

1997

Donald Harrison

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Donald Harrison

by Connie Zeanah Atkinson

Excerpt, Ph.D. dissertation, *Musicmaking in New Orleans: A Reappraisal*
(University of Liverpool, 1997)

Although Wynton Marsalis is probably the most prominent example of a New Orleans musician who has kept local ties while achieving success internationally, there are many others, such as Terence Blanchard, Henry Butler, Branford Marsalis, Harry Connick Jr., and Donald Harrison.

Horizontal and Vertical Integration

The career of Harrison offers a good case study of the professional development of jazz musicians in New Orleans and draws upon several notions of how a New Orleans musician evolves in a contemporary setting. Jazz saxophonist Harrison came to international attention with Terence Blanchard in the Art Blakey band, and continues to draw favourable reviews from New York jazz critics.¹ While maintaining this successful career as a jazz player in New York, Harrison lives several months of the year in New Orleans, working in a mentoring programme sponsored by the New Orleans public school system. He moves easily between these worlds, picking and choosing associations and groups that fill particular needs: in New York challenging his ability to compete in a world that values innovation, and in New Orleans, reacquainting himself with the musical values of his hometown and passing them on to local schoolchildren. Harrison is an example of a New Orleans musician who has attempted to integrate both vertically, with the national jazz community and recording industry, particularly through the New York jazz scene, and horizontally, through keeping close ties with the city of New Orleans, his teachers, and local players. Though he lives in New York and travels and plays widely throughout the country, Harrison believes in the distinctiveness of the New Orleans musical experience.

I always realised that here the music came up from the neighbour-hoods. The thing that is unique about New Orleans is that it is a place where the culture has survived -- in America. It is not happening in any other place besides New Orleans as far as music is concerned. You go to New York, there is no music that has lasted through the whole culture for a hundred years. Chicago either. Nowhere, where the whole city, from the youngest to the oldest, from the richest to the poorest, are in touch with the music. Not in America.²

Harrison does not, however, define the city's musical 'culture' as related to a specific style of music.

Oh no, that wouldn't make any sense anyway. People here know what I mean by their culture, and people in other places know theirs. Here, it's got a lot to do with music and how it's used. And as long as that's important to the people here, it will be here.

Recently there have been numerous attempts to challenge the notion of 'authenticity' in cultural forms. Debates on authenticity in music permeate cultural criticism, and music scholars in New Orleans have been at the centre of many of these discussions. However, and perhaps surprisingly, although New Orleans itself has often been used in debates concerning authenticity in music, the topics that preoccupy those involved in these debates seldom arise in interviews with New Orleans musicians. For the people

¹ See for example 'Scott and Harrison: Young Lions of Be-Bop,' *New York Times* 4 August, 1991, H22; Nat Hentoff 'The Young Saviours Of Old Jazz'; Peter Watrous 'Old Jazz is Out New Jazz is Older,' *New York Times* 31 March 1994, c11L.

² This and all following quotes from Donald Harrison are from an interview with the author, May 1996.

concerned, change is not a contradiction in their culture, but rather its systematic condition. Local musicians embrace change and the wider global music arena while at the same time they often distance themselves from it. Questions concerning 'creativity,' 'authenticity' and 'innovation' are often countered with responses that reject these notions, assertions that on the one hand, no matter how 'traditional' the music, it is always changing, and no matter how 'innovative' the music, it is never totally original. This approach, which permeates conversations with local musicians of different ages, playing in many styles, shows how the community might at the same time provide a place for both conformist and innovator: both those who would maintain cultural forms (while acknowledging that no musical form is ever exactly replicated from age to age, person to person) and those who would seek to be innovative (while at the same time knowing that innovation never comes out of a vacuum, but always to some extent draws from what went before). This reasoning, with emphasis on balance, duality, and unity of opposites, might be seen as the defining characteristic of 'New Orleans music.' This way of looking at music contrasts with one that which makes claims to rejecting all to do with the past, or which argues the importance, or even existence, of musical authenticity. Harrison describes the differing roles that he sees to be available to the city's musicians -- those of innovators, and those of 'guardians of the flame.'

