

Stefon Harris'
evolutionary
Blackout ensemble
strives to bring
jazz to the masses
with its new,
plugged-in CD





The Walleet Cat

By John Murph Photographs by Nitin Vadukul



Stefon Harris epitomizes the Information Age. He draws from a universe of data ranging from classic literature and philosophy to quantum physics and hip-hop. Harris allows that knowledge to dance around his psyche for while before fashioning all that information into poignant musical statements.

One of his favorite exercises is to stand in a crowd, close his eyes and just listen—to multiple conversations, ambient noise and any other auditory stimulations—simultaneously concentrating on every conceivable bit of information. “I enjoy that,” Harris says emphatically. “It heightens my awareness of what’s going on in the bandstand.”

On the table in his elegant room at Washington, D.C.’s Latham Hotel is a stack of recently purchased books: Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* and Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. Piled adjacent to the makeshift library are a handful of recently acquired CDs: Jay-Z’s *The Black Album* and Ludacris’ *Chicken-N-Beer* are scattered among the latest from Alicia Keys, Pink, Mary J. Blige and Sting. “I’m all over the place,” Harris laughs.

“I’m always looking, and the thing is I’ve learned not to compartmentalize. That was the problem I had before. I could only do one thing at a time, and I kept them so separate from my art. Now, I realize that everything that I take in can be and inevitably will be reflective in my art.”

Right now, he’s all riled up about Ralph Ellison’s 1952 masterpiece *The Invisible Man*. Harris’ bright eyes dance as he talks about the story’s prologue, which evocatively describes the protagonist’s hallucinatory submergence into Louis Armstrong’s “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?”

“Ellison recognized that most people never really heard music beyond the surface,” Harris says. “In the prologue, he’s describing the first layer of music as something about a woman who had two kids by her slave master, but she was in love with him even though he’d abused her. And once you get to another level, something else entirely different is going on—all of this is in the music.”

Harris won’t have time tonight to fully plunge into Ellison’s novel, though. Later this evening, he’s performing at the Kennedy Center’s KC Jazz Club, showcasing his new ensemble, Blackout. The group will focus mostly on material from his fourth solo disc, *Evolution* (Blue Note), a luminous master-jam that’s scaled-down in comparison to last year’s extravagant *The Grand Unification Theory*.

Where *The Grand Unification Theory* nearly imploded with overarching themes of quantum physics and reincarnation, *Evolution* is succinct. “The thing I’m most happy about with *Evolution* is that it’s very accessible without compromising my artistic integrity,” Harris says. “I think I’ve made a record for people who don’t necessarily like jazz.”

Indeed, much of *Evolution*’s vivacity derives from its contemporary references as much it does from Harris’ effervescent vibraphone playing. The disc effectively reconciles hip-hop, R&B and pop with the intricacies of jazz. With a

thicker kick beat and some electronic sprinkles, much of the undulating Afro-Latin burner “Red-Bone, Netti-Bone” could pass as a tune by drum ’n’ bass icons 4-Hero. “The Lost Ones,” with its mellow melodicism and sensuous groove, brings to mind the lubricious magic that D’Angelo or Jill Scott cast during their erotic lamentations. Then there’s the boogie-down cover of Bobby Hutcherson’s “Montara,” which has become a hip-hop staple thanks to the Roots and Madlib.

For all its funkiness, however, *Evolution* is a bona-fide jazz album. As Harris notes, Blackout isn’t a pet project designed to cater to populists’ tastes; it’s a natural progression. “I chose the name Blackout because I was thinking about it as blacking out a lot of the opinions that exist already. In that process, I’ve started including my direct influences.”

In selecting band mates, Harris corralled an esteemed team of players he refers to as “jazz modernists.” He relies on each band member to contribute his distinct multifaceted musical personality. For instance, pianist/keyboardist Marc Cary brings deep house and funk flavors, as does powerhouse drummer Terreon Gully. Alto saxophonist Casey Benjamin peppers his scintillating improvisations with knifing riffs and a bittersweet lyricism that belie his hip-hop and R&B roots, and bassist Darryl Hall projects fusion and funk sensibilities. Fleshing out the core group are guest appearances from flutist Anne Drummond, percussionist Pedro Martinez and keyboardist Xavier Davis.

“We’re all steeped in the jazz tradition history, we all can play changes and we all know a significant portion of jazz history,” Harris says. “But when we come together, we’re creating music that is reflective of our time. I think we’re having a really interesting dramatic transition in jazz, which I’m so happy about. We had this neoclassical period, where everyone was sort of recreating sounds of the past, and we were rewarded for being able to do that. Now, with record companies struggling a little bit, I think it’s working out as a plus for the music, because there’s just not that much of a reward for being able to recreate Louis Armstrong’s sound. I think young musicians are becoming less reticent and are writing whatever they want. Just listen to what Roy Hargrove, Nicholas Payton and Brad Mehldau are now doing.”

