country. I don't have that, those things that were in his music, but other things, like love or family or brotherhood or pain, those things, they make it. We stand on the platform of things like that from people like Herbie, people before Herbie, and people after Herbie. We are standing on top of each other looking for another branch. It's a continuous structure that just keeps getting bigger and bigger. Tradition is just part of that structure.

**Hancock** The great thing about that description of a tree is, when the baton gets handed from one generation to the next, you don't disregard the person who handed it to you.

**Washington** And one branch can grow from another. Herbie can probably attest to this: Someone learned something from you and grew a branch, and you said "Oh, that's interesting. I'm going to grow from there." That's the beautiful part—it's about sharing. One of the most powerful aspects of music is that it brings people together. You see it. A song comes on and, whether you know a person or not, you're connected. It's a powerful thing. It reaches beyond time. Like I said before, there are experiences that the world has gone through that put us in a completely different place from the way it was when Mozart was making music, but somehow, his experience can touch you. I can experience it, and our worlds are probably as different as two worlds can possibly be. I can still feel that music. That's amazing. There are very few things that exist like that.

**Hancock** I totally agree with you. And today, because of technology, we have the opportunity to experience, in various forms, what humanity is really about. There are so many elements that connect us. One hundred years ago, how many people might you have known from Thailand? Whereas today, I've been to Thailand. You meet people. You've had a chance, even on the Internet, to interact with people and see the proof of what our inner humanity is really about. It's refreshing, and it's uplifting.

Do you think technology is changing the way we listen to music as well?

**Hancock** I was around when the World Wide Web was first introduced. I got to see the birth of that whole thing, and it blew my mind. The first time I went online I stayed up for three days on the Internet without speaking. I couldn't sleep because it was like you turn a page and you're in another country, right in front of you, without getting out of your chair. Technology has afforded us the opportunity to not only get in touch with each other for communication, but to create together, to experience the artifacts of other cultures and the output of their creativity. There are so many common bonds that we have, that transcend our differences. The great thing about what Kamasi is doing musically is that he celebrates our differences and our similarities at the same time. I'm totally in agreement with that; that's what I try to do with music.



We live in such a quick world, and everything is so immediate with technology. Kamasi, with *The Epic*, did you think you were on the cutting edge releasing a 172-minute triple-album set?

**Washington** Well, information is more accessible than it's ever been. Knowledge is only as difficult as your desire to have it. There's no information that you can't readily get in an instant, but the balance to that now is getting people to want the information. When I was a kid there was no YouTube, there was no Spotify. You only got to hear the music you owned, and most people had maybe fifteen, twenty CDs. You were particular about what you got into because you couldn't get everything, and the things you did get you went all the way into them because you had no choice. Whereas now, you can have anything you want. The moment a kid decides he's into jazz, he goes on Apple Music and has a million jazz records. It gives the illusion that people have a short attention span, but I never really believed it.

I'm part of a generation, when I get into a show, I go on Netflix, and I watch the whole thing. I watch twenty-eight, twenty-nine hours because I'm into it. Or, my little sister finds a song she likes, and she listens to that song all day, every day. That freed me up musically. I don't need to worry about this time limit, this idea that people have short attention spans. They don't have short attention spans—they just have a very particular attention span.

Before I made my album, we just came from a place where music was what we did all day long since we were little kids. There was a whole bunch of us who were second-generation musicians who grew up together, and we would literally be outside all day, all night, just playing music. We might play one, two, three songs over the course of four hours and drive my neighbors crazy. My dad used to tell me that the police were going to come and make us stop. When I was making my album, I decided to make the album that I wanted to hear. I didn't take anything other than that into consideration. In hindsight, I can say I understood how the accessibility of information has shaped perception, but in reality, I just wanted to make something cool.

Switching things up a bit, you've both made important contributions to hip hop as well as jazz, but we still separate things: hip hop, jazz, house, classical. Do you think genres hold us back, or do they serve a purpose for people?

