



## **Stefon Harris is smokin' hot**

Howard Reich

November 7, 2009

Stefon Harris years ago established himself as one of the most charismatic young vibes players in jazz. So what does a virtuoso vibist do for a second act? Go urban. Or at least that's what Harris and his band Blackout have done with a vivid new recording, and a viscerally exciting live show that opened Thursday night at the Jazz Showcase. Though not all the personnel in this engagement are the same as on Harris' CD "Urbanus" (on Concord Jazz), the energy and dynamism of the project come through loud (very) and clear. Drummer Terreon Gully's hard funk beats and Casey Benjamin's snarling lines on alto saxophone sound still more forceful in concert than on the disc, giving Harris an edgier musical environment than past listeners might expect from him. With bassist Luques Curtis and keyboardist Sullivan Fortner underscoring the dance-beat sensibility, Harris proves that an ultrasophisticated jazz language can flourish in practically any setting.

The key to the success of this cross-genre experiment lies in Harris' refusal to dilute the substance, complexity or transcendent technique of his work. The fast-flying mallets and keen sensitivity to color and line are still there -- but the rhythmic accents are harder, the tone sharper, the attitude more aggressive. As if to bridge several musical worlds in a single gesture, Harris and colleagues opened their show by transforming the dirge "Gone, Gone, Gone" from George Gershwin's opera "Porgy and Bess." Rechristening the piece simply "Gone," Harris presided over a thicket of relentless backbeats and ambient electronics, a 20th century masterpiece reimagined for the 21st. As alto saxophonist Benjamin wailed freely, Harris produced the high-velocity passages and contrapuntal textures for which he's widely admired, but with a somewhat harsher edge. "That's George Gershwin?" Harris said with a smile afterward. "Well, that's what he would have sounded like if he were from the 'hood." Note to Harris: He was.

Elsewhere in the set, Benjamin produced otherworldly sounds playing vocoder, a kind of keyboard-based, vocal-effects synthesizer that enabled him to whisper haunting, ethereal lines. With Harris' softly stated chords on vibes and marimba as backdrop, this show conveyed a spiritual message one might not have expected.

## The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT  
SPONSORED BY



October 24, 2009

MUSIC REVIEW | BLACKOUT

# Jazz and Funk Roots, Joyfully Unearthed

By [BEN RATLIFF](#)

Stefon Harris stood before a vibraphone and a marimba on Thursday night at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, the instruments positioned at right angles. That's unusual in general, if usual for him. But the red keytar sitting on the side of the stage had a different kind of power: almost a menacing force, like that of a rifle hanging over the mantelpiece in a play.

Received wisdom says that jazz signifies restraint, taste and free will, and the keytar signifies excess, lack of taste and commercialization. But jazz is an enemy of received wisdom. The technique-versus-soul or slick-versus-heartfelt arguments fall apart around it. Jazz still allows musicians to be complicated.

Mr. Harris was playing with his quintet Blackout, which has existed in name for five years but has changed a few members and loosened, agreeably, into almost a different band. Once its music seemed to be backing into the smooth-jazz radio format; now it's developing its own identity from the inside out. The band's most recent album, "Urbanus" (Concord), has a far deeper connection to the pre-1970s jazz tradition but also to funk as well.

Thursday's early set included a version of "Minor March," a bebop tune that Jackie McLean wrote for a [Miles Davis](#) recording session in 1955. Blackout pushed its tempo much faster, with Casey Benjamin's tart alto saxophone sound flying through it. But a slower, odd-metered groove interceded out of nowhere, and the band's young new pianist, Sullivan Fortner — a name unknown around New York, though maybe not for long — went deep inside it, playing with gestures and percussive force. Together the musicians rhythmically broke the tune into pieces, then built it back up.

Next Mr. Harris welcomed a request: not for a song, but for an instrument to start it with. "Piano," someone called, reasonably. The band doesn't work with set lists, so it was on Mr. Fortner to come up with an improvisation and choose a song to connect it to.

Later, in a version of [Thelonious Monk's](#) "I Mean You," Mr. Harris started on marimba, facing his drummer, Terreon Gully; they performed it as a duet, with Mr. Harris playing hard and

imaginatively but never excessively. After a few minutes the band's other members joined, and soon Mr. Fortner was strumming a blues chord progression on the strings inside the piano, while Ben Williams played one of the more resourceful, songlike bass solos I've heard recently; the piece rode out on go-go beats, peeling alto saxophone phrases and watery synthesizer tones.

Soon the keytar had its moment. Mr. Benjamin strapped it on and set up his microphone Vocoder, which digitally makes a singer sound as if he were singing through his keyboard. He sang "For You," which he recorded for "Urbanus" and Robert Glasper's new album, "Double Booked." A soul ballad drenched in [Stevie Wonder](#) harmony set over a stuttering drum pattern, it was brittle and mysterious, sweet and abstracted, robotic and sensitive, and very hard not to like.

