

Guthrie Ramsey in Conversation with Stefon Harris

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One of the great things about listening to improvised music, particularly improvised music from the [African American] tradition is that relationships are so important. If you are dealing with a people with a history of social bonds being broken all the time, what people want and value in a musical performance is social relationships being demonstrated through musical metaphor.

– Guthrie Ramsey

Prior to the conversation below, Guthrie Ramsey conducted a master class as part of Express Newark's ["Blues People"](#) exhibition. Dr. Ramsey opened the afternoon with an excerpt of a film he produced "to tell part of the history of African American music." For the balance of the lecture, Ramsey explored examples of and pedagogical processes related to a type of "vocalization and musicianship" central to Black musicking in America that "gets passed along through oral and aural culture" by way of performances with vocalists WAYV WILSON ("Motherless Child") and ALYH ABOVE ("Moanin"), video clips of the gospel group the [Clark Sisters](#), and footage of himself passing down this tradition to his daughter and granddaughter.

STEFON HARRIS (SH): First of all, Dr. Ramsey, I want to thank you for leading with music. I think of you as a really critical figure in what's coming next in the evolution of art in this country, particularly from the perspective of an African American. It's because of this challenge that we've had for centuries, of people observing us, and people observing us from the outside and then trying to tell our story. But we haven't been in a position to actually articulate our own stories from the inside. We've had the ability, but we haven't had access to the infrastructure. So you, being a musician and being a brilliant scholar—bringing them all together, I think is so incredibly fascinating and incredibly important for the sustainability of this art form. Would you mind sharing a little bit with us about how you managed to find yourself? I know your foundation is in music. How did you find yourself in this space of scholarship? What was the journey like?

GUTHRIE RAMSEY (GR): Well, thank you for being here. You're one of my musical heroes. This is just incredible for me.

The transition from musician to scholar was meeting someone who saw it in me: the late, great Samuel Floyd of the Center for Black Music Research, who passed away in 2016. I was a musician. I was teaching school during the day. I was playing at clubs at night. I was playing at three churches on Sunday, I was making babies, changing diapers and just doing the musician thing. I was pursuing a master's in music education, not necessarily because I was into the pursuit of scholarship, but because I was a public school teacher and you could change pay lanes if you had a master's and get \$3,000 more a year... sign me up! And I did it. When you start doing the master's level you have to start reading more. I kept reading his name in books and learned that he and the Center for Black Music Research was in Chicago. I knocked on his office door one day and said, "Sir, I see that you're doing all of this writing. Can you tell me a little bit more about it?" And you know, you don't knock on people's doors unannounced like that—just fall off the turnip truck and show up at his office! And I see him still, looking quizzically over his reading glasses! He took me under his wing and gave me a little thing to do for research. When I completed it—something that would take me two weeks today, it took me about a year to do—he saw that I stuck with it. And then he just said, I think you'd be a great candidate to be a music historian... and it sounded good at the time, so I applied, and I got in [to the University of Michigan]. That's how I went down this road.

SH: In the field of musicology, we don't have a century filled with people of color who had the right to tell those stories. Did you find yourself feeling somewhat isolated as you entered into this field? Were there lots of role models? Or was it that you didn't really see your voice reflected in what had existed before?

GR: There were very few role models at that point. There were some, of course. In the late '80s, early '90s, they tended to be spread out over several disciplines: musicology, ethnomusicology, music theory, music education, composition, and performance. That's where I got my leads from. What happened in my career is, I was one of the first generations of scholars in musicology who could make Black music their specialty. Meaning if a university hired me, they would be hiring me to teach African American music. I wrote my dissertation on Bud Powell. [Writing] jazz dissertations was just picking up steam. People were being allowed to work on those topics. When I went into musicology, there were people who fully expected me to become a Verdi scholar, write on Bellini's *Norma* or opera or something like that. But it was just beginning to open up,

some diversity in topics... they called it multiculturalism back then, back in the day. So that gave me the opening to do this. And now it's common for people to be able to say, "I write on Nina Simone or I write on Meshell Ndegeocello and when a school hires me, I'm going to teach that." But that was not the case when I started.

