

2011  
KRESGE  
EMINENT  
ARTIST

Bill  
Kamau

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

Paul D. Dwyer

*Bill Harris at February 2011 rehearsals for the New York City premiere of "Cool Blues" at the New Federal Theatre. Mural by Sheila Goloborotko/Castillo Theatre, a program of the All Stars Project in New York City.*

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# Foreword

“The responsibility of a writer is to excavate the experience of the people who produced him.”  
—James Baldwin

The Kresge Foundation celebrates poet and playwright, Bill Harris — a lifelong Detroit — for his rich and varied contributions to literature and his unwavering commitment to developing local writers of all ages.

Bill exemplifies the writer as creator and craftsman. He melds the beat of his beloved jazz with the life and breath of his characters, giving voice to those he knows best. In his writing and storytelling he draws on actual life events, cultural history, and his imagination to explore questions that are universal and timeless. In these pages, you will glimpse his life story, experience his art, and come to understand why “allowing students to believe they can be writers,” as he says, is immensely important to him.

From Detroit to New York City and points beyond and in between, Bill Harris has won literary acclaim. And all the while, he calls himself a Detroit artist. It is an honor and a pleasure to recognize him as the 2011 Kresge Eminent Artist.

A handwritten signature in gold ink, reading "Rip Rapson".

Rip Rapson  
President and CEO  
The Kresge Foundation



**Y**our home is like an ancestor, a relative. You love it because it shaped you, and no matter what it or you become, you remember it through young eyes — when it was its sharpest, its hippest, its happiest— and/or if its present image is flaking, charred or down at the heels due to internal or external neglect, or the places you loved are no longer physically there, they remain, nevertheless, in your memory and heart, like that wedding or graduation-day photo. And you love it anyway. Detroit is my home.

From “Coda and Riffs” by Bill Harris



# What It Means To Be A Detroit Artist

by Bill Harris

**I**live on the main thoroughfare in Detroit. I’m used to the hubbub of traffic and the stir of people, subcultures bumping, bouncing off, blending one into another, into another — buoyed both in the moment and with a long-view awareness of history by the deep belief, based in the moment, that it will all be better.

This essay has been adapted from “Stone Songs, Or Disagreeing with Dolphy: Two Weeks In Another Town.” Monograph Series #25 2010 Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine.

Detroit is intense. It is thumps and thuds. Cracks, sprawl, splatters, rust, stress, sighs, full of surprise, and pride. It has a social, industrial, political, and racial history of positives, and not-sos. Labor has always been its reason for being. Migrants from the four corners, bringing their regional influences, and seeking a living wage, were willing to weather a lockout, or a blow to the back of the head from an antiunion goon, for a chance at a better life. They rode on and rocked daily to the rhythms of motor-driven machines making the gears and guts for other machines that moved the world.

They found the strength in tradition and discipline. Reveled in hard knocks and snowflakes, bouquets of bar-b-que smoke, a laugh in a cry, cry in a laugh, and hope. All of this, we decided, must be considered when thinking of the whys and wherefores of what constitutes Detroit art.

That history, with its synthesis of urban and rural rhythms of the blues, swing, bebop, R & B, Motown, rap, and techno, motivated Detroit through the twentieth into the twenty-first century, and its present period of redefinition. To its immense credit, that potage of tempi produced a contemporary creative populous that, taking daily appraisals of the life-pulse around them, eschews frivolity, and focuses on the depiction of the available means of survival. It is an aesthetic of working within forms that made Detroit an industrial giant, and the World War II “Arsenal of Democracy.”

Out of that reality a way of art has been honed on the grindstone of the in-their-face reality around them. That edge finds its way into the poetry, prose, painting, and modeling of the other genres, and is unquestionably in the DNA of all the city’s art forms.

Detroit artists are possessed by, and take possession of, that reality, leading, I think, to an honesty that gives life to art that knows the past and is always in anticipation of the next, the new, and always with a hope that is as vital as one’s next breath, or heartbeat. 📌

Left, inset: Young Bill in 1944 near his Detroit home on Richmond Street, now part of I-75.

Background: Campus Martius, downtown Detroit, 1960s.



# Recognizing the Beat

**A**t some point, you just have to do what you have to do with the writing.

*You have to be aware of the pacing of a piece. One of the primary things I always want to do is get music in it, should it be a sonata, should it be an etude, how much latitude do I have or am I to allow myself? When does it become a play or a novel? What makes those decisions?*

*It has to do with the nature of the material. Is it an inside story or an outside story? Is it a story of the mind or of the moment? Stage has to be more of a moment, two people in a room talking. With a novel or piece of prose, it can be a person thinking, it can be about the process of the realization of an internal moment as opposed to a moment that people can look at and see happen, which is what happens on stage. They share that realization, that revelation at the same time that the characters before them do.*

*With a poem, it's an even more specific moment ...*

*But it is a constant question, in terms of what does this need to be in order for it to be what it needs to be.*

Bill Harris, 2011



# Selected Poetry



## Coltrane, Half Note, New York, 1960

Man. Musician. Not a saint or martyr.  
His life's late Call: Repent. Revere. Reveal  
to those who'd hear. Roil the mainstream's water.  
Probe what the unfathomed might conceal  
unrelentingly, with a convert's zeal.

Trane purged, purified himself, then began  
with a screamsound, as pure as thunderpeal  
bursting unbound, antediluvian,  
to bring light to the murk of Stygian  
gloom; express wonder at the sensed, the seen;  
to give beauty — like fire — Promethean;  
to be in awe; be sanctified — serene.

Sought light midst dark. Bore witness with paeon  
psalms glorifying grey-truths protean.

## Reclining Nude

She lies, naked, twisted  
as the bedclothes.  
her rambling, easy riding papa  
done flagged that sundown train.

It's repeated, it's repeated  
just like a blues refrain.

Alone to do her rocking  
in the cold back  
rocking chair.  
Left her  
and his guitar,  
took and rode on away from there.

She lies empty  
as a cup full of moonlight,  
her coal-black, jelly rolling papa  
done flagged that Northbound train.

It's repeated, it's repeated  
just like a blues refrain.



## Portrait of Louis Armstrong

*Okeh recording studio,  
Chicago, 28 June, 1928.*

King Oliver's Little Louie,  
Dippermouth, Satchmo,

could only have bubbled up  
out of that Delta gumbo  
of Vieux Carré,  
Tenderloin, and Garden District conflicts:

complexion, place, creed, and politics;

seasoned with Back o'Town's pastiche  
of deprivation and parades  
and ragtime pimps with gold teeth,  
tippin' round razor toting whores  
with treasonous dreams.

Savoring the gage's last sweet drag,  
Louie rasps, "Call to order, gates,  
we here to make some music,  
so let's do that thing.  
How 'bout *West End Blues*,  
a-one ...."

and his flashing cadenza  
cascades from the bell  
like a thundering from the Lord,  
downflowing  
onto the old river's deep waters,

overswelling its banks and levees,

and henceforth and forever  
rerouting the mighty mainstream's course.

Pages 8-10 are  
selections from  
"The Ringmaster's  
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Bill Harris

## I Found a New Baby circa 1924

Fairskinned, even in  
her front room's evening  
dim, the boy hangs back.

Charles Junior sits on  
the settee, eyes his  
parents and the boy.

Bathed in her gaze, Charles  
Senior's slanty smile  
seems to take a week.

"I'm got to go off."

Then, sheepish as he's  
shown adds: "I'm giving  
up the life — going  
back to cooking on  
my old Pullman line.

You know his mama  
ain't much count — Well, we  
talked on it, agreed  
he'll get the better  
raising'neath your hand."

The fair boy chews at  
his lip, brushes at  
his straight hair, clutches  
at his bundled things.

\*

"She come to mope or  
nose around," says Charles  
Senior, "just remind  
her I done said, 'Naw.'"

His head motion to  
the boy's like a shove.

Grins at each of them.  
"Send something first chance . . ."  
then eases his hat  
on, rakish, and leaves  
his drunkard's breath and  
the fair boy behind.

"Come here, sugar," she  
says, "come stand here in  
the light and tell me  
what's your name." "Ikey."

"That's what they call you,  
but your real name's John."

"Yes'm." "I know," she

says, searching his face  
for Charles Senior and  
his wild wop-woman;  
can only find the  
least of each of them.

\*

"Charles Junior, meet your  
brother," then hugs the  
fair boy to her, just  
like he is her own.



## My Heart Belongs to Daddy circa 1929

1  
“Take me,” Charlie says,  
his tone assuming  
his bidding will be done.

Ikey’s “No”  
is precise  
as the tap  
of a tuning fork.

“You promised . . .” Nearer now  
to the pitch Ikey,  
attentive as a tuner  
to a concert grand,  
is listening for. “No.”

“Yes you did, . . .” a quaver.  
“The last time you went . . .”

‘Better,’ Ikey, thinks.  
The high-tone nearly gone,  
but still not meek enough.  
Still too  
Mama’s Boy.

‘Mannish!’  
their mother had confided  
about her second son’s  
latest stage. ‘Next  
he’ll be shooting pool.’  
\*

“I’ll  
tell her  
you go see him  
all the time,” but  
without heat or a tinge  
of the tone.

“I don’t care.” Ikey’s face  
a shield of nonchalance. A look  
Charlie has seen on older men (their  
father even, when he wasn’t  
‘in his sin’); men

relaxed, among themselves;  
greeting passing women  
or officers of the law. A look  
he loves.

“He’s my daddy,” Ikey adds. “See ’im  
when I want to. Any-  
body don’t like it,  
just too black-ass bad.”

Mannish! Mannish,  
Charlie thinks, the awe,  
the affection blazing in his eyes,  
hot-bright  
as Kaycee’s setting sun.

Ikey smiles,  
thinking  
he has won . . .  
\*

2  
“He’s my daddy, too,”  
Charles says, playing  
the trump card  
he didn’t know was in his hand.  
Says it instinctively,  
charged (at that  
moment) with utter but guile-  
less conviction; composed  
of intriguing desire  
and naked need. A tone  
he will hone, wield  
on pushers, club owners, sidemen,  
women, the authorities, and fans.

Ikey looks away. Spits. “Okay  
next time . . . You don’t  
get on my nerves before . . .”

Little Charlie waits,  
with a look of imitative  
indifference, says nothing more.

## Pennies from Heaven: Wham Bam

A lush shadow-shape  
answers Ikey’s knock,  
calls back in the house,  
“Baby! your boy  
back, again.”

Ikey turns to me, rooted  
in the unkept yard, winks.

Our daddy, holding the screendoor open,  
leans easy on the off-  
plumb frame, red braces heisting  
his pinstriped, yellow slacks.

They speak, low, familiar, like man  
to man; him watching me  
with hand-shaded eyes. He signals.

“Hey,” he says, and rubs  
my head with his woman-soft hand.  
“Taking care your mama good?”  
“Yes, sir — I guess.”  
He nods a minute, looks away,  
then: “Want a dime?” Hollers  
back into the house,  
“Eula! Bring me a dime here.  
Go on in there, boy,  
she’ll give you one.”  
\*

Inside as untended  
as the yard. Blue raw  
riffs drift from another room.

The woman, housecoat open, titties  
lulling in her dusk-pink slip,  
enters from where the victrola plays,  
enters, humming, through the glass-  
bead curtain — baubled strands rolling  
and sliding about her mulatto body  
like drops of jeweled sweat.

“So. You his other boy, huh?  
And a Charles, too, named for him.”  
She laughs inside herself. “Hope  
for your sake  
that’s all you got of his.”

Then, without consideration or  
shame, reaches down, in between her  
ample, ample, yellow, yellowness,

rummages, then with her free hand  
cups and hefts one,  
a fresh-ripe fleshy fruit,  
hefts, as if testing its  
nubile weight.  
(Rooted,  
I could no more not look  
than Mrs. Lot.)  
Rummages, till, at last,  
she fishes out a tatty  
purse of coins.

“Close that damn screen,” she calls,  
making me remember they, too,  
are in the world, “or this place’ll  
be full of flies.” Says it  
soft and easy, soft  
and easy as lullabies.  
It slams behind them as they  
move, talking, out into the yard.

“He say a dime?”

Eyes groping; them nipples  
big and poking,  
I nod, dumb as Adam’s ox.

Cool coin in my feverish palm.  
Mouth  
cotton-dry.

“Thank you — ma’am.”  
“Manners, huh? Here,  
have another. Hell, they’s  
mine much as his. More,  
for that matter.

But still, that second one’s  
our secret, . . . hear?”

Swear on the spot  
not to never spend it. Never.  
Not no time in my life.  
\*

“Don’t tell your mama  
where you got it,”  
Papa warns me after, “or  
where you been.”

And, to Ikey, says,  
“See you soon . . .”

*Pages 11-13 are  
selections from  
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Award, is the  
author’s first  
published book  
of poetry.*



# Selected Play Excerpts



Harris' "Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil"  
in an April 21, 1993 production at The  
Black Rep/The St. Louis Black Repertory  
Company, St. Louis.



excerpt from  
**“Riffs”**



CLAYBORN

(Pause.)

I *still* don't remember Bermuda Mohawk.

GROOVE

He was the hard-luck-est, low down-est son of a gun ever breathed air in the city of Detroit.

TUPELO

If luck was sugar, Bermuda couldn't've sweetened a spoonful of tea.

GROOVE

If common sense was soapy water, Bermuda couldn't've bathed a flea. And drank that Comet's Tail long as he could get it.

TUPELO

He was a menace to his-self and the North End.

GROOVE

Except for that one time.

TUPELO

That's right. Bermuda went for Indian.

CLAYBORN

Blackfoot?

GROOVE

Foot, face and ass.

TUPELO

Claimed on his granddaddy's side he was a West Indian Indian. Say that's where the name Bermuda come from. Claimed his grandmama was full blooded Mohawk.

GROOVE

Tried every way he could think of to keep from being a plain old Negro.

**Riffs** was first presented by Ron Himes at The Black Rep/The St. Louis Black Repertory Company, St. Louis, Missouri, on March 31, 1995. The men in "Riffs" are friends and nurturers who love and respect themselves, their experiences and each other. "Riffs" uses rich bantering language like a symphony of sorts, bringing forth a rhythmic, riotous slice of life.

**CHARACTERS**

**T. MIMS:** Retired department-store doorman.

**GROOVE:** Retired rhythm & blues & jazz radio disc jockey.

**TUPELO:** Retired barber.

**CLAYBORN:** Former blues singer.

**COSTUMES:** These are not frumpy old men. Each is concerned with his appearance. Even if they are out of style, they do it with style. Each has a hat or series of them.

**PLACE:** Detroit's North End; metropolitan Detroit suburb.

**TIME:** Whenever.

**SETS**

**ACT ONE:** Spoon's Lounge, a bar. Tables or booth with seating for at least four.

**ACT TWO:** A fast food national franchise type restaurant. Tables or with seating for at least four.

**ACT THREE:** Thomas Junior's large suburban backyard. Adirondack chairs & tables.

There is no need for the set to be realistic. Evocative & minimal; open space simple; push it on, pull it off.

At all times the dialogue should be presented as musically as possible. A continuous mix of the rhythms of bop, blues and rhythm and blues. It should approximate a jazz fugue, or quartet for four voices doing themes and variations, with rhythmic repeats, i.e., riffs; swinging whenever possible.

Pre-show music should include "Without a Song," by James Cleveland & "Precious Lord," by Hank Crawford, "Straighten Up and Fly Right," Nat Cole; "Caldonia," Louis Jordan.



TUPELO

One while Bermuda had me shaving his head with just a patch down the middle.  
Mohawk style.

T. MIMS

That's what kept him from having good sense, spent so much time trying to keep from  
being an ordinary Negro till it ruined his judgment. — Like Tom Tom's wife.

GROOVE

You remember his biggest mistake of all?

TUPELO

His biggest mistake, and the first positive thing he ever did.

TUPELO

Cameron Street. Christmas Eve.

CLAYBORN

What yall talking about?

GROOVE

(*"Yes."*)

But there was another time too. The time with the monkey.

T. MIMS

(*To audience.*)

You see what's happening, don't you? You know what they getting ready to do.

TUPELO

When was that?

T. MIMS

(*To audience.*)

Lie.

GROOVE

You remember about the dancing monkey.

TUPELO

I don't remember that.

GROOVE

You didn't hear about that?

TUPELO

Don't remember.

GROOVE

You'd remember if you had. Panhandler's monkey.

T. MIMS

(*To audience.*)

They getting ready to tell lies on innocent animals now.

TUPELO

Naw —

GROOVE

Panhandler named Six-Mile Willie. Had a parrot, Pinochle Polly, and a monkey  
that danced.

T. MIMS

You lying.

GROOVE

If I'm lying, I'm flying.

T. MIMS

Ladies and gentlemen, fasten your seat belts. We are in for a rocky ride.

GROOVE

And wore a top hat all the time.

CLAYBORN

Who?

GROOVE

Huh?

CLAYBORN

The top hat.

GROOVE

Six-Mile wore the hat ...

CLAYBORN

Six-Mile was the panhandler?

GROOVE

Six-Mile Willie.

CLAYBORN

And the monkey danced.

GROOVE

While the parrot whistled.

TUPELO

I don't remember nothing about this.

GROOVE

Monkey's name was *Master* Mumbo Jumbo.



CLAYBORN  
Master Mumbo Jumbo.

GROOVE  
They panhandled mostly around Eastern Market.

TUPELO  
Did?

T. MIMMS  
*(To audience.)*  
He say “Did?” like they didn’t work this out before hand.

GROOVE  
Six-Mile Willie, Pinochle Polly, the whistling parrot, and Master Mumbo Jumbo, the dancing monkey. And they made pretty good money.

