



B I O G R A P H Y

Stefon Harris and Blackout *Urbanus*

Jazz for the “here and now” is the best way to describe vibraphonist, composer and bandleader Stefon Harris’ new disc, *Urbanus*, his 7th CD as a leader, which also marks his Concord Records debut. *Urbanus* picks up where 2004’s *Evolution* (Blue Note) left off in that it features Blackout, his scintillating ensemble that’s as versed in modern jazz as it is with rhythms, melodies and soundscapes associated with R&B, pop, hip-hop and funk. Blackout displays a deeper group rapport as well as a more expansive sonic palette as Marc Cary complements the acoustic piano with Fender Rhodes and alto saxophonist Casey Benjamin lends his captivating vocoder work to the proceeding. The group also features Terreon Gully on drums and Ben Williams on bass. Harris’ brilliance at broadening textures and colors comes to play with his sensational woodwind and string arrangements on a few of the compositions as well.

“When you have the opportunity to work with people for several years and you’re all on the same page, what comes out is something that you could not predict,” Harris says of Blackout’s artistic growth since *Evolution*. “It’s what keeps us together as an ensemble. I think we really inspire one another.”

“Music is about authenticity, telling your story and sharing real-life stories that are from the ‘here and now,’ not just about the past,” he says of the Blackout’s group philosophy. He goes on to explain that the title: *Urbanus* is Latin for “urban,” however he wanted that word to convey the origins of the band members and jazz itself. “We all come from urban environments. And there’s a bit of an urban story told throughout all of the music. Also the origins of [jazz] have always been from urban centers for the most part. I think that has to do with the fact that you have a confluence of cultures which synthesize in urban environments.”

That said, Harris doesn’t completely do away with the jazz tradition. As evidenced by the inclusion of “Gone,” an ingenious variation on George Gershwin’s “Gone, Gone, Gone” from *Porgy & Bess*, and Jackie McLean’s hard bop classic, “Minor March” (arranged by Cary), Harris exhibits tremendous reverence and understanding of jazz history. “We have a very broad definition of jazz, but at the same time, we are careful not to exclude that which is perceived as tradition,” he says.

Case in point is the fantastic makeover of Stevie Wonder’s early-’70s song “They Won’t Go (When I Go)” from Wonder’s 1974 LP, *Fullfillingness’ First Finale*. “That’s one of my favorite Stevie Wonder songs,” Harris says of the tune. “In searching for music that would be the most conducive to what we do artistically, I simply looked for a great melody, something that was simple and pure. There’s a lot to choose from Stevie Wonder’s songbook. But that song really grabbed me. It really sparked something in my imagination, because I felt it could go in any direction.”

Also on the disc is the gentle ballad “Christina” composed by legendary bassist Buster Williams, who was one of Harris’ significant mentors and “Shake It For Me” and “11th Hour Blues” (Japanese-release only bonus track), penned by saxophonist Tim Warfield and guitarist David Gilmore, respectively. Those three aforementioned inclusions show Harris’ philosophy of also playing the music of his contemporaries. “I’ve often spoken about how in the past jazz musicians played each other’s music. This is an essential part of solidifying the message of the community and in turn creating the potential for hit songs.”

Rounding out the disc are superb compositions written by Harris — “Blues for Denial” and “Langston’s Lullaby” (co-written with Benjamin) — as well as by several of Blackout members: Marc Cary’s “Afterthought,” Terreon Gully’s “Tanktified,” and Benjamin’s “For You” (co-written by drummer Sameer Gupta). “One of the biggest indicators of our growth as a band is the level of contribution from all the members of the ensemble,” Harris enthuses. “The music not only incorporates all of our writing but everyone’s cultural backgrounds as well.”

