

Tom Harrell at the  
Village Vanguard in  
New York on Oct. 11



Tom  
Harrell

# 'Magic Can Happen Anytime'

By Phillip Lutz  
Photo by Jack Vartoogian

**TOM HARRELL IS STILL.** Head deeply bowed, a shock of gray hair falling casually over his eyes, the trumpeter silently sits, betraying nothing to a nearby questioner. Is he contemplating the questioner's inquiry? Dismissing it out of hand? The seconds tick off. The tension rises.

Then comes an answer. Uttered in Harrell's low-pitched drawl, it is an insightful gem, exquisitely shaped and defiantly idiosyncratic. The tension breaks. And the process begins again.

The setting is a music room tucked away in Harrell's upper Manhattan apartment. The room, a small space packed with the paraphernalia of a musical life, is where Harrell spends his days. The fruitful pattern of tension and release he establishes is not confined to the room. It is evident on the bandstand, where Harrell spends his nights—an edgy, enigmatic presence who lets loose musical declamations both soaring and powerfully restrained.



"I try to avoid anything that is ordinary," he said.

Harrell, born in Illinois and raised in California amid a jazz scene he says has been broadly misconstrued (more on that later), has been dodging the ordinary for most of his 67 years—perhaps at no time more than now. While he has been operating at enviable heights since landing a spot in Stan Kenton's band straight out of Stanford University in 1969, he has never been more in-demand as a player, more prolific as a composer, or more inventive as an artist.

In mid-October, Harrell booked two largely distinct ensembles for a two-week stretch at the Village Vanguard. The first, his longtime quintet, features Wayne Escoffery on saxophone, Danny Grissett on piano, Ugonna Okegwo on bass and Johnathan Blake on drums. The second is a piano-less quartet featuring Mark Turner on saxophone, Adam Cruz on drums and Okegwo on bass. Each group played to packed houses for six nights. Harrell also counts a nine-piece chamber ensemble as a working project. And he is writing material for all of them.

For Harrell—whose compositions have been performed by Joe Lovano, Kenny Barron, Ron Carter and Hank Jones—writing is first a discipline. He explained that he composes every day, to build writing chops "the same way you build

chops as a player."

But Harrell, an avowed believer in a higher power, also sees writing as a matter of inspiration: Stacked atop the piano in the music room is a pile of manuscript books, pocket-sized for portability and filled with meticulous sketches, fragmentary scores and the like. Amid the musical notations, the name of the spiritual teacher Baba Ram Dass also appears.

The name, inscribed in capital letters, conjures up the detachment of the yogi and may, in some sense, offer a clue to Harrell's inscrutable bearing. Harrell does little to discourage the possibility, admiringly invoking the notion of detachment in connection with Miles Davis' performing stance, which was a subject of discussion in Davis' day—as Harrell's is today.

"I try to keep a detachment so things don't get too heavy," he said.

In Harrell's life, things have got heavy many times. Yet he has remained constantly prolific, penning perhaps 500 compositions over the course of his career. A few years ago, Harrell wrote an entire chamber piece, "Perspectives," while waiting for news about his wife, Angela, in a hospital emergency room in Paris—where she had injured herself on a train.

Wherever Harrell's writing takes place, much

of it is accomplished between Vanguard engagements, twice-yearly staples that provide him a reliable forum for airing new music before the band takes it into the studio. (It was the setting for his acclaimed 2002 concert album for RCA Bluebird.) Minutes before Harrell sat down for the October interview, his quartet, Trip, had finished a rehearsal in the music room, where he presented the band members with the tunes that would make up the core of the Vanguard sets that week and be recorded the following week.

The tunes Trip tackled were a wide-ranging lot that constituted a primer on the art of the piano-less combo. They formed a guide, of sorts, to the exploration of space left open by the absence of a chordal instrument, and it was not much of a stretch to connect that exploration with the group's primal concept, embodied in its name, which Harrell said he cooked up "thinking about an experience where the music takes you somewhere."

The "you" Harrell had in mind was the plural pronoun, referring to both the listener and player. And among both groups, the music won high praise, particularly from those who know Harrell's music best. Prominent among them was Escoffery, who has played on the six albums Harrell has released since 2005 on the HighNote label, including his latest, *Colors Of A Dream*.

