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COVER PHOTO: NICK "BROWNMAN" ALI BY JASON HENDRIKS

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Shorter Moments

I first encountered trumpeter Nick "Brownman" Ali in the fall of 2001 when he and his Gruvasylum trio were opening for Canadian jazz-rock super group Metalwood at the Horseshoe Tavern in Toronto. At the time Metalwood were the reigning kings of the Canadian jazz scene, having been recently signed to Verve/Universal's Canadian division after winning a number of Juno Awards for their brand of Weather Report-esque jazz-rock fusion. Brownman's career was also progressing; he was coming off his big GM Grand Prix de Jazz win for his Latin jazz/funk group Cruzao at the Montreal Jazz Festival that summer. But Brownman was still considered a relative newcomer on the Canadian jazz scene. His opening-slot performance on this particular night demonstrated that, although he was clearly an artist prepared to challenge himself, his ideas needed a little more time to mature. The concept for Gruvasylum certainly grabbed my attention; edgy free-form trumpet improvisations over top of electric bass and drums playing highly contemporary drum'n'bass riffs. The music had attitude but not enough cohesion. Too often, the players seemed to be playing beside each other rather than with each other. Brownman showed technique but his lines lacked a sense of development. The group was a far cry from the accomplished melodicism of Metalwood that followed. Later, at the bar, I overheard Brownman say he was going home to practice for a couple more hours that night and I couldn't help but wonder what his own assessment of his performance was.

Fast forward to a Friday night in the fall of 2005 at the Trane Studio on Bathurst Street. Brownman is kicking off the first part of his "Five Weeks for Miles" tribute series, leading a pickup quintet through an evening of bebop tunes associated with Miles Davis. On this occasion, Brownman was another player entirely. Granted that the musical context was very different from the first time I saw him, his verbose lines nevertheless suggested a whole new attitude to improvising that practice alone could not necessarily account for.

In interviewing Brownman for the cover story of this issue, I got an answer to the question of what had happened to him between those two performances to account for the change. He traces it all to one moment that is etched in his memory forever. In the summer of 2002, Brownman and Cruzao were invited to play at the Rimouski Festi Jazz in Rimouski, Quebecc, as part of the package for winning the Grand Prix de Jazz. To his amazement, Cruzao was put on a double-bill with the Wayne Shorter Quartet. After the show, Shorter invited him and his saxophonist brother, Marcus, backstage to get acquainted. In recounting Shorter's words Brownman adopts a slow, husky drawl, not unlike the voice everyone who ever tells a Miles Davis story always uses.

"He shakes my hand and the first thing he says to me, before even saying hello, is something about 'They're going down under the polar ice caps and finding lichen. They don't understand how it can grow down there where there's no light.' He's going on like this for 10 minutes, talking about lichen at the bottom of the ocean, and Marcus and I are looking at each other thinking 'Wayne Shorter is a nutter.' Meanwhile, Danilo Perez, John Patitucci, and Brian Blade (the other members of Shorter's quartet) are standing behind him and just smiling. Finally Shorter says, 'We don't understand all the mysteries of the universe. So that's what we do: investigate the world we live in, then try and play about it on our horns.' These were some of the most profound words I've ever heard. My playing changed the next day." When I asked him for specifics on how his playing changed, he points out that he started using his technical facility to more of a spiritual purpose, and developed "more of a sense of sentence structure" in his improvising. In addition to his revered reputation for mystical playing, Shorter is also well known for his cryptic pronouncements. But based on the evidence of his effect on Brownman, it's clear he can get his point across effectively when he wants to.

MAX ROACH, 1924-2007

As this issue was going to press, the news broke that Max Roach died in his sleep at the age of 83. The master drummer's accomplishments are too numerous to summarize in a few short lines; a more fitting tribute will follow in an upcoming issue. Roach was one of the original architects of the bebop sound during what would prove to be historical jam sessions at Minton's Playhouse in the 1940s. His inventive use of the cymbals and toms revolutionized how people would think about the drums in the jazz ensemble. In addition to his musical accomplishments, Roach was also a leader in the civil rights movement of the '60s and '70s, expressing his opinions through his compositions such as the *Freedom Now Suite*. He is survived by five children; sons Daryl and Raoul, and daughters Maxine, Ayl and Dara.