*Stefon Harris and Blackout perform through Sunday at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Broadway at 60th Street; details and tickets at [jalc.org](#).*

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

---

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---

# PEOPLE

September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009

## SPOTLIGHT ON... NEW JAZZ RELEASES

● Whether on trumpet, piano or vibraphone, these four cats will have you grooving to all that jazz.  
—V.R. PETERSON



**TERENCE BLANCHARD, CHOICES** After his 2007 remembrance of the Katrina tragedy, the veteran trumpeter leads his quintet through an uneasy mix of philosophy—with spoken-word performances by Dr. Cornel West—and dark, richly textured music. The moodiness is lightened by guest singer Bilal, guitarist Lionel Loueke and Blanchard's searing solos. ★★☆☆



**STEFON HARRIS AND BLACKOUT, URBANUS** Known for his expressive touch on the vibraphone, Harris likes to bring the funk. This inventive disc, with his quintet Blackout, delivers in-your-face grooves like “Gone,” where Gershwin meets go-go, and a riff on Stevie Wonder’s “They Won’t Go When I Go.” ★★☆☆



**ROY HARGROVE BIG BAND, EMERGENCE** Hargrove’s 19-piece big band has power to spare—and a stylistic versatility that’s startling. Its sections blister and swing, soulfully framing Hargrove’s horn. Basie, Duke and Dizzy must be smiling somewhere. ★★☆☆

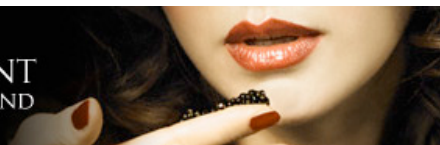


Pianist Glasper vamps it up.

**ROBERT GLASPER, DOUBLE BOOKED** If this disc were vinyl, side 1 would feature the pianist’s acoustic trio and side 2 would showcase his hip-hop jazz fusion band Experiment. The upshot: a captivating old-meets-new-school summit. ★★☆☆



LUXE RESEARCH WITH THE AFFLUENT IN MIND



## Stefon Harris: Authenticity and Audacity

By [R.J. DeLuke](#)



Authenticity is a special word for vibraphone wizard Stefon Harris when it comes to his art, which springs from the tradition of jazz music, but is approached through a modern lens that takes into account the sounds and perspective of 2009.

He has enough audacity--also a special word for Harris--to say it clearly, to elucidate what he is going for in his music. And he has enough audacity on the bandstand to go for it.

"It's one of President Obama's favorite words," the effervescent, upbeat Harris says with a chuckle [The current U.S. president became associated with the word from his book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (Crown, 2006), when he was still a U.S. senator]. "It's a really important cultural element of this art form [jazz]. You have to believe and feel that anything can happen. You've got to have confidence that you can take a risk beyond your own ability and know that everyone around you is listening, and we're going to support each other, and we're going to make whatever happens work in that moment."

That's how he approaches jazz with his band, *Blackout*, that has been together for about five years. Harris, 36, loves the group and wants his music to be relevant today, emblematic of what's happening "in the here and now." That doesn't mean rehashing bebop or standard swing music, but it does spring from that. He's not one to push the tradition aside.

Of his art, he says adamantly, "I think it's about what's happening right now. I think words like 'creativity' in jazz are overrated. The real word that should be put forward is authenticity. It's not always creativity that the consumer reacts to. I think they react to what's real. For me, it's not about creativity. You can take a cat and a dog, put them together and squeeze them in rhythm and call it creative. But it doesn't make it authentic and it doesn't make it move people.

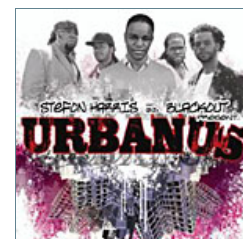
"So it's not about what's happening five years from now. I don't know what's going to happen five years from now. I'm concerned about what's happening right now and making sure I can play some role in a positive light in what's going on right now in the world."

His music has many elements and it aspires to be as representative of today as it is improvisational and unexpected. The latest documentation of where Harris stands is *Urbanus*, (2009), his first for Concord Records after a decade with Blue Note.

Of the tradition, he says, "For me, as an African-American, it's part of the reason I get up. Jazz is not just fun for me. This is my cultural heritage. When I look at the great [Miles Davis](#), [Duke Ellington](#), [Louis Armstrong](#), [John Coltrane](#), as we go down the line, I feel a great deal of pressure, and honor, to be striving to be a part of this legacy. In terms of the tradition, I think more in terms of legacy. It's very important to me as a man. It's inspired me to continue moving forward in life, separate from music."

But, he adds, "In terms of the way tradition is perceived in the jazz world in general, I think it's a misnomer. When people say tradition, they're generally thinking of older music. They're thinking bebop is traditional jazz. But if you really look at the cultural jazz--and what jazz really is--the real tradition of jazz is that of spontaneity. It has elements of creativity. And it's very much about authenticity and reflecting the here and now. That's what [Charlie Parker](#) did. That's what Miles Davis did. When you hear John Coltrane, you hear the story of what was going on in the 60s. You can feel what was going on in the world at that time. John Coltrane was telling the same story that [James Brown](#) was telling at that time; just from a different lens. The real tradition of jazz is what we're doing.

