

## **BARRY HARRIS: KEEPER OF THE BEBOP FLAME**

**by Michael Bourne\***

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*"Teachers should teach where they came from, not where they are. They tell you life is complex and you have to suffer to give of yourself, and that's not true. Life is very simple, and if you simply live and simply learn to play, you'll really give."*

*-Barry Harris*

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*\*Michael Bourne, who died on August 21, 2022, was a presence on the air at WBGO between the end of 1984 and the start of 2022 when he retired from full-time hosting duty. Founded in 1979, WBGO is a publicly-supported cultural institution that preserves and elevates America's music: jazz and blues. WBGO reaches a weekly audience of close to 300,000 in the New York/New Jersey metro area via 88.3FM. He was a senior contributor to Down Beat, with the magazine since 1969. Doctor Bourne earned a PhD in Theatre from Indiana University and was a theatre critic for the WBGO Journal.*

**B**ud Powell played piano on the screen, from a documentary of his life in Paris shown as the highlight of a tribute to Bud at this year's Kool Jazz Festival in New York. One particular sequence showed Bud and Thelonious Monk hanging out, underscored by Bud's haunting solo of *Round Midnight*. It was already a wonderful concert, climaxed by the movie, and there was more to come. It fell to Barry Harris to follow the film—and he played with a spirit that thrilled everyone all the more. First he played Bud's piece for his daughter Celia (with a quote of Monk for good measure), then a solo medley of Bud's music, and finally a flabbergasting *Tea For Two*. Even his most virtuosic turns at the piano were played with the greatest of ease.

So often through the years he's played bebop standards with a touch unique, a certain swinging grace. Barry Harris is the standard-bearer of bebop. If one calls Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk the Tigress and Euphrates of bebop piano, then Barry Harris is a tributary, flowing from (and always renewed from) the source. Ira Gitler, producer of the tribute, called him "The Keeper of the Bebop Flame"—and indeed he is. He keeps the flame—and hopes to kindle new fires—at the Jazz Cultural Center, the nightclub and school he heads in midtown Manhattan. We talked there the afternoon after the tribute.



*If one calls Bud Powell (above) and Thelonious Monk (below) the Tigress and Euphrates of bebop piano, then Barry Harris is a tributary...MONK PHOTO COURTESY THE GUARDIAN*



"There are so many young people who don't know about jazz," Harris said. "That's why we have concerts at the Center. We have teenagers playing in the concerts. I'll get together a teenage chorus and they're brilliant, quick to learn. They just haven't been exposed to the music."

Harris offers several classes at the Center on Mondays and Tuesdays. "I don't teach reading. I have a beginner's class just to interest them in the music. I make them play a few things and learn to like it. I have a piano class, then singers. I work on phrasing for singers, and the pianists learn to accompany. Then come the horns for an improvisation class, and some of the singers stay for that. Frank Foster teaches, too. When you have a one-room thing it's hard. We'd like to have two or three things going on."



*Frank Foster (above) teaches at the Jazz Cultural Center, the nightclub and school Harris heads in midtown Manhattan... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

Since the Center is boozeless, young people can play—and can listen to all the greats of jazz Harris presents. Harris opened the Center in August of 1982, and it's never been easy. (He was looking out for Con Edison while we talked. They'd threatened to turn out the lights.)

"This is not funded," he said, "and I haven't gotten my nonprofit thing together. It's been a struggle. Whenever they have these fiscal crunches, it's always the arts that suffer. I think that's intolerable. When we were kids we learned how to play instruments in school. I learned the clarinet in the sixth grade, the bass in the ninth grade. It's very important that kids have instruments, and schools nowadays don't have bands or classes for people to learn. You have to learn when you're young, and the young today really don't have it. I feel funny when people come here to learn how to play jazz and they're 20, 30, 40. We were playing this stuff when we were 13!"

Harris first played "this stuff" in Detroit. He was born in what came to be called Bop City in 1929. He grew up around some of the eventual greats of jazz: Hank Jones, Tommy Flanagan, Donald Byrd, Pepper Adams, Kenny Burrell, Paul Chambers, Doug Watkins, Yusef Lateef, and Elvin Jones, among others. And, he said, "there were the ones who never left, who people don't know, who really started us all. We had an alto player named Cokie we thought was Bird. And when Miles came out with his style, we said that was nothing—Cleophus played like that all the time!"

