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ALLAN HARRIS

'You Do It All'

Allan Harris gets bored easily. "I've done a love song," said the singer. "Now I want to move on to something else."

An ability to convincingly inhabit a hodgepodge of styles and genres—soul stirring in dialects ranging from Ray Charles to Luther Vandross, swinging standards with idiomatic Frank Sinatra-Tony Bennett flair, crooning ballads that evoke Nat "King" Cole at his most heartfelt, rocking out on the blues and signifying with raw electric guitar, fulfilling the singer-songwriter function with well-crafted lyrics—has been Harris' trademark during four professional decades.

Harris, 58, acknowledges that eclecticism has been both a blessing and a curse. "I'd like to do, and have done, one thing," he said from his Harlem home, citing a discography that includes un-Xeroxed tributes to Bennett, Cole, Billy Eckstine and Billy Strayhorn on his imprint, Love Productions. "But as a male vocalist of color, what do you do to get noticed? You do it all. I'm paying my bills. I'm traveling the world."

On the other hand, Harris added, "Promoters tell me they've seen me do so many things that they need to know what I'm going to bring to the table when they book me." For this reason, Harris decided to make an album—*Black Bar Jukebox* (Love Productions), supervised by Grammy-winning producer Brian Bacchus—documenting his heterogeneous approach to live performance.

The 13-tune program includes four self-penned songs, each distinct in style and connotation. There are personalized renditions of tunes by Elton John ("Take Me To The Pilot"), John Mayer ("Daughters") and Kenny Rankin ("Catfish," "Haven't We Met"), less-traveled Great American Songbook numbers ("You Make Me Feel So Young," "A Lot Of Livin' To Do") and Eddie Jefferson's vocalese classic "I Got The Blues," inspired by Lester Young's "Lester Leaps In" solo.

The album's title references the mixed-bag soundtrack of Harris' formative years. His mother, a trained concert pianist, listened to classical music (and Eckstine records) around their Bedford-Stuyvesant house. His opera- and blues-singing

aunt, who lived upstairs, was his voice teacher. His great aunt ran a restaurant across the street from the Apollo Theater, where performers—Harris mentions spotting Duke Ellington, Jimmy Smith and Count Basie—favored her smothered chicken and bread pudding. At 13, he heard Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze" at the neighborhood barbershop, and experienced what he described as "a turning point in my consciousness."

"Hendrix was a warrior," Harris said. "He had an axe, he was working it in front of white and black audiences, and he wasn't jumping up and down in tight mohair pants with his hair slicked back, singing 'Ooh, baby-baby, let me love you,' but some poetic shit that he wrote. I decided I'd be more than a romantic balladeer. I'd say something with some grit."

Two decades later, Harris crystallized this aspiration with an epic song cycle portraying and personalizing the history of autonomous African-American archetypes—black cowboys, Buffalo soldiers, black Seminoles—during slavery and the early Reconstruction years, primarily through the voice of a black cowboy protagonist named Blue. He's documented perhaps half the corpus on *Cross That River* and *Cry Of The Thunderbird*.

"Blue encompasses my whole life on stage," Harris said. Joined by his young working trio (Pascal Le Boeuf, piano; Leon Boykins, bass; Jake Goldbas, drums) two days earlier at Smoke, he'd rendered "Blue Is Angry." Goldbas' whip-like punctuations on cajon evoked an ambiance closer to "Mississippi Goddam" than the jazz-country-bluegrass marriage of the aforementioned albums.

"I'm tapping into the soulful end of the West," Harris said. "I identify with where Blue comes from, the things he surrounded himself with, how he interacts with people from a place of respect, not fear. He's astute and smart. He has a craft. He knows how to rope, how to break a horse. I direct the band where to go. I have a skill in moving my audience. From the time I get on stage until I leave, there's a choreographed plan to take you on this journey, and that's what I do." —Ted Panken