Yes [the music] is evolving, but at the same time, it's still the same. I mean, if you go hear Dejean [the Olympia Brass Band], they still have things that they are doing, and you can go to Preservation Hall, there's a lot of different factions, it's not just one faction. And when you go to hear the Dirty Dozen or the ReBirth, they're doing something different with it, so you have all the generations. And a lot of the younger players, they understand how to play with the older guys, so there's a tradition there.

Harrison outlines the basic training of a New Orleans musician, what Paul Berliner has called the 'dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation' (1992):

At first you start and you have to learn how to do it the way it was done before, and then you take it somewhere else. So that tradition is there and that's why it's evolving, but it's still the same. You have people who are changing it and turning it around like myself and some of the other guys, and then you have the guys who are keeping the tradition the way it always has been.

Thus Harrison reflects a complex view of tradition, demonstrating his belief that individuals bring their own perspective to the music, according to their own particular evaluation of experiences.

New Orleans is a traditional place but we also have to understand that there's nothing new under the sun, it's always got your own unique spin on it. Each individual lives a lifetime and each individual has certain experiences so therefore they can expound upon those experiences, so each individual brings something new. Even if I was trying to imitate exactly what someone else did I could never do it. I could never sound exactly like Charlie Parker. It would always have some kind of nuance on it that was me.

Pedagogy

Harrison believes that in a large degree he absorbed his ideals of music by actually being around musicians 'and listening, hopefully, to the wise things that they told me and trying to implement them into my life.' Nationally, he lists Art Blakey as a chief influence, along with Roy Haynes, Miles Davis, and Dexter Gordon. Locally, he says 'hundreds of musicians have taught me: Kidd Jordan, Ellis Marsalis, Alvin Batiste, Clyde Kerr, Doc Paulin.' Harrison discusses his evolution as a musician:

Initially I identified with the people who played my instrument. Charlie Parker and John Coltrane were my chief influences early on. But then you have to deal with all

instrumentalists, all types of music, very seriously, in order to grow. For me, everything is serious. If I hear someone playing I listen, I get a little from that, or if I hear someone playing anything, even a kid singing, I'll listen intently. I'll just stop right around and have a listen to everything.

In New Orleans, Harrison works in the schools, composing and teaching youngsters the fundamentals of music. He talks of the value of being physically in New York and New Orleans.

I just come home and do my work and go back to New York and hang out for a while -- I'm living in two cities at one time. I spend time here, then I spend time in New York. Right now I'm doing a residency for the 'Meet the Composer' programme, so I have to be down here to honour that commitment. Then I go to New York and play with the cats, I honour that fulfilment. The residency is great because I get to be home more, I get to play with guys, talk to guys more intensely. Coming to New Orleans before was a quick, brief thing and I really was not here. I'd come for maybe a week or so, every five months or something but now here it's like I'm really here. It's hard on my body; I'm very tired all the time, but I think it's worth it, because I'm getting so much from both places.

Besides teaching, being in New Orleans gives him the opportunity to compose and play with local musicians.

At the residency I write music and, for instance, today I talked to three classrooms, little kids, talking about jazz and what it's like to be a musician, what my life is like. I get to talk to a lot of people about the music, I talk to a lot of people about their experiences, and I write songs about them. The kids get to see me work, see how it's done. Also I get a chance to play more down here with different guys, young guys.

Harrison talks about how he draws on a variety of sources for his playing, and in turn, about how he hands down his knowledge to youngsters.