TUPELO  
Did?

T. MIMS  
*(To audience, mimicking.)*  
“Did?”

GROOVE  
Especially on Saturdays; day folks go down to get fresh vegetables and meat. That monkey could dance.

T. MIMS  
*(To GROOVE.)*  
I suppose “Master Mumbo Jumbo” did a tap dance?

GROOVE  
Did a dance to whatever kind of music Pinochle Polly the parrot would whistle. And she could scat-whistle just like Ella Fitzgerald doing *How High the Moon*.

*(Demonstrates.)*

TUPELO  
Could he Charleston?

GROOVE  
Could Mohammed Ali run his mouth?

TUPELO  
I’d like to see a monkey do the Charleston one time before I die.

T. MIMS  
*(To audience.)*  
Isn’t that everybody’s dream?

GROOVE  
Master Mumbo Jumbo done it. You missed it.

TUPELO  
Damn! I missed Tiny Tim’s wedding too.

GROOVE  
Six-Mile Willie wore that top hat all the time, summer and winter. It was his trademark.

CLAYBORN  
The monkey and the parrot should’ve been trademark enough.

GROOVE  
Kept the parrot up under the top hat when they wasn’t working, collected handouts in it when they were. Anyway, Bermuda was down there one time, picking up some peaches for Shorty O.

TUPELO  
That’s right, ‘cause he worked for Shorty O.

GROOVE  
Drove a truck, picking up fruit for Shorty O to make that moonshine.

TUPELO  
Sure did.

GROOVE  
That’s when Bermuda saw Six-Mile Willie and his dancing monkey.

TUPELO  
That make sense.

T. MIMS  
*(To audience.)*  
Yeah, right.

GROOVE  
End of the day Six-Mile Willie, Pinochle Polly and Master Mumbo Jumbo, the monkey, go down the alley at Orleans to the bank there on Gratiot.

T. MIMS  
Before they put the expressway through so the white people could get out of town quick.

GROOVE  
Six-Mile was saving up for another monkey. Had to save; couldn’t get a loan.

TUPELO  
Couldn’t he get a co-signer?

GROOVE

Master Mumbo Jumbo was the only somebody Six-Mile Willie knew with any money. But the fact the monkey was making more money than most Negroes during that time, didn't hold no sway with the loan officer.

TUPELO

Saving to get another monkey, huh?

GROOVE

Yeah, a girlfriend and dancing partner for Master Mumbo Jumbo. The little hairy son of a bitch stayed horny, and was getting hard to live with. Got so Six-Mile was scared to leave Master Mumbo Jumbo alone with Polly.

T. MIMS

*(To audience.)*

Imagine the off-spring from that union! Get something can hang by its tail, eat bananas, talk about your mama, and then fly its signifying behind on off?

GROOVE

This one time Bermuda delivered the peaches to Shorty O. Then he got him a jug of that Comet's Tail Wine. Went back down to the market. Sipped away the rest of the day, watching Six-Mile, and them do their show and collect money. Night fall. Market closes. Six-Mile and Master Mumbo Jumbo heading for the bank. Polly up under the top hat. It's dark, right. Bermuda run up behind them in the alley there, grabbed Master Mumbo Jumbo, threatened to blow its monkey brains out Six-Mile don't hand over the money.

CLAYBORN

That's low down, mug a man's monkey.

T. MIMS

*(To audience.)*

The lie these two Negroes telling; *that's* what's low down.

GROOVE

Bermuda played like he had a pistol, all it was was his hand in his pocket. But Six-Mile didn't know that. He handed over the day's receipts, and Bermuda run off down the alley.

TUPELO

*That* was cold.

GROOVE

Naw, that was when Bermuda's trouble started.

TUPELO

Cops caught him, huh?

GROOVE

Worse than that. But he did end up empty handed and in jail.

TUPELO

Like always. That Negro was a menace to his-self and the North End.

GROOVE

Except for that one time.

But this time, before he could get to the other end of the alley, Crackers, with shoe polish on his face as a disguise, jumped out from behind a trash can and told Bermuda to stick 'em up.

Bermuda jumped bad. Showed his hand-in-his-coat-pretend-like-he-had-a-pistol-pistol. Crackers showed Bermuda his real-pistol-in-his-hand-pistol, then run off with *Six-Mile's* money *and* Bermuda's wallet and clothes, except for them six buckle goulashes he wore all the time.

CLAYBORN

You didn't say nothing about Bermuda wearing goulashes before.

TUPELO

They was kind of his trademark.

GROOVE

Anyway, Bermuda, naked as a jaybird, went straight to the Police station, to file a complaint on the Negro mugged him. By that time Six-Mile and his menagerie showed up to file their complaint about being mugged. Bermuda couldn't identify *his* mugger, except that he was dark skinned, and smelled like Kiwi ....

TUPELO

That shoe polish ....

GROOVE

... but *Master Mumbo Jumbo* ....

TUPELO

... The monkey ....

GROOVE

... give the police a positive i.d. on *Ber-muda!* They loaned him some prison over-alls and locked his butt up.

TUPELO

Sound like what they call a precedent setting case.

GROOVE

Bermuda fought it up to the Supreme Court.

TUPELO

Master Mumbo Jumbo hired an NAACP lawyer and won the case.

GROOVE

It was in JET.

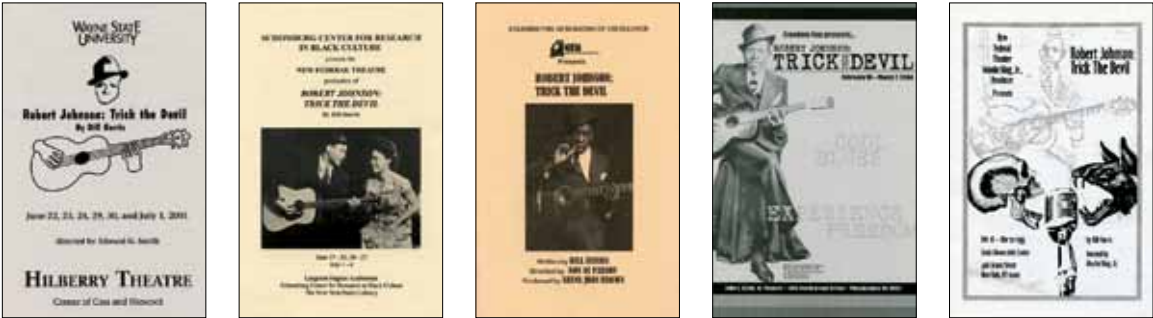
TUPELO

Yeah, Bermuda was a menace to his-self and the North End, whether he was drinking that Comet's Tail Wine or not. 🍷



excerpt from

“Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil”



**Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil** premiered on Feb. 18, 1993 with The New Federal Theatre at the Henry Street Theatre at the Henry Street Settlement: Abrons Arts Center in New York City.

“In most people’s mind, Robert Johnson was more a myth than a man. The nature of the myth – that he sold his soul to the Devil – seemed to me, to serve a community other than the one from which Johnson came. I wanted to, if not “set the record” straight, at least present counter possibilities that shed light on the darkness at the heart of the myth-makers intent. I have always been intrigued and guided by jazz and blues men. They get to speak with true voices of freedom in ways that not many other African Americans have access to.”

- Bill Harris on writing “Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil,” taken from an interview with Runako Jahi for eta Creative Arts Foundation in Chicago.

**CHARACTERS**  
**STOKES:** Blind piano player. A seer.  
**GEORGIA:** Late 30s, early 40s. Her own woman.  
**ROBERT JOHNSON:** Mid 20s. Lean. Blues singer. Insecure and braggadocious.  
**KIMBROUGH:** White. New England academic.  
**LEM:** A broken man in his late 30s, early 40s. Georgia’s estranged husband.

**TIME:** Summer 1938. Blues legend Robert Johnson is back touring the jook joints of Mississippi after a historic recording session in Dallas. Unbeknownst to him – his last.

**SETS:**  
**ACT ONE:** Georgia’s Colored Jook Joint, Mississippi.  
**ACT TWO:** Same place, a moment later.



ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

KIMBROUGH: *(Frustrated.)*

How could somebody make records like his and his own people not even know his name?

GEORGIA: Just because you want him don’t mean we got to know him.

STOKES: You know all the white folks made records? *(KIMBROUGH is silent.)*

STOKES: If I could hear him though I could tell you whether he from Alabama, *(Demonstrates.)* Texas, *(demonstrates.)* eastern Arkansas *(Demonstrates.)* or Tennessee; whether he’s a rambler or ain’t never left home. And if he been north? what railroad he took. And don’t let him be from Mississippi! — especially the Delta. Can nail it down to plantation and damn near who his daddy was.

KIMBROUGH: I told you, Robert Johnson is his name.

GEORGIA: *(To STOKES)* Can’t always go on a name, can you?

STOKES: I knowed a Robert Smith one time. They called him Chicken Lips. White folks called him Uncle Chicken Lips. Knowed a woman they called Pot Luck.... But no Robert Johnson.

GEORGIA: I remember a Bo-Peep, a Snooky, a Baby Boy and a woman named Barefoot. Now them some names.

STOKES: ... Mo Jo, Skeeter, Black Pearl ... Zero. Every year at settling time Zero’d get mad because he’d come out in the hole again. Worked a whole ‘nother year and come out owing the white man. Zero’d get drunk and run everybody out of town, white folks, dogs, everybody. Him and his family was such good workers though till the landlord couldn’t afford to kill him, so he let Zero have his little fun. Happened so regular they turned it into a local holiday. Zero Day they called it. Let me see, who else?

GEORGIA: A fellow up in Hopkins, Mississippi they first named School Boy. Probably hadn’t even never been near no school, so, of all the things they could have called him, they still called him School Boy. Anyway, one night he went to dreaming he was in a fight, got his pistol from under his pillow, shot his self in the foot. They called him Four Toes after that.

STOKES: Smokey Junior. He lived up by Miller County. Had some trouble about something with the Klan down there. Found him shot three times in the heart. Sheriff said he committed suicide.

GEORGIA: *(Laughs.)* Who ever heard of a Negro committing suicide anyway?

STOKES: Sheriff claimed Smokey Junior did.

GEORGIA: Naw, no Robert Johnson. But I knowed somebody one time didn’t have no legs, stuttered when he talked, and kept a rattlesnake named Gertrude for a house pet. And they call that negro, Hambone Red. Now, this one time he got into it, probably behind some signifying, with another negro. Over a woman run a whore house for a Chinaman outside a turpentine camp near Morganfield Station, Alabama.

STOKES: Right there where the Black Diamond Streamline train cross the Burnett River there.

GEORGIA: That’s right. Now the woman she was double sized. Weighed 500 pounds soaking wet.

STOKES: Must took a barrel of water to dampen her, and had to weigh her on cotton scales.

GEORGIA: I don’t know what they weighed her on, but it come to 500 pounds when they got through.

STOKES: That’s five bails! You ever picked 500 pounds of cotton?

GEORGIA: You?

STOKES: Yeah.

KIMBROUGH: But you’re blind.

STOKES: They didn’t care nothing about that, they just wanted that damned cotton picked. But about Hambone Red ....

GEORGIA: And now the fellow Hambone Red got into it with stood six feet seven inches in his big bare feet. And was broad through the shoulder as a crossbeam in a Baptist church.

KIMBROUGH: “To have a giant’s strength; but it is tyrannous To use it like a giant.” What was his name?

GEORGIA: Second Cousin. That was all anybody called him. Second Cousin. Everybody. Whether they was kin to him or no. So Second Cousin stood up there tall as the center pole in a revival tent as he threatened Hambone Red about this woman.

STOKES: Hell, she weighed 500 pounds, was enough of her for both of them.  
GEORGIA: Second Cousin wanted all of her to hisself. And threatened Hambone Red about her. Now Hambone Red couldn't run ....  
STOKES: Because, you say, he didn't have no legs.  
GEORGIA: That's right. And neither could he get his lie out good, because he got excited when Second Cousin threatened him ....  
STOKES: And he went to stuttering. (*"Right?"*)  
GEORGIA: That's right.  
STOKES: I don't blame him, negro that size.  
GEORGIA: That's right. So wasn't nothing left for Hambone Red to do but defend his self best way he knew how.  
KIMBROUGH: "But that defenses, musters, preparations Should be maintained, assembled, and collected As were a war inexpectation." So, What did Hambone Red do to defend himself?  
GEORGIA: Shot Second Cousin.  
STOKES: Did?  
GEORGIA: Five times.  
STOKES: Damn.  
GEORGIA: Ankle, knee, stomach, chest and head.  
STOKES: Chopped him down like a pine tree.  
GEORGIA: To keep that big negro from chucking his little ass off that trestle down in front of that Black Diamond Streamline barreling south through there that evening like convicts busting out of jail.  
STOKES: (*To KIMBROUGH.*) Every evening, 7:30 like clockwork. And even if that Streamline hadn't killed him, being throwed off that trestle would've.  
GEORGIA: Whole thing scared Hambone Red so bad that when it was over he didn't stutter no more.  
KIMBROUGH: Cut down as was Titus Andronicus.  
"And hither hale that misbelieving Moor,  
To be adjudg'd some direful slaughtering death,  
As punishment for his most wicked life."  
What happened did Hambone Red go to jail?  
GEORGIA: Not yet.  
STOKES: Kill a white man, next stop hell. Kill a negro, fare-thee-well.  
GEORGIA: Negro steal a nickel, do some time, white man take a million, that's just fine.  
KIMBROUGH: (*"Amazing."*) And what was the woman's name who was the cause?  
STOKES: Yeah, names is what got us going on this in the first place. What was the woman's name they was fighting over?  
GEORGIA: Honeydipper.  
STOKES: And what about the snake?  
GEORGIA: Gertrude? What about it?  
STOKES: You tell a story you got to tell it all.

GEORGIA: Well I heard what finally happened was Honeydipper was getting over in the bed with Hambone Red one night, stepped on Gertrude, killing it on the spot. And it scared big Honeydipper so bad she fell over on top of Hambone Red. Killed him too.  
STOKES: Umph! Bet it crushed him like a grape.  
GEORGIA: So, that's the story of Hambone Red, Honeydipper and Gertrude.  
STOKES: (*To KIMBROUGH.*) See, so what all that tells you is, a name don't mean what it might where you come from.  
GEORGIA: White man get a name he can keep it forever.  
STOKES: We ain't knowed our real name since we been here.  
GEORGIA: Best we can do is you know somebody by the name they go by.  
STOKES: He might be "so and so" over here, then be "such and such" over there. See. And neither one might not be what his mama named him. And I might know some stories on a fellah, but not *his* story, you see. And even if you know, like I say, it ain't etiquette to tell. It's strictly his business. And see, the way yall keep us dipping and dodging with this Jim Crow business and all, thing like leaving forwarding address can take second seat to trying to put food in your belly.  
KIMBROUGH: But I *paid* them: tobacco, whiskey, money, to deliver him to me, or tell me where he could be found. And they'd promise me —  
(*In black dialect.*) "Robert, he be at such and such a place, such and such a time." Or, "He was just here yesterday, tomorrow he be at so and so," and I go, and they would tell me, "He just left yesterday," or, "We never heard of nobody go by that name, boss."  
STOKES: Like the Indian say, "A heap see, but few know."  
KIMBROUGH: What Indian?  
STOKES: *The* Indian.  
KIMBROUGH: I'm afraid I don't understand the reference.  
STOKES: (*"That proves my point."*) See.  
KIMBROUGH: (*With edge.*)  
This is serious. You think if it wasn't I'd be chasing after a colored boy I know less and less about the more I ask?  
STOKES: (*not intimidated*) I don't know what you'd do.  
KIMBROUGH: Why do all you people take me for a fool?  
(*Sound of THUNDER. Pause as they react to it.*)  
STOKES: Well, yall ain't going worry me about looking for a guitar playing man.  
(*Sound of THUNDER, followed by RAIN. Pause as they react to it.*)  
GEORGIA: (*To STOKES.*) You know where I'll be. (*To audience.*) I think it started raining just as I was going upstairs. (*Laughs.*) I took it as a sign.  
(*To KIMBROUGH*) You need anything, Stokes'll get it for you. You can pay him. (*She exits.*)