**Washington** If it's a tool that's misused, then genres can hold you back. For me, they have a very practical application. When I go to a CD store, I want to hear music that has certain instrumentation and a certain kind of sound. That type of music is over there. That's the only real purpose to me of a genre. It's not to define what the music can be or the parameters or anything like that. It's when you start using it for that reason, that's when it starts to hold the music back.

**Hancock** It's a convenience to help you to get something that you want quickly, just like going to the store. The vegetables are over here, and the cereal, the corn flakes, is over there. But those categories put things in boxes, right? What I like to do is to think of what are the characteristics that define that box. In other words, a box is limited. It's a box, right? Music is infinite. It's not a box. Human beings are infinite. We're not a box.

What I like to do is think "How many things can I break?" I like to break things. I like to think about the characteristics of the box and how to defy that. That's what stimulates my creativity. A lot of times, when you're doing something that's not predefined, people will say "You can't do that." Well, the way you get me to do something is to tell me I can't do it. I figure out how to make it work, and after you've done that for a while, you get pretty good at it. You gain confidence, and it stimulates your courage.

I like to do things that support the courage of other people, the courage of people in the audience. I like to do things that they don't expect, or even make mistakes. When I hit the wrong patch and the sound definitely doesn't fit, my attitude becomes important then. Instead of freaking out and having it destroy the next moment, I go "Oops. Change the patch, and keep going." And, then, people know it's human to make mistakes. It's human to have something unexpected happen, and it's okay. Let it go.

**Washington** The act of overcoming is an idea people appreciate. What Herbie is talking about is he finds the box or the barrier that wants to stop you, and he says, "I'm going to overcome that." That's why we love his records, because you hear him overcoming something. He finds a really creative way to get there, and people go "I didn't think that was possible." We love that music because we share the experience. When somebody hears you overcome a challenge, it's like they overcame it themselves in a way.

**Hancock** What we've been defining is the rules-based stuff in our world. Sometimes, rules are necessary. Many times, they're necessary, or else there's chaos. But the people we actually learn from are not the ones who follow the rules. We learn, and we study the people who broke the rules. The ones who followed the rules, nobody knows who they are because they never made a difference.

**Washington** Some people who break the rules, they redefine the barriers. You're not redefining what the box is. You thought the box was a square, but no, it's a hexagon.

We've talked about technology, but we can't talk about the future from our vantage point in America right now without talking about the volatility of our politics. Music has always been a powerful force in some of the most difficult points in our history. What role do you see music playing in our society right now?

**Washington** Our politics right now are so focused on dividing people. I think it's why music is in one of the best places it's been in a long time, in a lot of ways. You listen to the records people are making, and a lot of inspiring stuff is happening. The world has a way of balancing itself—music being a counterforce to all that noise. Every time you turn on the news, anything that's spreading information, it's divide, divide, divide. Music has a power to overcome all of that and to take people and put them together. It reaches beyond your understanding and your reasoning.

I always say that sound is the one sense you can't turn off. It's there as the fail-safe. If all else fails, you'll hear each other. Because of that, music has this quality. You can hate black people all you want, but when James Brown comes on, you're not going to hate them in that moment. You know what I mean? That moment, you go "Oh, I'll go back to being a bigot when the song is over."

Right now, music has a job to do. You all trying to tear everybody apart? Well, we're going to keep them together.

**Hancock** That's a wonderful thing about music and the arts in general, too, that it has within it a force. Actually, it's within the human beings who are creating it. The ability to point toward the beauty of people with varying experiences, various cultures, various backgrounds, various religions, and bring us together to create something that no single one could create by itself. When you put two people who have different backgrounds together to create something, what comes out is a third thing. One plus one equals three. That's a new kind of math.

How can we ensure that the next generation is learning that new math? For the past few decades, music education hasn't been a priority within the public school system. Where do you see it going today?

**Hancock** A lot of things have changed over the years about the presence of music in our institutions. In many cases, music has been put on the back burner. It comes from not having a realization of the real value of what the arts are about because the arts are not in your face in the same way as your job or business or other aspects of life. But I'm sensing now that we're beginning to upset that apple cart and that the arts are finally starting to be recognized as an important thing that we almost forgot. We may not be seeing it in our politics so strongly yet, but I'm starting to hear voices outside, of people speaking up about their own experiences and how music has rescued their lives. Arts education is beginning to emerge as something that we all really need to pay attention to and need to support.

