



Donald Harrison
Free to Be

GRP Recording Company

PH: 212 424 1000
FAX: 212 424 1007

More than any other cultural archetype, the jazz musician embodies the American ideals of freedom and democracy. He is by nature a liberationist, heir to a legacy of revolutionary change. His solo gives voice to our individual and collective desire to soar unencumbered by the constraints of convention—to be free to be. In the tradition of previous manifestos issued by some of the most innovative musicians in jazz, *Free to Be*, Donald Harrison's second CD for Impulse!, boldly announces its author's intentions.

At 38, Donald Harrison is a mature musician, independent of mind yet acutely aware of his interdependence and comfortable negotiating the dynamic tension between freedom and the constraints of convention. More than ever before, his playing demonstrates a fundamental grasp of the truth that, together with our strivings for greater independence and freedom, we have a concomitant need to harmonize—to "inter-be" in community—on the bandstand no less than in life.

For Harrison, improvisation—the art of "inter-being"—is a metaphor for moving through life creatively, harmoniously, in communion with others. It's Michael Jordan dancing down the lane for two, moving the game forward with style and grace. It's the skilled skater, rollerblading through rush-hour traffic, weaving, spinning, skirting the potholes with unruffled poise, creating moments of rapture even in the midst of road rage. It's not where he's going but how he's getting there that exhilarates, inspires and, for that brief moment, liberates us.

And Donald Harrison's improvisations are nothing if not liberating and exhilarating. From the dancing, celebratory tone of his solo on the title track to the hard-swinging, high-stepping victory march through the Meters' "Cissy Strut," he seems determined to lift us up emotionally, even bodily, in spite of the gravity of matters and in defiance of gravity itself. As on *Nouveau Swing*, his debut release for Impulse!, his primary ax continues to be alto saxophone, but he is also heard on soprano this time out on the breezy, frolicking "Smooth Sailing."

Free to Be is a further exploration and development of the concept Donald introduced on *Nouveau Swing*. "With that recording I wanted to make a straight-ahead, swinging record with the rhythms of the '90s working underneath and in between," he says. And he recalls how, two months after having recorded the music for that album, he wanted to go back into the recording studio. "I was hearing this music and I wanted to play."

Having worked with wide-ranging styles, including reggae, funk, bop, hip hop, and traditional New Orleans music, Harrison has assimilated these and other far-flung influences, integrating them into his music in subtle and meaningful ways. As influences, they are implied in idiomatic nuances and inflections rather than proclaimed in clumsy appropriations, force-fitted to some contrived musical contraption.

"The possibilities for acoustic jazz are limitless," Harrison says. "I try to do what's most natural for me. Coming from New Orleans and living in Brooklyn, I take the things I hear all the time in the culture I'm immersed in. I'm not trying to force anything."

Nowhere is the fit more natural—in fact surprisingly so—or executed to such beautiful effect as on the Hammerstein-Romberg standard "Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise." Here the piano comps in a reggae rhythm keeping the beat on two and four, as reggae guitarists are typically heard to do.

Similarly that "Indian beat" driving "Indian Blues" is felt more than heard until it is pointed out to us, while the "open fourth" intervals played by Donald and tenor saxophonist Teodross Avery on the melody conjure the chants of Choctaw and Natchez Indians. Harrison, whose father was a Mardi Gras Indian, notes that the rhythms are Mardi Gras Indian, meaning African, originating as they do in Congo Square where slaves once danced the bamboula. "'Indian,' as used by African Americans at Mardi Gras," he says, "is a metaphor for native African culture."

"Duck's Steps," which takes its title from Harrison's nickname, was composed when he was 19 or 20. It's an exploration of bitonal music, which, he admits, "always sounded abrasive to my ear. I was trying to write a jazz piece that was bitonal but that was pleasant to the ear."

Duck's alter ego, christened "Mr. Cool Breeze" by Lena Horne, makes his debut on this CD, and for that alternative appellation, Donald says, "I'm very thankful to her." The tune "Mr. Cool Breeze" makes the broader statement that "popular" need not be an antonym for "serious" or "good." Fact is, popular music traditionally has served as a foundation on which Louis Armstrong and many other great players created some of the most celebrated improvisations and raised the towering edifice of jazz.