## ACT TWO

ROBERT: So I tell Willie Brown, “I’m going take my guitar and go down to the crossroads, man, see what old Satan got to say.” And old Willie say he would go but there was this old juicy gal had finally said what he wanted to hear. And since he could run into old Satan anytime, but this might his only shot at this big legged brownskin he was going let me go head on by myself. Well, that was all right ‘cause I’d been alone like that most of my life. And so I went on down. Got there just after midnight just like they say. And I waited. But didn’t nothing happen. Way off in the distance I heard a dog howl and an old owl cut loose with a hoot, so I sat down and got out my guitar and went to picking at a little tune. And still didn’t nothing happen. And so I said to myself, shoot, I look like a fool sitting out here on the edge of west Hell waiting on somebody, so I got myself on up from there and was just fixing to go on about my business, when all of a sudden I heard a laugh. And the Devil showed up. Sitting opposite of me on the stump of a tree. He wasn’t no bad looking fella as far as that went, least not like I might’ve thought. Didn’t have no faceless head with two horns swarming around with flies, big long tail and claws on his feet. He was just an ordinary white man in a suit and tie — but still he had blood in his eye. He explained the way it was supposed to go is I hand him my guitar and he play on it then hand it back, and the deal be done and I be able to play from then on like a rabbit can run. Well I thought about it and it seemed too easy to me. I hadn’t never got nothing before I didn’t earn, nor most of what I had; so I wondered what made me think he was about to start then? And besides, I’m particular, and I don’t let just anybody handle my guitar. I’m funny like that. So I got sassy and told him my guitar was all I had and if he wanted to play he had to get his own damned guitar. He told me, “Give me that goddamn guitar here, nigger!” And I didn’t move. I’m thinking that’s the way they talk to you here then it ain’t a bit better than where I just left, and to hell with it! I could’ve stayed home I wanted to be treated like a dog, fool or a child. And Satan say if I *didn’t* hand it over he was going do everything but eat me, and he might do that too. Well, I was new to the place, so I didn’t know if he could or no. And he told me then, “All right then, let me see what you can do.” And so I hit the lick I’d learned from worrying Son House and them. And the Devil fell out laughing. Laughed so hard he almost hurt hisself. Well that hurt my little feelings, and made me mad at the same damn time. So I kept on — trying to make up something, trying to remember every music I’d heard, from the Delta through the swamps of Louisiana, ‘cross the Mississippi and the Gulf on the Brazos. But that just tickled him all the more. He told me, he says, “Get on ‘way from here, boy, you ain’t doing nothing but wasting my time.” But he was having too much fun laughing to move. And I kept on like didn’t nothing matter, not a man, woman, child or plot of land. But I did quit trying to copy cat off them others playing. But still the Devil he say, “Boy, you can’t play no music.” Still I was whipping that guitar more ways than a skinner can whup a mule. But I could feel myself getting weaker. And I was getting scared. He wasn’t laughing no more. Everything was changing and I could feel myself sinking down to the deepest

places and the darkest parts — deep in hell as a hawk can fly in a week, to where 60 seconds was a day. Pigs could have puppies. And dead men dealing 5 card stud laughed at 3 headed babies as they drowned in lakes of sand. I was slipping back to the beginning of all mankind, but I kept on playing, knowing it was all stood between me and losing my soul. But I kept on playing — But then little by little, from somewhere, I don’t know, from me, mostly — I thought. But maybe not. Look like something told me to walk them four corners from point to point. And I did. Then kitty corner. Then round and round. And that’s what I done. And something else come to me and say, “Bob, the best way to get ahead is to go back where you started.” And I reckon that’s when I took the Devil by surprise. Because then it wasn’t just me no more — You know how folks, the old folks, talk, when they be setting around last before bed time, taking the ease of the evening air; we little nappy heads be dozing at their knee. And their words and thoughts be drifting out, like cook smoke into the moonlight — telling about *their* old folks and their old *folk’s* folk, far back as they could tell. And all what’d happen and the feelings to the time before the Devil first come to over there where they started. And following on up through their low down days and nights of sorrow: the bondage, being bid for on the block, the lash, Jim Crow, the rope, the chain gang and the Klan. And the longer I played look like the stronger it was coming out that guitar. And *that’s* what got the Devil, because he couldn’t call none of it a lie! The strings was so hot they was smoking and fire was coming from the box. And I handed it to him, and I say, “Now you can play it if you want to.” But it was so hot till he couldn’t handle it. And well — that just poured him back in the jug! He was so jealous all he could do was get out his guitar. And play. And it was the meanest, most hellish blues I ever heard. And just like I done with Willie Brown and them, I watched and saw how he done it. And *that’s* how I got to know the Devil’s tune! And he knew it. But right then wasn’t nothing he could do. And then he say, “Get on ‘way from around here, boy, I ain’t got time for you now.” And he got up and walked with me back to the gates of Hell. He told me, he say, “You going take some studying. But just as sure as 3 times 9 is 27, some day you bound to fall.” But I had him then, and him or nobody else couldn’t tell me nothing. Now that’s just how it happened, and every word is true. (*Goes to get drink.*) 🍷





excerpt from “Coda”

**Coda:** a concluding musical section at the end of a composition, introduced to bring it to a satisfactory close.

“Coda” premiered April 27, 1990 at Detroit’s Attic Theatre. Directed by veteran producer-director Woodie King, Jr., Coda is among Harris’ most beloved plays, a moving tribute to the last days of Detroit’s legendary jazz scene, its venerable musicians and their enduring legacy.

**CHARACTERS**  
**MADDOX (DOX):** Late 40s. Black. Jazz musician.

**WEATHERSPOON (SPOON):** Late 40s. Black. Bar owner.

**ROYST:** Late 30s, early 40s. White. Former musician, now host of children’s television program. Huck Finn in Pat Boone’s clothing.

**THERESA:** Early 20s. Black. Daughter of Maddox. Jazz musician. Has hard edged, hip sense of humor. Never self-pitying.

**SETTING:** North-End Detroit neighborhood jazz club. (Spoon’s Lounge) should have the feeling of being lighted primarily by the sunlight which fights its way in from outside & the few neon signs & working lights behind the bar; not gloomy but dim. There is possibly a mural featuring a reclining, scantily clad female, or dueling horn players, on the wall behind the bandstand. Also publicity photos, some yellowing and curling, of musicians who have worked the club over the years. A piano on the bandstand. Small tables with chairs, seats down atop them.

**TIME:** Monday, March 14, 1955, morning.



ACT ONE

DOX  
If Theresa had been an orphan, or grew up in the streets I could dig it. If she’d come from somewhere like this kid I met in the joint. He didn’t know *nothing*. Spoon. Nothing!

SPOON  
Did he even know that?

DOX  
What? That he didn’t know nothing? *No*.

SPOON  
Not even a clue.

DOX  
Hadn’t been *taught* nothing. In for armed robbery. I’m surprised he knew which end of the gun to point. I don’t mean ignorant, but — unschooled.

SPOON  
Nobody ever took time to *teach* him.

DOX  
Theresa had grown up like that .... He didn’t even know to brush his teeth every damn day. I knew if I *didn’t* show him something, the simplest thing, that when he got out he’d be back inside, inside a month.

SPOON  
Inside or dead. So you showed him...

DOX  
How to get a sound of the horn.

(“*That’s all it was.*”)

SPOON  
And once you *showed* him.

DOX  
And he *knew* that he *didn’t* know ....

SPOON  
But showed him gentle enough so he wasn’t *ashamed* of *not* knowing ....

DOX  
And didn’t have to be *afraid* of *wanting* to know ....

SPOON  
The Detroit way: like we used to do it: he could learn. If he wanted to. You would *teach* him.

DOX  
The Detroit way.

SPOON  
Un huh.

DOX  
(“*He blossomed. Blossomed!*”)  
You could see him opening up. Like a flower to the sun.

SPOON  
(“*Of course.*”)  
The Detroit way.

DOX  
Once I got him to *admit* he wanted to learn the horn.

SPOON  
You could *teach* him something then ....

DOX

Liked-to-worried-me-to-death after that.

SPOON

Just that he knew he didn't know.

DOX

He was willing to learn.

SPOON

That's all you need to know if you want to know.

DOX

Wanted to know everything. And *I* learned teaching him.

SPOON

*("Of course you did.")*

The-Detroit-way. Know that made you feel good.

DOX

That's the way we learned.

SPOON

The way we were *taught*.

DOX

Long way to go, long time to spend, for a simple lesson.

SPOON

Those be the ones sometimes. — How'd you spend the rest of your time?

DOX

Couldn't've made it if I'd been younger.

SPOON

That kid's age.

DOX

But I set up a little music department. Not too much hassle. Practiced everyday.

SPOON

Anybody to blow with?

DOX

Couple of cats, but it was mostly tax dodgers and they didn't have a whole lot of soul.  
You really think Theresa'll be in?

SPOON

She'll be here. Royst, too. I told him you were coming.

DOX

The TV star .... I could not believe it when I heard ....

SPOON

Channel 7 every Saturday morning. The kids dig him.  
Uncle Rooster. And his Rooster Boosters.

DOX

God bless America.

SPOON

Land of opportunity.

## ACT TWO

*(As above. No time has passed.)*

SPOON

*(To audience, referring to DOX & THERESA.)*

The Detroit way.

You know where the word jazz comes from, don't you?

From a French word —

*(With exaggerated French accent.)*

*jazz*er. Means to talk, y'know, run it down. Yeah.

And you know why I put music in here in the first place? Because I thought we needed it. I mean I got this joint almost like a gift — Ain't every day one of us gets an opportunity like that. And so, maybe I'll somehow kind of return the favor. Make a club of *our own*. Where we can come and hear our music without a whole lot of bullshit from people running it to make a buck, but not respecting the music, or us.

DOX & THERESA

*(Continue to "blow" throughout.)*

You know I said about Dox cutting Bird: One Friday night it was, and it was a classic.

Bird's blowing over at the Rouge Lounge, and everybody who can't get in there is here, figuring he will fall by after anyway. So, it's tight in here as 13 people under a parasol. And right down front, from the opening set; these two chicks. Two of the finest brown skins I have ever seen in my natural life! Drinking Bloody Marys, and wasn't having to pay for a-one, courtesy of every dude in eye shot of them.



And everybody with a horn is in here in the hopes of getting to blow with Bird when, and if, he shows. But Dox is having none of that; is cutting everybody with nerve enough to unpack his axe. Now Lily is on a break, down at the end of the bar, nursing a Coke with just a little ice, and digging Dox teaching school, and these two chicks digging him. I'm behind the bar trying to help Oscar keep up with the orders.

Okay, so we got Dox, eliminating all competition in anticipation of Bird's arrival; we got these two chicks — You know how when a jungle cat stretches, after a nap, and its muscles like be having a rippling tug-of-war with each other, all slow and sleek and powerful; and how, like, silk looks sliding across a nipple; the sound of nylons rubbing together —?— : these chicks, when either one-of-them goes strolling to the Ladies during a break! And we got a primed Friday night full-house — And about 2:30, in flies Bird. Excitement runs through the joint like Castor Oil through a cat. Bird immediately digs what's happening, draws his axe and mounts the stage. The pressure cooker is on. The flame is lit.

House rules have always been, new man calls the tune. Bird calls *Cherokee*, and takes off like Brer Rabbit through the briar patch! And Dox, Brer Fox, is on him! Like a duck on a June Bug, and is not about to be out run or out done. The crowd is shouting, "Blow!"

And that's when these two chicks get to clapping their hands, and one of them starts hollering, "Go, alto, go!" And Bird is digging this chick and is breathing fire and blowing bullets and tearing that little horn up! And when he comes to the end of his solo he quotes, in rapid succession from, *You Came To Me Out of Nowhere*, *I'm In The Mood For Love*, and *Now's The Time*. Talking to her.

And right on top of this, almost, Dox comes in with his solo, which he begins by quoting *All The Things You Are*, and *Things To Come*, to this other chick. Then goes into his solo with his ears laid back. Well the other chicks starts hollering, "Go, tenor, go!" And he does! Chorus after chorus after chorus. Then at the end of his solo he rips off quotes from *Embraceable You*, *You Go to My Head*, and *Lady Be Good*, aimed at this chick, dig it.

Lily was on her second Coke, light ice, and is just digging all this. Everybody else is screaming. It is so hot we've almost got to take turns breathing. The walls were sweating.

After Dox's solo, him and Bird they start trading 16 bars, then 8, then 4, then 16 again, 8, 4, 2. They wore it and everybody in here *out*. Wasn't a dry nothing in the house. People were screaming, whistling, stomping their feet. It's New Year's Eve on Benzedrine. And Bird and Dox are standing there like two fighters, Sugar Ray and LaMotta, after a 15-round war, looking down at Misses Fine and Double Fine.

Lily finishes her Coke, winks at me, and moves to the stand to reclaim the piano. Now Lily was known, among other things, for her ability to play long, hard and fast, from her days playing in the churches. She's the new man, right, so she calls the tune. Everybody is expecting another jet, like *Little Willie Leaps*, or one of them other race horses.

But she goes into a ballad. F'ing everybody up! People are thinking, What's happening, man? Even grumbling a little bit. They want blood. They want to see one of these cats hit this wall doing 900. But Lily was cool; like she was sitting in church on Easter Sunday, only thing missing was a little straw hat. Now you know Detroit piano players. They play all of the tune from verse to coda. The Detroit way. And Lily is all over the piano: Art Tatum and Horowitz. But it was an extremely hip crowd and it wasn't but a minute before they recognize what she's playing: *If I Should Lose You*.

Well Bird, leads off, and he's in to it. His little alto kind of resting on his Buddha belly, big sausage fingers — (f'ing drugs had him bloated up) but that don't stop him.

Bird's painting pictures. Watercolors, like down in the art museum: like landscapes. With like a little bird with a piece of pretty bow ribbon in its mouth; the blue bird of happiness, gliding through a fluffy-pink-cloud sky.

Now it's a whole different thing Bird's painting; people grinning like teenagers at the prom. It's orchid corsages on cotton candy dresses. And Bird steps back, as if to say, "Now out-pretty that." And then Dox begins. And it ain't a ballad no more. Lily is comping under him, and it's like she talking, whispering to Dox and there is nobody else in the joint. A woman talking to her man in that Detroit way like they can do. And it ain't a ballad or even a love song, it's grown folks talking. He's standing there with his back to the audience, blowing directly at her and she is playing at looking directly at him! *If I Should Lose You*. And they whispering back and forth.

You might not believe it, but their message was so strong that couples started like easing out two by two, hand in hand. And it wasn't the lateness of the hour that was sending them out of here. I remember it like it was yesterday. Man, I'd give anything to have a tape recording of that night. Make enough off it so my grandkids wouldn't have to work — which would put them in the same category as their daddies.

The two chicks?

(Laughs.)

They both left with Bird.

You know — I never heard either Dox or Lily play that tune again. Separately or together. Now they might have, somewhere else, I'm just saying they never played it in here.

(Light fades on SPOON, up on  
DOX & THERESA.  
they continue their duet as lights  
fade on them  
and the end of  
the play.) 📌

# Coming to “Coda”: *Remarks on a Work in Progress*

Bill Harris discussed his compositional methods and the development of a key concept in “Coda” at the LINES Writing In The City Conference at the Detroit Institute of Arts in October of 1988. A portion of his remarks are printed here as they appeared in *City Arts Quarterly*, Volume IV, No. 1/2 – Special Double Issue, Celebrating Detroit, 1989.



Vaughn Washington and Judy Milner rehearse for “Coda” premiere at Detroit’s Attic Theatre, 1990.

One of the few things that I learned in writing classes — I took a lot of writing classes as a student — I think there were two things that I learned which have held me in good stead: one, that plays are *rewritten* rather than *written*.

The other thing is to find the sound of your own voice, which means, I think, to be true to that which is playing around in your own head.

The problem in terms of getting it out of your head and on the page and eventually on the stage

is that what sounds good in your head may not work on the page. I mean, it can sound — you can hear these people talking, and that’s *right*. But somehow, in the process, when it goes from your brain down your arm, it loses it sometimes.

But if indeed you are able to struggle with this and make all these revisions, etcetera, etcetera, and you eventually get it so that it works on the page, then it may not work when you try and translate it to the stage.

One of the things — and it’s always interesting in terms of rehearsal, the rehearsal process — you go in and everybody sits around a table and you read through the script the first time. That’s probably the worst thing in the world for me, that part of the process, because you have a line that says “I love you,” for instance, and an actor will inevitably say, “I love *you*?” I mean, they just take it somewhere that it obviously doesn’t go.

So you make it through that, and then the first week all the actors love you because they can come in and they can ask you what this line means, and you try to explain it to them and you see it hit them in the forehead and drop off. But you go through that. And then, after the first or second week of rehearsal, somehow this magical thing happens in relation to actors, and they think it’s now *their* play. I’ve lived with this [play] for a year, a year and a half, and I’ve struggled and created and blah blah blah, but somehow in that very short period it becomes *their* play, and they don’t wanna hear anything from the writer any more. Somehow you’re a pariah, and they just don’t wanna see you because ... that’s how actors work.

In any case, the real joy in writing is finding *my* voice, and the way that’s done is by finding the various voices of the various characters, and doing that as *exactly* as I can. And it really is about the process of trying to put human beings on a stage, and having them recognized as such. It sounds very simple, but it obviously is not that simple. And if you don’t believe it, try it.

Anyway, I wanted to write this play about jazz musicians and didn’t really want to deal with the typical kind of struggle, of musicians struggling with being musicians. I don’t think that most musicians actually spend all that much time struggling with that kind of reality — I mean they *are* musicians, and that’s what they *do*, dot dot dot. So I wanted to do musicians — I mean, human beings who are musicians, okay?

Again, it sounds very simple, possibly even simplistic. And I wanted to do it about Black males — I’ve been a Black male all my life, and have always enjoyed that, and I think there are probably a lot worse things that a fellow could be ... despite all the kind of vilification by this weasly cadre of latter-day colonialists and jingo-genocidal kinds of folks.

So I simply wanted to put some brothers on stage who had an underlying kind of positiveness to themselves and about themselves and, again, whose main concern was not really sitting around worrying about “the Man.” I wanted to capture the energy of the images and rhythms and lines of two — in this particular case — of two men who are *friends*. I think that’s a thing that isn’t necessarily seen or portrayed a lot on stage or in movies or a lot of places: just two Black men who are in synch with each other in terms of their conversation — and I wanted their conversation to reflect this kind of *simpatico*.

I also wanted to do it — since language is really the only thing you have to work with prior to the things you have to work with on stage — to do it without actually *saying* it or actually talking *about* it. And, since this is a jazz piece, to do it in a way — and hopefully this reference will mean something to most folks — that, say, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker did it when they were playing. If you really *listen* to them, it’s a kind of conversation, and it’s a very — it’s a conversation that comes out of the fact that they are in *synch* with each other.