**Washington** I agree. For a long time, education became so much more about how to get a job, how to make money, than about really gaining any type of enlightenment and actually learning. Because information is so accessible now, people who really want an education are once again getting it for that reason, that enlightenment. When that happens, like Herbie was saying, the arts all of a sudden pop right back up. Music is such a core human activity. Just because you're not going to be a professional musician one day doesn't mean you shouldn't learn music. I think everyone should learn music. I think it's part of who you are as a human being. Yeah, you're going to have special people who are really, really great at it who end up going on to be professional, but everyone learns math even if you're not going to be a mathematician. Everyone goes to PE even though they're not going to be in the NBA. It's these core things, and music is one of them. As education becomes more a tool of enrichment instead of a pathway to an occupation, the arts will keep growing.

Coming from the LA Phil's perspective, we're interested in how classical music fits into that growth. Is there a role the LA Phil can play in the relationship between jazz and classical music?

**Hancock** Heck, yeah. I've been looking for that day for a long time.

**Washington** Is this the invitation? Accept it.

**Hancock** You know, I see a lot of new players coming along who were brought up not just listening to classical music but listening to pop music, and they want to know how to improvise. That's something I want to be a part of, teaching classical musicians that kind of skill, not necessarily jazz per se, but the concept of improvising. It used to be a very important part of classical music, and it got lost over time, unfortunately.

**Washington** To have that ability to hear music, one, and then understand what you're hearing, and then be able to create within it. There are so many classical players that I hear who have such a mastery of their instrument. You just tack on a little more understanding, and who knows what you might come up with? That interacts, then, with us as composers, to be able to write music for such amazing musicians like those in the LA Phil. It's inspiring. "So, I can pretty much write whatever I want to write? There's *nothing* off the table?"

It would be inspiring to collaborate, to have those kinds of colors to paint with in a different way. A lot of the stuff I write uses strings, and a lot of players say "You're writing stuff for me that I don't normally play." There's so much opportunity in there to create some new music that's never been heard before and to have musicians stretched to places that they're not used to being stretched.

**Hancock** The other thing is there's a lot more we can learn from the classical side of things, the different types of devices that we're capable of using on our instrument and in our own writing. Like writing for strings, knowing all the different types of bowing that get different kinds of effects, which we don't really use enough in the jazz world.

We're hearing a lot of cross-pollination right now between pop, R&B, jazz, even church music. It's been the stimulus of a new jazz sound that Kamasi is part of and Terrace Martin and Flying Lotus and other people from Los Angeles. I see it growing a new audience, and it's starting to get global attention. So, this is a great time for this kind of collaboration to happen, with classical music included, because can you imagine what the music could be like with the LA Phil?

**Washington** We could have a three-way collaboration: Herbie Hancock, Kendrick Lamar, and John Williams.

**Hancock** That would be cool.

**Washington** With the LA Phil being the centerpiece.



How do you see the LA Phil in the future? What do we need to be thinking about as we plan our next one hundred years?

**Washington** Herbie said it: jazz, funk, R&B, and pop music have started to come together, and it would be beautiful to have classical music come in there too. The last record I wrote was about that. You can maintain the beauty of what you have and still, when you want to, integrate with everything that's happening. It's not like you have to choose. It's all beautiful, all of it is.

I think people coming to shows and not knowing what they're going to get, it's almost a lost art to a degree. It used to be you'd go to concerts and people would debut pieces. Part of the excitement of going to a concert was to cross genres, that excitement of the unknown. All of these different kinds of music start to come together. It's like Herbie said, one plus one equals three.

The LA Phil should keep opening its doors to other forms of creativity and, in the end, recognizing music as a moment in time. The worst thing that could happen is that you won't revisit that moment in time. The best that can happen is something that's beyond our imagination. Opening the door would give us such beautiful colors to play with. Who knows what will come out of that?

**Hancock** Instead of a small garden, it will be a forest full of all kinds of colors.