SH: I've heard you joke about becoming a scholar and needing to learn words like intersectionality, those words that resonate in certain areas. But when I hear your music making, when I hear your compositions, when I see you move to the world of music, you don't seem to move in a way that looks like you're moving from one room to another to another. It seems that your space in music is holistically grounded in Black culture. For me, it's no surprise that you would find your way to someone like Bud Powell because it's all from the same lineage, but I think many people would say, well, you're coming primarily from a gospel foundation. How did you find your way to Bud Powell?

GR: Because when I started... First of all, there was always jazz in the house. I've written a little bit about this... I need to write more. My father and his brothers were into jazz. So, for me, that was a way to identify with what I perceived as a masculinist musicality whereas blues and R&B tended to represent a broader swath. This is just my family history and how I thought about it. We all have specific histories. What I've tried to do in my entire career is to say that we have personal experiences, but what we have to understand those personal experiences as they occurred in the social network. Meaning, you wouldn't know what feels personal unless it was a social phenomenon. Feeling something personally is social, okay?

The jazz was always there. Now, getting into Bud Powell, when I started sitting in with Von Freeman and his crew in Chicago Southside nightclubs, that's all I heard: "Listen to Bud Powell. You need to listen to Bud Powell." People would always tell you who to listen to. So, I was trying to learn—I don't know how good I ever got at it. It was when it became a scholarly specialty, I said I'm going to write about Bud Powell, because that gave me a way to stay close to being a musician in a scholarly setting. And then, why I didn't write the Bud Powell book first and wrote *Race Music* first, was because it was really easy to get branded in scholarship, at that time, as a jazz scholar because there were just a few of us. And they would slot me into the jazz thing... and I saw where that was going, because jazz was becoming accepted more as an art music within the academy—that started in the '50s, but it was becoming more of a thing aligned with classical music. I said, "I'm not going to fall for this one," because

that means I wouldn't be able to talk about all of the other musics that I was interested in, grew up listening to, and wanted to stay connected to as it was emerging, because at heart, I'm a musician and that's what musicians do.

SH: It seems that time and time again you may have run into this issue of bifurcation in culture. Whereas we come from a culture where we don't see things as separate, it's all a manifestation of our communities, of who we are as a people. Whether it comes out as so-called jazz or the blues. But when you enter an institution, sometimes.... You used the word art music, but the art in our culture fundamentally is the expression of our voices. It's not the art of the notes and tones.

So, I want to go back to a really interesting point that I haven't heard expressed by very many people, talking about masculinity and finding a connection for your own masculinity in jazz. Why do you think we haven't had a stronger acknowledgment of women in the history of jazz?

GR: Sexism.

SH: That, that's all you need to say. That's true.

GR: Misogyny, you can throw that in too. I'm not being flip by saying that. But I will say this, that all of my music teachers and music inspirations early on were women. My first piano teacher was a woman, and in the church I attended, women were the musical leaders. The musician for the youth choir was the music director's daughter. And she was very talented and taught us all the new stuff, all of the Hawkins Family music; she was hip and up on it. For me, musicality was always feminine in that way. But there was something about jazz in the settings that maybe I identified with.... I wanted to be like my uncles, so I want to listen to that, too. Now, I often think about what positions that put young women in, if, through socialization, they understood that a certain musical style was associated with masculinity, why would they be attracted to it? And you always have to come back to this idea of power. That gender is not just about sexual assignment, it's about how power is played in the world. So, if you see something that looks attractive and it looks powerful, why wouldn't a woman be attracted to it if they had musical aspirations? But what happens when you show up at the jam session is something else. Then, all of a sudden, you have to find a way to navigate these tricky waters. The same thing goes if you are queer. Where are you going to find the space to exercise the musicality that you're attracted to without getting hit in the head. So it's this: musical life is social life.

SH: Absolutely. It makes me think about the idea that really the foundation and core function of the music is to be a platform for people to articulate what's in their hearts and minds, regardless of your perspective. Clearly, we were brought to this country involuntarily, we come from different parts of the continent. We spoke different languages, practice different religions, didn't know each other. And one of the only ways we were able to sing our truth would have been through music and art.