"For me to play bebop tunes from the 40s, that's not the tradition of jazz. If John Coltrane was imitating and transcribing [Sidney Bechet](#), then I'd say okay, to imitate is the tradition of jazz. But that's not what he did and what it is. Swing is a part of the tradition and it's a part of the here and now. We integrate the backbeat, we integrate go-go, we integrate swing. Anything that's a modern influence on us. It doesn't exclude anything. It's just about authenticity, ultimately."



### Chapter Index

1. [Urbanus](#)
2. [The Perception of Jazz](#)
3. [Beginnings](#)
4. [Learning from Elders](#)

### Urbanus

Harris says when he approaches a CD, it's not so much about creating new ideas, but rather documenting the band and the music as it stands at the moment. *Urbanus*, he says, is a continuation of what *Blackout* did on its *Evolution* (Blue Note, 2004) album. "For me, music is about authenticity. It's about reflecting the here and now. It has very little, if anything at all, to do with the past. It's about being honest; being

authentic. Whatever our influences are now, and from our background, we included all of that in the music.”

“You’ll notice that the first song, ‘Gone,’ has a go-go feel. Two members of the ensemble, [Marc Cary](#) (keyboards) and [Ben Williams](#) (bass), are both from D.C. (The go-go beat is funk style said to have originated there, pioneered by musicians like singer Chuck Brown and drummer and Miles Davis alumni Ricky Wellman). They grew up playing in go-go bands. It’s part of their cultural heritage. So we included all of that in the music. My background is included. The drummer’s ([Terreon Gully](#)) background. It’s about authenticity.”

The album includes a cover of [Stevie Wonder](#)’s “They Won’t Go (When I Go)” that has saxophonist Casey Benjamin playing the vocoder, which emits a combination electronic/vocal singing style, another color the band uses to express itself. “Christina” is a ballad composed by bassist [Buster Williams](#), and shows the soft side of these young musicians. It also employs the vocoder for the delicate theme and creates an ethereal mood during Benjamin’s refined improvisation. “Langston’s Lullaby” {co-written with Benjamin) who was named after Harris’ young son, who in turn was named after the Harlem poet, novelist and playwright Langston Hughes. It’s a delicious composition, each musician showing restraint in their approaches, properly conveying the beauty of the song. Bebop master [Jackie McLean](#)’s “Minor March” is the closest the band comes on the CD to mainstream, bop-ish jazz, They all have the chops for it.

Harris, one of the finest vibes players out there, plays throughout with the confidence that one would expect, but--to his credit--he doesn’t throw himself out front and make the others subservient.

“Culturally, [*Urbanus*] is where we’re coming from. It’s not so much about the individual. It’s about a sense of community. It’s about the five of us coming together. Listening, loving and respecting one another. Doing something that’s much larger than the individual. We’re much stronger together than we are apart. It’s one of the things about the culture of jazz. It’s a little bit different than a lot of other art forms. I think in jazz, that’s one of the most prominent, significant cultural messages that we bring forth.”

“We have ‘Gone,’ which is a [Gil Evans](#) piece [based on “Gone, Gone, Gone,” from [Gershwin](#)’s “Porgy and Bess”]. But we do it in a modern way. We look for vehicles to express our cultural backgrounds and that we feel we can be authentic with... As soon as I heard that song, I could feel it immediately. It’s one of the best pieces of music ever written in jazz. Gil Evans is just pure genius. His arranging is unbelievable. I went and transcribed it and tried to take a peek at every single note that he wrote and learned a whole bunch. But the key is not for me to re-create what Gil Evans did. That would be sad. What would happen is, the world would miss out on the sound of my generation. My generation definitely has a sound. We’re serious about it and we’re coming,” he says chuckling at the notion. “We’re here. I think right now our voices have been a little muted. But the time is here. Jazz is really going to sound like the here and now.”

“I love each and every one of these guys,” Harris said in earnest. “These are my brothers. We’re going to roll forward and keep our ears open. It’s inevitable. Once you get out of the mindset that jazz is of the institution and that it’s about chords and scales, and that the real face of jazz is the face of the people, so to speak, it’s inevitable that it will continue to change. It will continue to evolve. All great art has always been a reflection of a group of people, of a region, of a moment in time. It’s not about the mathematics associated with music. That’s for me to worry about.



“Five years from now, the world is going to be very different. If we’re honest musicians and we’re authentic culturally, our music is going to sound very different and continue to grow and flourish.”

Harris is fond of the new music and the hard work the entire band put in for the project. “With Blackout, it really is a band. It’s not about me. It’s about every member of the ensemble. Everyone contributes songs. Everyone contributes arrangements. It goes wherever the moment goes. Everyone’s invested in this project, more so than just working for me... I definitely don’t feel like there’s anything I could have done in that moment. I prepared well in advance. I spiritually get in shape. I physically get in shape. I make sure I’m ready for the moment we walk into the studio... I’m really excited about it. There’s a lot of ambiguity around the definition of jazz. I’m very confident we’re making a statement about jazz origins, where it comes from, what it’s really about and that it is a music that is incredibly viable and valid.”

The recording was done in days leading up to the inauguration of President Obama. “I think it’s inevitable that that moment (inauguration of the first African-American president) instilled in all of us a great sense of pride,” says Harris. “The group Blackout, the music that we do is greatly influenced by the African-American diaspora. This is black music that we’re creating. If you look at the Stevie Wonder track. Everything we do is coming from that influence. Culturally, all of this is coming together for us. It’s a really special moment for us.”