Harris first played at home at age four. He became a church pianist, but in high school was more and more fascinated by jazz. "I played in church most of the time—until my mother said, 'What are you going to do, play jazz or church music?' I said I liked the jazz. And it was okay. She was beautiful to all of us, Donald Byrd, Paul, and Doug. My house was like a classroom. We could practice all we wanted."

Saxophonist Gene Ammons was an early influence. "When I was about 14 or 15, Jug played a lot of dances in Detroit, and he'd always let me sit in with him. He'd make Junior Mance get up. It wasn't me asking him. He'd ask me. I'll never forget Jug. He was the greatest help of all to me, my biggest hero."



*Gene Ammons (left) was an early influence on Harris...*

*PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

Bud Powell was another influence, although at first only technically—and somewhat by chance. "I remember I wasn't good at soloing. I borrowed a record player that could play at different speeds. I got this record to learn how to play solo. I don't know where I got it. It was *Webb City* by Bud Powell and the Bebop Boys. I don't know how or what I went through, but I slowed up the record and listened, and the next day I could solo some."

Eventually, he started gigging—at a bowling alley. "One of the first gigs I had was with Frank Rosolino at a place called the Bowladrome. It was a hip place. I remember the drummer Tiny Kahn came in. Then there was the Blue Bird, the joint I would run to when I was too young to get in. The bandstand was in the window. I'd knock on the window and the pianist, a cat named Phil Hill, would turn and look at me. When he finished a song I'd run in and play a couple of tunes and run back out. Then I started at the Rouge Lounge as one of the cats who played with people coming through. I played with Prez there, and Flip Phillips. Miles came to town for a while and a few of us had the chance to play with him." Harris first played with Coleman Hawkins in Detroit, then again just before Hawk died. "He went through Detroit pianists: Tommy and Roland Hanna, Hank Jones, and then me."



*One of Harris's first gigs was with Frank Rosolino (above) at a place called the Bowladrome... It was a hip place, where the drummer Tiny Kahn (below) came in...*  
KAHN PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM P GOTTLIEB





**A**nd then there was Charlie Parker. "Bird was playing at the Graystone Ballroom and his band didn't show up on time. So we young ones got up and played with Bird. I can't remember which bass player, Paul or Doug, and a drummer named Freddie Metcalf. We played with Bird, and that was the gas of the ages!"



*Playing with Bird (above) was the gas of the ages!... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

Harris didn't come to New York until 1960. "I was scared. I wish I'd come earlier. I'd have been around for the golden age of the music. I came with Doug Watkins for a vacation in 1952. I remember going to the Bronx and Art Blakey was playing. I'd sit in and he'd always play *Night In Tunisia* real fast—and I just couldn't play that fast. I didn't leave Detroit until Clifford Brown died and I joined Max. Donald Byrd replaced Clifford and I replaced Richie Powell. When I left Max I came back to Detroit. I came to New York to make some record dates, but I didn't really leave Detroit until 1960 with Cannonball."

Harris recorded *Them Dirty Blues* with the Adderley band. Also, the same rhythm section (with Sam Jones on bass and Louis Hayes on drums) recorded for Riverside live at the Jazz Workshop in San Francisco, one of his favorite sessions.

**BARRY HARRIS**  
**AT THE JAZZ WORKSHOP**  
RECORDED "LIVE" IN SAN FRANCISCO  
WITH **SAM JONES, LOUIS HAYES**



**RIVERSIDE**

Earlier, he'd recorded with a trio for Argo, an off-shoot of a Chicago session with Sonny Stitt, but the record wasn't released until he'd become a name playing with Cannonball. *Luminescence* for Prestige in 1967 was his first recording as a bandleader, but by then he'd recorded with a Who's Who of jazz: Sonny Stitt, Dexter Gordon, Illinois Jacquet, Hank Mobley, Wes Montgomery, et al. He's recorded often up front since then, especially several excellent sessions for Xanadu, two of the best being compositions by Tadd Dameron and . . . Barry Harris.