From the musicians that have gone before, I think whatever I get from them, it becomes part of me. I hear different things and I can say, I got that from Bird, or wherever. Certain things that I can understand from what he was doing that I have ingested, so to speak, will become part of my subconscious, because anything you do to a certain level becomes part of your subconscious, and you can just call it up when you're playing music. Certain things will come out, certain things you forget that you've learned. I like to use this for teaching the kids, 'You should know the music as well as you know your ABCs.' You don't have to think about your ABCs, it just part of you. If you study music enough it will come like that. It takes a lot of diligent practice and study. You don't think about it, it's just there, and it comes out when you need it.

His description of his music education reflects several of the precepts described earlier, including the professionalism expected of a young player and the notion that he represents the larger community in his playing.

A lot of New Orleans musicians, especially the teachers, all have their different ways of doing things and different thoughts about the music and they're very, very strong on their ideas about the music, as far as those guys like Ellis [Marsalis] and Kidd [Jordan]. Alvin Batiste, he's more 'this is what I do, everybody do their thing,' but they all were trying to instill in me to reach a higher level, be as good as you can be in practice and really give it your all and that's what they imparted into us as young musicians -- give it your all, and do your best. Don't ever let the level drop, don't drop the banner, so to speak. Always be on a higher level. And believe me, they will come tell you, Kidd

Jordan will come tell you 'you haven't been practising have you?' He'll come listen to you, sit in the audience, and then tell you what you have to work on. I love them for it, though.

A feature of Harrison's education, mentioned by other New Orleans musicians and reflective of Chernoff's description of West African pedagogic methods, was the withholding of praise from the student.

Not a lot of encouragement to get a big head, no. They just absolutely demanded excellence, but you'd never get too much encouragement. It was like 'Yeah, you can get up on this stage with me, but you bother me. Once you get it together, then we'll see.'

Like many other musicians in the city, Harrison began his career with a school band, and had the support of his family, including the gift of his first instrument. His formal education consisted of several teachers in the public schools, all of whom required a personal commitment to the music.

My father bought me a saxophone when I was in the junior high school marching band. When I went to NOCCA, I studied with Ellis [Marsalis] and Kidd Jordan and they were instrumental, especially Kidd Jordan, in telling me you have to practice. Kidd Jordan is probably the most instrumental in getting me to be very serious about what I was doing, because if I didn't practice he would leave me in his office for five hours and *make* me practice. He'd say, 'So you didn't put in the time this week? So you'll make it all up today.' My throat would be cracking and he'd come in and say 'Can I hear it? Okay, you keep getting it until you get it and *then* you can leave out.' But it was great and that's what got me together to really be intense and practice. Any great jazz musician has to put in a great amount of time just practising. To proceed to proficiency, those guys have to put in a lot of time. People don't realise that, that it's a lonesome, lonesome task to develop and learn an instrument on a high level.

Harrison's NOCCA experience echoes other NOCCA graduates in the treatment of the pupils there, with its emphasis on professionalism.

School was great. We were treated as adults in high school by the music teachers. They taught us as though we were in the real world, and I think that gives you an edge. I started going to NOCCA when I was in the eleventh grade. You have to take care of business like you're on a job -- you have to practice, you have to be ready when you come there. You have to do it, there's no getting around it or you can go, because why waste your time? I agree with that practice. These are formative years, and you could be doing something else instead of wasting your time messing around with music. Because once you get in the real world it's so difficult to get a job, even if you can play. At school, I just wanted to learn how to play, and hey, I was just, give me more, that's not enough, give me more!

Signifyin(g) Practice - 'Indian Red'

Each year at Carnival, Harrison 'masks Indian' with his father, Donald Harrison Sr., who is chief of the Guardians of the Flame (demonstrating again the diversity of membership in the Indian tribes). In 1995, Harrison recorded the Mardi Gras Indian standard 'Indian Red' in a modern jazz style (available on *WWOZ on CD Sounds of New Orleans Series*, volume one). The song is an anthem, sung traditionally at the beginning and end of Indian practices and on Carnival Day. Harrison's version, recorded for a compilation compact disc distributed by the Jazz and Heritage Festival, was extremely well received in the New Orleans musical community and was used by local radio station WWOZ to open and close its broadcast of the 1996 Jazz Fest. As one WWOZ disc jockey said,

song, and we all know that. But he did it with such love, such respect, in his own style. He was saying 'I respect you' to all of us. And 'Indian Red' is a killer song, anyway.³

Harrison speaks of the dual inspiration for the song between the tradition of his father and his New York influences.