Like all bands that remain together, there is not only musical growth, but a chemistry among members that are open to the process. For such groups, playing in the moment comes easier; appears in a collective form, not just individually. “Your instincts just line right up and the chemistry gets stronger and stronger over time, so that you don’t need to go too far with the planning,” Harris says. “The CD actually happens

on the bandstand over the five years. Trying new things. There are things that happen spontaneously, that we start to write down, that turn into some of the arrangements that you hear on the CD. It's a very organic approach to jazz."

### The Perception of Jazz

Harris says jazz could use a perception change in order to grow more and be accepted by the public. He referenced a recent *Wall Street Journal* article that ruffled some feathers in the jazz community during the past summer. "[Can Jazz Be Saved?](#)" claimed the jazz audience is dwindling, a familiar refrain of articles penned over the decades, sounding the death knell for the art form. Harris disagrees with the article, as does the jazz community in general, but feels there are issues to be addressed for the art form.

"This neo-classical movement is not something that brought jazz to its pinnacle. It's that spontaneity, that authenticity that brought jazz to its pinnacle. If we're going to make sure this art form is OK in the long run, we have to make sure the integrity and the core values of the art form remain in tact," he says.

"I think we're in good shape. I'm not afraid that the music is going to disappear. This art form is far too flexible, far too pliable to disappear. It will continue to adjust. It is one of America's greatest contributions to the world of art. This is a jewel. All over the world it's greatly appreciated. I'm not afraid that it will disappear. I'm very much concerned about the perception. The key word for me, again, is authenticity. Once you lose that core cultural value of what makes jazz special, I can understand why some people may not gravitate to it."



l:r: Marc Cary, Casey Benjamin, Stefon Harris, Ben Williams, Terreon Gully

He adds, "I have no problem with a consumer not liking jazz that is not authentic. I don't like jazz that is not authentic from my perspective. We're looking for life stories. It's not about jazz, it's about art. All great art is a reflection of a group of people, of an era, of a time. If you look at jazz now, we have to be very careful and make sure we ask ourselves the question, 'What story are we telling right now?' And are we telling the story of the people? If we are, the people will love us. They'll love us because they hear themselves in what we do. As they hear themselves in what they hear in pop music. As they hear themselves, hopefully, in theory, in politicians that they get behind, the literature that they read. That's what art is supposed to do.

"In the end, the record [*Urbanus*] is just fun. We can get into these discussions, but in the end, we just had a great time making this record. Incredibly inspiring," he says with a smile. "These conversations are great and interesting, but the most important thing is to put it on, and if you move your body, go ahead and move a little bit. We don't have a problem."

Harris composes with those thoughts in mind, influenced by various factors, including his classical background.

"My writing, ironically, seems to be very separate from my performing element," he says. "When I'm performing, nothing else matters, other than being there in the moment. It's much more spiritual than it is anything else. When I'm at the piano (composing), I'm peeking around corners and starting to discover new music, writing just comes to me. It's not like I sit down and say, 'I'm going to write this huge thing, 90 minutes long.' I sit down and I study and try to figure out the mechanics of music and how it works. I open one little door. It's so beautiful. 'What is that?' I start to discover something that I didn't know about before. That's so inspiring that it needs to expand and it turns into music. I think it's a critical part of the artist's inspiration.

"When you look at improvising and composition, I don't know that they're any different. They're pretty much the same thing. Composing is very, very slow. Improvisation is extremely fast composition. But the mindset, the mentality, the authenticity should be the same."

Harris also challenges himself, composing sometimes in areas outside his comfort zone. One such project is writing material recently for a classical woodwind quartet, Imani Winds. He will do some touring with the group this fall, playing the music. "I hadn't written for oboe or anything like that. So it was quite the challenge. I had to listen to a lot of the European classical tradition and learn about the instruments and how they work. And find a way to maintain my own niche in this writing... I take on those challenges and the growth that I get from that, and my understanding of music, of course comes out when I'm making my own records. You can hear on this record the use of woodwinds and tell that my voicings are definitely influenced from my classical background."

### Beginnings

Harris, a native of Albany, N.Y., the state's capital some 160 miles or so north of New York City, says he's been interested in music going

back as long as his memory will allow. When he watched cartoons as a child, he listened with fascination to the music, uninvolved with the antics of the drawn characters. Once in the music program in the public school system, he took advantage of the opportunity to bring home instruments and play them--even if he knew nothing about them.

"I used to take instruments home from school, instruments I couldn't even play. The trombone. No lessons or anything. *The Pink Panther* [cartoon] used to come on. I would go home and put it on and try to play along by ear. I'd turn on the radio and try to figure out what was going on. Music is a part of my soul. It's part of who I am."

He got so he could play most any instrument he got his hands on, to a certain extent. "I played all the band instruments. Clarinet was one of my best instruments. I played trombone and flute. I played bassoon. It was just about the love of music."

He ended up playing the vibraphone because through Richard Albagli, a percussionist with the Albany Symphony and who was Harris' private teacher beginning in junior high school. "He is pure genius and shared his love of music with me in a way that I could never repay him for. I am forever grateful for the love that this guy shared. He happened to be a percussionist, so, okay, I learned to play that instrument [vibes], so I'm comfortable expressing myself through it."