DARYL ANGIER

Max Roach (left) with Herbie Hancock at Massey Hall in Toronto for the 50th anniversary of the "Greatest Jazz Concert," May 2003.
PHOTO/BARRY THOMPSON

The BROW-RAISING JAZZ of BROWNMAN

Trumpeter Nick "Brownman" Ali's award-winning blend of Latin jazz, funk and hip hop has attracted dance-loving music fans and the criticism of jazz traditionalists in almost equal measure. His latest gig with Guru's Jazzmatazz project exposes him to a whole new audience.

By Daryl Angier

It was just another day's work for Nick "Brownman" Ali when he got a call last fall to put together a band for a Toronto appearance by rapper Guru and his Jazzmatazz project. The Trinidad-born, New York-schooled trumpeter, who is a leading light on the Toronto jazz scene, had done the same thing for people like Brazilian harmonica specialist Hendrik Meurkens. But two months later, when Guru would start recording the fourth album in his Jazzmatazz series and neither Donald Byrd nor Roy Hargrove could make the date, he remembered the skinny guy from Toronto with the nasty "Brooklyn" sound and gave him a call. In addition to the record date, he was invited on the release tour. "I nearly fell outta my chair," he says of his reaction to this opportunity.

however, exposes him to a whole new audience: an audience of younger, more energetic fans that will be drawn to his eclectic blend of white-hot improvising, Latin rhythms and streetwise attitude in his playing. After years of hard work guided by an unwavering dedication to the principle of artistic growth, Nick Ali is poised to make the jump from a national phenomenon to something greater: a trumpeter aspiring to the pantheon that includes Miles Davis, Freddie Hubbard and Brownman's greatest mentor, Randy Brecker.

Brownman's family moved to Canada from Trinidad in the '70s. Ali grew up on a steady diet of Nancy Wilson, Joe Williams and the great jazz singers. An early musical epiphany occurred at a summer arts camp at age 12, when he heard a recording of Paquito D'Rivera with trumpeter Claudio Roditi playing a rollicking Cuban reworking of the standard "All the Things You Are." This would plant the seed in Brownman of the possibilities inherent in Latin rhythms. He studied trumpet privately with Guido Basso as well as in the high school music program at Bramalea Secondary School in the Toronto suburbs. Ironically, he credits the weakness of the school's music program with giving him the freedom to explore a variety of instruments and musical roles on the trumpet and flugelhorn. When he was 16, famed trumpeter Randy Brecker of the Brecker Brothers came to Canada to do a clinic. Brownman (still known as "Brownboy" among his friends at the time – a racist taunt that he turned on its head to become a positive statement of self-identity) introduced himself, took Brecker's card and swore that he would seek him out to study with him one day. Even at that age, in deciding on Brecker as his mentor, Brownman was already laying the groundwork for developing a forward-looking approach to his music. "I came up through Freddie and Miles," he says. "Randy's the next evolution beyond those guys."

Years later, in 1991, after completing a physics degree with top marks at the University of Waterloo, Brownman went to New York and fulfilled his promise.

He picked up my horn and he ate it whole—tone, range, he had it all. I've been in New York all of five minutes and the pizza guy is kicking my ass.

Reached by phone in August at the tail end of the tour, he was ready to simply fall back into his bed. The two-month odyssey has taken him through Europe and all over the US, playing shows almost daily. But the potential payoff is worth it: Through constant session and sideman work and leading up to seven different award-winning bands of his own, Brownman has ascended to the front rank of musicians in Canada over the last 10 years. The Jazzmatazz tour,

Brecker recalls: "I just remember opening my door and seeing this grinning kid holding my business card in his hands. An old business card at that. His first words to me were: 'Remember me?' I didn't at first, but did later once he refreshed me...I was doing a lot of loft sessions uptown with younger musicians, inviting them over to hang and play. He was there for all of those."

