



ALLAN HARRIS

MENTORED BY ICONS,
PERSONALIZING BLACK HISTORY

By David R. Adler

Here's an enviable yet daunting circumstance: warming up the Charlie Parker Jazz Festival in Downtown Manhattan before the Jack DeJohnette/Dave Holland/Jason Moran trio takes the stage. In late August, singer and guitarist Allan Harris faced that challenge and won over the crowd with apparent ease. Being personally mentored by Tony Bennett can have that effect (more about Bennett in a moment). Touring and recording steadily for over 20 years, even more so.

Harris, who had turned 60 in April, played material from his 2015 album *Black Bar Jukebox* and its 2016 follow-up, *Nobody's Gonna Love You Better: Black Bar Jukebox Redux*. These releases, both produced by veteran jazz A&R man Brian Bacchus, have brought Harris' artistry into sharp focus, painting a deeply personal portrait through originals, standards and unexpected detours into classic pop, rock and soul. There's a strong "working band" identity as well—so strong that the rhythm section from *Black Bar Jukebox* became its own band, King Pony, featuring keyboardist/lead vocalist Pascal Le Boeuf, bassist Leon Boykins and drummer Jake Goldbas. (Harris sings as a guest on "One More," from King Pony's 2014 eponymous debut.)

Between these albums, his tributes to Billy Strayhorn (*Love Came*) and Nat King Cole (*Long Live the King, Dedicated to You*), the beautiful duo release *Convergence* with pianist Takana Miyamoto, the 1996 collaboration with the Metropole Orchestra and all the way back to his first jazz recordings, Harris has honed an accessible, musically rigorous style and proven himself not just a survivor but an artist of continual growth. "I think Allan's starting to really hit his stride," Bacchus remarks, "and I hope that I was complicit in some way in unlocking that. But I think it had a lot to do with his background from the very beginning."

In the "man cave" of the Harlem brownstone that Harris shares with his longtime wife and manager, Pat Harris, the Brooklyn and Harlem native looks back on how it all began. His mother, Yohanna Harris, was a talented classical pianist who disapproved of jazz. "No son of mine is going to be some colored person sittin' on the stump singin' the blues!" he recalls her saying. "It was that whole Harlem Renaissance thing. So I took piano lessons from her for three years, but she was insane—she was like a Mommie Dearest. Ask my relatives, they'll tell you, 'We had to save him.'"

Meanwhile, Yohanna's sister, Theodosia "Phoebe" Ingram, was a jazz and blues singer who encouraged her nephew's growing interest and secretly bought him his first guitar. Ingram was helped along in her own career by none other than Clarence Williams, a major figure in jazz history and a close friend of Louis Armstrong. When Williams fathered a child with Ingram it was a scandal, but it transformed Williams into Uncle Clarence and brought young Allan deeper into jazz, even close to Satchmo himself. "I was afraid of him!" Harris says. "But to me he was just Mr. Armstrong, with a voice like a frog."

Spending weekends at the Williams home in St. Albans, Queens, Harris encountered musical royalty without fully knowing it. "Oh my God—Ruth Brown, Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan, Martha Reeves—they all used to come over to the house," he recalls. "Couple that with my great aunt who had a soul-food restaurant down the street from the Apollo called Kate's Place. There's an album by Jimmy Smith called *Home Cookin'*, and [on the album cover] he's standing in front of the place. We used to go there on Sunday between the matinees and everyone would come in, from the Temptations to Marvin Gaye, Johnny Mathis, that whole bevy of African-American musicians."

The day came when Harris' mother found out about the secretly stashed guitar, but she acquiesced. "She saw how I was improving and how it brought me out of my shell," Harris says. "She saw what she was doing to me." So she found Harris a classical guitar teacher, the first of many important mentors. Along the way her son had also caught the singing bug. And when he passed by a poster of Jimi Hendrix in a Brooklyn barbershop window, the effect was immediate. Harris' life course was set.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

During his teens the family relocated to the Pittsburgh area, where Harris' father, a Navy man and a "cowboy," had a 600-acre horse farm. Harris attended college nearby and racked up gigging experience, ultimately moving to Atlanta, where he worked with an R&B cover band, and then finally Miami, where he sang six nights a week with a 12-piece show band. It was there, in 1994, at age 38, that Harris had the opportunity to sing "I Left My Heart in San Francisco"—of all songs—to an audience that included Tony Bennett, who immediately took him under his wing.

The next night, Bennett invited Harris to sing at an event honoring Sophia Loren. Among the audience members were David Niven, Suzanne Pleshette, Don Ameche, Tony Curtis and many more. Harris' disbelief seems to linger to this day: "[Bennett] said to me, 'What are you doing here in Florida? Here's my card. Come up to New York. I'll introduce you to some people.' He put me up for two weeks and it was—I can't describe it—he just took me to school. I realized what I was lacking. Thank God he had patience and he opened some doors for me and gave me my homework. He took me from what would've been a Vegas-type performer into a serious interpreter of the American Songbook, and I started to write my original material based upon that. And because of that I was able to attract serious musicians, not just people who wanted to make money and look good onstage." In 1995, at Bennett's urging, Harris moved back to New York.

Pulling together the varied strands of his career, Harris has embarked on a project called *Cross That River*, a theatrical concert work steeped in Americana and blues, inspired by the forgotten history of African-American cowboys (his father's ancestral heritage). He has documented the piece's evolution on two albums, *Cross That River* and *Cry of the Thunderbird*, and is now preparing a five-week Off-Broadway engagement—as many as eight shows a week—at the 59E59 Theaters beginning in late November 2017. "It's a story of pre-industrial America, told through the eyes of an ex-slave," Harris says. "I put a little more *oomph* into it, based upon this thing that *Hamilton* has done. *Hamilton* has invited the common street poet to the theatrical table. So on that note, I went back and added a little more grit. I put a little more blackness in it, you might say."

"Allan's got a million stories if we ask him," says Pascal Le Boeuf, whose smart arrangements and rich blend of piano, Rhodes and Hammond B-3 have given Harris' recent output much of its character. "But he's not somebody who's been around and *has* to tell you," Le Boeuf adds. "He interacts with everyone as though they're a colleague and a friend." It stands to reason that the two met at the post office. Harris saw Le Boeuf ahead of him on line, stuffing a score into an envelope, and figured him for a pianist. He asked him over that day to audition for a tour of Italy and hired him on the spot. "Allan always flirts with reality in some way," Le Boeuf says. "He's always talking to strangers. It's part of the way he interacts with the world. He dives into it." **JT**

Recommended Listening:

Nobody's Gonna Love You Better:
Black Bar Jukebox Redux (Love, 2016)

Black Bar Jukebox (Love, 2015)

Cross That River (Love, 2006)

Love Came: The Songs of Strayhorn (Love, 2001)

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