

Kevin Harris's Museum of sound

By JON GARELICK | February 13, 2013

Kevin Harris learned piano by playing gospel music in church. If the music he's playing these days isn't gospel, or blues, per se, you sense that they're never far below the surface. It's there in the vocal shapeliness of his melodic lines — whether written or improvised — and in the warmth and soulfulness of his delivery.

The pieces on the Kevin Harris Project's new Museum Vol. 1, his fourth album as a leader since 2007, are organized as a series of "exhibits," a kind of gallery of the mind. There are very specific suggestions in the liner notes. "The Nile" is "water flowing vertically from floor to ceiling on all four walls." For "Pinched Nerve," he asks us to picture a "spacious dark room with the word HOPE faintly illuminating from the center of the room." For "BBBB (Brown Bean Barnyard Boogie)," there's "a boombox in the middle of the room with a mixing spoon on top."

But programmatic directives aren't necessarily what music is about. So what you're likely to take away from Museum Vol. 1 is its combination of freedom and poised arrangements, its episodic flow. This isn't a matter of Harris's quintet soloing over a simple verse-chorus structure, but a mix of moods and gambits. So "The Nile" flows, one thing after another, from stately fanfare to African 6/8 groove, through little pools and eddies of solos. "Pinched Nerve" mimics the "flare-ups" of a condition Harris was nearly incapacitated by in its occasional musical outbursts. But what grabs you is the loping, funky bassline, informed by Harris's Fender Rhodes. For Harris, "BBBB" recalls the sounds and sensations of his old Kentucky home (Lexington, to be specific), but what jumps out here is the asymmetrical interaction between Harris's piano and Kendall Eddy's bass, as well as Rick DiMuzio's spiraling tenor sax line. "The Dinosaur Suite" and Wayne Shorter's "Prince of Darkness" capture the tight/loose elasticity, the tension between form and freedom that was the hallmark of so many Miles Davis sessions with Shorter and Herbie Hancock.

The album is like that — calm and collected, but also loose and full of surprises. Harris, 37, has been based here since entering the New England Conservatory masters program in 1998, and he now teaches at Berklee. He's gathered a strong team of Boston regulars: longtime collaborators DiMuzio, Eddy, and drummer Steve Langone; trumpeter Jason Palmer, who sounds more focused and eloquent with every recording; and brilliant young drummer Richie Barshay. (DiMuzio, Eddy, Langone, and special guest Greg Osby join Harris for the CD-release party at the Regattabar on February 16.)

Harris attributes his relaxed, uncluttered lines to listening to Monk. "I always appreciate artists who can use space," he tells me, over soup and a sandwich at the Fenway Panera. "Sometimes you listen to a skilled musician, and you're saying, 'That's a lot of skill in one space.' Sometimes you wish that same ability would be spread out! They're trying to fit it all in! That's what I tell my students at Berklee: take your time, tell me a story, paint a picture."

Originally a trumpet player, Harris started studying piano in junior-high school with teacher Charles Little. Little (one of the dedicatees of "BBBB") was a towering figure in the Lexington music-education program, and he inspired Harris to become a teacher as well. But at Morehead State, Harris was introduced to jazz by a teacher who gave him a Charlie Parker piece to study. It was brutally hard. Harris was starting jazz late, but he was hooked. A cousin studying at the Boston Conservatory said to him, "If you love playing jazz piano, you have to come up to Boston."

As many musicians who come here have found, there was plenty to learn outside the classroom. For a while, Harris was the house pianist at Thursday Afro-Cuban nights at Wally's. "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." The great Cuban musician Francisco Mela happened to be the drummer. "I fell in love with all those rhythms, and Cuban culture in general, through those guys. You fall in love with a type of music because people you know are playing it."

There's a bit of the Afro-Latin influence on *Museum Vol. 1*. Harris's instrumental arrangement of "You Are My Sunshine" recalls for a moment George Russell's version of the song, but Harris had never heard it. Instead, he says, he was looking for something that could accommodate the Brazilian baião rhythm. "I'm a concept person," says Harris. "If I need to practice something, then I put it in a song. Then I have to practice it." It also happened to be a song that he and his wife, Luisa, love, and it's dedicated to her.

On *Museum Vol. 1*, Harris also sings for the first time — an agitated arrangement of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song," but delivered with a kind of casual intimacy. "I'm not a jazz singer, and I probably never will be. But the message of the song gives you some courage to sing."

Still, what unifies the album is that serene flow. Maybe it all comes down to those Kentucky roots. "If the music is swinging, there's something about it that reminds me of home."