Despite the fact he was following his

PHOTO/BARRY THOMPSON

dream of becoming a professional musician (something that led to a temporary estrangement from his parents), and was practicing up to eight hours a day. Brownman recounts his time in New York as a period of struggle. He wrestled with low self-esteem, wondering whether the time spent pursuing a science degree could have been better used advancing his playing career. In the early '90s, the jazz scene in New York was thriving and a lot of young talent was drawn to the city. Brownman recounts a humiliating incident that occurred as he arrived: "I rented a room in what I later found out was a crack house and decided to order a pizza. The delivery guy shows up and sees my trumpet over my shoulder and says 'I play trumpet too.' I invited him in to play for a minute. He picked up my horn (which has a very specialized mouthpiece) and he ate it whole—tone, range, he had it all. I've been in New York all of five minutes and the pizza guy is kicking my ass."

Brownman continued practicing relentlessly and having informal sessions with Brecker. "We'd just play, usually with Aebersolds (play-along instruction books), and he'd ask a million questions," says Brecker. "I wouldn't call them 'lessons,' given how casual it all was. I don't think I was a very good teacher and sometimes wouldn't take his money." Brownman's most important accomplishment during this time was getting out from under the shadow of his influences and finding his own sound as an improviser. His loquacious personal style is mirrored in his playing: the man has a lot to say, whether it's in words or through the bell of his horn. Although he declares that his greatest influence is Miles Davis, his improvising style seems more heavily informed by other similarly notey players like Lee Morgan, Woody Shaw and, especially, Freddie Hubbard. "He was so into Freddie when I first met him, and I was concerned about him finding his own voice," recalls Brecker. Brownman recounts Brecker's words: "'Listen, it's great you're so into Freddie – you couldn't ask for a better teacher. *But* let's do this from now on: for every hour you spend lifting Freddie solos, you spend an hour on Brownman...I want you to put a standard on the stand and blow through changes against a metronome – improvising as

Randy Brecker (left) with Nick "Brownman" Ali and Cruzao in 2003. PHOTO/HOK NG

BROWNMAN would, not Freddie.'" Brecker, however, downplays his role: "I barely thought of Brown as a student really – but as a younger generation trumpet player...he would have found his way regardless of me." The style that Brownman ultimately found is edgy, dark and more than a little influenced by the cadences of hip hop he also heard while living in Brooklyn.

In '95, Brownman left New York when he was accepted into the prestigious jazz program at the Banff Centre in Alberta to study with Hugh Fraser and Canadian trumpet legend Kenny Wheeler (Brownman's opposite in terms of style and approach). It was Fraser, a closet physics nut himself, who helped Brownman finally overcome his misgivings about his academic background, urging him to let his scientific perspective on the world inform his playing. ("What if you could express a Fourier transform as a piece of jazz music?" he asks rhetorically at one point in our interview.)

Returning to Toronto, Brownman's career started taking off with a steady stream of session work and sideman gigs. He now has over 250 recording credits to his name. He and his alto-playing brother, Marcus, started developing a reputation for themselves in the Latin-jazz community when they joined the horn section of the Dominicanada Show Band, playing merengue. The two also landed a steady quartet gig at the Caoba club on College Street, where they played groove-oriented music and jazz standards twisted with Latin and funk rhythms. Later they would add percussion and, after Brownman started writing his own music for the group, name the band Shades of Brown, later re-named Cruzao. This five-piece unit would ultimately become the foremost vehicle for his music.

A major turning point in Brownman's career came in the summer of 2001, when Cruzao was invited to the massive Montreal Jazz Festival. The group's performance led to them winning the festival's GM Grand Prix de Jazz, a competition for Canadian bands that came with $8000 in prize money, 50 hours of studio time and a one-album record deal with Montreal's Justin Time label. The resulting album, *Shades of Brown*, stayed at the top of the national jazz charts for months, leading to Brownman's first Canadian National Jazz Award win for Composer of the Year in recognition of his Cruzao compositions. But sweeter than the money and the opportunity for Brownman was the validation he received for the originality of his artistic vision. "I can't wait to talk to the motherfuckers from the jazz festivals who wouldn't return my calls," he said in his notoriously salty style in an interview at the time.

