

COREY HARRIS EXPLORES BLUE AND BLACK, AND ALL THE SHADES IN BETWEEN

blu.black due in stores September 29, 2009

More than just a blues musician, Corey Harris is a seeker of the countless historical and cultural truths locked within the music. For more than a decade, the guitarist-vocalist-songwriter has dug for the deepest and truest essence of the blues, reggae, gospel and other roots music by examining and celebrating their origins in various and diverse cultural centers – Africa, the Caribbean, Appalachia, Europe and beyond.

Zion Crossroads, Harris' 2007 recording on Telarc – a division of Concord Music Group – was a reggae-flavored set that reflected his travels to Ethiopia during the prior year. *Blues Revue* editor Kenneth Bays called the album “an astounding record – musically rich, instrumentally diverse, and bursting at the seams with the spirit of African tradition.” *Global Rhythm* called it “one of the most vibrant reggae albums to be released this year.”

But the honors and the accolades have come from sources beyond just the music press. In 2007, he was awarded a \$500,000 MacArthur Fellowship – commonly referred to as a “genius award” – from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The annual grant, which recognizes individuals from a wide range of disciplines who show creativity, originality and commitment to continued innovative work, described Harris as an artist who “forges an adventurous path marked by deliberate eclecticism.” That same year, he was also awarded an honorary Doctor of Music degree from Bates College, his alma mater in Lewiston, Maine.

The intersection of art, history and culture remains at the center of Harris' work with the Telarc release of *blu.black* on September 29, 2009. The album is a collection of thirteen primarily blues and reggae original songs and one Burning Spear cover that examine the African-American story of earlier centuries and connect it to present day and future generations.

“There's a blues song at the end of the sequence that's simply called 'Blues,' and a song at the beginning called 'Black,’” Harris says of the range of material on the recording. “The record is both of those things and everything in between. All the styles in all those songs represent everything between blue and black.”

Harris approached *blu.black* with the idea of making a record as live and organic – and at the same time as richly layered and relevant – as possible. Throughout the sessions, the emphasis was always more on the thematic and less on the technical aspects of the project. “I always deal with Africa and the blues and roots on my records,” he says. “Those have been my primary themes throughout most of my career. On this record, I wanted to express my love for great black music, and demonstrate that love in original song form. It's the same goal I've been pursuing for some time – to make original music and try to educate people in the process.”

But the commitment to crafting a richly layered recording doesn't necessarily require excessive production. “I didn't want a busy record,” says Harris, who enlisted the services of producer and keyboardist Chris “Peanut” Whitley. “I think this record proves that you can have minimal instrumentation and still express a lot of different ideas. I wanted to have each song be basically a combination of keyboards, bass, drum and guitar – or in some cases, guitar only. I didn't want a bunch of different guest artists and a full horn section. Even though the music has variety, the sound is consistent throughout. This was recorded all at the same time, in the same studio, with the same people on each track. You can make a record with heart and soul without adding a lot of bells and whistles.”

The album opens with “Black,” a song whose combination of arrangement and tempo suggests the soul music of the early 1970s, but also includes an interlude of rap that gives it a more

contemporary spin. “Black” is immediately followed by “My Song,” a track that leans more toward gospel, with the help of two backing vocalists – twin sisters Davina and Davita Jackson. “I was very pleased with how the vocals turned out on this song,” says Harris. “I’ve worked with the Jacksons a number of times over the years – since about 2001 – and they always bring an inspirational dimension to my music.”

Further into the set, “Babylon Walls” plunges headlong into reggae, with lyrics that herald the coming of Judgment Day and all of the worldly evils that will meet their demise in the final accounting.

“So Good To Me” is a breezy track that celebrates the virtues of a simple life and a good companion. “I came up with the chord progression, and I liked it, but I really didn’t know what words to put to it,” says Harris. “It took me a long time to get the words together. In the end, the song feels like a plant that I grew over the course of many months. Other songs just sprout up overnight, but this was one that I had to pay attention to. But I put in the work and it paid off, and I was happy with the result.”

On a darker note, “Pimps and Thieves” paints a grim picture of the entertainment industry and all of its inherent dead ends, with ominous accents and fills provided by saxophonist Gordon Jones. The tone shifts to something a bit more lighthearted a couple tracks later with the island backbeat of “Run Around Girl.”

In the final stretch, “Every Time I Look at You” is a heartfelt devotional built on an elastic tempo, while “Blues” is exactly what the title suggests – a slow 12-bar shuffle that brings the set to a churning close.

Each song on *blu.black* is its own story, says Harris, and all of the stories heard as a whole provide a map whereby we can reconnect to our individual and collective histories. “The story that I want to tell is that we who have had the experience of coming from parents who came from the south, whose parent were poor and the children of slaves – we can take this music and make something new with it,” he says. “The story isn’t finished. There are still places where it can move forward. There are still things that can be accomplished. There’s so much that can be done if we stay connected to the music and stay connected to our culture. That goes for all of us, for people of every culture. If we know where we’re coming from individually, then we’ll be able to present those gifts to the world so that others can appreciate them.”

Corey Harris’ *blu.black* (TEL-31795-02) is due at retail on September 29, 2009.

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