



Biography

## Harris, Kevin 1975—

*Contemporary Black Biography*

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### Kevin Harris 1975—

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#### Jazz pianist, educator

“With a [jazz] trio, it's like a conversation—it's me, you, and another guy,” Kevin Harris told Jonathan Perry in the *Boston Globe*. “And say one guy is in a really talkative mood, so you and I just kinda hang back and listen—if he has some important things to say.” Since his childhood, Harris has been part of many good “conversations.” He started out playing the trumpet, but then switched to the piano when he was in middle school. Harris's mother, Margaret, told Merlene Davis in the *Lexington Herald-Leader* that she never had to make him practice. “He would play for hours,” she shared. “We would tell him he could not play past 11 o'clock on school nights and he couldn't get up and play before 5 a.m. A lot of the time, right at 5 a.m., he would start.”

### Discovered the Piano

Harris's love for music began during his childhood, when he would listen to his mother sing from the kitchen and with other congregants at the Greater Liberty Baptist Church in Lexington, Kentucky. Of the music at his church, he told music writer Jason Howard, “It's hard to describe. So many feelings. We got the experience every Sunday. It taught me what music is.” When he was eight, Harris started playing the trumpet, with Louis Armstrong as a clear influence. In middle school, after hearing Charles Little, his band director, play “Georgia on My Mind” on the piano, Harris's instrument loyalty swayed. “He inspired me to become a musician,” Harris told *Contemporary Black Biography (CBB)*. “His love for teaching, music, and life inspired me.” Harris signed up for piano lessons and within weeks he had learned “Georgia on My Mind” by ear. “From then on,” he told Howard, “it was piano, piano, just wanting to play by ear.”

Harris was just 12 years old when his father, John, died from a stroke. A respiratory therapist, John was 40 years old, healthy, and fit when he died, and his death was a shock to the family. Even after his passing, he continued to be a major influence in Harris's life. "His middle name is also my name, Lemuel," Harris shared with *CBB*. "The king in the Bible in Proverbs, a wise king. I like to always think of my father like that, because he always had a lot of wise things to say." He continued, "Although he's gone, I hear stories, every story is so valuable, from aunts, uncles.... Even though a person is not with us, their ripples are still with us, so you continue to get to know them well." In his grief, Harris turned more vigorously to the piano, as well as to martial arts, which he and his brother participated in from young childhood through college.

During those early years Harris played classical and gospel music; it was not until he was a student at Morehead State University that he started playing jazz. From the moment he heard a Thelonious Monk album he was hooked, and years later he attributed his uncluttered musical approach to the jazz piano great. "I always appreciate artists who can use space," he shared with Jon Garelick in the Boston *Phoenix*. Harris rapidly expanded his jazz repertoire and was also influenced by Duke Ellington, Sonny Rollins, and Charlie Parker. At Morehead, he was mentored by Professor

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## At a Glance ...

Born Kevin Lemuel Harris on June 1, 1975, in Lexington, KY; son of John Lemuel Harris (a respiratory therapist) and Margaret Lee Jones Harris (writer and English teacher); married Luisa Cinquetti Harris, October 28, 2000. *Religion:* Baptist. *Education:* More-head State University, BME, music education, 1998; New England Conservatory, MM, jazz piano performance, 2000.

**Career:** Teacher and founder of five separate band programs in Boston with "Arts in Progress," 2000–02; Cambridge Friends School, trumpet, piano, and jazz band teacher, 2003–13; Kevin Harris Project, founder and pianist, 2005—; Charles River School, instructor, 2008–09; Berklee College of Music, assistant professor, 2010—.

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Jay Flippin, who taught him to connect the dots between classical and jazz. "He would call Bach the first jazz musician, drawing the bigger picture of music in general," Harris told Howard.

## Attended New England Conservatory

After graduating from Morehead, Harris applied to the New England Conservatory, and following an intense audition, he was accepted. Besides attending classes and taking private lessons, he expanded his education in Boston jazz clubs, where he heard entirely new sounds, including fusions of Cuban, Peruvian, and Venezuelan. The experience inspired him to work harder. "I think that's what woke me up," he told Howard. "Those musicians knew all the tunes, no matter what you called.... If you don't know your stuff when you get up there, thinking you are going to play—'It's nothing personal, but go home and practice. Sorry man,' they'll tell you." Harris incorporated the new sounds into his playing. Cuban music, in particular, settled into his soul. "I was hearing these musicians play Monk with guaguancó, rumba, son. But there was always a jazz tune that I knew on top of it," he told Garelick. "I fell in love with all those rhythms, and Cuban culture in general, through those guys."