In the years since 2001, Brownman has been able to spend an increasing amount of time on his own music. While working steadily with artists ranging from jazz singer Rita Di Ghent to hip hop group The Pocket Dwellers, Brownman was also establishing his own musical identity through the now-seven different groups he leads, satisfying different musical interests in each combo. In addition to Cruzao, he started Marrón Matizado, a 10-piece salsa band he co-leads with his brother Marcus. His Gruvasylum group (trumpet, bass and drums plus a rapper) plays freely improvised hip hop and drum'n'bass with a jazz twist. He even created a 15-piece version of Cruzao called Cruzao Grupo Monstruoso to play the Cruzao band book with expanded charts. More recently, his Electryc Trio has come to prominence with his second National Jazz Award win this past spring for Electric Group of the Year—and the group's album has yet to be released. While he now spends the majority of his time on his own projects, his fiery sound is still in high demand with other musicians. The day after he was due back from the tour with Guru's Jazzmatazz, he had three separate studio sessions booked.

The band concept for Cruzao not only sheds light on Brownman's skills as a composer, arranger and improviser, it also illuminates his drive to push jazz traditions forward and not rely on the commercial safety of playing only in well-established styles. It wasn't enough to create a band that would play his original music; he wanted the entire concept to be something new. His quest led him to the concept of a "chordless" Latin group – one without a chording instrument such as piano or guitar, something he claims had never been done before. He added driving funk rhythms and freestyle hip hop vocals to the formula, creating a heady blend of tonality-based Latin jazz with streetwise, urban attitude. The mixture proved to be a bracing tonic, attracting a dance-loving

young audience with an appreciation for the music's complexity.

Nevertheless, the concept for Cruzao involved considerable musical risk, especially with the Cuban musical community. "I was concerned I'd get tomatoed when we launched the band because we were messing with their traditions," he confesses. The band's name—Spanish street slang for "the crossing"—reflects this tension. Brownman's compositions for Cruzao rely heavily on the clavé, the rhythm that is the heartbeat for all Cuban music, and there are certain well-defined rules about when you can and can't "cross" the clavé by breaking that rhythm. "It unnerves the Cubans in my band when I do it. I'll explain to them that it's only for four bars in order to propagate the melody. They'll say, 'Well maybe I won't play those four bars.'"

The Cuban musical community, however, ultimately accepted his concept. After visiting Havana in 2001 to gain a deeper understanding of clavé, the friends he made invited him back the following year to perform at a festival with members of the Afro-Cuban All-Stars and Chucho Valdés's groundbreaking ensemble Irakere. Cruzao got some airplay in Cuba after that, and in 2004, Valdés personally invited Brownman to bring his whole band to that year's Havana Jazz Festival. In the end, with the aid of the Canada Council, just he and Marcus flew down with the Cruzao charts and assembled a Cuban version of Cruzao with members of Irakere. But Cruzao's appearance at the festival led to a two-month tour of South and Central America. Outside of the Canadian jazz scene, Brownman, or "Marróncito," is now an established name in Latin America. In the last few years his influence has spread further. His Cruzao compositions are now in the band books of one of the Humber College student ensembles and the Toronto Jazz Orchestra, and have been recorded as far away as Estonia and the Czech Republic.

With artistic recognition came more bookings, but Brownman and Cruzao were not always well-received by "the jazz establishment" in Toronto. In the summer of 2002, the band was booked into the now-defunct Top of the Senator for a weeklong engagement. He brought along rapper MC Enlight (from Gruvasylum) as his guest. "Bad idea," he said in a 2003 interview about the decision. "The booker for the club showed up...and said I was self-indulgent. She told me, 'This is a jazz club. You don't bring a rapper to a jazz club! Is this jazz?'" Sybil Walker, the booker in question who now books the Opal Lounge, recalls the incident differently. Looking to book some of the city's younger talent and also needing a week of Latin jazz, she booked Brownman on the strength of what she had seen of his show at The Rex Hotel and was surprised to see something other than that on stage. In her view, he was simply not delivering what he had promised when she booked him, despite Enlight's appearance on the *Shades of Brown* album they were then touring. "He was trying something out and it didn't sound like a cohesive unit," she says now. Walker maintains that the Senator was always open to presenting acts that fell outside the boundaries of straight-ahead jazz, although the examples she cites (Garth Hudson, Hot Club of Cowtown) do not necessarily suggest that she was amenable to presenting an artist who so openly embraces the edgy urban elements that Brownman employs.