But, he reveals, expression of the music is more important than the medium through which it is created.

"For me, instruments aren't that important. If you look at instruments, it's just a bunch of metal and wood. It doesn't really matter," he says gleefully. "It's about the story that the artist is telling--what's coming through the instrument... If you look at my practice regimen, the first thing that I do is practice singing for about two hours in the morning, away from my instrument. I don't even come down into my music room. I just work on tuning and hearing sounds in my head first. Then I'll come down and do some physical work on the instrument. The vast majority of my work is actually at the piano. It's not about instruments."

In high school, Harris had access to instruments and encouragement to pursue music whole-heartedly. His formal training was geared to classical music and the music he heard around him was pop music of the day, especially Stevie Wonder, "the soundtrack to my upbringing... Jazz came a little later for me. But primarily, I was playing classical music. My mother's a minister, so I grew up in the church. I heard a lot of gospel music. Around the house, when I went to my aunt's, I remember hearing the blues all the time. [B.B. King](#), [Muddy Waters](#) and all the classics."

Harris was a classical major in his freshman year at Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y., which didn't have a formal jazz program at the time. But he encountered other students heavily into jazz. "I would hang out with them. 'Show me this. Show me that. What record should I buy?' I was completely fascinated, not only spiritually, what I was hearing, but also intellectually into the music and how complex it was," he recalls. "I had never heard Charlie Parker, [Dexter Gordon](#) or anyone like that."

His inquisitive mind and keen musical sensibilities enabled him to absorb these new discoveries--these audacious sounds--quickly. He took them to heart.

Naturally, as he got into jazz, he listened to the important vibraphonists. "My initial influence on the vibraphone is [Milt Jackson](#), hands down. My freshman year, I bought this record people told me to get called *Things Are Getting Better* (OJC, 1958), with Milt Jackson and [Cannonball Adderley](#). I transcribed every note that Milt Jackson played on that record and did my best to learn that stuff. I was all about Milt Jackson."

"After one year I knew I needed to move to New York City and be part of a school that had an established jazz program and be closer to the culture of jazz. So I left Eastman and moved to New York" and the [Manhattan School of Music](#) [He graduated with a bachelor's degree in classical music and a master's in jazz performance]. "I don't think I was even good enough to get into a jazz program at the time, so I continued in classical music. But the bug was in my head immediately, as soon as I heard Charlie Parker's 'Now's the Time.' That record in particular completely blew me away."

"When I moved to New York a year later, a funny thing happened. Around the corner from where I lived, they had a jazz festival. I came home one day and someone said Milt Jackson was playing two blocks away," he says, still animated about the memory. "I went up there and I got a chance to see him play and watch him walk and shake his hand. It was so clear to me that everything about this guy--why he played the way he played. It was how he walked. It was the clothes he wore; the way he spoke. It was very clear to me, immediately, that I could never be that. I came from a whole other era, a whole other background. At that point I knew to sit around transcribing the past, that's not really what jazz is about. It's about your story. My seriousness went to a whole other level.

"The same thing was reiterated when I met [Bobby Hutcherson](#). When I got to play with [Joe Henderson](#). It's the authenticity and individuality that is the most striking in being on the stage with people like that."

Picking up the jazz feeling rapidly, he began playing gigs. An early gig was with a Latin band. "I played in salsa bands, African dance companies. I just love music. Any style of music. It doesn't matter. It's not about style."

One particular gig with the Latin group was witnessed, however, by legendary drummer [Max Roach](#), who happened to be in the audience, "but I didn't know. I flew back to New York and I checked my answering machine, and Max Roach was on my answering machine saying, 'Hey, young boy. I heard you play. Call me.' Of course, I called all my friends trying to find out who left the message," says Harris with a soft laugh. "So I called (Roach), and sure enough he left the message. I started playing with [M'Boom](#)."

Shortly after that, he had the opportunity to play with [Bobby Watson](#) and [Wynton Marsalis](#), all while still in school. But basically, he says his career rise has been "a slow burn." he said overnight sensations in music are not a reality and those situations aren't good for the music or the musician.

"Understanding the spiritual depth is something that comes in time. Understanding how to be on stage. You just don't get that from practicing in a practice room. For me, to be able to be on stage with Max Roach is a breakthrough. That's one of



many breaks I had along the way," he explains. "Playing with Buster Williams, who's a great friend of mine, helped me get signed to a record company. I was at the Village Vanguard with him, with [Geri Allen](#) on piano and [Lenny White](#) on drums and Buster on bass. That kind of company. People from the record company were there and heard me play. And being on the road with Joe Henderson, people would talk about me, so I had a little buzz going. All of these things are a confluence of events that led me to a point where I was able to be signed [by Blue Note]."