You have two men who are *improvising* — I mean, the things that they’re playing, they have never played before. But it works because they know who *they* are, and they know who the other person is. They have a very confidential kind of assurance of who they are and that this other person’s going to be able to answer them in this kind of improvisational interplay. Don Cherry and Ornette Coleman in the early recordings that they made are a good example of that.

So that was one of the things. And then I just wanted to get the whole feeling of the lying and signifying kind of thing that happens between Black males when they come together, and just the joy of the brotherhood, and the apin’ and japin’, which is as natural to, it seems to me, Black males as breathing. Just the kind of interplay that they have with each other, where nothing really has to be explained. I mean, with a friend, whoever your friend is, I think a part of that is you don’t really have to explain stuff to them, and they just kind of — they witness and “amen” the kind of things that you are and that you say and that you come up with, etcetera, etcetera.

So, in terms of specifics in relation to this particular project, I talked to a local jazz musician, and the thing that really — I wanted to, again, get a sense of, to *hear*,



some of these stories that took place in the 50s in Detroit in relation to music, and as I talked to him, the thing that impressed me most was not just the stories about jazz — I mean, he had millions of those — but the sense that, how much of a *teacher* he was.

The first time I went to his house to talk to him he got a phone call, and it was from a kid who he had — the kid's father at some point had put him out of the house, it was some kind of disciplinary problem or whatever — and this musician had taken the kid into his home and allowed him to live in the basement. He taught him music, taught him just the basics of being a human being. And this kid was calling from — he'd gotten a scholarship to some music conservatory or something, and he was simply calling to say that he had gotten the scholarship and he was doing fine and dot dot dot.

So it was this kind of thing that impressed me, particularly in relation to this individual.

Musicians have a kind of attitude, or a kind of philosophy, which nobody's ever written down, on how you deal with younger people — the younger generation. And I think Detroit really has a very rich history in terms of jazz, of music, and a part of that, it seems to me, is that there was always this very *giving* kind of attitude by the older musicians to the young. I mean, there was no kind of barrier set up, you know — "I'm older than you, and I'm hipper than you, and somehow you have to make it for yourself." There was always this kind of sharing sensibility, which to me is very African in terms of its orientation.

So I wanted to get the idea in the play of "*the Detroit way*," where you take a younger — it's like, "each one/teach one." An older musician takes a younger musician and hand-carries him through this process, so that the younger cat doesn't make a lot of the mistakes that the older one did, dot dot dot. I really wanted that sense in the piece, the whole idea of bridging generations, and that idea, it seems to me, is one of the things that we're gonna have to get to, not only in the Black community but everywhere else, where you are gonna have to be able to bridge these things between genders and everything else.

The completed version of the play has the phrase, "*the Detroit way*," which becomes a kind of refrain in the piece, and they simply say:

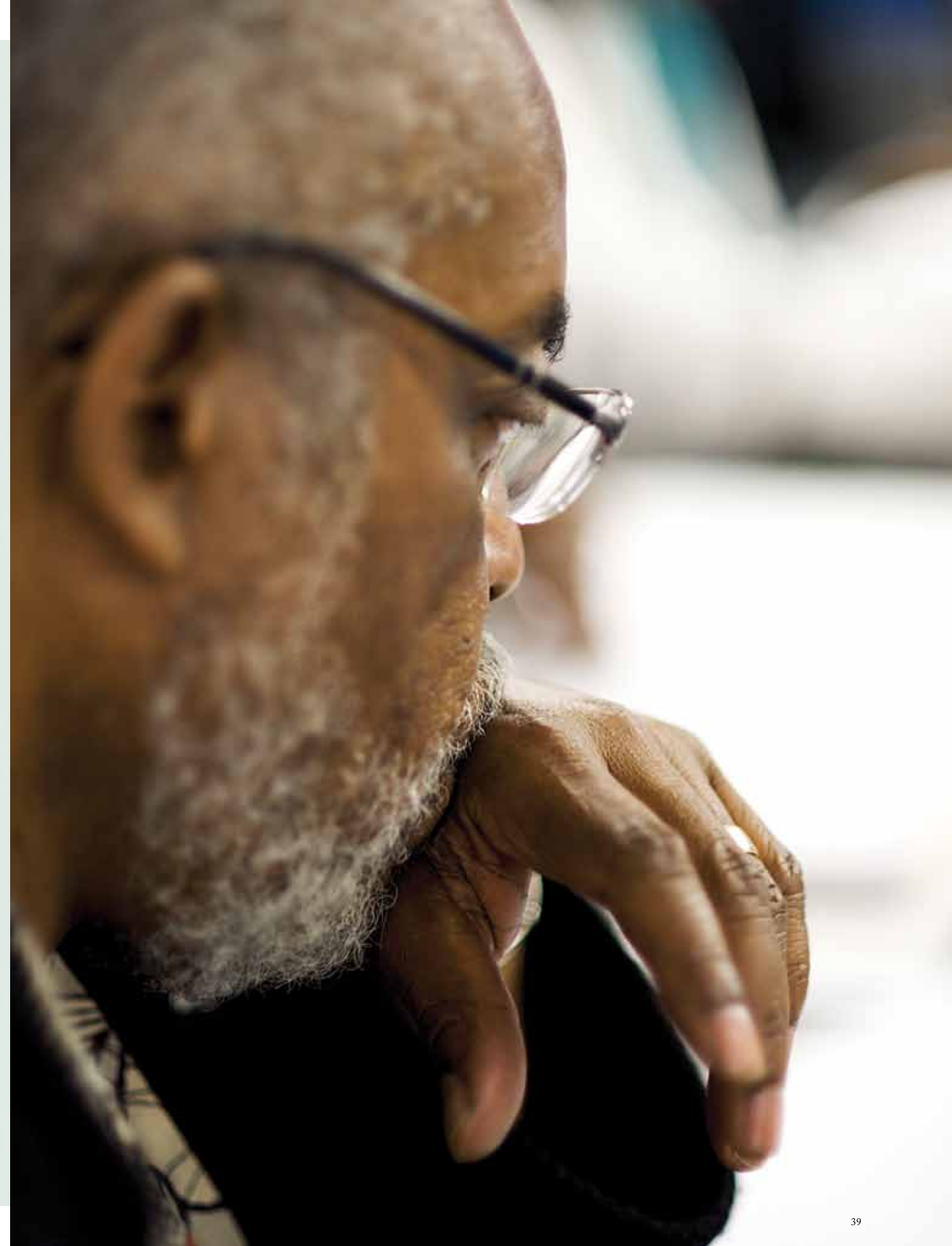
*"It's the Detroit way, like we used to do it ...."*

*"He could learn, if he wanted to. You would teach him."*

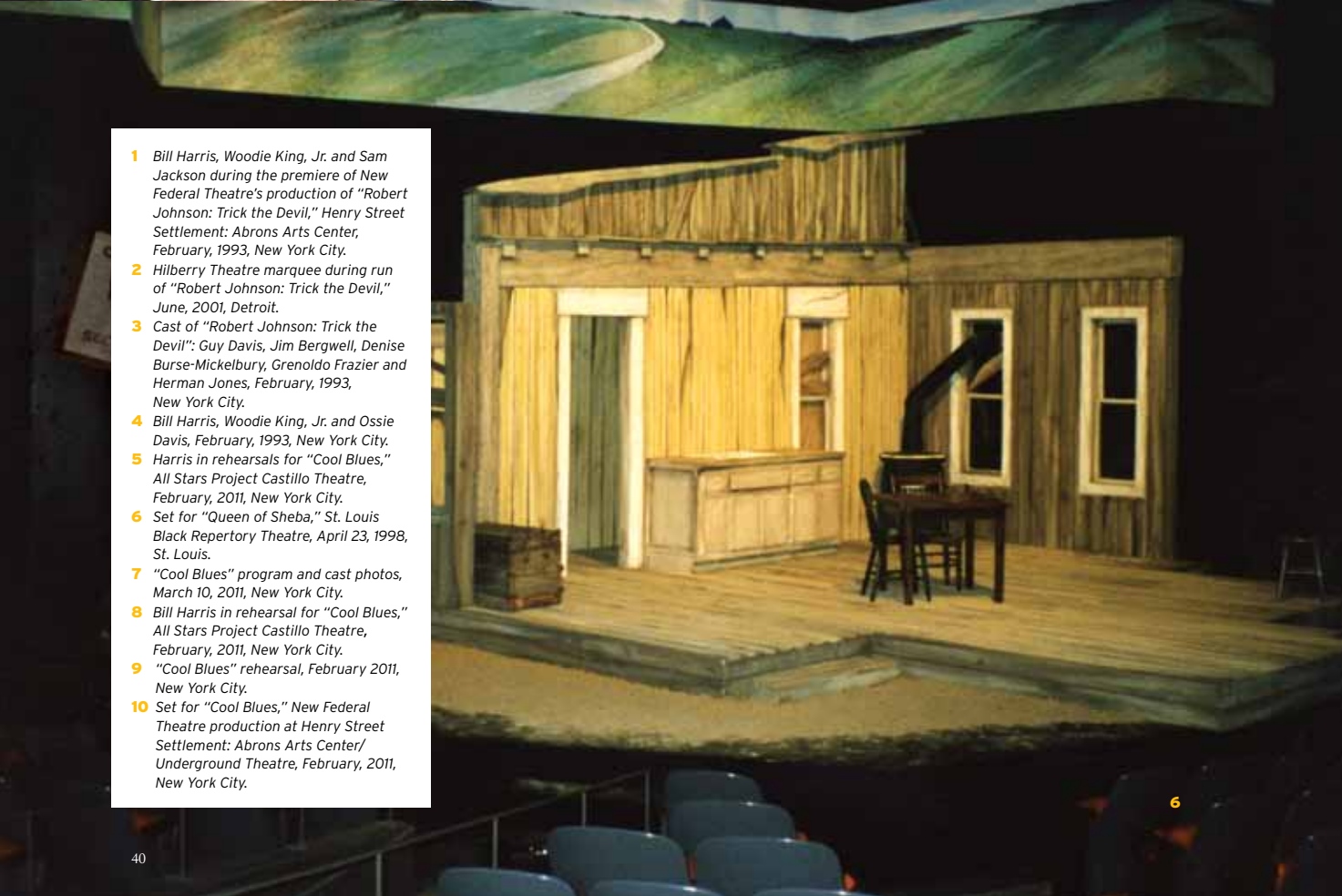
*"The Detroit way ...."*

*"Uh-huh ...."*

And it's just that kind of back-and-forth, hopefully jazz-rhythmic kind of progression that happens on the page and that will eventually come across on the stage. Even after you get into rehearsal and even after it gets mounted, you still kind of tinker with it — it's a constant kind of thing that happens. And it will depend — the final version, how it will actually be on stage — it depends on the sound of the actors' voices, the kind of rhythms the director uses, all those kinds of things. 📌







- 1 Bill Harris, Woodie King, Jr. and Sam Jackson during the premiere of New Federal Theatre's production of "Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil," Henry Street Settlement: Abrons Arts Center, February, 1993, New York City.
- 2 Hilberry Theatre marquee during run of "Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil," June, 2001, Detroit.
- 3 Cast of "Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil": Guy Davis, Jim Bergwell, Denise Burse-Mickelbury, Grenoldo Frazier and Herman Jones, February, 1993, New York City.
- 4 Bill Harris, Woodie King, Jr. and Ossie Davis, February, 1993, New York City.
- 5 Harris in rehearsals for "Cool Blues," All Stars Project Castillo Theatre, February, 2011, New York City.
- 6 Set for "Queen of Sheba," St. Louis Black Repertory Theatre, April 23, 1998, St. Louis.
- 7 "Cool Blues" program and cast photos, March 10, 2011, New York City.
- 8 Bill Harris in rehearsal for "Cool Blues," All Stars Project Castillo Theatre, February, 2011, New York City.
- 9 "Cool Blues" rehearsal, February 2011, New York City.
- 10 Set for "Cool Blues," New Federal Theatre production at Henry Street Settlement: Abrons Arts Center/ Underground Theatre, February, 2011, New York City.



# Selected Fiction

## “Dewitt Meets Picasso” excerpt from “Just Like in the Movies,” a novel manuscript



*An eighth-grade class, Dwyer Elementary School, Detroit's North End,  
Monday, April 12, 1954.*

**D**uring free drawing periods in Mrs. Weeks' art class, DeWitt drew war pictures, pictures of Russian MiG type fighter planes in dog fight duels, their wing-mounted machine guns spitting death; B-52 type planes raining bombs from their open bays as enemy anti-aircraft artillery ACK-ACKed at them from down below.

He also drew pictures of foot soldiers, their fixed bayonets at the ready, charging up body-littered hillsides at enemy troops charging down to engage them, their fixed bayonets at the ready, in man to man, hand to hand combat.

His drawings were good. They filled the page and he had an excellent sense of color and composition and movement, Mrs. Weeks said.

Yeah, the boys agreed, a hint of envy and a gleam in their eyes like the ones that shone there in the darkness of the Saturday show, as, in the last reel, Good butted heads with Evil to the sound of gunshots or steel on steel and the outcome teetered in the balance. Yeah, the boys agreed. Dewitt's drawings were real good. They were horrible, grimaced the girls. Just awful. Though, if pushed, they would agree that, yes, he could draw, better than any of them, boys or girls, it was just that if he would only draw

something nice for a change, like people posed in a line outside the family house, by the family car, with the sun shining round and yellow-orange above them, or children playing with a red ball in a field of green grass, or something, anything besides war all the time. It was enough, their expressions said, to make somebody sick.

In Mrs. Weeks' art class, they did not just do art, drawing, coloring, cutting, pasting and paintings; they studied about it. From time to time, Mrs. Weeks had shown them what she called “reproductions” of paintings by “the Old Masters,” guys who had been dead a hundred years or more. Most of them had been pretty easy to get: the people looked like people, the trees like trees, chairs like chairs. The sky was blue. There were a lot of them about Jesus and Bible stories and landscapes and even some with Greek gods and goddesses who didn't have all their clothes on, like in some of the sword fighting or gladiator movies. Then she began showing them ones by another group, “School” she called them, even though they didn't really all go to the same school. Walter Armstrong argued they should be called gangs. “The Impressionists” she said were one of the most famous schools. These were a little tougher. To get some of them required squinted eyes and extra concentration. But after she told them it was a lily pond or a church or something, they could get it pretty easy.

Being able to understand art, Mrs. Weeks told them, was as important and as useful as being able to read or count change or cook or lay down a bunt. When she said it to them, it did not sound like other adults telling them to eat their spinach “because it was good for them,” or that knowing the capital of Idaho, or the chief agricultural export of Buenos Aires would help them grow up to be good citizens. When she said it, she said it almost the way one of their buddies would tell them what was on a test they had missed, or what so-and-so had said about them behind their back. And maybe it was because they could tell that Mrs. Weeks really believed what she said about art, and she really believed that it was important, and that if they didn't know that, then they would be missing something good, something too good to miss. She also told them that just because, at first, an art object might be different from what they were used to, or it might be hard to understand, that was no excuse to laugh at it or think it was stupid. She added, “Just like with people,” but she didn't dwell on that like a lot of adults would have, she just trusted them to be mature enough to understand the parallel — or that there was one — whether they were or not.

That morning she brought in a reproduction of a painting. “It's by Pablo Picasso,” she said.

“That guy with the Blues Period,” Augusta Swann remembered.

“That's right,” Mrs. Weeks said. The title of the picture was “Guernica.”

That was all she was going to tell them about it, except that it was painted about 15 years ago in Spain.

She then called for DeWitt to join her at the front of the class so that he could interpret it for them.

He stood and made his way slowly to the front, as if it was the cell-lined Death Row in a prison picture and he was taking that walk down the Last Mile on his way to the Hot Seat. He took the reproduction from the teacher and studied it for a long time, holding it so that the class could see it also. He took a deep breath and began.

“This here piece of art, done in the abstract Cubist style, is about war, see. Just like my stuff.” He looked up at them, daring anybody to laugh. “I ain't sure if it's one of them wars we studied about in Social Studies or not, or if these is supposed to be the

good side or the bad side.” He paused to consider it. “But I don’t think that make no difference in this picture,” he decided. “But anyway, I’m thinking it ain’t no regular war zone that’s getting bombed, ’cause there’s this bull in there and this horse that’s getting blowed up, see, along with these peoples. But the people, mostly womens and some babies too, from what I can make out. Maybe they in their bomb shelter or something, yeah, I think maybe that’s it — and so, that’s all.”

He stopped and looked at their teacher. He seemed embarrassed at having talked so much.

“Is the artist — what was his name class?”

“Pablo Picasso!” they shouted.

“Was Pablo Picasso for or against war?” she asked DeWitt.

“Against it,” he said without hesitation.

“Like your stuff,” she said, with a slight smile.

“He saying it’s stupid and maybe crazy to be blowing up them womens and babies and horses and stuff. They ain’t no soldiers. They just innocent bystanders. Don’t nobody need to be blowing them up — anyway, that what I get out of it.”

“Why do you think Picasso didn’t use any colors?”

No one knew.

“You see he limited his palette to grays and blacks,” she said.

DeWitt raised his hand even though he was already standing in front of the class.

“Thems ghost colors,” he said. “And death.”

Clarice Brown laughed.

“That’s a very good guess,” Mrs. Weeks said. “Very good. And now, one more question.”

DeWitt shifted uncomfortably.

“What size would you guess this painting is? The real one?”

DeWitt could not guess. Neither could the class when she asked them.

It was a mural, she told them. They knew what a mural was. “It’s almost 12 feet high, and over 20 feet long.”

They were impressed and looked up at the walls of the room, trying to imagine a painting of that size.