Uptown recorded his newest release, *For The Moment*, in the spring of 1984 live on his home turf at the Jazz Cultural Center. One highlight of the concert is a medley of Monk's music. Another is a Harris original, *To Monk With Love*. Harris and Monk lived together through Monk's last years, looked out for by jazz patroness the Baroness Nica de Koenigswater (the inspiration for *Pannonica*, among other bebop classics). Harris watched Monk's health fail. "He was physically sick," Harris said. "Nobody could figure out what was wrong with him, and he just resigned himself and didn't do anything. I remember one time I was playing a concert for him with a big band with Paul Jeffrey. I said to Monk the night before, 'Why don't you come and play?' And he didn't say no. I go to the concert and in walks Monk, and he played! He didn't play at all the last few years."



*Jazz patroness the Baroness Nica de Koenigswater (the inspiration for Pannonica, among other bebop classics) with Monk at the piano...*

Harris laments what sometimes seems the passing of the music with the passing of so many great musicians. "I'm trying to get young people into this music because I'm tired of all the funerals. We've been losing them steadily. It's almost like if a few more



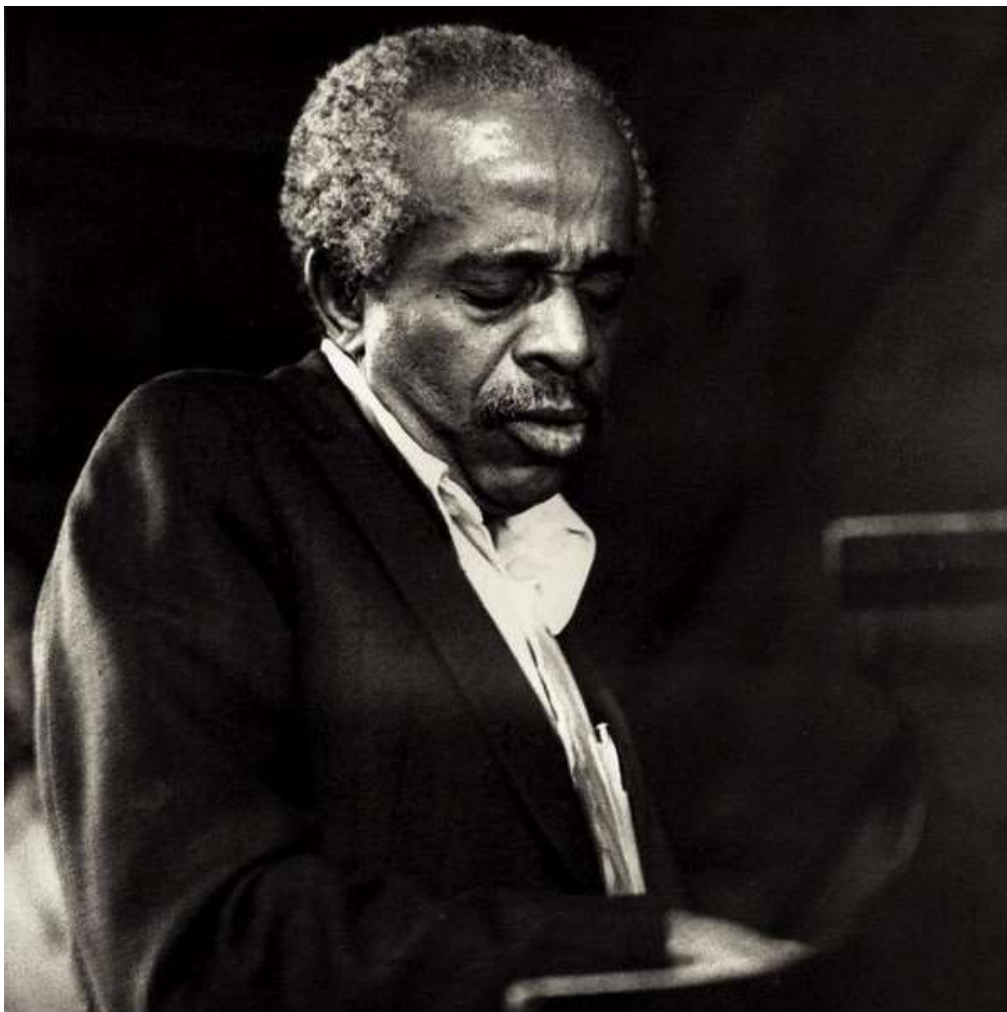
of us die the music will die. There's nobody carrying on what we carry on." Harris also laments that teachers often don't teach the fundamentals. "Always the basics! Teachers should teach where they came from, not where they are. They tell you life is complex and you have to suffer to give of yourself, and that's not true. Life is very simple, and if you simply live and simply learn to play, you'll really give."