### Learning from Elders

"I've learned a lot from every step of the way," says Harris. "I learned very different lessons from every musician. I learned a lot from Buster Williams about how to be a leader, in terms of timing. When to get in and out of a song. How to direct a band without saying anything at all, but with the notes that you play. I learned a lot from Wynton Marsalis. We'd be on the road, and he'd have these events that he would go to. No one else would go and I would say, 'Wynton, can I go?' And I would ride with him and sit in the back of the room. I've watched him get the Key to the City in Chicago. They'd do a master class for kids in a high school and I would go. I would follow him around and I would watch him. In addition to being on stage, I watched how he dealt with an audience. He has the uncanny ability to take a huge concert hall and make it feel like a living room. So I learned things like that from watching Wynton, in addition a lot about the details and mechanics of music and business."

He recalls of his experience with Henderson that the saxophonist was "so spontaneous and so incredibly intelligent. The most intelligent musician I've ever been around. I think he spoke seven languages. His solos had unbelievable structure, unbelievable discipline. He played in a way that every note was a possibility. Without getting into the technical nature of music, he'd take a major 7th chord and take the most theoretically wrong note and make it so beautiful. [chuckles] Audacity. I was blessed to have the opportunity to watch a great master express that. It taught me to take chances. A better way to say that is play beyond what you know."



Playing "beyond what you know" was one of the mantras Miles Davis stressed to the musicians in his most creative bands of the '60s and early '70s. Davis, it turns out, is also a major influence on Harris.

"The vibraphone is just a bunch of metal and wood. I rarely talk about the vibraphone. It's cool. It's pretty. I like it. Whatever," he says laughing at the image. "But my main influence as a bandleader is Miles Davis. He's definitely a role model for me because I think that he found a way--and I think it's a cultural thing--to bring five people together--six people, four people, whatever--and get them all to buy in to what was going on and take ownership of it. You never got the sense from hearing Miles' band that he was telling anybody what to do. There's no way Miles Davis taught [Tony Williams](#) to play the drums that way or [Herbie Hancock](#) to play the piano that way. But he created an environment and inspired them to dig deep into who they are and push forward, so that they bought into the band. That type of mentality is what I try to create in my own band. I want Terreon Gully to be playing like Blackout is his band. Because it *is* his band. That's how I'm going to get the best out of the people around me.

"If I tell people what to do, they're going to do what I want them to do and the music is going to be limited to what's in my head. We're all much stronger together than we are apart."

Another thing Davis did in his music was continue to move forward, to play music that related to the people and the times they were living in. "Stella by Starlight" didn't fit 1969, or 1974, or 1985. Miles grew tired of hearing people pine for that music and those times, even while, among his friends, he looked back very fondly at those times. Harris is also looking to have his art be emblematic of his time. And times moves on. So should music.

"Jazz has become so ambiguous. What happens when an art form becomes ambiguous, I think, is that the standards are lowered. You can say anything is jazz. So I think it's important to reflect on what made jazz so special. In its pinnacle, what was it that people were drawn to. I think it's ultimately that cultural expression that brought people in. People were hearing themselves in the music. It wasn't about the theory of music, chords and scales. You're up there and you're a representation of people's hopes and dreams. You have to sound like the times, or fantasy of the world at the time or whatever it is, your music is a reflection of the people. Until we get back to the point where it is an art form of the people, and inject culture back into it, and not just mathematics of playing--the institutional approach--I can understand why the average person may not be drawn to it.

"Our group Blackout, we're absolutely about the African-American tradition, about our culture, about our background. Expressing our life experiences, and being of the people. I think culturally, we've always been raised to know you're never bigger than your people. We're a reflection of them. We have to get that back into the music so that we stand above you, you sit and silence and watch us and give this great dissertation on art. If it goes that way, good luck. It's not where I'm going though," he says, gleefully, not somberly. "Can you tell I love this art form?"

That fondness is apparent. And these are clearly good days for the young musician.

"It's been amazing," he reveals. "I'm more inspired right now than I ever have been in my entire life. I practice more now than I ever have. I practiced yesterday for 10 hours straight. I never could do that in the past. I think it's because it's not about notes, it's about passion. I love doing whatever I can to continue to grow in my understanding of it and do whatever I can to make sure it's a viable art form out here in the world."

In times when the music business is turbulent and the economy sluggish, Harris is holding his own and then some. He's happy about his decade with Blue Note records and excited to now be with Concord. His group has also diversified its performance possibilities by getting involved with chamber music events.

"We didn't try to follow the laid path that was already out there," says Harris. "We took a look at what's coming next and we saw that chamber music was a burgeoning art form and they were in transition. They were beginning to be open minded about jazz. So we pursued trying to get into these new opportunities in the chamber music world. My quartet, when I was coming up, we were the first jazz



group to ever play and of the [chamber music] series that we played. That's opposed to only pursuing the jazz clubs and the jazz festivals. We took a different approach and it's paid off in the long run.

So, "has been very, very good," he notes. Blackout is on the road this fall and he is also part of the [SF Jazz Collective](#) and will be working with the Imani Winds.

"We're going to be alright, man. Jazz will be okay," he says with confidence. "We've just got to change the attitude, change the perception of what jazz is... instead of being in the control of the institution. If it's in the control of the institution, when that happens, it's going to go the route of the institution, which takes it away from being of the people. If it went that way totally, I probably wouldn't be a jazz musician. I would do something else. I think it's a good time in the music, actually. When you look at the actual number of people who are musicians, there are more musicians now than ever in the history of the music. There are more people trying different things.

