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Kenny Barron with Special Guest Stefon Harris, January 30, 2003

ABOUT THE ARTISTS *by Larry Kelp*

It's about time that one of the masters of modern jazz, Kenny Barron, made his San Francisco Performances debut. The pianist's Grammy-nominated 2001 recording, *Freefall*, is a duo CD with San Francisco Performances' first Artist-in-Residence, violinist Regina Carter. And this concert pairs Barron's quartet with vibist Stefon Harris, the current Artist-in-Residence.

It is also the West Coast debut of Barron's quartet. "The flute with vibes and piano is not standard instrumentation," Barron admits, "but I really like it in terms of the musical colors we can get." The group is so new that it just made its concert debut in November. And while Harris is billed as "special guest," he and Barron both talk of the band as a quintet.

Harris recalls, "The first time I heard Kenny Barron (on a duo record with vibist Joe Locke), I just remember how smooth his playing was, like an exhaling breath that never ends. He captures almost everything he hears, and that's something to strive for." Known for his melodic approach to bebop and post-bop styles, Barron admits, "I really like lyricism!"

A seven-time Grammy Award nominee who has worked with everyone from Dizzy Gillespie and Stan Getz to Charlie Haden and Ron Carter, Barron has appeared in the Bay Area often, most recently last summer at Stern Grove with his Canta Brasil quintet of Brazilian and American musicians. With at least 40 albums of his own as well as appearances on more than 60 other musicians' recordings, he is one of jazz' busiest artists.

Since summer Barron (in addition to teaching at Manhattan School of Music and Julliard Academy after retiring from a 27-year tenure at Rutgers University in 2000) has performed in Paris with this quintet, played piano duets in Cuba with Chucho Valdez, recorded a new CD with his and Harris's Classical Jazz Quartet as well as making that band's concert debut in New York City in December, performed in the Midwest with Canta Brasil, and doing his first duo concerts with Harris in Cambridge, Mass.

The program for this concert is a mix of jazz standards with Barron's original compositions, and possibly some of Harris's songs. "A couple of months ago this quartet without Stefon did a concert in Paris, playing the music of Billy Strayhorn and Wayne Shorter," Barron says, "and those tunes fit together really well. So we might play something from them. I've also been working on a commission to write music for this group to be performed in February in East Lansing, Michigan, and we may try some of it out in San Francisco."

Barron and Harris cite their intuitive sense of playing together. "We've never worked anything out," Barron says. "We just play." Harris adds, "I think it is our open-mindedness that was the key. The first time we tried playing together there was a special chemistry. We were both willing to go anywhere the music took us and not worry about boundaries." Likewise, the quintet plays tunes with arrangements that leave much space for improvisation. Both drummer Kim Thompson (from St. Louis) and flutist Anne Drummond (from Seattle) are players Barron first heard when they were in high school. Thompson is now a student at the Manhattan School of Music where Barron teaches, and Drummond is one of his piano students there. Other than himself, the oldest member of what Barron laughingly calls his "baby band" is in his thirties: Kiyoshi Kitagawa, from Osaka, Japan. "Bassist Ben Riley turned me on to him. Kyoshi

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worked with the Heath Brothers band and the Harper Brothers."

"One of the things I most admire about Kenny as an artist is that he's constantly creating himself. Unlike most musicians who get a style and stick with it, he's putting together new groups and new associations, from (Miles Davis' percussionist) Mino Cinelu to Regina Carter. And he's willing to work with younger musicians; that's an opportunity that people like me and Regina and his band rarely have, to work with these masters."

Harris and Barron are also half of the Classical Jazz Quartet, along with drummer Lewis Nash and bassist Ron Carter, with CDs of improvisations on music by J.S. Bach and Tchaikovsky.

KENNY BARRON

"Jazz is first for me as a player," Barron emphasizes. "But I love classical music, anything that's melodic and challenging, such as Brazilian music, and not just the bossa nova but the more experimental creators like Hermeto Pascoal."

Barron—who will turn 60 this June, and has lived in the same Brooklyn house for 25 years—grew up in a musical family in Philadelphia. "My two brothers and two sisters and I all had to study piano, and while I studied classical piano for ten years until I was 16, bebop was what I really grew up on. There were always 78 rpm records around the house of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, and then the post-bop Blue Note Records albums. Then when Ornette Coleman came out (1958-'60), some people loved what he did, some hated it, but I loved it, especially Ornette's compositions."