After graduating from the conservatory in 2000, Harris got married and became a regular in Boston, and later New York, jazz clubs. He divided his time between performing, composing, and teaching and worked in various educational settings around Boston, including in low-income, affluent, and Quaker schools. He formed the Kevin Harris Project in 2005. "I named it 'Project' so it could be a trio, quartet, any kind of 'project,'" he told *CBB*. The group released its first album, *The Butterfly Chronicles*, in 2007. Combining Harris's piano with Kendall Eddy's bass and Steve Langone's drumming, it was a collection that "possesses a spare style and a gentle touch," said Forrest Dylan Bryant in *Jazz Times*. "Harris tiptoes and pirouettes across a relaxed set of ballads and lightly soulful grooves." The next album, *Freedom Doxology*, was released in 2008 with Harris on piano, Langone on drums, and Eddy on acoustic bass.

In 2010 the group released *Chapters*, on which Rick DiMuzio's tenor sax added to the mix of piano, bass, and drums.

The result was a lavish sound of traditional jazz. The album began with “Nellie Jones,” a bass-accompanied phone message from Harris's grandmother, sharing her love and esteem. Also included were Latin-influenced beats, such as “Rumba for Mary Ann,” and fun undulations, such as “Childhood.” The album closed with the beautiful and dreamy “Journey's End,” with interactions that included gentle brushes, subtle side steps, and full-on (but never loud) meshing. For *Chapters*, the Kevin Harris Group hosted a CD release show at the Boston jazz club Scullers. Of the show, *Berklee Groove's* Andrew Slotnick proclaimed, “The Kevin Harris Project carried a full room on a bumpy ride through exciting, emotional, and technically challenging music.... Throughout the night Mr. Harris looked at home on the piano and exhibited the joy of a musician in his element.”

For the group's fourth album, *Museum, Vol. 1* (2013), Harris fully embraced the Latin influence that had shaped him as a student. He alternated between a traditional and Rhodes electric piano, and added a trumpet (played by Jason Palmer) and a second drummer (Richie Barshay), along with bass and tenor sax. “There's no suggestion in pianist Kevin Harris' liners that *Museum Vol. 1* is in any way an exercise in minimalism,” said Michael West in *Jazz Times*. Although West suggested that parts of the album were repetitious, he pointed out, “And yet ‘Bluegrass’ has the same (if not greater) tendency toward repetition, and it's heavenly.” Harris attributed the title—reminiscent of viewing music as if in a museum—to his wife, a photographer who created the album cover.

## Maintained a Busy Music Schedule

In 2010 Harris became an assistant professor at Boston's Berklee College of Music. He also continued to perform in Boston and New York City and to work on new recording projects. As of early 2014, he was working on “Bird Etudes,” piano interpretations of Charlie Parker's music. For future projects he hoped to collaborate with other musicians,

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including the bassist Ben Street, the Cuban drummer Francisco Mela, the trumpeter Avishai Cohen, and the drummer Terri Lyne Carrington. This variety reflected Harris's commitment to letting the music steer him. “The deciding factor [in instrumentation] is what the song and music is communicating overall,” he told *CBB*. “Mixing it up keeps things fresh, so we can convey with energy and be alive, to challenge the listener.”

In 2013 Harris joined a fund-raising effort in Lexington to help the First African Foundation purchase a local Baptist church. If successful, the group planned to transform the church into a cultural center. In August of 2014 Harris was scheduled to perform in his third fund-raising concert for the organization, with drummer Will Smith, at the historic Lyric Theatre in Lexington. The planned performance added to Harris's already busy music schedule, but he did not mind. “Music is a reminder of what it's like to alive, to be human,” he told *CBB*, “and I don't mind losing sleep over that.”

## Selected discography

### With Kevin Harris Project

*The Butterfly Chronicles*, 2007.

*Freedom Doxology*, 2008.

*Chapters*, 2010.

*Museum, Vol. 1*, 2013.

### Collaborations

(With Steve Langone Group) *Steve Langone Group*, 2009.

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## Other

Additional information for this profile was obtained through an interview with Kevin Harris on May 14, 2014.

—Candice Mancini

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