One of the other things that's really striking for me in observing some of the material you showed today is the role that music is playing here. I love that term you used earlier, "jazz as an art music." But here the music is almost in the background. It's core function... it's not like you're there to watch the organist [in the [Clark Sisters performance](#)], who is amazing, her ability to listen and adjust, and the spontaneity, and [ability to] build emotion and storytelling is absolutely brilliant. But it strikes me that in this situation, the music is not what's most important. And when we tend to think about art music, we tend to center the artists as opposed to the cultural function. Is this a distinction that you've seen quite a bit between Black music and Western music in general?

GR: Yeah, I think I would frame it a little differently though. I love that you're noticing, for instance, Twinkie Clark on the organ. All of those singers are being taught and passed along this idea of timbre or quality of sound being important to everything that you hear—all these different shadings, nasal, throat, guttural, head voice, all in one thing. If you notice, the organist was doing the same thing with the drawbars, going through a mosaic of timbres. And, the audience was responding to every timbral and harmonic shift. They are very sophisticated listeners. They know if you put a #11 on that thing. And the crowd goes, "okay!?" They don't recognize that some believe the music world is carved up into art music and social function music. We might ask, however, "What is the social function of art music?" Because when we call it art, we imply that it's not functional, it's just transcendent. You're silent in the face of it. And you are transformed because you participate in it. The reverse can also be true. If you want to grow as a listener, listen to what *they're* doing... [to] music that is being shorthanded as social function music and not artifice. Part of the work that I've been doing for the last 30 years is to jumble that whole thing up to talk about the social function of terms like art music.

SH: Beautifully framed. Can you talk a little bit about the pedagogic process? Because we're witnessing true brilliance in terms of the way you passed down ancestry from one generation to the next. As educators, we intend to do this

across every field. But there's something really a bit more human, I don't know if that's the correct word, but organic perhaps is better. That's occurring here. I'm curious in two parts. The first part is when I listen to the organist, I'm hearing extremely complex levels of harmony. A deep understanding of functional harmony from a Western tradition, from a jazz tradition, from an African tradition. This is true brilliance. The pedagogic process to get to that level, is it akin to what occurs in terms of music theory lessons. Or is it a different process that happens in the Black church?

GR: What I love about that question [is that] it allows me to segue to one of the singers I'm working with, WAYV WILSON. "V" and I have worked together since 2017, When I first heard V sing, I recognized many tributaries of musical styles that you don't typically find in one person. There was obviously what I just talked about, specific approaches to timbre, for instance, that you're supposed to have a mosaic of timbres at your disposal. You got to move from the head voice to the nasal, to the guttural, and have it all well supported. In theoretical terms, there are certain approaches to scales in the blues family—blues, jazz gospel—that you're supposed to be able to manage and manage them in the context of song... [there's a] cluster of riffs and runs and things like that that come from that tradition. Then I also hear this other thing. People who went through solfège have this mastery of intervals, where no matter what the underlying harmony is, they'll shift with it.

SH: One of the things that is on my heart and on my mind is... first of all, my mother's a minister, so I grew up in a church so I can relate, she's a preacher for real. Last time I saw my moms preach, it was just so much, Pentecostal, so much fire, I was like this is like a Coltrane solo right here, the form, the shape, the emotion, the passion, it's just unbelievable. And as I began to study music over the years at institutions, you start to realize that there's another approach out there. In some ways they want to try to invalidate the foundation that you have. What I know from coming up in the church is that we have something incredibly beautiful to offer the world. It works for us, clearly. We're able to sing our truth. We're able to make it through difficult times. And music is a central part of what helps us do that. We found the function and the art in music.

SH: Is there a way, do you think there's potential... or what struggles would you forecast for us to be able to codify some of these special unique characteristics of our culture and to bring them into the curriculum, to bring them into institutions

so that people outside of our culture can reap the benefits of the incredible things we have to offer as a piece of the fabric of this country.