While he studied other instruments in high school, including bass and cello, Barron always felt that piano was it for him. And jazz was his language. "It was the feeling of playing jazz, and the idea of being able to pull notes out of thin air and make sense of them, as opposed to being locked into the printed page." His first big influence was bebop pianist Tommy Flanagan, then Hank Jones and fellow Philadelphian McCoy Tyner.

After playing in local bands, in 1959 he worked with drummer Philly Joe Jones, and after moving to New York City in 1961, he was soon in-demand to play with a seemingly endless list of the jazz greats, including a four-year stint with Dizzy Gillespie, and extended stays with trumpeter Freddie Hubbard and flutist Yusef Lateef, and in the mid-'70s he was in former Miles Davis bassist Ron Carter's first quartet, a chamber jazz group (piano, bassist Buster Williams, drummer Ben Riley and Carter on piccolo bass) that allowed Barron to deeply explore that lyrical side of his playing. In the '80s that band (minus Carter) added saxophonist Charlie Rouse to become Sphere, taking its name from Thelonius Monk's adopted middle name, and playing new interpretations of Monk.

Over the past 20 years Barron has performed and recorded with a who's who of modern jazz including Stan Getz's final concerts and duo recording in 1991, leading up to the breakthrough *Freefall* CD of duets with violinist Regina Carter. "In a jazz sense it was unusual," Barron says, "just the two of us. Some of it was freer than standard jazz. That title tune had nothing written, it was just, 'Let's turn on the tape recorder and see what happens.' It was really free."

STEFON HARRIS

Vibist Stefon Harris, who is almost midway into his four-year stint as San Francisco Performances' second Artist-in-Residence, is now an old regular here, having performed in the area while barely out of his teens, first with Wynton Marsalis, then a 1997 group led by Berkeley-reared guitarist Charlie Hunter. Since then Harris has led his own band, and a year ago nearly stole the show as the new kid in Cedar Walton's all-star band at Yoshi's.

Currently calling Newark, New Jersey, home, Harris has appeared on a number of recordings, but still has only two out under his own name, *A Cloud of Red Dust* and *Black Action Figure*, plus a recent quartet album with pianist Jacky Terrasson, *Kindred*. His major commissioned composition, *Grand Unification Theory*, has been recorded and will be released on Feb. 11. An 80-minute large scale work for 12 musicians including flutist Anne Drummond, it sums up—in instrumental terms—Harris' philosophy of life and everything else. Harris wrote the liner notes to explain his ideas behind the music, "about the theory in quantum physics, and how that theory inspired to bring all the different elements of my life together and focus them in the music. It's really not music I thought of, but that I discovered."

It's a long way from Harris's not-so-long-ago youth, when he felt drawn to the piano that the previous tenant had left behind when his family moved into a home in Albany, New York. "Jazz wasn't allowed in the house, and I couldn't play in church because I wasn't saved. In school, because I could read music, I got to try a bunch of instruments. I auditioned on clarinet and percussion, and ended up

on percussion." He went on to get his undergraduate degree in classical orchestra.

"I started writing music in eighth grade, before I knew jazz or classical. Now I've got a master's degree in jazz, and what I write is in the same spirit I had in the eighth grade, only now I've got more options from my studies. I've worked with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, Charlie Hunter, Joe Henderson, Cassandra Wilson, Greg Osby, Steve Coleman, and African dance companies. So now when I compose I'm drawing from all those sources and more." His current role as San Francisco Performances' Artist-in-Residence, working several times a year with students from elementary schools to colleges around the Bay Area, has been a thrill, he says. "It's a tremendous source of growth. I've always been interested in teaching. I was mostly self-taught as a child, so I came up with my ideas of music education, and now I get to try them out and put them into practice." As with Regina Carter before him, Harris is well-suited to the role because he is engaging, energetic, and eager to share his love of music with anyone else, especially youngsters.

Stefon Harris made his San Francisco Performances' debut as a member of the band in a joint performance of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and Jazz at Lincoln Center concert in a pairing of Stravinsky's Histoire du soldat and Wynton Marsalis' A Fiddler's Tale in May 1998 at Davies Hall. His Quartet shared a concert with violinist Regina Carter's Quartet in April 2001, and he returned with his Quartet in February 2002.

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