Well, my thoughts were to take certain elements and use what I know about modern jazz, then bring them to a higher standard artistically while retaining the feeling of what I grew up with. It was very important that I grew up with this music, so I could retain a feeling of it, and it is also very important that I got a chance to play with all the guys who are great modern jazz musicians. So there's a balance, there is a certain balance that I try to achieve with the music. The way we did it was in the first place it was done in the modern context with a Second Line feel, that was an Indian blues with a modern feel, with modern colour changes and a modern harmony, and still retaining the feeling, the original essence of what's it's all about.

This commercial treatment of one of the Indians' most important songs presented no difficulty to Harrison's father.

He doesn't have any problems about it -- it's just that on Mardi Gras Day it's supposed to be a certain way and that tradition has to be held and only certain other people who really know the game can come out at that time of year. The only people who can come to practice -- who can be an Indian at practice -- are the Mardi Gras Indians. It's a very private club and as long as they have those ideals and they stick by their guns, and they have people around who are in power like my father and any of the other big chiefs who believe in that way -- as long as they are around and maybe the younger guys believe in the same way they come up later on, years down the line and still have those ideals, they won't change. But that's not to say it's not changing, it's always changing. Guys do different things, the songs, the routes, the costumes, who's masking from year to year, guys have one type of feather in the '40s and another in the '50s, it changes. My father is trying to add some kind of new feather now.

So Harrison expresses the contradictions that often emerge in discussions with New Orleans musicians, where change and continuity are drawn up into one performance practice, a glance in two directions at once.

Signifyin(g)

In 'Indian Red,' Harrison drew from many experiences to create a song that can be understood on several levels -- Signifyin(g) on his father's music and New York jazz, and open to interpretation in various ways by people conversant with various aspects of the song.

'Indian Red' is a Mardi Gras Indian spiritual. That's what it means to me. There are many different levels of interpretation. I wanted to capture the feeling of what the Mardi Gras Indian tradition means. Like I said, it is a spiritual song so I wanted it to be spiritual -- with the flavour of New York. If you didn't understand what the Indians were about, you still will be able to relate to it from a jazz perspective, if you understood jazz. If you understood spirituals, you'd relate to it from that. And that's what 'Indian Red' comes from, having a lot of experiences in the Baptist church, with the Indians,

³ Graham 1996.

with the modern jazz musicians, and the R&B musicians and being able to put all these experiences into something and draw from there, and then everybody who comes from those other places, they can relate to it from their own experiences, and then you give them something else from the other places you've been. That's what New Orleans musicians have always done. They've been able to take diverse things then put them together and draw people together. The bottom line with music is to bring people some kind of joy, hope, love, peace. If you understand Indians, if you understand New Orleans music, if you understand modern jazz, R&B, then you can hear all those things, and it gives you a deeper understanding and it gives you a deeper feeling for music.

So, for Harrison, music as played by New Orleans musicians carries within it a mechanism for its own criticism, a reflexive potential that can convey a variety of meanings to those with the cultural information to read it.

Historical appraisal: European versus African influence

Harrison speaks of the evolution of the city's music as a sharing of an African-derived style, drawn on by a series of people for different uses through time, rather than as one essential sound, passed down unchanged.

You can just imagine, back to Congo Square -- and imagine that when they went home the people who couldn't make it there, they heard the music of the people who had been there and they'd take it and it stuck and it grew into different elements -- the Mardi Gras Indians probably took some of it, jazz musicians probably took some of it, and now here we are.

