

Billy Harper

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By [Russ Musto](#)

Billy Harper has one of the most impressive resumes in jazz, including stints with Gil Evans, Art Blakey, Elvin Jones, Max Roach, Lee Morgan, Thad Jones-Mel Lewis, Charles Tolliver and Randy Weston, but it is his unique sound on the tenor and distinctive style as a composer that has brought him international acclaim and truly sets him apart from most other players.

All About Jazz: Let's start with some of the things you've been up to lately?

Billy Harper: Basically some of things that are happening most recently are two recordings that I've done with my group. One has to do with a tour that I did in Poland and the recording was done with a sixty piece choir. So we added some musicians and also this choir from Szczecin, Poland. This was filmed by the television people over there, so it's going to be a pretty big thing. It should be out maybe in March.

AAJ: This is your music written specifically for ...

BH: The choir and for the instruments. So, we had my regular group and added three other horns and the sixty-piece choir. This was a very big event over there and it was filmed, so it's going to be a DVD.

AAJ: And the band was your regular quintet with Francesca Tanksley and Eddie Henderson?

BH: No, actually the trumpeter over there I used is a Polish trumpeter named Piotr, Peter.

AAJ: That's the trumpet player Piotr Wojtasik, whose CD *Quest* (Power Bros., 2003) you appear on playing several of your compositions.

BH: Right.

AAJ: This takes you back to your roots. Your first record, *Capra Black* (Strata East, 1973), utilized voices.

BH: Right, right, right.

AAJ: You sang in church before you began playing saxophone?

BH: Precisely. I thought that—when I was young anyway—I thought that I was going to sing—that was going to be my main thing.

AAJ: Did your singing have an effect on the way that you approached the tenor saxophone?



BH: Oh, definitely. When I met Gil Evans he was saying—and I never thought of it that way—he said, “Oh, I love the way you just sing on that horn.” Sing. And I’d never thought of it, I wasn’t thinking about singing, but that must have been a natural part of my style. I did it subconsciously at first, but now I know what he meant and I know how it works well with the horn. It’s like a singing style that happens on the horn.

AAJ: Your sound on the horn is certainly one of the most distinctive ones on tenor. Are there other factors that caused you to develop such an individual sound?

BH: Yes I think so. You know, everybody talks about the tradition of the Texas tenor; I didn’t know anything about that when I was in Texas, but I did hear a lot of really good saxophonists and they had a pretty big sound and it was sort of natural. Almost all those saxophonists had this big sound. You know all the way back to Arnett Cobb to “Dicky Boy” Lillie. I also played with musicians in Dallas. So there was James Clay... he was really my favorite. Don Wilkerson, he was also from Houston. I think the sound has to do—I mean at least developing that sound naturally—might have to do with marching. Marching when you’re small in a marching band and really playing ... really developing a sound while moving—that’s one thing that we have all had in common.

AAJ: You were the first Afro American to be in the North Texas State One O’clock Band. Most of the people who came out of bands like that had what you might describe as more “common” or “ordinary” sounds. Did you have any problems at first because your sound was so different?

BH: Yes, a little bit, yes. I was specifically interested—even in school—I was really interested in playing with Art Blakey, so my thing was always small groups and my sound and my style, I guess—in relation then, was a little more “dangerous”—a little wilder—and I liked having a “wild” sound. I’ve always liked that kind of thing anyway. So they kind of balked at the kind of boldness with which I approached sound, but they also knew that I was able to do the stuff that was required in order to make the One O’clock Band and after playing there and really getting really into the academics and knowing what I was doing, they realized that they had to do probably something about that and I was able to make the band.

AAJ: Your music has a definite spiritual feeling. Do you feel that music is part of a general spiritual existence?

BH: Of course, that has been the thing that has led me in my own spiritual development and spiritual life. I finally understood the real connection of the purpose of my being here at all and being able to connect that to the music. The music has led me to that and that has led me to the music. And so it does turn out to be a spiritual journey—all of it—the music that I’m playing and my walking through this life, at the same time.



AAJ: Many people, like myself, have wondered for a long time and still wonder why in spite of the fact that your music is so audience grabbing that you work so infrequently with your band?

BH: The reason really has to do with how the musical industry is set up. The industry is set up basically to cater to first of all, the things that are going to make the most money—so the most commercial things—that’s first. Secondly, they are still trying to be conscious of what kinds of sales, so whomever the hot players or the known players at that time, that’s who everybody jumps on. And myself, as a really developed musician and person, I’m not really so interested in running around trying to hack out getting gigs the way I was when I first got to New York. You know I’m thinking by now, you know, certainly people should know, but of course they don’t [laughs]. A lot of people don’t.

Sometimes, also, it's based on, unfortunately—in this system that we live in because we came up in the USA—it's certainly based on race a lot of times. And a lot of the black musicians have felt the brunt of racism. Another thing that has happened probably is that there's a psychology that goes along with the use of the word underrated. If they use the word underrated—I understand what they mean and they mean something good, they're saying that this is an underrated player that people should listen to—but what it really means is that this is a person that people are ignoring. So an underrated musician is often ignored.

AAJ: Once someone hears you, you're someone who is hard to ignore. What else is coming up?

BH: Well, okay, there's another album that I recently recorded, other than the DVD.

AAJ: And this is with your regular band?

BH: The new one that I'm about to tell you about is something that is with my regular band, but this one though has Amiri Baraka, so he's also speaking on it.

AAJ: And he's doing his poetry?

BH: Yes, he's doing some poetry that relates to the music and it'll be behind some of the music that we're doing. It's not the whole record, his thing; he's doing three things on there.

AAJ: And what's the record going to be called?

BH: It's called *Amazing Grace*.

AAJ: So it continues in the spiritual vein your music has been following.

BH: But on the record we're also doing a thing called *Africa Revisited*, which is more connected to Trane's *Africa/Brass*.



AAJ: What prompted you to want to use Amiri on the record?

BH: The idea of people today who are into what they call rap, right, [laughs] that prompted me to think, "You know what, these cats—you know, the real cats—were rapping way before they're calling this rap and I remember Amiri, in the name of Leroi Jones, at that time, who was really rapping then.

AAJ: So are you working with your band a little bit more now?

BH: No, we could be working much more. If something comes up for us, we might be doing something in Europe again, but we need to be doing something in the USA. So no, we could use definitely some more, some more work. Still, it has to do with the control of the musical industry, control and how they see things. But the real listeners—I've always had some heavy followers—because they heard the music—the direct music—because they really get the message of the music. There have always been people who have done that with my music.

Selected Discography

Charles Tolliver, *With Love* (Blue Note, 2007)
Grachan Moncur III, *Exploration* (Capri, 2004)
Billy Harper, *Soul of an Angel* (Metropolitan, 2000)
Billy Harper, *If Our Hearts Could Only See* (DIW, 1998)
Malachi Thompson, *Freebop Now!* (Delmark, 1998)
Benny Carter, *Journey to Next* (Lightyear, 1996)
Billy Harper, *On Tour in the Far East, Volume One* (Steeplechase, 1994)
McCoy Tyner Big Band, *Journey* (Telarc, 1994)
Billy Harper, *Billy Harper Quintet in Europe* (Soul Note, 1979)
Billy Harper, *Capra Black* (Strata East, 1973)
Gil Evans, *Svengali* (Koch, 1973)
Max Roach, *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (Atlantic, 1971)
Thad Jones and Mel Lewis, *Consummation* (Blue Note, 1971)

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