“That’s smart,” DeWitt said, nodding his head. “I’d make it that big if I had a chance.”

“Why?” Mrs. Weeks asked.

“So they could see what I was talking about. How it’s stupid and crazy. It would be like dropping a art bomb on the people to get them to see how stupid war is.”

He looked at her again, anxious to be told he could return to his seat.

“That was a very good interpretation, DeWitt. Thank you very much for your insights.”

“That’s okay,” he said as he held the picture out to return it to her.

“It’s for you,” she said, “if you want it.”

For a moment he did not move. Then he looked at the class. He was wearing his mean look, warning them again about laughing. He mumbled Thank You, and without looking at Mrs. Weeks again he took his seat. 📌

# “The Custodian of the Dream Book”

excerpt from “Just Like in the Movies,”  
a novel manuscript



Saturday, April 3

“I still need me a good figure for today,” Adair said.

Raz told him to ask Fastball.

Everybody looked at Eddie at the rear of the shop where he was working on a pair of pointed-toed black Stacy Adams oxfords with white stitches around the soles. Eddie’s customers had to ascend the two, high gray marble steps in order to take a seat and place their shine-needy shoes on the ornate metal footrests. The stand was a three seater of darkening oak, chocolate brown leather, and brass-headed brads. The curved arms that separated the padded seats featured carved fauna of as an anonymous a phylum as the real life giants on the platform that ran the length of the front window. There the two, big, more brown than green, thick-stalked potted plants framed the storefront window with the arching sign in red letters shadowed in white:

RAZ’S TONSORIAL PARLOR.

“He just a boy,” Adair said.

A boy getting a chance none of us didn’t have, or didn’t take advantage of, Raz said, talking about education. And he’s doing something with it, Prentis added.

Prentis was the little barber who had the middle chair, on Raz’s right. Raz had the first chair, the one nearest the entrance.

The barbershop was across the street from the New Villa Bar, Eddie’s father’s favorite, in the eleven thousand six hundred block of Oakland, between Englewood and Rosedale, the second block down on the way to school from Mrs. Beasley’s.

“I’ve known plenty of educated fools,” Adair said.

Raz and Prentis, the two regular-through-the-week barbers, had been arguing about whether Charles Laughton or Sydney Greenstreet played Captain Bligh in *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

They led most of the arguments because they would argue about anything and their opinions were almost assuredly as different as they were in appearance. Mutt and Jeff. Prentis could not have been much taller than five foot nothing soaking wet, as Raz said. He kept his chair cranked all the way down and stood on a wooden Pepsi-Cola crate to cut hair.

Raz, on the other hand, as Prentis said, was well over six foot plenty something. His chair was cranked up almost as high as it could go. Raz kept a cigar clamped in his teeth all during the day. He wouldn’t light it until he had cut the last customer’s hair and was stropping his razor in preparation for the next day’s work.

Eddie was sometimes called on by Raz to be the arbiter in certain kinds of disputes. There were usually ones that involved what the barbershop regulars called school learning — where a specific answer, such as a name or date or an amount —



would clear up the point of contention. Eddie had settled the Charles Laughton versus Sydney Greenstreet question, reminding them of Laughton’s appearances in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Captain Kidd*, and Greenstreet’s *Maltese Falcon* and *Casablanca* roles.

Eddie was never called on to decide any matter that had to do with women or how things had been down home, things, they said, that couldn’t be learned out of no books, and were therefore outside his experience.

Eddie liked Raz. He liked when Raz called him Little Professor sometimes, Fastball or School Boy at other times. Others sometimes called him Little Jack. Jack was what they called his father; real name John. It all started when he and his father began rooming over the candy store with Mrs. Beasley, two blocks up Oakland, and came to the Raz’s to get their haircuts. In those days, 6 or 7 years ago, when Eddie was 5 or 6, Raz had to place a board across the arms of the barber chair for Eddie to sit on for the extra height. Eddie remembered the day his father said to Raz that he was thinking maybe the board wasn’t needed anymore. Raz agreed.

“Besides,” Adair continued, almost pouting, “he ain’t the only one been to school.”

Raz told Adair, Eddie was the only one *in here* been to school *up here*, where the school got more than one room, meet most of the year ’round, and the teacher cared whether you learn something or not.

“What?” Mr. Jenkins said. He was a little hard of hearing and didn’t like to miss anything.

Mr. Jenkins came in every morning about ten o’clock when his daughter, who had left her husband and moved back home, got out the bed and started stirring around. He leaned forward a little in his chair, lined with the others along the wall facing the barbers.

Behind Raz and Prentis was the big mirror where, when they’d finished cutting a customer’s hair and had given him a chance to appraise the results with a hand mirror, they would spin him around (Prentis getting down off his box first) and let the customer face himself head-on in the looking glass lighted by the glow of a line of near-blue fluorescent tubes.

Scotch-taped to the mirror behind Raz’s chair was the license certifying Willie Lee Simpkins qualified to provide tonsorial services in the State of Michigan. Taped next to it was the photograph. Eddie remembered it from the days when he still had to sit on the board. Even then the photo was curling at the corners and changing color like an eternal autumn leaf. Young Raz and the other members of the all-colored baseball team in their loose-fitting uniforms with **BROWNS** in bold letters sewn in an arch across each of their shirts.

His nickname Raz, short for razor, came not from his present profession, but from his pro baseball days. The name was given to him, he had explained, by the poor, unfortunate colored, and occasional white boys, who faced him when he was playing in the Negro Leagues, back before Jackie Robinson broke the barrier into the white professional big leagues in ’47. His fastball had been so sharp the nickname naturally followed.

Windexing the mirror was one of the chores Eddie had been responsible for the last four months of Saturdays he had been Raz’s Tonsorial Parlor’s shoeshine boy. He also ran errands, kept track of the order in which the customers came in, brushed them off with a whisk broom after their haircut, and swept and mopped up at closing time.

Forrest, who had been dozing, mumbled into his chest, agreeing with Adair about educated fools. Prentis was giving him a razor line along his neck. As a preamble to a story Forrest was starting to say he remembered one time when, when Adair said a figure had to feel right before he would put his money on it. He said it quick and loud, trying to cut Forrest off.

Adair continued cursing himself for playing 263 the day before. It had come out straight. He’d known better than not to play it, but he hadn’t been thinking. 263 fell every time he had a buzzing in his ear and his old lady’s mama made meatloaf! The last

time it’d come out was in February.

Mr. Jenkins nodded, verifying it, and agreed 263 was a good number. Lovecraft, who was getting his Stacy Adams shined, had caught it that time. Hadn’t had but a dime on it. Should’ve sweetened it, but he hadn’t, even though he’d seen it on a license plate yesterday morning as he was coming out of the Big Bear market up on Woodward. Lovecraft had lost his right hand in a stamping machine up the street in Highland Park Chrysler plant. He was on a disability pension. He kept saying he was going to get a ticket and go back to Georgia, buy a farm and raise chickens and hogs.

“All right, Raz right,” Adair said. He looked to Eddie. “Fastball, you got a good mind. Give a good number.” His earlier attitude was forgotten. Nobody, no matter how loud the argument, seemed to stay angry for long.

Eddie did not remember when he had first realized how much the men in the barbershop respected education, even though, or maybe because, they generally had so little formal schooling themselves. That was, he thought, why they bothered with him. They had heard, through his father or Raz, how well he did in school, and some of them were proud of him, just as proud in their way as his father or Mrs. Beasley were in theirs, and they sought to encourage him.

The greatest proof of their pride was not in the tips they gave him for services rendered, followed by an admonishment to put it in the bank “for his education.” Even greater than that was making him the custodian of the Dream Book.

The New  
1954 Edition  
The Original  
Lucky  
Three Wise Men  
Dream Book

The number’s players Encyclopedia Britannica and Bible.

It was kept in the shoeshine stand drawer next to the ones where Eddie kept his polish, rags and brushes. “The Red Devil Almanac,” the “Black Cat,” or “Prof. Hitts’ Rundown and Workout” among them. But the barbers and customers of Raz’s preferred “The Three Wise Men.”

“938,” Eddie said.

Mr. Jenkins smiled.

“938,” Adair said, nodding. “Yeah — 938. That sound like one I can work with. I knew you had lots of sense. 938.”

938 — Hoping.

2. WORKING, MAN

“Hey, Eddie, man!”

“Hey, DeWitt, man!”

“What you doing here?”

“Working, man.”

“Shining shoes, huh?”

“Yeah, man.”

“Yeah, man, cool. I come to get me a haircut.”

“Yeah, man, cool.”

Eddie introduced DeWitt as his new friend. Had just transferred into school from down south. Raz said he’d take good care of him. 📌

# Selected Nonfiction

## “Black Detroit, 1970”



Sometime in the late 60s, Bill Harris was asked to write on the Detroit Black Community, or the DBC, as he calls it, for “Detroit a young guide to the city.”

Edited by Sheldon Annis and published by Speedball Publications, the first printing of the book occurred in 1970.

The photos throughout this essay are the work of Bill Harris, taken in the early 1970s in Detroit.

The initial motion into the Detroit Black Community (DBC) was the movement of thousands of southern blacks to whom the big cities of the North were the “home” they (or their parents) sang about in “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” “I’m Marching to Zion,” or “Walk Into Jerusalem,” i.e., any of the coded songs voicing their hopes and plans for escape to that golden shore on the other side of Jordon. The promised land. For some it worked out that way. For most it didn’t. These (transients moved like low rank chess pieces on steel welfare strings, encountered the withering ghosts of political and economic promises) moaned and mourned as the golden shore tarnished before their sad but wiser eyes; hipped to the stuff of the urban blues, the big city blues that talked about the situation just like it was.

The city they sang about in a lot of those blues is Mr. Ford’s \$5 a day town. And now, fifty or sixty years later, the offspring of these transplanted farm boys are the nucleus of the DBC and are in the position that blacks of America will soon occupy.

They’re everywhere. As much as some people would like there to be, there is no central ghetto that houses all blacks. Like the big sprawling city, the DBC has few visible boundaries. It begins at the very center of the inner city (it *is*, in fact, the inner city) and spreads, interlocked every mile of the way with the white community. The DBC and the white community reflect each other like an image cast between mirrors on two different walls, and it is not at all farfetched to say that as the blacks go, so goes Detroit. To take it a step farther: as Detroit blacks go so go the blacks of America, for Detroit is a cultural center and also one of the main political centers of black America. The DBC is a microcosm of what is good and what is bad in the American society. Some of the richest black men in America live in Detroit and, conversely, some of the poorest and most bitter (not to say that the ones who are poorest are necessarily the most bitter. See the report of the Kerner Commission for specifics.)

Because Detroit is the city responsible for the auto/motion of the nation, and because the auto is the nation’s largest and most profitable industry, Detroit is basically a working-man’s town. A great deal of money is made here by those who provide the labor. Blacks employed in automobile factories comprise the bulk of the middle class of the DBC and their motion (they hope) will be from rents to mortgages — to the world at the other end of the expressway, next door to their white counterparts in the subdivided tracts. Customers. Believers in commercials and tv. That remote. That removed.

It is the black people who stay inside who will take care of the necessary business, the real work of meaningful progress which has begun and which must be continued and expanded for a million or so reasons. There is always a sense of life in any black community but here in Detroit

nation’s fifth largest city to a complete halt. (The kind of power that white America has used throughout its history as justification for sticking out its nationalistic chest). There is a great deal of pride now because it was something *they* had done *together*.

There is a motion, a purposeful fingerpopping, headshaking, loose hipped motion at all times of the day and night. The brothers and sisters go about their business in and out of buildings that house the echoes of the passage of urban minorities.

Another part of the motion is an impatient restlessness of the brother on the street who takes daily mental inventory and who is acutely aware that there has been insufficient progress down at his, the grass root/concrete level. This was the problem before and it remains the problem today, compounded daily by the inability or lack of



that feeling of brotherhood has been augmented by an even deeper sense of trust and comradeship. Black people are taking chances on themselves that they have never taken before. Go down a black street and see, hear, feel the new sense of pride and awareness. Much of this has happened since July 1967 when the DBC turned a lot of A&P’s into basketball courts and burned out a lot of rats, roaches and owners who infested their neighborhoods. (This period saw a significant change in black leadership and the tunes to which they danced, the boogaloo replacing, finally and forever, the buckdance.) The DBC was a little awed by the power it generated in bringing the



commitment or concern, (depending on who you talk to) on the part of those with the power. Also, there is the near shuffling motion of second-chance-seeking blacks going into Community Centers, up rickety stairs to dark rooms with push-button phones. Forms piled on splintering wooden desks beneath peeling ceilings. A phalanx of understanding-educated blacks and whites coming from meetings, full of daylight enthusiasm and programs. Hundreds and hundreds of programs that amount to no more than drops. Drops that cause no waves.

But, brothers make it with or without federal programs. They make it the way they have



to: the way they can. Or, vice versa. They work hard to survive and play hard to forget their powerlessness, and the outside world of the powerful. The owners. To be themselves, to retain some identity, they dance and drink in the all black bars (the “all” refers to employees and customers — not ownership); eat in the all black restaurants; do some of their loving in the all black motels of 12<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, Dexter, John R, Brush, the Boulevard, or what’s left of them. Being themselves, the beautiful black people.

The phrase “black is beautiful” has been attributed to the late Reverend Martin Luther King and he must have been in Detroit when he said it, for in the DBC the clothes seem a little bit brighter, creases a little sharper, cars a little bit longer and lower, dance steps a little bit more supple, hipper, highs even, a little bit higher.

There is a great deal of purposeful activity in the DBC despite all of the energy wasting effort and motion involved in simply existing here. The business of building something large and black and beautiful is going on without much centralized leadership of the type that was emerging after July ’67. This type of leadership for the most part has been jailed, infiltrated into impotence, harassed into silence, bought off, or driven back into the shadows to fester. So, the responsibility for forward motion has been placed in the hands of the people and the people have gotten together and accepted the responsibility. They are turning niggers, who have been taught to fight against the humanity of themselves, into men. Proud black men. And the black communities are about the only places in this country where there is this motion. They are building a civilization and maybe even saving one in the process, but this is secondary. What they are doing for themselves is primary. The teachers, barbers, paperboys, mailmen, preaches, factory workers, lawyers, artists, judges, disc jockeys, garbage collectors, bus drivers, car washers, all of them, are doing it. Together.

Detroit is going to erupt again with an even greater force than before. A force that will be felt by the people of the world. Black, brown, yellow, red, white. A spiritual explosion of millions of “common” people of goodwill totally aware of themselves and their history. Formed into a unit to declare and demand no more lies, stupidity, greed, hatred, hypocrisy, no more compromises with their lives, no more concessions, etc., etc., etc., etc. Threatening even to go so far as to employ the very methods that have been used to deny them their due, if it comes to that, against *anyone* who would seek to cut them off from their possibilities. Go where they hide, uproot them, turn them around, put the heat of black unity on them, topple them; million dollar businessmen with dogeared copies of Harold Robbins latest in their brief cases, juicy fruit brained housewives with pink plastic curlers, even sweet little old ladies rocking in front of TV game shows, anyone who seeks in any way to be politicians of somebody else’s soul.

There is going to be the widest ranging, most all encompassing, all inclusive



revol(t sol)ution of any time, of any society, of any people, ever.

There will be a (second, maybe last) chance for you to peel the dead skin off your conscience and concern, to stand knee deep in the mire of almost complete corruption of the ethical, esthetic, and humane standards of this country, with a shovel. And dig! Go. Enter into it. Help lay the foundation for this most multifaceted of endeavors: the better of the lot of people. All people.

There is already a great deal of interest, among both black and whites, in the kind of progress that blacks (and, as importantly, whites) will make in the near future. Without much publicity a lot of people are putting in a lot of time and energy to see that, for the right reasons, the June ’67 thing, doesn’t happen again. But still a lot of people don’t give a damn. And you can hear things being sharpened. Loaded. Posses being formed.

Right now it could still go either way: for the blacks of Detroit (and America), and for the whites of Detroit. And America.

On the west side less than an hour’s driving tour will take you through some of



the extremes of that section of the Detroit Black Community. From thriving business to throbbing poverty, as close as around the corner or in the next block. From a new car dealership to a hospital with a black spectrum in between. A sampler for nibblers afraid to bite off more than they can swallow and keep down at any one time.

Start at 14<sup>th</sup> and West Grand Blvd., and one of the more obvious examples of black money. **Conyer’s Ford** (Congressman John and brother Nathan) doing big business. Down 14<sup>th</sup> one block to Ferry Park. **White’s** just off the corner. One of the few black owned record shops doing well. Left, down Ferry Park to 12<sup>th</sup> Street featuring a couple of flats and a Cunninghams drugstore in the short block back to the Blvd. Easing you into it. Across the Blvd. on the left hand side is the **DSACE theatre**, temporary home of playwright Ron Milner’s **Shango Theatre** group. Then all of a sudden 12<sup>th</sup> Street really gets to be 12<sup>th</sup> Street. As if by some white magic spell it gets sick from neglect and withers and dies before you can blink, turning into tired bricks, plywood and billboards advertising politicians and blues singers. Empties and dirt and vacant lots. Broken things, abandoned. People. The **Chit Chat Lounge**; the entertainers, the barmaids and Karate on Sunday announced in red letters over the door. 12<sup>th</sup> Street. Virginia Park. **Grace Episcopal Church** and the **Wall of Respect**. Art coming back to the people where it belongs. Functional, conceptual, rather than decorative or purely intellectual (gray stripes on a black canvas or 20 foot square boxes for example). These paintings by James Malone, Bill Walker, Curtis McNair and other local black artists depict important events, people, etc., and become an integral part of the history of the black family, taking on cultural importance lacking in much of western art.