The reactionary responses of Toronto audiences and jazz tastemakers to Brownman's hip-hop influenced music are not surprising. The urban music explosion of the '90s was slow to catch on in Canada. The Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC), for example, waited until 2000 before it finally granted a broadcast license to a commercial radio station with an urban music format. Similarly, Brownman points out that his seemingly radical—to Canadian ears—marriage of jazz and hip hop has been common practice in New York for a long time. "I believe that the distance between the true core of hip hop and the true core of jazz, which is improvisation, is absolutely one and the same," he has said in the past. "The people who are separating them are doing so for cultural reasons and perhaps even racial reasons rather than artistic reasons."

His convictions about the relatedness of jazz and hip hop inform his band concepts (such as Gruvasylum) as well as his approach to composition. The dark, hard-driving lead-off track on the *Shades of Brown* album, "Mago Malpensado," featuring Carribbean-accented rap weaving in and out of spicy trumpet-and-sax interplay, is an example of how the improvisational element common to both genres can work in concert to striking effect. Brownman composed the tune after reading *Faust*. "I called MC Enlight into the studio and told him the story of Faust in my own words, gave him five minutes to digest it, and then turned on the mic and hit record. He freestyled the three verses you hear on the CD and it's an incredible overview of the story from an urban street perspective." While some may only hear off-putting egotistical bluster in the rap ("I took the power of the devil and I used it against him"), the lyrics are, in fact, solidly in the blues tradition of the "voodoo child" who goes down to the crossroads (the "cruzao") for a meeting with the devil.

Brownman's marriage of jazz with hip hop is yet another way he has attempted to follow the example of his hero Miles Davis. While he, thankfully, does not also share Davis's famously terse and irascible temperament (if anything, Brownman occasionally comes off as a bit too cute), his statements criticizing conservatism in the jazz mainstream have perhaps garnered him just as many enemies. In tribute to his hero, this November, for the third year in a row, Brownman will be mounting his popular "Five Weeks for Miles" series, presenting music from the various stages of Davis's progression from bebop and cool, to "Doo-bop and Beyond, If He Had Lived," over a series of five Friday nights at the Trane Studio on Bathurst Street. From the early '70s until his death in 1991, Davis was relentlessly criticized for supposedly caving in to commercial considerations when he blended his music with "inferior" popular styles such as funk and rock in order to attract a younger audience. Like Davis, Brownman makes no apologies for creating music with a strong youth appeal. Nor should he—Brownman's music brings back to jazz something that was lost in much of the music some time ago: a visceral sense of fun, free of the beard-scratching intellectualism that has since replaced it. A story he relates offers an instructive illustration: "A few years ago, when Cruzao headlined the main stage (at the Beaches

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BROWNMAN

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Jazz Festival), I was transfixed by this one young boy who was throwing himself about in time to the music. He wasn't analyzing the chord progressions, wasn't impressed by the intricate conga patterns, wasn't noticing how the downbeat was always hidden and the tune was in 13. He was just moved to groove. And that's humanity in a nutshell for me – that unbridled passion. Youth are more able to tap into that; they haven't been tainted by the hardness of the world yet."

With the recognition that comes from his latest gig as trumpeter for Guru's Jazzmatazz ensemble, occupying a chair formerly held by Donald Byrd and Roy Hargrove, Brownman's career has taken another major step forward. "I call him 'the young Miles' when I introduce him," says Guru. "Miles would be proud of who he is." Given the differences between Davis's playing style and Brownman's, the link between them is slightly more intangible.

