

Eighty-Eight Keys to Barry Harris

By Justin Desmangles

The sudden get-down-boogie-stop-shuffle-bounce-back-beat-bump breaking hearts echoing back to the wrong side of the tracks is Barry Harris's right hand. His left is doing something different, its chanting the changes to Charlie Parker's Be-Bop hallelujah, "Ah-Leu-Cha"! Both hands are talking about it and telling it like it is, as only true Jazz piano masters can, with the Blues all up in it. That right hand is weaving patterns through the many-colored threads adorning the tune's harmony. The left hand though, it ain't letting go of that church shout. There's still a moaner's bench in Harris's *modus operandi*. Both hands are exalting Bird's emanation of divinity. It is a song of praise, the highest vibration, and therefore challenging to play, demanding virtuosity. Harris could make the complexities of this music come together with wit. A graceful navigation of the stars, finding new constellations of meaning in Parker's ecstatic logic.

Harris came up in Detroit alongside a generation under the genius of Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell actively composing, performing, touring, and recording. Fellow Detroit pianists Tommy Flanagan and Hank Jones (brother of Elvin and Thad), alongside Harris became among the foremost interpreters of Powell and Monk's music. All three continued to perform its repertoire to the end of their lives. Harris outlived them all, dying recently at the age of 91.

As a late-night jazz disc jockey, you learn to come to work armed and equipped with the essential. I held this job for seven years at San Francisco's fabled radio station KPOO. This was where Ntozake Shange hosted a program called *The Original Aboriginal Dancing Girl* at the time she was writing *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. Harris's Riverside album *Newer Than New* became not

only essential, but a record that could get you out of trouble. In a live situation like this one (I never did a prerecorded broadcast, ever), the sequencing of record albums is an art form in itself. It is easy to get lost out there if you don't keep a silent sun at the center of things. With this music, you are narrating the history of the New World, not just the United States. That multicultural encounter attributed at the very origin story of New Orleans remains in the story of all Jazz music. Jazz piano is complicated, and the piano is among the few instruments through which the entire genealogy of the music can be traced. If Jazz had a Genesis chapter it could very well read "In the beginning was the piano, and it was good."

Harris's *Newer Than New* got me out of a lot of jams because of its vivid emotional directness and immediate harmonic depth, a quality Toni Morrison hints at in an interview shortly after winning the Noble Prize. "[Jazz] has the characteristic of being sensual and illegal. And its sensuality and its illegality may prevent people from seeing how sophisticated it is. Now, that to me says something about the culture in which I live and about my work." Something illegal, a fugitive in elegant finery, buying freedom with gold buried beneath the sea. The sophistication is evident and there is so much joy in its simple call to our intuitions. Listening to it is an art as well. But that is just the thing, you see, to get out of any traps you might lay as a disc jockey, by accident or oversight. What is the next song if the first one either went too far, or more mysteriously, set a more vivaciously demanding mood? Mixing at the turntables at 3 in the morning, been came on at midnight, now is the time! Where can you go into the ebb and flow? No matter where you are at *Newer Than New* brings you back home, intimately with assurance.

After all, as all listening is an intimacy between worlds inner and outer, Harris has the glue to the fourth dimension on this album. He is holding the Be-Bop universe in place.

Joining Harris is the frontline of the Charles Mingus organization of the day, “those Be-Bop kids from Detroit” Mingus called them. Charles McPherson and Lonnie Hillyer, alto saxophone and trumpet respectively, burn this mother down! The sudden shifts of nuance and timbre, even in the most subtle degree, are given fullness and contour. They get down on things like “Anthropology” but also their own Bop bag with “Make Haste” with its index of quotes, accelerating tempos, and strategic imagination. Hillyer really takes hearts away with the beautiful “I Didn’t Know What Time It Was” in balladeer stylings. Not a dry eye in the house, I’m telling you. The breadth of his tone is wide, dark, glowing. You can tell Hillyer knows the poetry to this classic by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart.

What Harris is probably best known for is his contributions to Lee Morgan’s break-out album *The Sidewinder*. I was always most impressed by Harris on “Totem Pole” where he almost steals the show. It begins with a piano introduction, giving him something of a head-start. Once we get to his solo, he has already been bright, glistening in the undercurrent of the tune. Harris comes out so elegantly, such buoyant images swing out, he sounds as if he is dancing. But this dancer has multiple partners, and is so deft in his rhythm and grace, he can keep them all satisfied. They are all at the club that night laughing and talking to each other. These folks got some moves, boy! There’s a story here being told here, actually several stories, Harris is in full narrative mode. Great musicians can take on several voices and have a conversation of styles within a single performance. Consider the cast in a play, the musician as playwright, because Harris has real drama.

Powell could do this practically better than anyone else. Monk was the greatest dramaturg of them all.

If you can understand the way Eugene O’Neil families might end up at Tennessee William’s one day, then you know that a lot the very best pianists came long before either Monk, or Powell. Men like Art Tatum, Fats Waller, James P. Johnson, Earl Hines, Willie “The Lion” Smith, Meade Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons, and going back much further the man himself, Ferdinand La Menthe, popularly known as “Jelly Roll” Morton. Well, I will tell you, just as there is a bit of Aeschylus in Ishmael Reed, all those pianists above can be heard in Barry Harris, and that is saying something, brother! But you know what, that is the way it is with all the true masters of Jazz. They carry the entire history of the music and their instrument within them at all hours of the day. Whether they are touching a piano or not, the eighty-eight keys are within them.

One of Harris’s greatest recordings is the *Live in Tokyo* album released on Xanadu. The concert culminates with one of the most incandescent treatments of Powell’s “Un Poco Loco” ever. Time travel happens in the arc of this rainbow. Afro-Latin rhythms layer in as if they were a drum choir. People who know the original Bud Powell Trio recording with Curly Russell and Max Roach, May Day, 1951, know it as an unforgettable musical experience. The African retentions so evident in music from throughout the Americas is explosive in Harris’s trio performance here. A beat within the beat becomes the heart in another space and time in syncopation. The ancestors have come to dialog on this session, have their say loud and clear to all who agree to boogie your body. Just how Harris greets this space between worlds is as a glorious one. He gives over to it and lets the spirits do their work.

That was a real show-stopper, or an immediate tonic to pick me up on the late-night shift at KPOO. The Nightfly, the radio show was called,

and I loved spinning that record. From a professional broadcasting point of view, I have over thirty years on-the-air as a jazz disc jockey, Barry Harris is one of the keys to the kingdom.

The study of Jazz requires much reading into the literature of Black writers who were contemporaries of the musicians. Just as a novelist can reveal and disclose the lives of people in ways that a journalist cannot, so Jazz musicians can stick closer to the facts of Black life in America. Writers who helped me understand this and more about the music of Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, and Thelonious Monk, include Chester Himes, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes. Of particular interest is Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, a suite of poems comprising an entire book, one that is a direct response to Be-Bop in Harlem, New York at the time.

Jazz contains all the orality and folklore from which all great Black literature has come from. Barry Harris had it in spades.

Recordings by Barry Harris discussed in this article

"Ah-Leu-Cha" (Charlie Parker) *Magnificent!*, Prestige, 1970

"Anthropology" (Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker) *Newer Than New*, Riverside, 1961

"Make Haste" (Barry Harris) *Newer Than New*, Riverside, 1961

"I Didn't Know What Time It Was" (Rodgers - Hart) *Newer Than New*, Riverside, 1961

"Totem Pole" (Lee Morgan) *The Sidewinder*, Blue Note, 1964

"Un Poco Loco" (Bud Powell) *Live in Tokyo*, Xanadu, 1976