Continuing down 12<sup>th</sup>. Small grocery stores, **Benny's Flamingo Barber Shop**. Ice cold beer and wine to take out. Pick up a *Chronicle*, journal of the black community. Euclid. Philadelphia. Beer cans, trash, fire scarred buildings. Pingree, Gladstone. Record stores. Former pawn shops. Faded portraits in a locked photo studio. The 12<sup>th</sup> Street Academy: education and pride. A basketball court, and Clairmount! John Lee Hooker wrote a song about it. Flames and looters early one Sunday morning in July. News all over the world. The Urban League Community Service Center right there on the corner in some kind of symbolic move. A phoenix like residential section springs up suddenly at Atkinson or Edison. Turn west (left) at Chicago. "Boulevard" with a strip of tended grass down the center. Trees. Multi-room brick residences on double sized lots. Mowed lawns. Cars in every driveway (as there are everywhere. They'll sell cars to anybody anywhere, houses are something else). 14<sup>th</sup>. LaSalle. Linwood and turn left. **Sacred Heart Seminary**. A ¾ life size white stone statue of Christ with a black face; painted during the rebellion and that way ever since. Storefronts, gas stations, beauty parlors. Clairmount again. Taylor, Hazelwood, Gladstone and Philadelphia and the **New Bethel Baptist Church**. Rev. C.L. Franklin (Aretha's daddy) presiding. One of the most stylish of the big city type Baptist preachers still around. Outside the church is modern (redesigned by black architect Nathan Johnson). Bullet holes inside, site of an armed confrontation in March 69. One policeman dead, 140 black men, women and children arrested en masse. One black hero, Judge George Crockett, emerged out of the whole situation. **Inter Faith Center** on Taylor. **Greenleaf's Restaurant** between Euclid and Virginia Park. Soul food and just about the slowest service in town. (Slowfood?) On the next corner the Civil Rights Commission in a building with a new face and green plastic letters. Linwood isn't nearly as bad as 12<sup>th</sup> if looks mean anything. **The United Tenants Organization** is right next to the **Shrine of the Black Madonna**, pastored by Reverend Albert Cleage, long time black nationalist leader and still one of the most exciting speakers

on the scene. The altar painting of the Black Madonna by Glanton Dowdell has deservedly received national publicity. It's worth getting up for Sunday morning services for the experience of the painting.

At the Blvd. again turn right. Pass the **Lee Plaza**, a senior citizen residence, the **Rio Grande Motel**, Northwestern High School and the Fisher YMCA at the corner of Dexter. Turn right and head north through a well kept residential section zoned also for funeral homes. Clairmount. Black owned **Our Supermarket** to the left on Joy. **Big Star Recording Company**, royalty child of old Detroit bluesinger, Bobo Jenkins, at 4228. **Little Sam's Bar** farther down at 4444.

Apartments across Clairmount on Dexter. **Safari Bar** at Chicago, **Reverend John's Religious Supply House** at Calvert, the defunct **Dexter Theatre** at Burlingame. Operating as a live black theater until Rap Brown had a rally there a couple of years ago causing previously undetected building violations to appear resulting in the eventual closing. On the east side of the Burlingame block heading north: **Creations Unlimited**, **Black Out Organization** (BOO), 868-0310, dealing in information on all black organizations and businesses. **John's House of Jazz**, a resale shop, and TV repair. **Doil's Hatland**. **Tree of Wigs**, **Didney's Bottom of the Barrel**, men's fashions.

Another block. The east side. A bank front church, **Lord David's** rent-a-tux, and **Mattie's**. Excellent soul food, good prices, and the waitresses take care of business with a smile. Next door is an open front vegetable store, left over from the days when this was a Jewish neighborhood with an European market atmosphere.

Both sides of the street: **Ed Davis Chrysler**, a black new car dealership that was one of the first in the country. **La Feminique Botique**, **Haslip Shoes**, **Charisma**, featuring a choice of items with an international flair. **Vaughn's Bookstore** specializing in literature by and for black people.

Richton. Cortland, Sturtevent. **Hollywood Fashion Clothes**, **House of Diggs**, **Esquire Delicatessen**, good corn beef 24 hours a day.

Another Jewish holdover. **Le Player's Men's Wear** and the business section goes respectable residential on down to Davison. **Kirwood Hospital** to the left. Black owned and operated, formerly the Jewish Community Center. Ample evidence throughout this section that there is hope, and also that a lot has to be done.

For a total contrast try the east side. It's a whole other country.

The lower east side. Acres of decay. Around the general area of Mt. Elliot Cemetery. Sherman, Antietam, Waterloo. Draw your own conclusions from those names. McDougall, Monroe, Macomb, Meldrum. Worn, drooping, rotten, rickety, busted. Mullett, Madison, Montcalm. (A lot of the streets don't even bother to have name signs anymore.)

As in the old days this section is a way station for poor migrants, who leave the south, but not the rural way of life. Unskilled refugees. Living hand to mouth under a tremendous gray weight. Discards, no deposit, no return, who fled the floods, boll weevils, and white folks of the south, where the most they ever got was a bare minimum: wages, education, opportunities, et al. Anonymous old people. Fundamentalists. Sanctified or into voodoo. Sitting or standing or existing with a weary defenseless resignation. Waiting for the bulldozers, among the weeds, filth, and throw aways, in patched and paintless houses with broken gingerbread trim.

Most of the young and more adventurous are gone. Told to move (so, it was explained, and therefore justified, that anti-suburb glass and steel magnets might be erected, high rise, high price monuments to progress and eradicators of (somebody's failure). Then gathered their things, as they had always done, and left, for one of the side streets off Mack and a less rural situation, or the 12<sup>th</sup> Street area and the real urban blues. Away from where the blues aren't sung anymore. It's just a faint groan. But which continues to endure. 📌



In 1972, artist Carole Harris posed for husband Bill Harris in front of a work by their friend and fellow artist, Maceo Mitchell. Gallery 7, Detroit.



# Other Voices: *Tributes*

Bill Harris is one of the major American playwrights and he is a major American playwright because he understands literature, characterization and he understands plot. That's very, very hard to find in playwrights. He's deeply rooted in the craft, so his plays are extremely well crafted: the subject and characters are people we know who take on universality.

I don't think you'll find a better writer than Bill, and I know hundreds and hundreds. Bill is committed, he's right at the top.

– **Woodie King, Jr.**, *African American theater arts pioneer, founder and producing director of The New Federal Theatre, New York City.*

He takes time with people — he never puts himself up on a pedestal. He's just an excellent instructor — he's the whole package. He's not only an instructor, he's a people person who knows how to relate to people on their level as opposed to trying to bring people up to his level. He makes everyone think “you can do it.” Never does he say you can't.

– **Harriet Sturkey**, *former student*

Bill — he's all kinds of different things. He's a genius. I think he's one of the most creative artists working in Detroit. He's this generous, kind human being. He's into blues, and jazz. I mean no one can say anything bad about him. He's calm. He's collected. He knows so much stuff!

Bill would not step on anybody to get somewhere, hurt anybody to get his play onstage. He's just more focused on the service and the community and what he can contribute to it.

– **M.L. Liebler**, *author, poet, literary activist and arts organizer*

I love Bill's storytelling, and the poetry in his storytelling.

“Riffs” is actually one of Bill's scripts that keeps coming up in planning around here (The St. Louis Black Repertory Company). It's a comedy and it's just full of great older black male characters. Each one of those guys, is such an interesting and vivid character! That has a lot to do with the audience appeal but even more so the appeal that it has for the actors who want to play those characters. The wildest, craziest storytelling! It's just a comic treat.

– **Ron Himes**, *Founder and Producing Director of The Black Rep/St. Louis Black Repertory Company, St. Louis.*

Bill's writing is about black people — their problems, their joys, their celebrations. He gets the humor of black culture and the underlying sensitivity of black culture — his characters speak so naturally and unaffectedly, you think “this is the way that people in those situations would act.” He has a great knowledge of people of different socioeconomic situations. He goes in and out of it very easily — it's part of his talent that he can do that, relate to all people.

– **Hilda Vest**, *poet and publisher of “Coda and Riffs” at Broadside Press, Detroit.*

Bill has been a serious writer for as long as I've known him — and we've been friends off and on for almost 50 years.

– **George Tysh**, *author, publisher, educator*



Bill Harris was a perfect choice to win the Eminent Artist Award. I can think of no more deserving person. I have the greatest respect for him.

– **Naomi Long Madgett**, *Detroit poet laureate, publisher/editor, and educator*

Bill Harris has made an indelible impression upon my heart with his chronicling of African American culture in our community. His work is a written legacy and treasure for all of us to see and hear.

– **Marcus Belgrave**, *jazz trumpeter, 2009 Kresge Eminent Artist*

I have known Bill for many years. I have always been interested in his work but I knew his writing mostly from his plays. I thought to myself, “I will pester him to do a book of poetry.” He would always remind me that he was first and foremost a writer of plays and prose. But he did eventually say “I'll work on it,” and sure enough one day in 1997, the manuscript arrived: “The Ringmaster's Array,” his trilogy of poetic impressions. It just worked on so many different levels — the personal, the historical, the lyric.

Bill has such a take on language. He has an amazing ear for the vernacular, for patois. Whatever he's writing about, he can make that sound really poetic and poignant, and it doesn't come off as sounding anywhere near gratuitous. When Bill does it, you find the story in the language, the meaning that he's conveying. Pretty good stuff.

– **Dennis Teicher**, *publisher, Past Tents Press, Ferndale, Mich.*

I like the way honest people tell the truth with what they are doing. I see that in Bill's work, that truth of conviction, that truth of understanding some of the organization, the realities of nature. Everything comes out of nature's order. That kind of order gets us through the day without running into a tree. It guides us and serves as a principle maker for what we do, the undercurrents of what we make. It's what I see in his work and feel in his presence when I'm communicating with him. It's just magnificent that someone is that aware and is able to express it in words. I reach for the same thing but I use symbols for an ocular point of view and his is from an audio-visual point of view. It's all about seeing and when I say seeing, I'm not talking about looking at something. I'm talking about seeing as understanding and then adding that slice of lucidity to what we do.

– **Charles McGee**, *painter, sculptor, 2008 Kresge Eminent Artist*



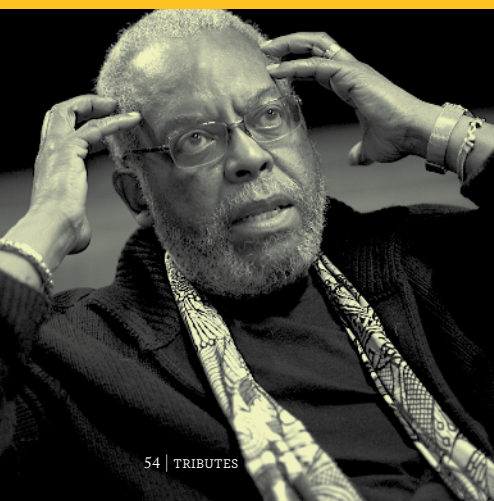
As a writer, Bill is focused on being a master. He is so dedicated to his craft. He doesn't worry about accolades or money, he just talks about getting the work done.

He's a natural teacher. Our relationship has been about him teaching me something, sharing some kind of information with me. I really do feel a little smarter after every conversation with him.

– **Charles L. Latimer**, *writer and jazz critic, Metro Times, Detroit.*

Bill's influence [at InsideOut] was profound and invigorating. Through his understated, open-minded demeanor and exacting love of language, he instilled a courage and respect that enabled students to express and value their voices. His example was absolutely essential to the birth and growth of InsideOut.

– **Terry Blackhawk**, *Founder/Director, InsideOut Literary Arts Project, Detroit.*





## An Enduring Devotion to His Craft

Whatever his genre of choice, Bill Harris is essentially a storyteller, concerned with the individual tales as well as the collective saga of his people. He wants to get under the skin of the characters he sees in the world, show us the dilemmas they are facing, and what inspires their choices.

Emerging as a writer in the Black Arts period of the 1960s and 70s, Bill joined his distinguished contemporaries in Detroit, playwright Ron Milner, director Woodie King, Jr., and poet Dudley Randall, in the mission of that era: to create a literature and theater where the struggles of African American people, the brilliance of their folk wisdom, and their daily heroism would be revealed. In Bill's writings, one of the consistent motifs in the telling of these stories is the cultural centrality of African American music and musicians.

Though Detroit as the Black consciousness *mecca* was the backdrop of Bill's early work, over subsequent decades, his recognition and influence as a writer extended far beyond his hometown, through residencies and stage productions in New York and other cities, and at major universities.

Before he joined the faculty at Wayne State University, I often invited Bill to my classes as a guest who would inspire students to take their writing and their creative gifts seriously. He projected an exemplary discipline and commitment when he discussed his work with students. Reviewing the students' efforts, he would focus intensely, offer insights, and indicate a direction for further development. Given Bill's long tenure as professor in the Wayne State University English Department, certainly hundreds of students have benefitted from this deeply attentive approach to teaching writing.

Of course, Bill inspired his fellow artists as well, always inquiring, "What are you working on?" — urging us on in his keenly perceptive, terse style. His genuine involvement with a broad community of cultural activists represents one of the important roles Bill has played over many years — always with his "no fanfare" demeanor. In addition, through his service on the boards of numerous art agencies, he has been engaged consistently in the institutional work required to ensure a thriving arts community.

It has been a profound pleasure to have Bill as a colleague at Wayne State University, but even more rewarding to have his friendship over the span of our entire adult lives. For his generous appreciation and encouragement of creative work wherever he encounters it, for his many years of absolute devotion to his own calling as a writer, and for a scrupulously crafted body of work that elucidates some of the most important issues of our time, I celebrate Bill as a recipient of the Kresge Eminent Artist Award!

— Gloria House, *Ph.D.*

*Educator, poet and community activist Gloria House wrote her original essay expressly for this publication.*

## Other Voices: *Reflections*



## To The Ring Master: Blue Moses

Mornings he took his walk around east-downtown to the cobalt rivers edge or west over the freeway across 12<sup>th</sup> passing the boarded up, the burnt out the squatters, the old Serengeti.

He might go north to Mid-Town down the boulevard past the Fisher the Coney, the Old GM, Henry Fords' even south past the forsaken graffiti walls of the abandoned Studebaker plant.

Whichever way the wind was blowing he thought that's the way he'd be going that walking should be easy, walking in rhythm.

He would stop to take pictures of extraordinary neglect; old Detroit structures, lost work gloves — gloves plastered and weathered against the asphalt; like some of the people he'd meet and greet (never breaking stride) with a bit o change and a smile.

We'd break bread and say good bye he'd return to his hollow to vibe on Bird, or cats like Weston; gloss lessons. At the comfort of his personal keyboard he would sit to attempt to compose his music If the wind was at his back he wouldn't crack and you couldn't stop him until the story was told.

He saved lives. He hippped us to Lester Young Max Roach, his meaning of art; tight jawed, Black eyed, he didn't let the world tear him apart. His rule of the game from start was, "Don't do any harm." His black eye captured the musical heartbeat of souls that ring master that told it like it was. The biddle dee Parker could see. He always had time for us none of his goodbyes were gone.

— Thomas Park, *poet, educator*  
*Mr. Park wrote his original poem expressly for this publication in honor of his former teacher, Bill Harris.*

Segments of quilted tapestry works by artist Carole Harris. Background "Epistrophy," and left, "Fire Music."





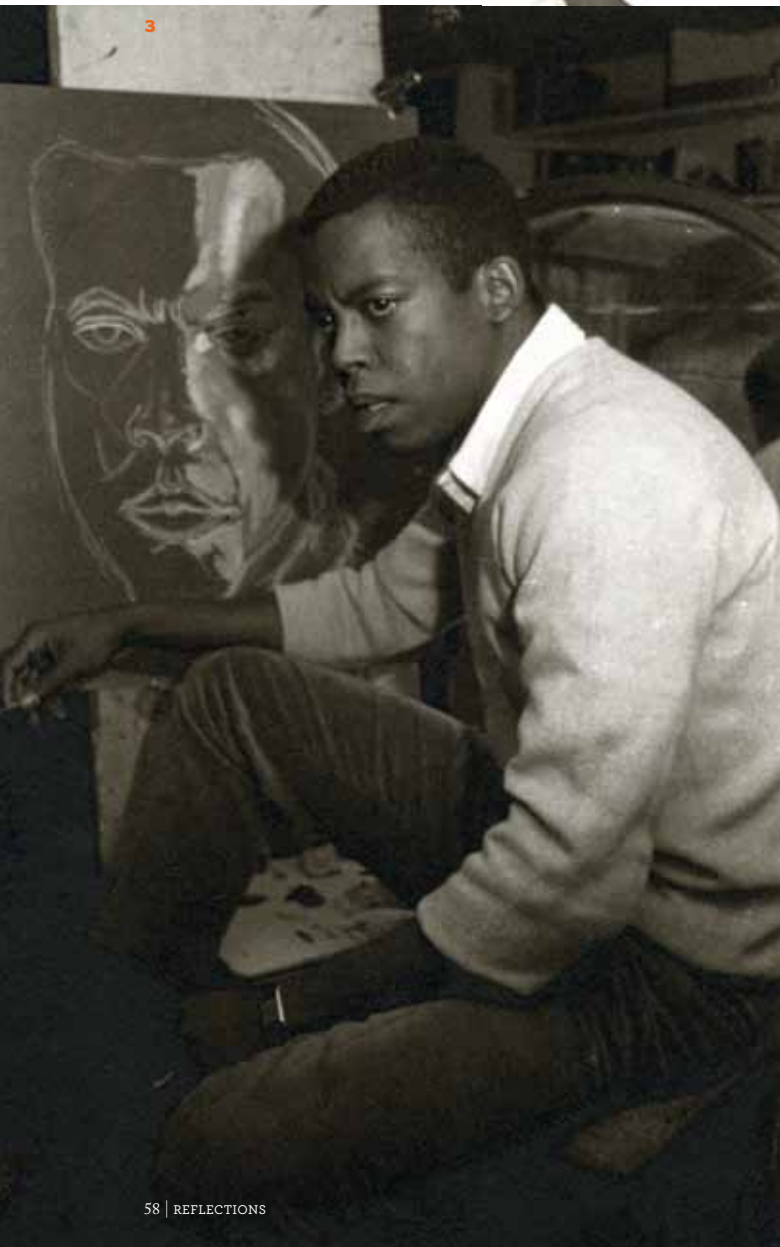
1 September, 1974, Belle Isle, Mich.