"Creativity, I think, is overrated. Authenticity is where it's at. You can find creativity in this art form. And you can still find authenticity, too."



#### Selected Discography

Stefon Harris and Blackout, [Urbanus](#) (Concord, 2009)  
 Stefon Harris, [African Tarantella: Dances with Duke](#) (Blue Note, 2006)  
 Stefon Harris and Blackout, [Evolution](#) (Blue Note, 2004)  
 Russell Gun, [Ethnomusicology, Vol. 3](#) (High Note, 2004)  
 Stefon Harris, [The Grand Unification Theory](#) (Blue Note, 2003)  
 Greg Osby, [Inner Circle](#) (Blue Note, 2002)  
 Stefon Harris, [Black Action Figure](#) (Blue Note, 1999)  
 Stefon Harris/Jacky Terrasson, [Kindred](#) (Blue Note, 2001)  
 Wynton Marsalis, [Sweet Release](#) (Sony Classics, 1999)  
 Stefon Harris, [A Cloud of Red Dust](#) (Blue Note, 1998)  
 Joe Henderson, [Porgy and Bess](#) (High Note, 1997)  
 Terrell Stafford, [Centripetal Force](#) (Candid Records, 1996)  
 Records, 1996)

#### Photo credits

Page 1, Portrait: [Nitin Vadukul](#)

Page 2: Stefon Harris and Blackout, courtesy of [Nitin Vadukul](#); Stefon Harris, [C. Andrew Hovan](#)

Page 3: [Nitin Vadukul](#)

---

Click the BACK button to return to the previous page.

All material copyright © 2009 All About Jazz and contributing writers.  
 All rights reserved.

Reviews All **Music** DVDs Live Cinema TV Books Comic Books Video Games



## Stefon Harris and Blackout *Urbanus* Concord

Aug 28, 2009 | [WEB EXCLUSIVE](#)

By Cory Frye

SHARE

A sense of anticipation—as well as a healthy dollop of soul/jazz fusion as originally crafted by the masters and enhanced by their students—pervades *Urbanus*, waxed mere days before Barack Obama took the oath of office. Acoustic meets electric, go-go shakes hands with funk, the pot melteth over. We are urban; urban is us.

Even the mellower numbers thrum with a certain exuberance. "Langston's Lullaby," written for bandleader Harris' newborn son, is positively exuberant in its sleepytime tempo, a celebration of new life commingling with the promise of cultural rebirth. Casey Benjamin's alto sax clamors for brighter colors as the song builds toward contentment. "Blues for Denial" is a "blues" in name only, as Harris playfully chases notes up and down the vibes, pianist Marc Cary following suit.

Benjamin also pulls duty on vocoder, returning the machine to the jazz idiom after years of coloring hip-hop, pop, and electronica. Here he demonstrates what a thing of beauty the beast can be when powered by the right set of lungs. In this context, it's amazingly similar to his other axe (alto sax): sexy, smooth, and slinky, a soft verbal stream as opposed to a series of aggressive metallic clacks and robo-pops. Benjamin pours sweet-nothings through it on "Christina," a boudoir mood-lit by Harris' martini vibes and the amorous gaze of Cary's Fender Rhodes (some situations demand electric enhancement). The trio later return—Cary massaging acoustic ivories this time—on the seductive "For You," which Benjamin also recorded for Robert Glasper's *Double Booked*.

Despite its deceptively cool demeanor (and what are vibes but cool's exotic echo?), *Urbanus* is part of an exciting new swerve in jazz, a truly American art form that forever absorbs and learns, learns and absorbs, then paints its lessons with a striking beauty for all to enjoy. The conversation is ongoing, and it's about time we listened. ([www.stefonharris.com](http://www.stefonharris.com))

Author rating: **7**/10

CURRENT ISSUE



Issue #27

Jul 07, 2009 | [ISSUE #27](#)  
[SUMMER 2009 - JARVIS COCKER](#)

MOST RECENT

[Photos from All Tomorrow's Parties \(News\)](#)

[Photos from the Vivian Girls show at The Echo \(News\) — Vivian Girls](#)

[Noah and the Whale Announces U.S. Tour This October \(News\) — Noah and the Whale](#)

[The Swell Season Announces U.S. Fall Tour \(News\) — The Swell Season](#)

[Jens Lekman Likes to Whip It...Whip It Good \(News\) — Jens Lekman](#)



## Free to play all of who they are

The Boston Globe

### On new jazz albums, Glasper, Harris show their deep influences

By Siddhartha Mitter, Globe Correspondent | August 23, 2009

For years they've feigned split personalities, building their name and platform in jazz with straight-ahead trios or quartets, while nurturing their generation's funk roots and mash-up aesthetic through side projects or hip-hop moonlighting gigs.

But new albums out this week from vibraphonist Stefon Harris and pianist Robert Glasper, both among the wave of premier bandleaders born in the 1970s, suggest that jazz's 30-somethings are finding the confidence and the market space to make high-profile, major-label work that draws on hip-hop, funk, and electronica. And all this not in order to probe new frontiers but simply to express who they are.

