

Up-and-Coming Jazz Artist Enthralls Audiences

Written by Jimmie Jones

Tuesday, 13 November 2001 18:00

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One of the primary goals of any artist, especially a jazz musician, is to have a distinctive style. Knowledgeable jazz musicians and even fans can hear just a few bars of Clark Terry, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Milt Jackson, Thelonious Monk, and many others and easily recognize who is playing. Although Stefon Harris will be the first to admit the influences of vibraphone legends Milt Jackson and Bobby Hutcherson, he has incorporated what he has heard from them and others into his unique voice and sound, which he demonstrated in the many long solos I heard over the past week.

As part of its Visiting Artist series, Quad City Arts brought young jazz vibraphonist Harris to the Quad Cities for a two-week residency November 5 through 17, during which he performed at schools, colleges, libraries, museums, and theatres. Harris used a trio of outstanding local musicians – David Holcomb on piano, Ron Wilson on bass, and Manny Lopez III on drums – at all of the workshops and concerts except at the Adler Theatre this past Saturday night, where he was backed by the Black Hawk College Jazz Ensemble.

Harris is a native of Albany, New York, and began his collegiate studies at the Eastman School of Music in 1991, finishing his MA in jazz performance at the Manhattan School of Music in 1997. He has performed with bands led by Max Roach, Steve Turre, Bobby Watson, and Buster Williams and has toured Europe numerous times, as well as Japan, Hong Kong, and Australia. He has taught privately and at the Manhattan School of Music. Blue Note Records has released three CDs from this 28-year-old rising star: *A Cloud of Red Dust*, *Black Action Figure*, and *Kindred*, with pianist Jacky Terrasson.

On Tuesday, November 6, at noon, Stefon gave a 45-minute performance at Scott Community College before an audience of about 20 students, touching such jazz standards as Benny Golson's "Whisper Not," Joe Henderson's "Recorda Me," Cannonball Adderley's "Things Are Getting Better," and Duke Ellington's "Caravan," plus the popular ballad "You Don't Know What Love Is."

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Harris and the ensemble performed many of the same tunes for a receptive audience of 200 students and adults at the alternative school on West Kimberly in Davenport. Later, at Horace Mann Elementary School in Coal Valley, after performing several jazz standards, Stefon spent some time telling the students about the musical instruments being played by the band. He had Holcomb raise the cover of the piano and demonstrate how the pedals worked. Next, Ron Wilson showed how he used the strings on the bass. Stefon sat down at Manny Lopez's drum set and demonstrated the use of the snare and bass drums, the high hat, and the cymbals. When Stefon got to his own instrument, he pointed out the meaning of "vibrations" by making yodeling sounds with his voice then showing the vibration sound of his instrument.

On Thursday, November 8, Stefon spent four hard hours working with Edgar Crockett's Black Hawk College Jazz Ensemble, rehearsing for the Adler Theatre concert on Saturday. The performance was magnificent and with a highly receptive audience at the Adler.

The Black Hawk College Jazz Ensemble opened the concert with an up-tempo take on Charlie Parker's "Koko" (based on ideas in "Cherokee"), with Edgar Crockett on trumpet, Kris Dinussen on trombone, Kevin Carrier on alto sax, Matt Craighead on tenor sax, and Dan Leahy on piano.

Edgar then introduced Stefon to the audience. The first tune featuring Stefon was Oliver Nelson's "Stolen Moments," followed by the beautiful Wayne Shorter ballad "Infant Eyes," "I Hear a Rhapsody," "Beautiful Love," and "Salt Peanuts." While Stefon was the featured performer on all these tunes, ensemble musicians Crockett, Dinussen, Craighead, and Leahy took solos on most of them.

The closing two numbers were Harris compositions, and Stefon outdid himself in showing his love and dedication to the music, with the tremendous technique and energy he used in playing the vibes. On "The Velvet Couch," he had the audience clapping its hands in time to the beat of the ensemble. But the highlight of the concert was the closer, the ballad-like tune "The Song of the Whispering Banshee," which Stefon indicated was a funeral march. For an encore, Stefon and the ensemble performed Duke Ellington's and Juan Tizol's "Caravan."