"Having been an associate of Tom's for so long, one might think that I wouldn't be surprised by his writing," said Escoffery, who along with Grissett attended the first night of Trip's stint at the Vanguard. "But I was really blown away and impressed. I was amazed at how fresh and different the writing sounded."

Four days into the week, at an Oct. 18 early set that was sold out, the band was still sounding fresh, despite the somewhat calculated aspect of the set list. Throughout the week, the lists were largely predetermined, with the sets functioning as de facto rehearsals for the recording session that would follow. But the predictability ended there: The band's interplay was spontaneous, and the writing clearly had met Harrell's objective to imbue each tune with its own aesthetic.

"I try to make each composition unique," he said. "That's my goal—each composition is a world unto itself."

The result, at the Oct. 18 performance, was a set of remarkably varied tone and temperament. At one end of the scale, Harrell offered an accessible "Shuffle," which was just that, although a few slyly delivered, angular twists kept the piece from descending into the generically danceable. At the other end, he served up a six-movement suite, which he had debuted at Dave Douglas' Festival of New Trumpet Music in October 2012 and ranks as one of Harrell's most ambitious works.

The suite, which Harrell has yet to title, was still something of a work in progress. Nonetheless, it vividly illustrated his ability to compose for his band members' specific strengths. Okegwo was unfazed when given some tricky turns to negotiate, at one point picking up the melody line after it had been stated by the horns; at others, navigating improbably wide-interval double stops.

Turner, meanwhile, attracted notice for the clarity of his attack. That, at least, was the effect

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that fellow reedist Escoffery generously noted. “Mark has great technique, crisp, clean articulation,” he said. “A couple of the melodies have nice runs, and I think they would sound completely different if I were playing them.”

As assured as Harrell can be about his intentions when scoring a piece—especially one as complex as the suite—he can be just as clear about his willingness to make adjustments. According to Okegwo, when it became evident as the week wore on that some sections could be expanded to accommodate more involved improvisation, Harrell readily allowed it.

“Tom is very open for each individual to put in his character,” the bassist said. “He writes for specific groups, but he knows how to trust the people he works with.”

Just as Harrell displays an innate sense of when to make adjustments, his predilections can act as a natural break on material that threatens to become abstruse. “No matter how complex the harmony,” Okegwo said, “there’s always something melodic about Tom’s music that people can relate to. I’ve heard from people who don’t listen to jazz constantly that there is something that speaks to them directly with the melody.”

Harrell’s melodic penchant is apparent throughout his oeuvre—especially in the chamber works, and most particularly on personal compositions like “Morning Prayer.” The piece’s debut brought more than a dozen players to the Vanguard stage before it was released in 2001 as part of *Paradise* (RCA). It was revived to great effect in 2010, with the Harrell quintet joining the local Mista String Ensemble in Cuneo, Italy.

On the score, Harrell has designated a Part 1 and 2. Despite subtle threads linking the parts, the piece is sometimes viewed as two distinct works—opening as a modernist string quintet before Harrell’s combo kicks in. At its most impactful, that has proven a powerful moment, with the rhythm section and the strings creating a low-key, high-intensity bed for Harrell’s understated flugelhorn. The mixture has generated enthusiastic cheers as well as poignant tears.

“I want people to enjoy it, even if they cry,” Harrell said. “Crying’s good, too. It’s a spiritual experience.”

As strong as the melodic component is in Harrell’s chamber originals, it may even be more pronounced in his treatments of the French Impressionists. Attracted to them for their lightness of being, Harrell left little doubt that in his adaptations—the list included “Sainte,” a Ravel chanson originally set to a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, and two Debussy pieces, “Beau Soir” and “Passepied”—he had no intention of altering the melody, even as he freely introduced reharmonizations and modern rhythms.

Harrell’s respect for the inviolability of melody doesn’t obscure his affinity for those rhythms. He integrates them into his concerts—their influence, filtered through his sensibility, could be heard during the quintet’s first set on Oct. 11 in the characteristic backbeat on “Trances”—and makes them part of his rhetoric, drawing direct lines between those rhythms and their antecedents.



“The way bebop was in the ’40s,” he said, “hip-hop is today.”

Harrell views hip-hop in a broader cultural context, marking it as “the most potent music of today.” His attitudes are consistent with his broader systems of belief about the African American experience and the business of music delivery in the postwar era.