In discussions on the European influence on jazz, Harrison echoes most of his contemporaries in New Orleans:

There is an influence of it but it's music that is from an African-American perspective, definitely. I mean, if it was European we wouldn't have syncopation. If it was European we wouldn't have the blues. If it was European so many things that are African in nature, like the soloist stepping out -- if you're doing a chant, in African music one person takes the lead and everybody's underneath them -- the group improvisation, all those things are African.

In placing African styles at the centre of the city's music, Harrison also acknowledges the European influences.

In other places, a lot of the stuff [African music] just died. It wasn't allowed. But it was allowed in some form or fashion to grow here and still be heard. That's what New Orleans is about. I would presume, New Orleans is one of the most African places in the Western hemisphere. Now, I think the French have a great influence here -- architecture, a lot of influence on the food, and the music -- when you listen to zydeco, when you listen to Cajun music, the rhythms and the instrumentation, and all the things that have played a big part in Louisiana, too, you draw from all sorts of things.

Having pointed out the European forms in African-based styles, he also points to the improvisation inherent (and often ignored) in European classical music.

Some of the old classical guys used to improvise too. Bach -- I mean that figured bass is improvisation, it's like reading chord changes. The rule's to let you know something, 'Oh that's the root position, okay,' and then you can do what you want, play your

melody. Figured bass, it's almost the same as playing jazz, the concept of it to me. But I think that with African rhythms, because Africans have syncopation, and the use of different colours on notes, the blues sound and different harmonies, you can play a melody and have the freedom in the music to colour it in any kind of way you feel like colouring it, and even though this is the style, you can still go out of the style and do something that works. With European music it's a certain style you have to improvise in and you can't change. If you're playing Mozart there's just a certain group of people that really understand how to play Mozart, so to speak. And they play it the way that it's supposed to sound and then they love to put their interpretation to Mozart's certain sound, but there's certain things you can't do. In jazz you can do what you want.

When it is pointed out that some people write that New Orleans music is distinctive because the city is a port and all kinds of influences have come through it, and that the innovative music of New Orleans sprang from an equal merging of African and European styles, Harrison suggests that an agenda of racial 'one-upmanship' may be at work in downplaying the African element in the city's musical history.

Anyone who makes that argument, history will prove them wrong. Sometimes people want to make things so that they can feel better about something, because they have some kind of funny hang-up or problem. So they try to rewrite things, or change it a little bit so they can feel comfortable by saying this is this, when it is really something else. But history has a way of proving all people like that wrong. So it's best to just go ahead and say what it really is, and not try to prove something that is false. Because history will bear it out whatever it is, history will bear it out.

Vertical Integration

On the distinction between 'art' music and popular' music, Harrison evokes his mentor Art Blakey on the musicianship necessary for playing jazz:

Jazz musicians often have a lot of respect for classical music, and a lot of them are proficient at being classical musicians as well. Art Blakey used to say this. If there are any doubters they can try it. You can take a jazz musician, and you'll notice a jazz musician can play most styles of music. But musicians from other types of music cannot get on the bandstand with jazz musicians and be proficient stylistically and really deal in the jazz world the way the jazz musicians can deal with other worlds. Maybe they should think about that.

Harrison constructs and represents himself and others in musical terms --music as arena in which he and his community have asserted an independent cultural identity. As presented by Harrison, the goal of the youngster learning music in New Orleans is to develop his or her own approach while accepting the constraints of the model. This initially involves attempting to emulate mentors, integrating the young musician into the norms and values of the community, then a personal contribution in the changes inevitable as musicians translate their life experience into their music.

Each individual has to look inside himself when he plays and he has to go back and study the tradition, and that is a never-ending challenge, to learn as much as possible about great musicians who went before us. But there is something that you also have to realise. All the great musicians had ideals and their ideals *were to be themselves after they learned the tradition*. And that is why Charlie Parker was great, because he told of his experiences through the music. Duke Ellington was great, not because he imitated anybody, but because he played what he felt, and those are the musicians that history

will bear out as being great musicians -- those who had the highest level of proficiency as far as understanding the music and being able to play their instrument and understanding the times they lived in, and taking all those elements and channelling them through their lifetime and being able to relate all of that in a very cognisant way through their music -- history will bear them out, and it really does. If you don't do that, history will treat you very unkindly, because music has certain ideals and you have to deal with them, you really have to deal with them.

