

Harrell Nods to Davis at Jazz Standard

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Tom Harrell (Photo: John Rogers/johnrogersnyc.com)

Trumpeter Tom Harrell is a disciple of Miles Davis, from his attitude to his ability to distance himself from his audience. Harrell's lanky frame has adopted Davis' signature backward lean, and he can keep a crowd at bay by walking off stage to the wings and then returning. With a career that spans more than 40 years and appearances on more 260 albums (with artists such as Charles McPherson and Horace Silver), Harrell is one of the most prolific trumpeters in jazz. At his Oct. 6 late-night set at New York's Jazz Standard, Harrell tapped into Davis' adventurous spirit by performing timeless songs from his repertoire, as well as some original compositions.

As part of the weekend-long Festival of New Trumpet Music (FONT)—which celebrated its 10th anniversary under the direction of trumpeter Dave Douglas—Harrell showcased his daring work “The Suite.” It expands on what Harrell achieved with his May release, *Number Five* (HighNote Records), by drawing from a plethora of influences and yet still keeping swing as the focal point. In his quiet, dusky voice, Harrell gave a count of “One, two, three” before a succession of four-beat, rhythmic unisons, courtesy of his quartet—which on this night had a lineup of drummer Adam Cruz, multi-reedist Mark Turner and bassist Ugonna Okegwo.

Cruz served as a gatekeeper at the start of the first movement, where he transitioned from African-inspired tribal calls into full-on swing, giving leeway so his bandmates could jump in. An undeniable bond was established between Harrell and Turner early on, as evidenced by their tight relay of the melody. The four movements that followed shared an unconventional structure, with every pause keeping the listener guessing what might come next. Harrell's ambitious composition drew upon elements of classical, samba and hip-hop, and it gave his musicians ample room to explore.

The latter half of the set consisted of two Davis classics that allowed each musician to find his own way. Complemented by Okegwo's driving bass and Cruz's steady rhythmic drums (especially during his closeout solo), Harrell tackled “No Blues” much like Miles would have, with staccato notes that cut to the chase. Then suddenly, Harrell surprised with a tidal wave of circular notes that seemed like they could go on forever. Turner, on alto saxophone, relished the sounds of his lingering improvisation. An arrangement of “Donna Lee” was much more uptempo, highlighting the virtuosity of Harrell and his forward-thinking group.

During a recent conversation, drummer Johnathan Blake (a longtime collaborator with Harrell), talked about working with the trumpeter: “One of the things that my time with Tom has taught me is [the importance of] living in the moment and letting the music play *you*, as opposed to forcing the music.” Harrell's performance at the Jazz Standard certainly exemplified this credo.

—Shannon J. Effinger