Even after all these years, Harris believes, a teacher still needs to be taught. "That's the secret. I take lessons from Sophia Rosoff, who believes as I do. I don't believe in playing the piano with your fingers. You play with your butt, your feet, your elbow. We have some classical pianists messed up because they believe in fingers. There's a lady who taught some people around here, Abby Whiteside. She wrote a book, *Indispensables Of Piano Playing*. Her theory is that our Western theory of playing piano involves finger technique and ways of strengthening the fingers. We believe just the opposite. You strengthen your body. You play from your arm, transfer the weight off. It's just like a machine: the little levers in your fingers are strengthened by the bigger levers of your body."



*Harris takes lessons from Sophia Rosoff (above): I don't believe in playing the piano with your fingers. You play with your butt, your feet, your elbow...*

There's another lesson he's learned—the most valuable, Harris believes. "When you play a piece, be sure you play it all the way through. A friend of mine went to see Bud Powell in the morning and he was playing *I Should Care*, and when he came back that night Bud was still playing *I Should Care*. I've heard some tapes of Monk practicing. He was playing *Lulu's Back In Town*, in time, for 90 minutes! We have to learn to practice as if you're playing. Most of us, if we don't play all the time and then we go into a club, it takes till the end of the week to be comfortable. The thing is to play every day by yourself, take some tunes and play them—play that blues over and over and stretch yourself out."



*Harris: I knew I was a musician when I was four. I'm fortunate, because most people go through life without knowing what they want to do...*

Barry Harris feels blessed to be a musician. "I knew I was a musician when I was four. I'm fortunate, because most people go through life without knowing what they want to do. Some find out late, some find out early, and some never find out. It's beautiful to have known early what I wanted to do. I've had this music all my life:'

## **BARRY HARRIS' EQUIPMENT**

Barry Harris especially enjoys playing on the Steinway piano which he has at the Jazz Cultural Center. He says, "I was lucky. I used to play with Coleman Hawkins at a friend's house in Connecticut, and this cat had this piano done over and gave it to me. It's been my blessing."

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## **BARRY HARRIS SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY**

### **As a leader**

*FOR THE MOMENT*—Uptown 27.20  
*LIVE AT THE JAZZ WORKSHOP*—Riverside 6123  
*LUMINESCENCE*—Prestige 7498  
*BULL'S EYE*—Prestige 7600  
*MAGNIFICENT*—Prestige 7733  
*STAY RIGHT WITH IT*—Milestone 47050  
*PLAYS TADD DAMERON*—Xanadu 113  
*LIVE IN TOKYO*—Xanadu 130  
*PLAYS BARRY HARRIS*—Xanadu 154  
*TOKYO: 1968*—Xanadu 177

### **with Cannonball Adderley**

*THEM DIRTY BLUES*—Riverside 12-322

### **with David Allyn**

*DON'T LOOK BACK*—Xanadu 101

### **with Al Cohn**

*PLAY IT NOW*—Xanadu 100  
*AMERICA*—Xanadu 138

### **with Dexter Gordon**

*GETTIN' AROUND*—Blue Note 84204  
*POWER!*—Prestige 24087  
*MORE POWER*—Prestige 7680  
*BITING THE APPLE*—SteepleChase 1080  
*TRUE BLUE*—Xanadu 136  
*SILVER BLUE*—Xanadu 137

### **with Coleman Hawkins**

*SIRIUS*—Pablo 2310-707

### **with Jimmy Heath**

*PICTURE OF HEATH*—Xanadu 118

### **with Illinois Jacquet**

*BOTTOMS UP*—Prestige 7575

**with Charles McPherson**  
LIVE IN TOKYO—Xanadu 131

**with Billy Mitchell**  
*THE COLOSSUS OF DETROIT*—Xanadu 158

**with Sonny Stitt**  
*12!*—Muse 5002  
*MELLOW*—Muse 5067  
*PLAYS GENE AMMONS*—Muse 5091  
*BLUES FOR DUKE*—Muse 5129  
*SONNY'S BACK*—Muse 5204  
*IN STYLE*—Muse 5228



*Barry Harris, pictured in 1999... PHOTO CREDIT ALAN NAHIGIAN*