2 Bill Harris with pioneering science fiction writer Octavia Butler at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, April 1994, Detroit.

3 Bill Harris with self-portrait in progress, 1963, Detroit.

4 Carole and Bill Harris with Carole's artwork, Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit.



# Our Congratulations

Writers work in what Octavio Paz called a labyrinth of solitude: a place where they can dream and contrive, and nurture their fidelity to language and their compulsion to create magic. Detroit's own Bill Harris is a magic-maker and a man of letters in the truest sense. He has been a modest yet compelling force in Detroit's — and the nation's — literary community for decades, producing highly esteemed works of literature, hybrid forms of poetry, plays, novels, essays and criticism. For these accomplishments, as well as for his mentorship of young writers and his innumerable contributions to our community, it is our pleasure to present the 2011 Kresge Eminent Artist Award to Bill Harris.

Each year, the Kresge Eminent Artist Award recognizes a Metropolitan Detroit artist whose work and career exemplify sustained, outstanding achievement and a commitment to sharing that work with the local community. Bill Harris is inarguably eminent, and we are honored to bestow this award on such an astonishing talent.

Nominations for the award are made by the Kresge Arts in Detroit Advisory Council, a volunteer group of leaders in the Metropolitan Detroit cultural community who provide external oversight to the program. The 2011 award recipient was selected by an independent panel of three distinguished members of Detroit's literary community: Dora Apel, associate professor and W. Hawkins Ferry Chair of Modern and Contemporary Art History at Wayne State University; Vince Carducci, cultural critic and adjunct faculty in liberal arts at the College for Creative Studies and lecturer in sociology at Oakland University; W. Kim Heron, writer and editor of the alternative weekly *The Metro Times*. Kresge Arts in Detroit is grateful to the panelists for their hard work and sensitivity to this important task.

If art is the highest form of hope, Detroit has a great future. Artists like Bill Harris, and his fellow Eminent Artists Charles McGee (2008) and Marcus Belgrave (2009), define what is extraordinary about our great city and its cultural community — unwavering energy, imagination and dedication to our hometown. Our congratulations and thanks to Bill Harris for making Detroit a better place.

*Michelle Perron*

Michelle Perron  
Director  
Kresge Arts in Detroit



# Life in a Masterful Key

*Writer Bill Harris chronicles the African American experience in a soaring theatrical and literary canon, scoring his stories in a distinct poetic blend of lyricism, finesse and oh, yes, jazz.*

by Sue Levytsky

Sue Levytsky writes about the arts and popular culture. Her original essay is based upon her interviews with Bill Harris in 2011 and was written expressly for this publication.

2011 has been quite the year for playwright, poet, critic, novelist and educator Bill Harris. Harris turned 70 this year and his protean talents have kept the native Detroit writing, editing, and generally creating at a breathtaking pace. Harris has just published a critically acclaimed hybrid work of prose and poetry on minstrelsy — “Birth of a Notion or the Half Ain’t Never Been Told” — with its sequel, “Booker T & Them: A Blues” moving toward release. His newest play, “Cool Blues,” a reimagining of the last hours of jazz legend Charles “Bird” Parker, had its premiere with New York’s New Federal Theatre in March with further productions scheduled for later this year.

And though newly retired from Wayne State University, where he first started teaching creative writing as Distinguished Faculty in 1989, Harris revealed in a recent interview for WDET Detroit “at this point, I’m continuing to hit my stride.”

Indeed, there seems to be no stopping Bill Harris now, perhaps never. Harris has been one of Detroit’s leading literary and theatrical lights for more than 40 years, earning national acclaim for his moving and insightful examinations of the black working class. Harris’ most celebrated work often centers on the life and times of a black jazz man: blues singer and guitarist Robert Johnson in “Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil,” Motown master Harold “Beans” Bowles in “Coda” and Charles Parker, in his book of poetry, “Yardbird Suite: Side One,” winner of the 1997 Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award.

“Bill writes about the humanness of people, and interwoven in that is the experience of being a black man that is just different, always on the outer edge, on the outside,” says artist Carole Harris, his wife of nearly 45 years. Harris’ plays, including productions of “Stories About the Old Days,” that starred jazz singer Abbey Lincoln, and “Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone,” that featured Denzel Washington and S. Epatha Merkerson, have seen more than 70 productions internationally.



William A. Harris charming his baby photographer, clearly captivated by the experience of having his picture taken.

## Early Aims and Influences

Bill Harris grew up as an only child in the Detroit of the 40s and 50s, having moved north from Anniston, Ala., with his mother at the age of two. They settled on the East Side, into a home and neighborhood filled with family and folk who would provide Harris with his nascent inspirations. “My grandmother had five children and at Christmas, everybody had to be at her house — from Birmingham, Buffalo and Detroit. For years, I was the only child, so there were all these adults and me. The thing that interested me most was the feeling in that room on Christmas Day as they relaxed and started telling stories about the old days. I saw

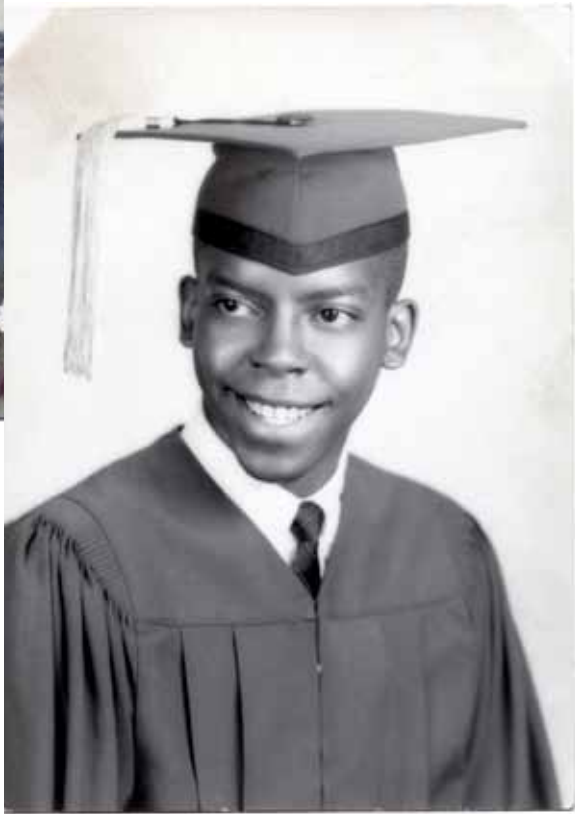
them in an entirely different way in those moments. They weren’t worried about work, about bills, none of the real life stuff. It was a kind of sharing, filled with love and companionship and everything that stuff is supposed to be.” (Harris would later dramatize such sociable moments in his plays, providing audiences with what he calls “the sharing of a shared past.”)

Harris was a serious youth, intellectual and determined, earning high grades and praise from teachers along with notable prizes such as The Scholastic Writing Award while still at Dwyer Elementary School. “Bill was an introspective child, very bookish,” says wife Carole. “I loved the library as a kid,” remembers Harris. “It was like a mile away from my house, on Woodward and King — the Utley branch. That’s where I found out about these other possibilities, this world of literature.”

Harris would attend Cass Technical High School, majoring in commercial art and continuing his studies in the fine arts at Highland Park Community College. He earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees in English from Wayne State University in the 1970s upon returning from military duty in 1968. Harris started what would become his first critically acclaimed play, “No Use Crying,” on the plane home from Germany, where he had been stationed as a Personnel Specialist, Rank Sp-4.



Bill Harris, budding photographer, Detroit, 1952.



Graduation from Cass Tech, 1959.





In 1972, Bill Harris found himself at the center of Ron Milner's *The Spirit of Shango* Theatre Company in Detroit. The company was noted for its productions of dramas culturally relevant to Detroit's black community.

## Finding His Voice

Detroit bubbled with all manner of intellectual and artistic activity during the 60s and 70s and Harris would soon find himself — as a writer — with “a foot in two different places.” “On the one hand, there was Ron Milner, who was a black writer writing black stuff and I was dealing with him and trying to figure out what to write and what form it would take. And on weekends, I’m dealing with this white group who are talking about music and poetics and their love of jazz.”

Playwright Ron Milner and black theater pioneer Woodie King, Jr., would play seminal roles in the development of Harris’ theatrical career. Milner, to gain fame for his plays “Who’s Got His Own” and “What the Wine Seller Buys” became a lifelong mentor to Harris, encouraging his work and acting as a springboard for his play ideas. King, Jr. would later come to be an invaluable collaborator and supporter of Harris’ work, producing a number of his plays, including “No Use Crying,” “Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone,” “Coda,” “Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil” and “Trio.”

Harris was also looking for critical feedback on his literary work and would often read his latest poems at the Cass Corridor meetings of the writers, artists, poets and jazz musicians collectively known as the Detroit Artists’ Workshop. It was a tantalizing, provocative mix of personalities and agendas. “Amiri Baracka was a major influence on all of us who were in the Detroit Artists’ Workshop together. It was his poetic side, his way of putting words together on the page, the breaking with convention. For me, this was as important as the whole political side of what he was saying. The way he was saying things, his lack of reservation about saying it and his right to say it and all of that. Huge.”

Harris was not, however, politicized. “I wasn’t into the civil rights thing,” he says. “I was still figuring out how to be black.”

Harris would continue honing his craft in his native city but felt a move to New York was imminent by 1980. “I wanted to write for theater and there was a great deal of theater in Detroit but in order to do what the masters do you have to be where the masters are, so I went and tried to see if I was indeed a proper playwright.”

New York would further expose Harris to the dynamic jazz musicians who would figure so prominently in his future plays. Harris would remain in New York for a number of years, finding inspiration and material first as production coordinator for Jazzmobile, a jazz production and music education organization that has featured performances by John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, Cecil Taylor, and other jazz greats and later at Woodie King, Jr.’s New Federal Theatre. “Bill was our company production manager. He interfaced with some of the most talented writers in America at New Federal,” recalls King, Jr. “Amiri Baraka ... Ed Bullins ... Ben Caldwell ... Melvin Van Peebles. They were all very disappointed when Bill went back to Detroit to teach at Wayne.”



The newly married Carole and Bill Harris, 1967.

Bill Harris off-duty in Gebersdorf, Germany, 1968. As an African American couple, Bill and Carol had difficulty obtaining off-base housing in post-war Germany.

Harris returned to Detroit in 1987, writing “Coda,” through a commission from the Attic Theatre, underwritten with assistance from a Guggenheim Foundation Award. “Coda” was eventually produced in 1990.

## The Harris Sound

All of Harris’ plays, either in content or in form, come out of music — primarily jazz or blues. It has been said he writes like a musician, with a rhythmic sensibility and a cadence that unforgettably enlivens the dialogue in his plays. “The Detroit rhythm in Bill’s work, it’s really in sort of a sync with a Midwest rhythm, a sort of working





Carole and Bill Harris at the White House in 1998. As a distinguished artist from the State of Michigan, Carole was invited to create an ornament for the White House tree.

rhythm, of the working class guy,” says producer and director Ron Himes. Himes has staged many productions of Harris’ plays at The St. Louis Black Repertory Company (now known as The Black Rep). “I just love the poetry in his story telling.”

The downbeat came during Harris’ teen years, i.e., Detroit’s golden age of jazz, when bebop reigned along the Woodward strip. “Music is really important because I hear that and somehow it’s a part of everything I do and whatever it is that is the spirit in that music and behind that music and really where that music comes from in terms of the various elements that go into the whole African thing and the blues thing, all of that, hopefully, is a part of the writing,” said Harris in a 1983 interview with *Solid Ground: A New World Journal*. “Jazz and blues, these, and other types of music, play as prominent a role in my life as they do in my work. The idea of improvising within a form, whether in life, music or playwriting is basic to my existence.”

## The Harris Way

Bill Harris has provided a rich lode of knowledge and expertise to Detroit and its citizens, giving back as a teacher, mentor, cultural steward, literary activist and community historian. Harris would insist that he is only doing things “the Detroit way.” “‘The Detroit way’ is our own sense of community,” he stated in a 1991 interview with The Detroit News. “It’s based on a sharing — past, present and future.”

“Bill’s from Detroit. He was raised with a sort of working-class ethic and morals, giving back,” reflects his friend and colleague, poet M.L. Liebler, “Bill Harris is about service to the community.”

Harris has instilled an appreciation for the literary arts and mastery of creative writing in students attending Wayne State University, The College for Creative Studies and Detroit’s public schools for almost 25 years. “Bill had tremendous seriousness and grace in working with the students,” says InsideOut Founding Director Terry Blackhawk of Harris’ time working with her at Mumford High School in the Poets in Schools outreach program of the 1990s. “He created an atmosphere that encouraged creativity to bubble up.” Harris was to become a founding member



Bill Harris at an exhibition of his photographs at the Pontiac Creative Arts Center, February 1998.

Bill Harris with his mother, Elizabeth Gay, May 1990, Detroit.

of InsideOut, along with Blackhawk. “That program has grown to include 20 schools and is now headquartered on the Wayne State University campus,” reports Harris.

Over the course of his teaching career, Harris nurtured many aspiring poets, playwrights and novelists. Just retired, he was a valued member of the Wayne State University English department, where he sat on numerous boards and selecting panels. He has been a featured artist in Wayne State University Press’ Made in

“I love to teach,” says Harris. “I love getting people to realize possibilities beyond what they come with, to see possibilities in terms of what they are capable of and in terms of tapping into the larger possibilities of the world.”

Michigan Writers Series, has given poetry readings and participated in writing workshops around the city of Detroit. He has also served as a visiting writer at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts’ summer workshop in Deer Isle, Maine.

Ever the historian, Harris served as Curator of Living History and Chief Curator at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, where he spun his many creative talents into a whirlwind of educational activity, creating breakthrough exhibits for Black History Month he called “hourly living history tours.” “I really liked that job,” recalls Harris “because it asked me to be everything I was and am: writer, artist, playwright, teacher.”

Former student Thomas Park, now teaching high school English in North Carolina, feels Harris is a guardian angel for many who come into his circle. “He’s a really special man,” says Park. “I’ve seen him lower his wings to so many people out in the street and in his writing, there are always these characters who are struggling to just get by, against all odds. He makes a difference for everybody.”

M.L. Liebler agrees. “In any way Bill can help people, whether it’s students or people in the community or other artists in different disciplines, he’s there.”



Bill Harris has been in love with jazz since his early teens, when he was first introduced to the sounds of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and other greats. His 1970 photo of a drummer mid-set at one of Detroit's then numerous jazz clubs captures the energy and intensity of the music and the mood.

# Bill Harris: The Big Sound of Life Itself

by George Tysh

**B**ill and I go way back, to before we even knew each other, back to Detroit jazz of the late 50s, Ed Love's "Sundown" show on WCHB, jukeboxes in chili joints playing Jimmy Reed, Etta James, and Art Blakey, neighborhood record marts full of the latest R&B and bebop.

In 1958, when my dad moved our family from New Jersey to the Motor City, Gerry Mulligan, Charlie Parker, and the Modern Jazz Quartet were major food groups in my listening diet. But little did I know that a whole new world of sound and ideas awaited me at the high school I would soon attend: Cass Tech. I was 16, just beginning my junior year, and had never seen so many black, white, and Chicano kids all in the same place. Cass was an eight-story culture factory, with resources for just about anything you wanted to study, and elevators that zipped between floors. The music students played concerts of Bartok and Hindemith, and anybody lucky enough could listen when jazz sessions broke out under the stage. Although Bill and I didn't meet up until the early 60s at Wayne State, we were both fish in this same nurturing pool that brought together the offspring of Armenian, Greek, Jewish, Syrian, Polish, Mexican, et al. immigrants with those of folks from Appalachia and the Deep South. After school, some of us would walk downtown to mingle in the bustle of cars, buses, Coneys, pawnshops, pool halls, office buildings, and people, people, people everywhere. We wandered wide-eyed through Hudson's high-rise department store, checking out the fine neckties and shirts, and the fine salesgirls too. Before the 60s were over, we'd join the picket lines in front of Woolworth's on Woodward to protest their policy of lunch-counter discrimination (not restricted to the South by any means). And in the constant background of our souls was the music: Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, James Brown, Miles Davis, Horace Silver, Charles Mingus, Sonny Rollins ....

When I got to Wayne State ("choosing" it was an economic no-brainer for any working class kid), I finally got to take creative writing, something I'd been anticipating since I first pored over Ginsberg's "Howl" and Kerouac's "The Dharma Bums." Bill had graduated from Cass before me, and had spent a few semesters at Highland Park Community College. But in 1962 we fatefully bumped into each other in a creative writing section taught by Jay McCormick, and started comparing

Poet George Tysh teaches film studies at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit. His latest work is "The Imperfect" from United Artists Books, New York City.