Music on the Agenda

Harrison expresses a common attitude of many of the city's musicians toward musical success, articulating a view that looks to the quality of the music to attract an audience, rather than any effort by local policy; it is a view that is not opposed to, but is rather ambivalent about, the impact of the city's initiatives on musicians:

With me, I never worried about whether the city was promoting it or not. I just did things, and if they wanted to come on board they came on board. Each musician or each person who's doing something has to find it in their heart. And if the system is with them, be happy, and if not, if you really believe in it then just do it and keep doing it the best you can. Art Blakey used to tell me 'If you do something that's worthwhile the world will come to your door.' That's what I try to do, something that's worthwhile. For myself and my contribution -- my little corner of the world -- this is what I do, this is the way I do it, this is why I do it, I'm having a ball doing it, if you want come have a ball with me, come on.

When he discusses the consequences of the city's tourism policies, Donald Harrison articulates this balance between making music 'for the love of it' and making music that is only for the money:

It will only bring in some money and maybe some people will change, but as long as the majority of people still feel the same about what they're doing and the reasons that they're doing them, if you're doing it for the love of what you are doing, then nothing changes. If you're doing it for the love of money then it will become something else that has nothing to do with anything but making a fast buck.

Harrison is not worried that tourism or recording success will significantly affect the local emphasis on performance.

That's why I don't think anything changes when people come here, tourists, outside people, because, it's like if you go to Jamaica, reggae is there, and some people make big hits and some people don't, but the culture is so strong in Jamaica that it's not going anywhere. And you go to some places in Europe, like in Ireland, there's their culture, and I don't see how someone getting a hit off it, off the sound, or somebody doing something commercial, is going to affect the culture as long as the people are into it, the people at the grass roots level. If the people that are keeping it alive are there, and the people love it, it's going to stay there.

When discussing changes with new technology and changes in the music industry, and the consequences of those changes for New Orleans, Harrison talks, not in terms of commercialism versus a 'folk authenticity,' but rather in terms of commercialism versus a duality that is inclusive of commerce *and* tradition:

It all rests upon the people who are part of the culture, what their ideals will be and what they want to do with what they have, and the thrust of the direction they want to take it. If they want to take it and just make money with it, it changes. If they understand the

balance of how to do something new, and still calling back and doing the things that are truly out of the tradition, maybe changing it a little bit or keeping it the same or whatever, well, that's the way it's been around here for a long time. We'll just have to see.

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Though every city varies in physical appearance, demographic profile, economic, political and social history, New Orleans has had a pattern of development distinct from the rest of its immediate neighbours in the US-American South, with an African-American musical community that has developed out of conditions exclusive to that place. Like other early settlements in the New World, New Orleans was a place of cultural mix, where people from Europe and Africa intertwined their lives and customs with those of the native inhabitants. The fact that the resulting way of life differed dramatically from those that evolved elsewhere demonstrates the infinite variety of cultural choice when people of different cultures come together. Since those early days, the city has been invented and reinvented by processes associated with social, economic, and political factors both within and without the community. Given a theoretical model that opens up space for the city's cultural practices to be read, researchers might find within its musical practices the values and beliefs of a community that texts have failed to reveal.

Through performing their past in the present, with the shifts and variations that might be expected in any long-running performance with many changes of players, the people who produced the city of New Orleans and its musical styles worked within those patterns taught to them, and at the same time, through economic, social and political pressures, continued to create new patterns of living and creative activity. Meanwhile, the performance and pedagogic practices of New Orleans echo with long-past memories and re-memories, challenging historical texts, celebrating survival through music.

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