Harris, 36, who grew up in Albany, N.Y., and came to jazz after classical training, is putting out "Urbanus," the second release of his Blackout project, five years after its debut. The disc embodies each member's life and style: There is a go-go track, for instance, supplied by bassist Ben Williams and keyboardist Marc Cary and reflecting their Washington, D.C., roots. Saxophonist Casey Benjamin also plays vocoder, the synthetic-voice device seldom heard in jazz since late-'70s Herbie Hancock, and more often associated with hip-hop, Euro dance, and sci-fi flicks.

Glasper, 30, takes a daring approach on his record "Double-Booked." The first half is in regular trio format, straight-ahead albeit full of hip-hop-inspired arrangements. The second half features the Robert Glasper Experiment, a free-form entity where top rappers and soul folks tend to turn up.

Glasper, who was raised in Houston, is music director for Mos Def and Q-Tip, and also works with the Roots and Maxwell. Mos and singer Bilal appear here, and Roots drummer Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson supplies a voice-mail interlude (another comes from trumpeter Terence Blanchard). Benjamin and his vocoder are on the Experiment, too, and one of his songs, "For You," co-written by Sameer Gupta, made it onto both records.

In separate interviews, Harris and Glasper express a shared feeling that a moment has come.

"This is just the time for it," Glasper says on the phone. "We're ready musically, and we need it now more than ever."

Partly, he's referring to the credibility these young artists have achieved, which allows them to put out music that the genre-boundary police might otherwise dismiss. "I couldn't do it out of nowhere, bring the Experiment out too soon," he says. "I had to establish myself first as a jazz pianist, and get that respect. Otherwise, very fast, you'll get pegged as a hip-hop pianist."

But it's also a moment for jazz, in its constant quest for focus and renewal. "Our audience is old," Glasper says. "Nine times out of 10, if a 20-year-old is listening to jazz, it's a musician. Jazz is so hidden, it's like a museum, with dinosaurs. Everything you see is in black and white."

Over lunch in Newark, Harris makes an even starker assessment of jazz today. There is no shortage of musicians, he says; in fact, there may be too many. The question is what experience - cultural, social, political - jazz is expressing.

"It's not just about loving chords and scales," Harris says. "This is our life, our culture, and our history, and we are putting it forward because we love this music. As an African-American, this is my cultural heritage. This is the music of my people, and I feel a great sense of pressure and a real honor to do my part to continue this legacy."

When he looks to the past, Harris says, it is less as a jazz preservationist than it is to understand what made it click: "What was it that drew people to the music? What made it special? Let's really examine that. It's not about style - we don't want to just go back and play bebop. The real tradition of jazz is about the here and now. It's about spontaneity,

and about being the voice of the people.”

Harris says he welcomes anyone to play jazz, as long as what they play conveys the authenticity of their personal experience. For his part, he says, that means the urban, black American experience, with the traits that his Blackout mates share, from the church tradition of music and testimonial, to the reality of police harassment. “I guarantee you get the five of us together, and all of us have been pulled out of cars,” he says.

From this stems the entire program of “Urbanus”: the album title (“Urban Us”) and its musical commitments, from go-go, marching band, and church to the spectacular reworking of Stevie Wonder’s “They Won’t Go (When I Go)” that includes Benjamin’s vocoder and a guest flute and clarinet section.

Harris’s “Urbanus” is eclectic, but its pacing and feel are still those of a classic jazz record. Glasper’s “Double-Booked,” with its framing conceit, two-part structure, rap interlude, and general ornamentation, is more of a self-conscious hybrid, reflecting the influence on Glasper of seminal hip-hop producers like his friend the late J Dilla. That applies not just to the Experiment tracks but also to the trio material.

“I love to take a few chords and loop them so it sounds exactly like a sample,” Glasper says. “It just gets you into a zone, and once you set that palette you can work stuff on top of it. It’s very rare to listen to a jazz record and something just settles - including things that are sexy.”

The Harris and Glasper generation was barely on the scene the last time jazz and hip-hop attempted earnest conversation. Between 1993 and 1995 a mini-wave of projects appeared, led by some big figures: saxophonists Greg Osby, Steve Coleman, and Branford Marsalis. The respected MC Guru launched his series of “Jazzmatazz” compilations.

Those records never really stuck. On some, stilted, second-tier rapping jarred against high-grade musicianship. On others, pleasant-enough lyrics and beats never quite made room for the kind of probing, improvising playing that brings complexity or lift. And so the moment passed.

Now, in a music landscape upended by downloads, iPods, and sampling, the encounter - at least as reflected on these new records - feels less forced, more open and organic. Benjamin is optimistic that the jazz and hip-hop audiences are overlapping more than ever. He recalls a recent set with Glasper at New York’s Village Vanguard: “I looked out and it was the crowd you would see at a Roots jam,” he says.

It may be, as Harris suggests, that the woes of the music industry overall have, paradoxically, liberated musicians to make more personal music rather than hew to genre. It may be, as well, that the centrifugal unraveling of hip-hop has helped to fertilize jazz as it has other music - in a kind of creative decay.

In the end, though, none of this would be possible without a new generation of players who feel, simply, that their time has come. As Benjamin puts it: “This is our generation, and our interpretation of what jazz is.” ■