

## Episode 2: Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man"

Herbie Hancock's first album, prophetically titled "Takin' Off" (1962), was the start of a career with a very steep trajectory. Hancock established himself as a successful composer and pianist by age 23. That first album included his own tune, "Watermelon Man," which -- in a recording by the Afro-Cuban *conguero* Mongo Santamaria -- became a hit in both North and South America. In the same year, he was invited to join the Miles Davis Quintet, the premier band in jazz at the time, full of future luminaries like drummer Tony Williams, saxophonist and composer Wayne Shorter, and bassist Ron Carter. In this edition of *One Track Mind*, we will look at his first important composition, "Watermelon Man, and the many radically different versions of the tune that followed.

Born in Chicago in 1940, Hancock studied classical piano from age 7 to 20 and once played a Mozart piano concerto with the Chicago Youth Symphony. He attended Grinnell college where he was an engineering student, but left school to play jazz at night while working days in the Chicago post office. (There were virtually no jazz educational programs in US; the Berklee College of Music in Boston opened in 1954, graduating its first class of B.A. degrees in 1966.) After subbing for trumpeter Donald Byrd's regular pianist in Chicago, Byrd invited Hancock to move to New York and join the band permanently. New York is where he recorded "Takin' Off" and came to the attention of Miles Davis.

"Watermelon Man," which -- as Herbie explains in this episode's first track -- was written to capture part of black life in the inner city. The musical context of the early-1960's was the "hard bop" movement, a bluesy, heavily-swinging interpretation of bebop (or "modern jazz") that generated many combos comprised of piano, bass, drums, trumpet, and saxophone.

By the late-1960s, Herbie, like many jazz players, was experimenting with electronic instruments. In part they were influenced by the commercial success of rock, soul, and R & B, but as jazz players, they were also seeing what kind of different musical approaches they could achieve. Through the decades, Hancock was always willing to experiment and also to return to his core means of expression, straight-ahead acoustic jazz. Along the way he composed dozens of pieces, many of which became jazz standards, and he wrote for film, including the score for *'Round Midnight*, which won an Academy Award (1982). By 2011, when he was honored by the Kennedy Center (along with Shirley McLain and Carlos Santana), Hancock had a portfolio bursting with a diversity of accomplishments.

Link 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzPZvKSdN7g> (11:14)

In this selection, you will see Hancock at the piano describing how the song was created out of elements he had observed in the black community. Hancock is being interviewed by Elvis Costello (who seems a bit misplaced, despite the fact that he has recorded with several jazz musicians). The video starts with Hancock explaining the

origins of “Watermelon Man,” and then exploring both its funky, bluesy acoustic origins and then later electronic experiments with it.

When watching this video, try to set aside your expectations and remain open to the electronic sounds and see if the song stays true to its original feeling while incorporating much more abstract musical ideas.

Link 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbHJHPTikQA>

The original “Watermelon Man,” rec. 1962. (7:10)

While the tune is steeped in the blues and adheres pretty strictly to the traditional folk blues chord progression, the piece departs from the 12-bar form. It has two A sections, each 16 measures. “Watermelon Man” is a kind of hybrid of a blues and the 32-bar popular song form. The opening rhythmic statement establishes the “funky” quality that Herbie was aiming for -- a danceable rhythm with a catchy blues-based theme. There are great solos by two stars of this period in jazz -- Freddie Hubbard on trumpet and Dexter Gordon on tenor sax -- just before Herbie’s piano solo.

Link 3: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUvj9qYP\\_JA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUvj9qYP_JA)

The Mongo Santamaria version with good video of his conga playing. (4:47)

The video has some problems during the first minute, but it’s nice to see the Latin band live with its full percussion session.

Link 4: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3m3qOD-hhrQ>

Herbie Hancock’s Headhunters band in a very creative electronic version of “Watermelon Man.” The song starts at 15:43 of this performance, which includes the whole album. So pull the slider along until 15:43 if you just want to hear this tune.