

FULL FLOW

Known as much for being a film composer as a jazz musician, trumpeter **Terence Blanchard** makes an abrupt departure on his latest electronica-influenced recording by leaving much of the writing to his band. Reckless, you might think, until Herbie Hancock stepped in as producer. Blanchard, who replaced Wynton Marsalis in the Jazz Messengers and then became Spike Lee's preferred soundtrack composer, might have just turned in the album of his career. **INTERVIEW :: JOHN MURPH**

Terence Blanchard is ecstatic. Although you couldn't tell by the nonchalance in his voice, the celebrated trumpeter, composer and film scorer is as giddy about this summer as a child waiting for Christmas morning. It's not because he's recently got high praise for his music in Oprah Winfrey's TV production of Zora Neal Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or that he'll be working this summer on yet another Spike Lee Joint production. Blanchard is ready to hit the road with his scintillating ensemble in support of *Flow*, his most provocative album yet and one that'll certainly be one of the most talked-about jazz releases of 2005.

Like The Roots' last disc, *The Tipping Point*, which took its title from Malcolm Gladwell's contemporary pop psychology book, Blanchard's new work derives its name from a similar tome, *Flow*. Its author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi expounds upon "the psychology of optimal experience" in the book, which basically translates to those elated when you're in complete mastery of your artistry that your ideas blossom effortlessly.

Blanchard's wife and manager Robin Burgess gave him the book. And when reading some of the passages, he quickly remembered conversations he had with the late trumpeter Woody Shaw. "He would always talk about being in a kind of dream state of mind when you're playing," Blanchard recalls.

"It's like you practise, practise and practise, to get your tools heightened. Then when you play, it comes out unconsciously."

Two years ago, Blanchard switched labels, severing a two-decade association with Columbia. He jumped to Blue Note and released *Bounce*. While many artists would have leaped at the chance to redefine their artistry with a label shift, Blanchard utilised it as rejuvenation fuel. Although the album threw some subtle curveballs with Robert Glasper tickling the Fender Rhodes and by intriguing harmonic sketches strummed by guitarist Lionel Loueke, *Bounce* sounded a logical progression from 2000's *Wandering Moon* in its inventive way of displacing hard bop phraseology into 21st century modern jazz.

And while he argues that *Flow* is a "natural extension" of *Bounce*, the new disc finds him exploring new colouristic and textural terrain via electronica.

"I was thinking a lot about our live performances and the type of tunes that we were playing," Blanchard says on the phone from his New Orleans home. "I just kept saying that there was something missing."

The "missing" elements were sonic enhancers that could expand and thicken the band's

orchestral palette without neutering the telepathic bristle associated with small jazz combos. It's to Blanchard's credit, though, that he didn't get bogged down with all the electronic paraphernalia, thus snuffing out the natural timbres and nuances of his band, in favour of high production gloss.

He also avoids making embarrassing gestures towards stylistic idioms within electronica. There's no hip hop, drum 'n' bass, techno or broken beats to be found on *Flow*. The evocative, suspenseful compositions certainly cast a transfixing splendor but there's nothing nearly as anesthetising as trance. Perhaps, the disc's strongest trump is that it doesn't resemble one of



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those what-Miles Davis-would have done messes.

"I didn't want to have a lot of effects on the trumpet, because they're a part of *Bitches Brew* signature sound – the wah-wah pedal and all of that stuff. I think a lot of other guys have already done that. We wanted to use the electric instruments for their strengths, and let our guys be who they are."

For guidance, Blanchard recruited Herbie Hancock as producer, who, of course is one of the pioneers of jazztronica. Still, *Flow* manages to exert a fresh new sound, never rehashing the pianist/keyboardist's innovations with Mwandishi and the Headhunters.

"I was thinking of a person that could really help us and not try to change us," Blanchard replies when asked why he chose Hancock.

Although he plays piano on two cuts ('Benny's Tune' and 'The Source'), Hancock certainly exhibits a slight touch in terms of production.

"His presence, in and of itself, did a lot for the guys. It kind of reassured them about what they were doing. And for him to be so supportive meant a lot too," Blanchard says.

Instead of relying lazily on past triumphs in electric jazz or making blatant stabs at commercial electronica, Blanchard infuses the same level of exemplary compositional integrity, imaginative displays of virtuosity and invigorating ensemble dialogue that marked his previous albums. As aberrant as *Flow* may appear at first, a few more spins reveals it to be in true Blanchard-ian fashion. "If you think like a composer, you're not going to succumb to an idiom," he says.

"The Fender Rhodes is not a part of an idiom. It's an instrument that's used in various music styles. You can redefine all of those electric instruments just by not being afraid to do your own thing."

Blanchard's trumpet, in particular, sounds confident in the new ambience, excelling at not becoming a prisoner to technological innovation; his clarion horn is as lustrous as ever. His customary bag of tricks containing pinched, upper-register wheezes and whines, guttural growls and full-on bravura – all extensions of the great New Orleans' jazz trumpet tradition – animate his suspenseful improvisations.

While he's certainly the leader, he's clearly not the only bright light on *Flow*. With his ever evolving sextet, he's leading his most audacious crew yet.

"I'm constantly fascinated with what the band comes up with," he says, almost in an avuncular manner.

"In years past, I would say, 'OK, this is the kind of sound that I want.' With this group, it's not so much about sound that I'm trying to capture; it's more of a type of exploration. The thing that I like about this particular band is that every member is a young open-minded visionary."

"It's almost like a basketball team," says Brice Winston, who's been in the group the longest. Sometimes he pairs his tenor saxophone alongside Blanchard in brotherly unison, à-la-Jazz Messengers. Other times, he'll stretch, cajole and go in tandem with Blanchard's declarative blasts, engaging him in intense banter.

In Aaron Parks, the trumpeter has found a resourceful pianist who lays down restive accompaniments that are rhythmically intricate, harmonically jolting and always full of melodic consonance; and when he strikes out into one of groping jaunts, he punctuates them with serrated jabs counterweighted with an impressionistic shimmer. Drummer Kendrick Scott and bassist Derrick Hodge replace Eric Harland and Brandon