Davis was not the most skilled of trumpeters. He couldn't hear well in the higher registers and often stumbled at faster tempos. But Davis brought a certain style and hipness to the music that no one has been able to duplicate since. Davis epitomized an era when jazz music was cool and dangerous, a time when Lester Young coined phrases that would enter the lexicon of hipster speak and Charles Mingus might put a knife to your throat if you crossed him. But ever since the Modern Jazz Quartet donned ties and tails and took polite bows, the hip, dangerous edge that jazz music once had has been disappearing. Perhaps the thing that audiences find most threatening in Brownman and his music is how he brings back some of that lost edge of outsider cool. One thing is for sure, the strong visceral reaction towards Brownman is the latest proof of an old jazz adage: How do you know the next big thing has come along? Because when you hear it, you won't like it. (Brownman's website is www.brownman.com.) **c**

ULLMANN

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won yet another Berlin studio award *Schwartzegeist* will soon be recorded. "I've been experimenting with DJs for years. I worked with electronics in the 1980s, even played the lyricon," recalls Ullmann. "But I decided at a certain time to work on the acoustic side, which doesn't mean I don't like electronic devices in music, they just didn't work for my ideas. This project may be a new beginning in that way."

Swell has noticed some subtle modifications in Ullmann's improvising during their association. "I think any time you play with a group of individuals your playing changes or adjusts somewhat to that particular dynamic. We [Ullmann-Swell-Greene-Altschul] are primarily interested in a group sound, not a band of soloists. So we're working towards that goal all the time."

Stevens is even more analytical. "When we first started Conference Call Gebhard did not want to perform any music that was blues derived or had a real quarter- note swinging feel. He generally wasn't interested in 12 or 16 or 24 bar forms," the pianist remembers. "This forced me to compose different kinds of music for the group. For example, on our first CD we perform my polka ("Could This Be a Polka?"). On our last CD we perform my tango ("Little Pete's Diner"). I feel that the group is constantly evolving and growing. We're developing our own musical language by listening and learning from each other."

Physical impressions of Ullmann can also be misleading, explains Swell. "When I first played with Geb, I got off the train and right to a rehearsal in Berlin before our gig that night. We went through all his tunes, all of them difficult. I was very tired but dealt with it. I thought, 'Wow, this guy is very serious and demanding.'

"But as I have gotten to know him he reinforces the cliché that 'you can't judge a book by its cover.' Gebhard is really a very open person. Open to ideas and suggestions and very patient although you may not think so to meet him. We are on the same page in terms of career, maturity about things, sensitive to each other's feelings and grateful for the amount of work each of us does to get tours for this band."

Involved with water sports such as scuba diving, snorkeling and kite-surfing, Ullmann says it helps his thought process to see what is going on underwater. Tied in with this, and belying any baggage that could be associated with his potentially menacing skin-head-like appearance, he's also passionately committed to environmental issues and trying to minimize global warming. "This affects my music, my children and the way I live. In my own personal life I try to consider these things day by day. As a musician do you have to fly low-cost airlines and play a one-nighter in, let's say, France just because you can do it now? And yes whenever I had money I have left I put it into solar companies."

Given his history it's no surprise that Ullmann is constantly testing new groups and new musical formulae. His view of what constitutes jazz is broad – perhaps wider than that of many of his contemporaries.

"I have a very wide idea of what jazz is," he explains in Berlin that day, having just returned from gigs near the Baltic Sea. "Classical, gamelan, contemporary composed music – Messiaen, Stravinsky, Stockhausen – all the great jazz masters, some more than others, sometimes a little bit of rock, it's all in there.

"I'm also a world musician, meaning I use music from all over the world – and I travel a lot, but there's a certain conception when it comes to how I use all this. The sounds are abstracted and get a new meaning – my meaning – it's all Ullmann.

"This is what connects all my so-called concept albums. It is not about doing this today and something different tomorrow," he insists. "The aesthetic doesn't change. The trios may be more chamber-music-like and highlight other details and dynamic ranges in the reed work, but maybe that's not true, since the Clarinet Trio can play full blast too. I like to explore the soft and the noisy ends but this I do in all band formats. My oeuvre works as a whole."

Many jazz fans on at least a couple of continents would agree with this statement. **c**