"You can take that music and give it a modern sound with an acoustic band and still be playing some hip music,"

Harrison says. "It doesn't have to be saccharine." To further make his point he cites "Inch Worm," "My Favorite Things," and "Chim Chim Cheree" as recorded by John Coltrane; and "The Hucklebuck," which in Bird's hands became the bebop anthem "Now's the Time." And, lest we forget, swing was a popular music, a dance music.

On "Nouveau Swing (Reprise)" Mr. Cool Breeze returns to vocalize in the tradition of Dizzy Gillespie, Clark Terry and James Moody, but with the added influence of the hip hop of his generation. The track is actually a reprise of "Mr. Cool Breeze," but the half rapped, half sung lyrics explaining the concept of nouveau swing have, until this recording, been performed over "Nouveau Swing" as the tune was recorded on Donald's first CD.

For Donald Harrison, the freedom to be derives from a solid grasp of a wide variety of musical styles and a high level of musicianship, allowing him to incorporate, say, pop and hip hop into "Mr. Cool Breeze" or a cha-cha into "Smooth Sailing." That fluency and high caliber of musicianship are defining characteristics of the other players in the band as well.

In addition to such veterans as pianist Mulgrew Miller, bassist Christian McBride, drummer Carl Allen and pianist Eddie Palmieri, a number of younger musicians who regularly tour with Donald make their appearance here: drummer John Lamkin, pianist Andrew Adair, trumpet player Brian Lynch, bassist Vicente Archer, and Teodross Avery, one of Donald's favorite tenor players. Harrison also brought in guitarist Rodney Jones, Lena Horne's musical director who was responsible for bringing Donald into her band. He was also musical director for *Showtime at the Apollo*. Sounding for all the world like Wes Montgomery, he conjures up a Wes wind on "Cool Breeze."

Growing up in New Orleans, Donald Harrison studied with Ellis Marsalis and Kid Jordan at N.O.C.C.A., the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts, where he gained fluency on his horn with various jazz styles while learning about the history of the music, its innovators and leading stylists. "We studied Charlie Parker and John Coltrane, of course," Donald recalls, "bebop and post bop. That was Ellis's thing. Kid Jordan showed me the avant garde stuff, but always stressed that you should do what's natural for you."

At home, Donald was exposed to a wide variety of musical genres. "My mother and father were great that way. It made me keep an open mind. I've always said that one minute we'd be listening to Bach and the next minute it would be Etta James. I played with the brass bands, R&B groups—everything really. When I hear that stuff come through in my playing now I really wonder. You never know how what you've done will affect your sound."

Harrison left New Orleans with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers—graduate school for such renowned players as Johnny Griffin, Lee Morgan, Wayne Shorter, Donald Byrd, Wynton and Branford Marsalis, Mulgrew Miller and others. He toured and recorded with the now legendary drummer from 1982 to '84 when he left to co-lead an ensemble with fellow Messenger alumnus Terence Blanchard. The band was heralded for its hard-driving swing and deep lyricism. Along with Wynton Marsalis's unit, the Harrison-Blanchard group put a lot of the guts and brains into the so-called neo-conservative movement of the day. The handful of records they made together was well received critically and commercially.

But Donald Harrison went his own way, making solo recordings and working with Roy Haynes, among others. He investigated several styles, gleaning the most interesting aspects of each. Drummers have been instrumental in Harrison's development, and nouveau swing as a concept in large part is a unique and personal synthesis of the rhythmic elements of a wide variety of musical styles.

Donald Harrison is free to be the creative musician he has become because of all that he has been exposed to and all that he has assimilated. As sole producer on *Free to Be*, making all the bottom line decisions, he took yet another step toward greater freedom. "It puts another type of pressure on you, but in the long run it also gives you another type of freedom. Anything you conceive can be explored, developed, and realized. I was pretty confident I could put together a fine album."

Confident that the music speaks for itself, Donald Harrison's evolution on *Free to Be* is, more than ever, music to our ears.

For more information, contact: Chris Wheat (212) 424-1153

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