

## Jazz CD Preview and Survey: Years of Utter Beauty, Part 1

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By Steve Elman

*Each happy marriage is happy in its own way, at least when the partners are jazz and poetic text.*

I'm tempted to generalize, but I won't. Maybe it's just coincidence that 2018 saw the release of four ambitious and powerful jazz releases driven by poetic texts, with two others in the same spirit in 2017, and three more in the two years before that.

A trend? Hardly. But when the artists taking on this challenge range from English poet — singer Norma Winstone to bassist William Parker, from drummer Matt Wilson to poet laureate Robert Pinsky, from German pianist Florian Ross to saxophonists Jane Ira Bloom and David Murray — and when four notable projects plowing similar ground are being performed live in our area in the coming months — attention must be paid, in both senses of that phrase.

But who, exactly, is paying attention?

I don't know if any of these diverse and provocative efforts are finding an audience. I only know that each of them deserves some sympathetic ears, so I'm going to do my best to lead you to the recordings in question, beginning with those that are primarily driven by musical considerations.

In a second post, I'll have a look at another set, where poetry is in the driver's seat.



Composer Kevin Harris. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Before we get to music on disc, let me point you to a live performance, which (let's face it) will provide you with a superior experience to something on CD. If your interest is piqued by the survey below and in the next post, I can recommend that you visit the Berklee Performance Center for **Kevin Harris's "Contemporary Octet Expedition through the Expressions of James Baldwin"** on February 5 at 8 p.m.

Pianist Harris has been writing music for more than a decade, making CDs since 2007 and working extensively with his "Kevin Harris Project" ensembles all around the globe (Panama, Peru, China, Italy, and Poland in 2018 alone) and occasionally in local venues. It's always unfair to pigeonhole an artist, but it's safe to say that if you like modernist / modal post-hard-bop like that offered on Blue Note CDs of the early 1970s, you ought to come to grips with what Harris is doing. Even if you don't know his earlier stuff, this "Expedition" concert is going to be worthy of your attention, because it represents a bold step forward in the pianist's composing career, and it promises to be a wide-ranging sonic experience.

The music for his Baldwin project is through-composed, with a bit more formality than Harris has adopted previously, although there will be plenty of variety — tech effects, including tape loops and samples influenced by black gospel; unusual meters inspired by Afro-Cuban music; passages of free improvisation; and even some foot percussion. In fact, the composed aspects are so important to Harris that he is giving the piano role to another player. Harris will concentrate on coordinating the performance and directing the production. The "contemporary octet" for this evening consists of eight wind instruments (two trumpets, two trombones, French horn, flute, alto sax and tenor sax) plus a rhythm section of piano, bass, and drums. Notable players on the gig include trumpeter Jason Palmer, alto player Jonathan Suazo, and pianist Nikolai Mishchenko, who are all well along in building their individual reps.

The words inspiring the music come from James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. To read and sing the texts, Harris is incorporating a kaleidoscope of recorded voices, sometimes altered and filtered using EDI. To sing "It's Gonna Rain," the spiritual about Noah and the ark that Baldwin quotes in the book, he will employ a recording of Kentucky vocalist — preacher Rev. Charlotte Cox.

When I spoke to Harris about the performance, he said that he considers Baldwin's textual voice to be "another instrument" in the group, and he ranks Calvin Limuel, who will be responsible for the EDI transformations, as another equal partner with the musicians. As he put it, "I wanted to give [*The Fire Next Time*] to someone else to interpret" using the tools of modern technology.

It promises to be well worth hearing. This **YouTube video**, from another BPC performance, will give you a taste of Harris's composing and the quality of his group. It includes some beautiful trumpet work by Harris's frequent stablemate Jason Palmer and strong tenor from Hery Paz, along with Eric Jackson's narration of William Ernest Henley's poem, "Invictus." For something completely different, **here** are his piano-bass-drums takes on Thelonious Monk's "Evidence" and the standard "I'll Remember April," recorded in Beijing. For more sampling, four of his CDs are hearable via Spotify; search for "Kevin Harris Project" to avoid confusion with other artists of the same name.