GR: Throughout my career I've taught at Tufts, Penn, Dartmouth, Harvard, McGill, and Princeton Universities. Frankly, I didn't find those places to be terribly diverse, particularly when I first started teaching. If I think about it, that's what my assignment has been. To take this practice, theorize it, write about it, and teach it in a way that everybody feels that they can be a part [of it]. In the current book I'm writing, *Soundproof*, that's one of the theses: that Black music has been one of the most profound spaces of interracial interaction since the middle passage. It has continued along those lines. Now, power relationships have been a different thing. But when it came down to musicality, the sharing of musicality and the participation in that musicality, it is something that I think is a central thing that we need to understand. I think it is the perfect time for musicians to step up and to share our gifts. Because I, frankly, feel it's one of our only hopes.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., a Guggenheim Fellow and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, is a music historian, pianist, composer, and Professor Emeritus of Music at the University of Pennsylvania.

A widely-published writer, he's the author of *Who Hears Here?: On Black Music Past and Present* (2022), *The Amazing Bud Powell: Black Genius, Jazz History and the Challenge of Bebop* (2013), and *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (2003). He edited and wrote a foreword for Rae Linda Brown's *The Heart of a Woman: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price* (2020) and co-authored with Melanie Zeck, Samuel A. Floyd, Jr.'s *The Transformation of Black Music* (2017).

As a producer, label head, and bandleader, Guthrie has released five recording projects, including *A Spiritual Vibe, vol. 1* and has performed at The Blue Note, The Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, and Harlem Stage. He scored the 2019 prize-winning documentary *Making Sweet Tea*, and the play *The Black Feminist Guide to the Human Body*. His documentary *Amazing: The Tests and Triumph of Bud Powell* (2015) was a selection of the BlackStar Film Festival. Ramsey co-curated the National Museum of African American History and Culture's 2009 exhibition *Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing: How the Apollo Theater Shaped American Entertainment* and was a consultant and narrator in the 2020 Emmy Award winning HBO documentary *Apollo: The Soul of American*

Culture. Guthrie is the CEO of Musiqology Media Group, a production and consulting agency that helps artists produce their best work and to tell their story successfully.

Stefon Harris is a four-time Grammy-nominated jazz vibraphonist, educator, app developer, and thought leader. He has been heralded as “one of the most important artists in jazz” (*Los Angeles Times*) and is a recipient of the prestigious Doris Duke Artist Award and the Martin E. Segal Award from Lincoln Center. He has been named Best Mallet Player eight times by the *Jazz Journalist Association* and Best Vibes Player in *DownBeat Magazine’s* Critics Poll. Harris currently tours with his Grammy-nominated band, Blackout, and has released eleven albums as a leader. He has also recorded and performed with The Classical Jazz Quartet, Kenny Barron, Ron Carter, Lewis Nash, the SFJAZZ Collective, Joe Henderson, Wynton Marsalis, Milt Jackson, Lionel Hampton, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Bobby Hutcherson, Cassandra Wilson, Diana Krall, Max Roach, Chaka Khan, Kurt Elling, Buster Williams, Dianne Reeves, Common, and Pablo Zeigler.

Along with performing, Harris has taught at universities throughout the world, led curriculum development at the Brubeck Institute, served as a part of the jazz faculty at New York University, and formerly served as the Associate Dean and Director of Jazz Arts at Manhattan School of Music. He is currently Artistic Advisor of Jazz Education at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC), the Director of the Harmony Lab at Express Newark, and a tenured Associate Professor of Music at Rutgers University – Newark.

In 2013, he founded The Melodic Progression Institute (MPI) and created a revolutionary ear training app called *Harmony Cloud* which is widely used by musicians across multiple genres.

As a thought leader, Harris leads transformative presentations on corporate leadership and team empowerment for Fortune 100 companies using jazz as a metaphor. His 2012 TED Talk, “There Are No Mistakes on the Bandstand,” has gained nearly 900,000 views. Through these presentations, Harris is committed to the proliferation of empathy through the arts and empowering others with the necessary tools to articulate their authentic voices through music.