



Home / Whatson / It's A Thriller

# It's a Thriller

**Brownman Ali and Electryc Trio reinterpret Michael Jackson's classic**

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*Brownman Ali performs his version of Michael Jackson's Thriller album at a special Halloween show Saturday night at the Jazz Room. - Nils Blondon Photo*

Looking for the ultimate way to celebrate Halloween? How about enjoying a jazz interpretation of Michael Jackson's Thriller album, replete with costumes and the kind of dancing that made him a sensation.

After successfully staging that spooktacular event in Toronto for years, the Brownman Electryc Trio will do the honours this Saturday at the Jazz Room at the historic Huether Hotel.

It's the perfect venue for bandleader Brownman Ali, who earned a physics degree at the University of Waterloo before music became his main muse after graduating. He tells a story of how when he was a child the only way his parents could get him to settle down was to play some Miles Davis.

He'll be channeling Davis in his interpretation of the King of Pop's seminal album aided by Nick Maclean on keyboards, Brad Cheeseman on electric bass, and rhythm legend Paul Delong on drums.

**//** *"People say what a great idea to have an electric jazz version of Thriller, how innovative. But it's, 'Nah man,' this is the tradition and exactly what jazz musicians have been doing all along. We just updated it." Brownman Ali on his Thriller show at the Jazz Room this Halloween.*

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"We're just reimagining it and using this record as our framing," said Brownman. "People say what a great idea to have an electric jazz version of Thriller, how innovative. But it's, 'Nah man,' this is the tradition and exactly what jazz musicians have been doing all along. We just updated it."

It's all about falling into that creative space that all the jazz greats laid down before him, said Brownman. And he's building his own reputation as the go-to trumpeter for artists such as rapper Jay Z. He is currently touring with rap queen Missy Elliot.

He also making a name for himself as an independent artist with his own music label. The Brownman Electryc Trio just won the 2015 Toronto Independent Music Award in the "Best Jazz Instrumental" category to go with last month's win at the International Independent Music Awards for 2015 Jazz-Funk/Fusion/Jam Album of the Year.

His name is also writ large on the Canadian National Jazz Awards after moving to New York City in his teens to study at the feet of the masters.

He thought he was pretty good heading down to the Big Apple, but he soon found out how good everyone else was. Even the guy delivering his first New York-style pizza took a blow on his horn and blasted out a tune that left Brownman slack jawed.

But instead of being intimidated, Brownman decided to put the work in and with the help of mentors, like Grammy-winning trumpet legend Randy Brecker, he found his own musical pocket to work from.

He said the biggest thing was connecting the music to the audience. A lot of people have the technical skill but they fail to make that connection.

"A lot of kids coming out of school today are writing super clever tunes with advanced chord structures, but they aren't making that visceral connection to the people with their music," he said. "That's what Michael Jackson always did, along with Quincy Jones. The record really connects with people's primordial state."

Brownman has had the pleasure of meeting Jones, and other music influencers as well. Those connections have served him well.

"If you can tap into that as a jazz musician while interpreting the music, that's what people like Miles Davis based his own career on," he said. A lot of the jazz lineage came up reinterpreting the standards and that's really we're doing with the Thriller show.

"It's not something that hasn't been done before, but there are only a couple of jazz guys in this area that do it."

That's why one of the showstoppers of Saturday's performance will be Michael Jackson's song Human Nature, even though it didn't appear on the album. Miles Davis' version of the song demonstrated the best of what happens when you fuse the genres. "We play it like Miles because it's part of the pantheon now," said Brownman.

Stephen Preece, of the Grand River Jazz Society, said this show really bridges different music styles with jazz. "I can't wait to hear what he does with it," he said. "It's such an iconic album.

"People should come out and dress up for the night"

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by **Bob Vrbnac**  
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