To illustrate his point, Harris mentions the disc’s opening track, “Gone,” which bounces to the pulsating polyrhythm of go-go, a sound indicative to Washington, D.C.’s urban landscape. Both Williams and Cary hail from Washington, D.C. It doesn’t hurt also that Harris is a big go-go fan. “How can you not like go-go? It’s so funky,” Harris says. “But even if I didn’t, as a bandleader, it would still be there, because it’s a representation of the members of the ensemble. It’s not all about what I hear.”

Mentioning Williams, he’s the youngest and newest member of Blackout, having replaced original bassist Darryl Hall, who moved to Paris. Harris first encountered Williams when he was only in the 8th grade, playing the upright bass at the now-defunct East Coast Jazz Festival. “Even then, you could hear that this was a special human being with an unbelievable gift. I took a liking to him then. I just waited and followed him throughout the years. While he was in college, I spoke with him a few times,” Harris remembers. “When Ben moved to New York, it was just the right time. Sometimes it’s about working together over a period of time to develop chemistry and sometimes it’s simply about having the right combination of people. It was a perfect fit. He stepped right in without a single issue.”

“The band members treated me like family immediately,” Williams adds. “I’d already known Harris’ music from listening to his CDs. I also knew the band members, so it was pretty easy to get right to it.”

Another example of how *Urbanus* fully optimizes the individual personalities of its band members is Benjamin’s remarkable work on the vocoder, which produces otherworldly electro-textures similar to the much contentious sounds of Auto-tune, used by rappers such as Kanye West and T-Pain. What could have resulted in gimmicky pandering of the times becomes something far more sophisticated and enduring. “[The vocoder] is one of Casey’s special talents,” Harris says. “And it’s not one of those things that I asked for. It’s just in his bag of tricks. When he said that he was interested in trying it, I said, ‘Absolutely. Bring it in and let’s try it.’”

Another challenge of incorporating the vocoder on the disc is meshing it well with Cary’s piano and keyboard parts and the silhouette string arrangements on some of the compositions. “Casey has a good understanding of sonics and how to really use electronic instruments,” Cary says. “We never got in each other’s way when he was on the vocoder and I was on the Fender Rhodes or just acoustic piano.”

The delicate “For You” provides the perfect example of how Blackout balances the worlds of the acoustic with the electric co-written by Benjamin and Sameer Gupta. Before Harris recorded it,

“For You” was a favorite on Benjamin’s Myspace page and has since undergone several incarnations. Harris first heard the tune when the band was rehearsing in San Francisco. Cary had just recorded the song for another date and shared it with the band. “We checked it out then decided to play the tune,” Harris recalls. “That evening we went over it and actually played “For You” in the concert. It was a perfect vehicle for the chemistry in our band. Casey later added a bridge and we continued to expand on the composition. Before we went into the studio I wrote the woodwind arrangement and Casey added the string parts.”

The romantic lyrics and bewitching melody is mostly Benjamin’s work. “I listen to a lot of singers,” says Benjamin. “People like Michael Franks and a lot of ’70s rock influence my melodies just as R&B does.”

Benjamin also collaborated with Harris in writing the spellbinding ballad “Langston’s Lullaby,” which closes the disc. Dedicated to Harris’ newborn infant, Langston, who was named after the legendary Harlem Renaissance figure, Langston Hughes, the song was almost completely developed on the concert stage. “I had a set of chord changes that I was working on using the vibraphone and marimba,” Harris says. “One evening on stage, someone said ‘Can you play ‘Happy Birthday?’ I said, ‘Sure,’ then we started just improvising “Happy Birthday” over those chord changes and Casey started making up a melody on top. Over a period of time it became ‘Langston’s Lullaby.’ Later I added a bridge and wrote the woodwind arrangement.”

Recorded just a few days before the historic presidential inauguration of Barack Obama, *Urbanus* sparkles with optimism, ingenuity and emotional immediacy. “How could it not?” Harris says when asked if the anticipating for the inauguration had an impact on the sessions. “Being in the studio, knowing that we were getting ready for the inauguration of the first African-American president – how could that not change my life? I was extremely inspired and that created a great feeling of audacity and some fantastic energy.”