The impetus for Blackout came about after one of his students introduced Harris to an electric vibraphone called the MalletKat. Harris played it at a jam session and quickly became intrigued with its amplified sounds and textures. “It was just like a whole other level of expression,” he says. “It sort of changed the way I phrased. On it, I would use grace notes in different sort of way, in a more vocal way. When I went back to playing the vibraphone, I could hear the influence of the MalletKat.”

While fiddling around with the gadget’s sonic possibilities, Harris also began taking stock in how his generation listens to music. “The *bump* that we’re hearing on those R&B, hip-hop and rock albums is the bump that we need to have in our music. We’re used to hearing things that thump; stuff you can bounce to. And if jazz is going to be relevant to not only myself as a musician but to my peers, some of whom aren’t musicians, the music has to have a certain kind of thump to it.”

Because of his newfound fascination with the MalletKat, Harris decided to end his regular straightahead quartet (pianist Xavier Davis, bassist Matthew Parrish and drummer Kim Thompson) and embark on a more amplified sensibility that, well, *bumps*. The MalletKat inspired Harris to form the first version of Blackout as a plugged-in ensemble, complete with elec-



Blackout, L-R: Casey Benjamin (saxophone), Darryl Hall (bass), Marc Cary (keys), Stefon Harris (vibes), Terreon Gully (drums)

tric bass, lots of keyboards and the EWI (Electric Wind Instrument). His compositional slant also shifted to more of a groove orientation. To achieve a higher sense of vocalized nuance in his melodies, he began transcribing the music of Stevie Wonder, Nancy Wilson, Shirley Horn and Roy Ayers—one of the early players of the MalletKat. (Harris says of Ayers: “In transcribing his music, I realized that he has a lot of integrity in his notes. He’s not just playing blue scales or some simple licks or something. He’s really improvising, and his solos are never cluttered. Roy is an individual voice on the vibraphone, and that’s hard to come by. Just for that alone he deserves a lot of respect.”)

After finding the well-suited band mates and penning appropriate material, Harris test-drove Blackout at various New York City clubs for almost a year before recording. One of the group’s defining performances was at last year’s North Sea Jazz festival—“We played there in a club filled with young people, and they were just yelling and hollering. It was just great”—but it wasn’t just the crowd’s response that shaped the band.

Shortly after the North Sea gig, Harris realized the MalletKat’s limitations. “The MalletKat has something like 260 different points of dynamic range. Well, an acoustic instrument has no limit to its range. You can hit the vibraphone and get from 260 to 3008 points—there’s a lot more subtleties that you can get out of acoustic instruments, especially when you play softly.”

It wasn’t just the MalletKat in which Harris began to notice dynamic shortcomings. The original instrumentation of Blackout was too one-dimensional. “Those instruments sort of nip a lot of the subtleties out of the music,” Harris says. “That reproduced electric sound just started clashing. The bass seemed too far in the front, and it wasn’t quite blending well with sounds of the drums. Also, when Darryl walked on the electric bass, it sounded thuddy.

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Marc Cary concurs with Harris: “Our improv is real heavy; it’s not like a funk band. We’re funky, but we do a lot of improvisation, and that MalletKat was just not expressive enough. It sounded so loud in some situations due to the intensity of our playing.”

Harris decided to make concessions between the electric and acoustic, so he streamlined the band. Cary’s arsenal of

keyboards—piano, Fender Rhodes, clavinet and the Minimoog—was retained, but the MalletKat was discarded in favor of the vibraphone and marimba. Benjamin reduced his EWI playing to occasional textural shadings, and Hall transferred his electric-bass techniques to the stand-up acoustic.

“When I played the electric, sometimes there was a tendency for everything to get heavy, because sonically when

there’s an electric bass, it tends to push things and fills the space up,” Hall says. “With the change to the acoustic, it makes working with a bass line a little harder, because I don’t have the luxury of just playing fast licks all the time. I really have to respect the acoustic bass—the string’s length and the amount of time it takes for a note to respond.”

In addition to paring down Blackout’s instrumentation, Harris also fine-tuned his compositions for the band. As Cary explains, the original music for the band was much busier than what’s presented on *Evolution*. “It was almost like he was writing out everything that we would be actually improvising. When we started, Stefon wanted so many things, compositionally, to happen,” he says.

1/2 Vertical Island

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When Harris composes, he tends to think big. His music often exudes a wide-screen scope, with dramatic tempo and mood shifts, sweeping crescendos and spectral interludes. Through his spatial awareness and keen sense of tonal color and texture, Harris can make a rather conventional quartet sound grander.