He recalled growing up in 1950s California at a time when baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan, teamed with another horn and bass and drums, was being hailed as the avatar of a new sound. That particular sound, Harrell said, was one whose hollowness he grew to love—and is, to some degree, evoking with Trip—but one that was mislabeled by marketers. In essence, he said, they sought to “sell something” by promulgating the concept of “opposing systems,” pitting the nation’s coasts against each other.

“I don’t subscribe to the phrase ‘West Coast jazz,’” he said.

The sound, he said, actually drew on the work of Davis and Gil Evans, who were experimenting with classical forms in the salons and clubs of New York as early as the late ’40s. Meanwhile, “a lot of the black musicians were overlooked,” he said, citing Charlie Parker, Wardell Gray, Art Farmer and Eric Dolphy as prominent African Americans who played Los Angeles. “That was a thriving scene, and it was West Coast jazz, too.”

To this day, Harrell said, he rejects, at some peril, attempts to pit groups against each other. “I try to embrace all music, even if it gets me in trouble,” he said. “There are cliques, and if you are outside a certain clique you could even be risking your life. I believe I’m going to take that chance. I try to embrace all music, but I try to be authentic.”

No one has challenged Harrell’s authenticity; far from it. He commands fierce loyalty from his quintet sidemen, all of whom have been with him for the entire run of HighNote recordings. Having lived with Harrell on the road, they concur with Escoffery’s estimation of the trumpeter’s labors.

“None of it’s contrived,” Escoffery said.

The *Colors Of A Dream* project stands to some extent apart from its piano-less counterpart, Trip. It has three horns, two basses and wordless vocals. For this project, Harrell has recruited saxophonist Jaleel Shaw and Esperanza Spalding, who plays bass and contributes the vocals—and, as a result, has a soundscape at once more opaque and varied.

“You look at the whole bass scenario differently,” Okegwo said. “It gives you more space and more sound.” Sometimes he and Spalding play in unison, functioning as a bass section with all the power attendant to it. At other times they play off of each other, with one walking and the other creating chords or simply laying out.

The collaboration with Harrell marks another key step in Spalding’s artistic evolution. A March engagement with the *Colors Of A Dream* group at the Vanguard “was one of the richest experiences of my life,” she said in an email. Referring to Harrell, she added, “The breadth and variation in his playing, arranging and writing is mesmerizing, totally inspiring and uplifting to one’s mood (to say the least!).”

Spalding will tour with the band for several weeks this summer. An avid Harrell fan, she said the prospect of touring with him is a “dream come true.” The core members of the group agreed that she has become part of its fabric—and they are eager to tighten the weave on tour.

At least one new title will be added to Harrell’s discography in 2014. His chamber ensemble went into the studio last April for the label Harmonia Mundi. But the album that the session yielded, *First Impressions*, will be vying with the album Trip recorded in October to be released first, according to Angela Harrell, who co-produced *Colors Of A Dream*.

During the October session, the group recorded the six movements of the suite, as well as “Sunday,” one of the few tunes that both the quintet and quartet had played at the Vanguard dates.

She said her husband has a backlog of perhaps 100 tunes waiting to be recorded, and he continues his regimen of daily writing—a practice that Okegwo said had been constant since he first met Harrell in the early 1990s, when they shared a stage in saxophonist David Sánchez’s band.

“He’s not standing still—*ever*,” said Okegwo, who has been in Harrell’s bands for 17 years.

Harrell’s website currently lists five leader projects, and the trumpeter said he tries to “look at each situation as being on an equal footing.” He continued, “Any configuration has the possibility of being totally mind-boggling: solo, duo, trio, quartet, quintet, nonet, big band, symphony orchestra, symphony orchestra with chorus, three symphony orchestras. Music is such a powerful force that the magic can happen anytime.”

Just like Harrell’s devoted fans, his bandmates aren’t sure what will come next. “No one can really tell you what’s in Tom’s mind except Tom,” Escoffery said. “But his compositions go in waves.”

The question, then, is, What exactly will be the next wave? Harrell’s reply placed him in full enigma mode. “I’ve done pretty much everything I’d like to do,” he explained. “As Mulligan said, ‘I just maybe want to play one more tune.’”