“I like to describe that as my imagination being far larger than my budget,” he chuckles. “If financial considerations weren’t issues, I would definitely have a large ensemble most of the time. I’m very big on structure and change of color. In my songs, I tend to create different forms for each solo, so that the piece will have

momentum. From my classical background, I'm used to music having endings. A coda is a standard thing for me. A lot of times, I like to change tempos and moods just so it fades and settles you down. I like to control the pace of the listener with interludes. There may be something that's really dramatic; you need a moment to just chill out before the next storm comes in."

To see Stefon Harris vigorously hammer out an improvisation is akin to watching the tough-but-graceful athleticism of an NBA player. "The physical expression becomes part of the experience for the audience," he says. "The visual image of how you strike the instrument plays a major role on someone who's watching. I can strike a note and move my hand away very, very slowly back toward my body, and people will hear that note dissipating into silence. If I hit that note and keep my hand really still, people will hear that note as being really abrupt. It's just articulating the emotions."

Although he sees himself as a "natural" at the instrument, Harris fell into being a vibraphonist by happenstance. While growing up in Albany, N.Y., he was a child prodigy, teaching himself to read music on the piano. When Harris began school he initially wanted to follow in his brother's footsteps with the trumpet, but asthma prevented such aspirations, so he took up the drums. Teachers quickly noted Harris' advantage over other students in reading music, so they encour-

aged him to take up the clarinet, which he excelled at as well. By the time he reached eighth grade he had developed considerable command of piano, drums, clarinet, bassoon, flute and oboe.

Despite his ability to navigate all those instruments, Harris says, "I needed to focus. A lot of teachers were telling me that if I played all of these instruments that I would become a jack of all trades and master of none."

Decision time came when he auditioned on clarinet and percussion—his two best instruments—for an orchestra. "I got accepted as a percussionist. It was really a random decision. If I got accepted as a clarinetist, I would probably be a clarinetist today."

Harris' first encounter with the vibraphone was when he was a high school senior, playing in a school production of *West Side Story*.

1/2 Vertical Island

Listening Pleasures

I keep current on all the releases by my peers in the jazz world. I buy them all—I don't burn them. The CD I can't get out of my player is OutKast's *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*."

Gearbox

Pro-Mark Stefon Harris Signature mallets. (He is in the process of closing a deal on vibes and marimba, but can't say yet.)

After continuing his musical education, initially at Eastman and finishing up at Manhattan School of Music with an undergraduate degree in classical percussion and an M.A. in jazz performance, Harris rose to prominence quickly in the mid-'90s through his work with Wynton Marsalis, Buster Williams, Joe Henderson and Charlie Hunter. But it was his association with Greg Osby that Harris really cemented his reputation as a significant new jazz voice.

Harris' 1998 debut, *A Cloud of Red Dust*, with Osby on alto sax, and its Osby-produced 1999 follow-up, *BlackActionFigure*, were critical successes. Blue Note realized it had a roster of hot, young talent on its hands, so the company put together the New Directions band to radically reinterpret tunes from its catalog for a self-titled CD in 2000. The band featured Harris and alto saxophonist Osby as well as pianist Jason Moran, drummer Nasheet Waits and bassist Tarus Mateen, who have since become the formidable Bandwagon trio.

Moran, Waits and Mateen also toured



with the vibist in a Harris-led band, and almost immediately he recognized the trio's connection. In fact, Harris says that he often felt like an interloper. "The three of them together sounded very natural to me. When I was in the New Directions group, I remember saying to them that they sounded amazing as a trio. I think it's a great thing that those musicians were able to come together."

"Stefon is very specific in what he likes to hear," says Moran. "Some days some things might sound right and on others they didn't. During that time, Nasheet, Tarus and I were really forming as a unit unto itself. At certain points, I'm sure Stefon did feel [out of place], because we

were going into an alternative path that ran parallel to where he was going. I suggested to Stefon that maybe he should chose a different piano player, because I knew that I really wasn't giving what he wanted to hear. It was a mutual understanding. So, it was very easy to depart even though we were living together as roommates."

All is well between Harris and Moran, with the vibraphonist even suggesting that eventually they'll play together again. But for now, the two extremely gifted and singular voices are mapping out their own distinct trajectories, both of which, in their own unique ways, are attracting new listeners from their own generation.

"I think it's important for the jazz industry to recognize that we need to develop an audience," Harris says. "There is something going on with the new music by people like Jason's Bandwagon, the Bad Plus and Roy Hargrove. You're going to come across a couple of things that aren't quite there, but eventually something is going to break, signaling a real evolution." **JT**

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