George Tysh wrote his original essay expressly for this publication.



Signs of the times: militant posters and graffiti speckle a building in downtown Detroit, early 1970s.

notes, so to speak, both the verbal and musical kind. It didn't take long for us to realize that deep inside our love of language (its sound and structure, the way it set up fascinating possibilities and opened the gates of feeling) was a shared passion for jazz. Bill had a regular job to pay for tuition, but he also worked at a downtown record store, Monroe Music, so he could get paid in LPs(!) One summery Saturday afternoon, we met on Monroe Street near the old National Theater, and Bill took me over to the shop, where my eyes worked harder than my fingers as they flipped through rows and bins of the most exciting vinyl I had ever seen: Prestige, Blue Note, Riverside, Contemporary, labels that literally championed the new music, the covers overflowing with luscious colors, photographs and typography to announce the treasures within: Gene Ammons, Lou Donaldson, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk .... These were 33 rpm discs, but my head was spinning at 78!

I don't know which was more important to us in those days, music or writing. Bill let me read one of his first short stories, about a young black guy who robs a party store to get money for Ray Charles concert tickets, but ends up dead in an alley, shot down by the police. We became ardent devourers of a handful of specialized magazines that, not coincidentally, focused on both music and writing: *Metronome*, *DownBeat*, *The Jazz Review*, *Evergreen Review*, and *Kulchur*. Edited by critics Martin Williams and Nat Hentoff, *The Jazz Review* featured articles written by the musicians themselves (among them, some lovely pieces by Cannonball Adderley), plus amazing analyses of Coltrane solos, Muddy Waters' lyrics, and an introduction to that rising young Turk of the tenor sax, Wayne Shorter, penned by poet, jazz critic and playwright LeRoi Jones (soon to become Amiri Baraka, author of "Dutchman" and "The Toilet," and a founding father of a new, explosive, black theater).

The autumn 1962 issue of *Kulchur*, a literary journal edited by poets Charles Olson, Frank O'Hara, and Jones, for example, included "Five Statements for Poetry" by Louis Zukofsky, art work by Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, and Franz Kline, a childhood photograph of Lester Young and his mother, a "Theatre Chronicle" by Joseph LeSueur (discussing Samuel Beckett's play "Happy Days"), and jazz reviews by Jones and A.B. Spellman. The doors to a whole universe of artistic engagement were flung open, and we couldn't wait to enter them into the future.

By 1963, the die was cast, and young artists, musicians, and writers began to interlock orbits in the Cass Corridor. When poets Robin Eichele, John Sinclair and myself, photographer Magdalena Arndt (soon to become Leni Sinclair), and jazz trumpeter Charles Moore got together in 1964 to spearhead a new project called the Detroit Artists' Workshop, Bill was one of the key poets to read from his work at the Sunday jazz concerts on Forest, between Trumbull and the Lodge Freeway. Even in those early days, his writing had an unmistakable authority, a world-wise gravitas, but one that never undercut his "sound."

After I left for Paris in 1965, and Bill got an invitation from the Army that he couldn't avoid in 1966, we lost touch until the mid-70s. Yet picking up where we left off was one of the easiest things I've ever done. By that time, Bill had married Carole, his college sweetheart (and another Cass alum), and I had come home with Chris, my Parisian bride. Carole had already begun to transform the Southern quilting tradition into vibrant modern art, and Chris was starting to write both poetry and plays, so the connections were there more than ever, but quadrupled,



Bill Harris at home, in Detroit, 1969.

and our collective attachment to Detroit remained unshakable. Then in the 80s Bill's vital immersion in the independent theater world of Manhattan finally brought him the critical recognition he deserved, and he hasn't stopped expanding the parameters of his projects ever since: from such plays as "Coda," his heartfelt evocation of the Detroit bebop scene (its final soliloquy is a masterful poetic sermon), to "Yardbird Suite," a "biopoem" on Charles "Yardbird" Parker, to his latest book of investigative poetry, the amazing "Birth of a Notion."

In February 1993, as I was walking out of Tower Records in downtown Manhattan with a fistful of jazz CDs, I heard a voice call my name. I turned and there was Bill, asking me what I was doing that afternoon — his latest play, "Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil," was opening at the New Federal Theatre and he wanted me to see it. Fate and happenstance, or a Motor City mojo, had brought us together once again.

A few hours later I found myself sitting in a dark auditorium marveling at the magic of Bill's writing for the stage, his command of dialogue and poetic inflection — the plot concerns the last three days in the life of the mythical bluesman — intertwined with classic Johnson tunes that functioned like a Greek chorus commenting on the action. It was an apotheosis. Everything that I knew about Bill's work came together in that testament to his talent, compassion and engagement with the lives of "the people," as Duke Ellington famously once said. It was the big sound of life itself. 📌



# Biography

William A. Harris

BORN: January 25, 1941  
Anniston, Alabama

Education

Cass Technical High School  
Highland Park Community College  
Wayne State University:  
Bachelor of Arts  
Master of Arts

Professional Activities

Educator

1987  
**Martin Luther King/  
Rosa Parks Visiting Scholar**  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

1974-1979; 1986-1990  
**Instructor**  
College for Creative Studies  
Detroit, Michigan

1993-1999  
**Associate Professor**  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

1999-2011  
**Professor**  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

**Appointments**  
1987-2005  
**Board Member/  
Master Panelist**  
Detroit Council of the Arts/  
Department of Cultural  
Affairs  
Detroit, Michigan

1989  
**Artistic Director**  
New Voices Play  
Reading Series  
Detroit, Michigan

1989  
**Guest Writer in Residence**  
Detroit Public Schools  
Detroit, Michigan

1993  
**Juror**  
Tompkins Drama Award  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

1994  
**Manuscript Reader**  
Wayne State University Press  
Detroit, Michigan

1994  
**Panelist**  
Arts and Educations Grant  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

1994  
**Panelist**  
Creative Writers in  
School Review  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

1997; 2000; 2001  
**Chairman,  
Board of Directors**  
InsideOut  
Detroit, Michigan

1998  
**Appointments Committee**  
Theatre Department  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

1998  
**Board Member/Reader**  
Wayne State University Press  
Minority Studies  
Detroit, Michigan

1998  
**Master of Fine Arts Panelist**  
Theatre Department  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

1998; 2005  
**Board Member**  
InsideOut  
Detroit, Michigan

2005  
**Board Member**  
New Federal Theatre  
New York, New York

**Consultant**  
1989-1990  
**Curator of Living History**  
Charles H. Wright  
Museum of African  
American History  
Detroit, Michigan

1990  
**Judge**  
Detroit Institute of Arts/  
Detroit Public Schools  
Writing Competition  
Detroit, Michigan

1991; 1997  
**Panelist**  
National Gold Key Literary  
Competition  
The Scholastic Art &  
Writing Awards  
New York, New York

1991-1992  
**Chief Curator**  
Charles H. Wright  
Museum of African  
American History  
Detroit, Michigan

1997  
**Juror**  
Travel Grants Awards  
Arts Midwest  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

1998  
**Judge**  
Student Writing About Art  
10th Anniversary Anthology  
InsideOut  
Detroit, Michigan

1998  
**Judge**  
Summer Fiction Contest  
Metro Times  
Detroit, Michigan

1998; 2000  
**Collections Committee**  
Charles H. Wright  
Museum of African  
American History  
Detroit, Michigan

2001  
**Judge**  
Judith Siegel Pearson Awards  
Detroit, Michigan

2005  
**Senior Grants Panelist**  
Arts Council/  
City of Detroit  
Detroit, Michigan

2008-2010  
**Selecting Panelist**  
Kresge Eminent Artist  
Award/Kresge Artist  
Fellowships  
Kresge Arts In Detroit  
Detroit, Michigan

2009  
**Consultant/Curator**  
Art and Perseverance:  
Selected Papers for the Bill  
Harris Archival Collection,  
African American Special  
Collection Room,  
David Adamany  
Undergraduate Library,  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

**Selected Honors/Awards**  
1969  
**Tompkins Writing Award:  
Drama**  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

1972  
**Writing Award: Novel**  
Mary Roberts Rinehart  
Foundation  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, Virginia

1974  
**Merit Award: Drama**  
Greater Detroit Motion  
Picture Council  
Detroit, Michigan

1989  
**Arts Achievement Award**  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

1989  
**Distinguished Pioneering of  
the Arts Award**  
United Black Artist USA  
Detroit, Michigan

1993  
**Best Production/Black  
Theatre Awards**  
“Robert Johnson: Trick  
The Devil”  
AUDELCO: Audience  
Development Committee  
New York, New York

1993  
**Honorary Member**  
Golden Key  
National Honor Society  
Reston, Virginia

1996  
**Naomi Long Madgett  
Poetry Award**  
For “Yardbird Suite:  
Side One”  
Detroit, Michigan

1996  
**University Teaching Award**  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

1997  
**Silver Medal for Drama**  
for “Robert Johnson:  
Trick the Devil”  
International Radio  
Programming Festival  
New York, New York

1998  
**Career Development  
Chair Award**  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

2001  
**Charles H. Gershenson  
Distinguished Faculty  
Fellow Award**  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

2001  
**Humanities Center Faculty  
Fellowship Award**  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

2005  
**Spirit of Detroit Award**  
Detroit Common Council  
Detroit, Michigan

2010  
**Dr. Charles H. Wright  
Award for Excellence in  
Fine Arts**  
Presented by The Friends  
Committee  
Charles H. Wright  
Museum of African  
American History  
Detroit, Michigan

2011  
**Kresge Eminent Artist  
Award**  
The Kresge Foundation  
Troy, Michigan

2011  
**Faculty Recognition Award**  
For “Birth of A Notion”  
Wayne State University  
Board of Governors  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan



# Selected Bibliography

### Anthologies

**The Dog on the Victrola**  
*City Arts Quarterly*  
Volume 3, Number: Fall  
Detroit, Michigan, 1988

**Every Goodbye Ain't Gone**  
*New Plays for the Black Theatre*  
Edited by Woodie King, Jr.  
Third World Press  
Chicago, Illinois, 1989

**Up and Gone Again**  
*Roots & Blossoms: African American Plays for Today*  
Bedford Publishing  
Detroit, Michigan, 1991

**Coda** (2 excerpts)  
*Voices of Color: 50 Scenes and Monologues by African American Playwrights*  
Edited by Woodie King, Jr.  
Applause Theatre Books  
New York, New York, 1993

**He Who Endures**  
*African American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*  
Edited by Al Young  
The HarperCollins Literary Mosaic Series  
HarperCollins College Publishers  
New York, New York, 1996

**Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil**  
*The National Black Drama Anthology: Eleven Plays from America's Leading African American Theaters*  
Edited by Woodie King, Jr.  
Applause Theatre Books  
New York, New York, 1996

### Audio Books and CDs

**One of His Own**  
Featured reading from a December 13, 1964 recording  
Produced by Book Beat  
Oak Park, Michigan, 2005

### Books

**Stories About the Old Days**  
(Drama)  
Samuel French  
New York, New York, 1990

**The Ringmaster's Array**  
(Poetry)  
Past Tents Press  
Ferndale, Michigan 1997

**Yardbird Suite: Side One**  
(Poetry)  
Michigan State University Press  
East Lansing, Michigan 1997

**Riffs and Coda**  
(Drama)  
Broadside Press  
Detroit, Michigan, 1998

**Birth of a Notion or The Half Ain't Never Been Told: A Narrative Account with Entertaining Passages of the State of Minstrelsy and of America, the True Relation Thereof (from the Ha Ha Dark Side)**  
(Poetry and prose)  
Wayne State University Press  
Detroit, Michigan, 2010

### Booker T & Them: A Blues

(Bio-poem)  
Publication Date: Spring 2012  
Wayne State University Press  
Detroit, Michigan

### Fiction

**Your Cheating Heart, DeWitt Meets Picasso, and The Little Red Schoolhouse**, chapters excerpted from "Just Like in the Movies."  
*Solid Ground: A New World Journal*  
Spring, 1986, Volume Number 3, Number 1, pp. 34-38.  
Detroit, Michigan

**In Enemy Territory, Books Everywhere, and In Perilous Flight**, chapters excerpted from "Just Like in the Movies."  
*Solid Ground: A New World Journal*  
Spring, 1987, pp. 36-39.  
Detroit, Michigan

**That Ought To Hold You**, chapter excerpted from "Just Like in the Movies."  
*Wayne Literary Review*  
Spring/Summer 1992, pp. 37-40.  
Detroit, Michigan

**Chapter excerpt from "Just Like in the Movies"**  
*TRAIT; a Detroit Journal of Regional Art and Culture*, March 1999  
Detroit, Michigan

**The Custodian of the Dreambook**, chapter excerpted from "Just Like in the Movies."  
*Working Words: Punching the Clock and Kicking Out the Jams*  
Edited and introduced by M.L. Liebler  
Coffee House Press  
Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2010

**Foreword contributor**  
*Talking Shops: Detroit Commercial Folk Art*  
Photographs by David Clements  
Wayne State University Press  
Detroit, Michigan, 2005

**Poems**  
**Within the Circle of Ourselves and Images/Before**  
A pair of poems in the *Ontario Review*  
Fall/Winter 1977-78, pp. 72-75.  
Princeton, New Jersey

**Silent Tongues**  
*48222 A Detroit Book of Poetry*  
Detroit River Press, 1979, pp. 97-102.  
Detroit, Michigan

**According to the Pattern**  
*Kick Out the Jams, Detroit's Cass Corridor 1963-1977*  
Detroit Institute of Arts, 1980, p. 138.  
Detroit, Michigan

**Griot De La Grand**  
*Black Scholar Journal of Black Studies and Research*  
Volume 12, Number 4, July/August, 1981, p. 55.  
The Black World Foundation  
Sausalito, California

**Elegy; Billie's Blues**  
*Nostalgia for the Present, An Anthology of Writings from Detroit*  
Post Aesthetic Press, 1985, p. 44.  
Detroit, Michigan

**(Third Movement) Two Moons of Luvernia Callaloo**  
*A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters*  
No. 35, Volume 11, Spring, 1988, pp. 275-276.  
Johns Hopkins University Press  
Baltimore, Maryland

**Romare Bearden – Suite For Reclining Nudes**  
*Cranbrook Review*  
Spring, 1992, pp. 87-90,  
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

**Charles and Rebecca. Their Bedroom. Evening; Nighthawks; Back Home Blues; and Hot House 1515 Oliver Street K.C., MO**  
A trio of poems in the *The World*  
Number 48, 1993, pp. 44-50.

**Right Down There On 12th Street**  
*Eyeball*  
Number 3, 1994, pp. 9-10.

**Birth of a Notion**  
*DISPATCH DETROIT*  
Volume 2, Doorjamb Press  
Detroit, Michigan, 1998

**Allie McGhee Runs the New View Down**  
Markszine.com and show catalog in collaboration with Allie McGhee and Faruk Z. Bey  
G.R. N'Namdi Gallery  
Detroit, Michigan, 2002

**Tiger In the City**  
Exhibition collaboration with visual artist Patricia Wynne  
Mahu Gallery  
New York, New York, 2002

**WAR: An altered found poem.**  
*DISPATCH DETROIT*, Volume 6,  
Doorjamb Press  
Detroit, Michigan, 2004

**Rhythms: Micro to Macro**  
*Allie McGhee Exhibit Catalog*  
G.R. N'Namdi Gallery  
Detroit, Michigan, 2005

**Still**  
*Charles McGee & Al Hinton Exhibit Catalog*  
Scarab Club  
Detroit, Michigan, 2005

**Cabinet of Curiosity**  
Arnold Klein Gallery  
Royal Oak, Michigan  
February, 2008

**Paths of the Traveled Artist**  
*Charles McGee 2008 Eminent Artist Monograph*  
The Kresge Foundation  
Troy, Michigan, 2010





# Selected Productions

**Boo-A Musical Fantasy**

1991 December 5-January 5,1992  
Attic Theatre  
Detroit, Michigan

2001 October 10-28  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company  
St. Louis, Missouri

**Choreopoem—a Tribute to Langston Hughes**

1988  
One performance  
Produced by Your Heritage House  
Bonstelle Theatre  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

**Coda**

1990 April 25-May 20  
Attic Theatre  
Detroit, Michigan

1996  
Excerpt for  
“Spoken Art: The Art of Wooing”  
Produced by Sleeping Giant Productions  
BRAVO! Canadian Cable  
Television  
Toronto, Ontario  
Canada

**Cool Blues**

1993  
Staged reading  
National Black Theatre Network  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

2001  
Staged reading  
New Federal Theatre  
Henry Street Settlement  
Abrons Arts Center  
New York, New York

2004  
Staged reading  
New Federal Theatre  
Henry Street Settlement  
Abrons Arts Center  
New York, New York

2011 March 10-April 3  
New Federal Theatre  
Henry Street Settlement  
Abrons Arts Center  
New York, New York

**Every Goodbye Ain't Gone**

1983  
New Federal Theatre  
Henry Street Settlement  
Abrons Arts Center  
New York, New York

1983 October 14-16  
CCNY Aronow Theatre  
New York, New York

1984 May 1-May 20  
National Black Touring Circuit  
Colonnades Theatre  
New York, New York

1988  
Southern Illinois University  
Carbondale, Illinois

1989  
Billie Holiday Theatre  
Brooklyn, New York

1989  
Black Folks Theatre  
Boston, Massachusetts

1993  
Earl D.A. Smith Theatre  
University of Detroit  
Detroit, Michigan

1996  
Staged reading  
Carrie Productions  
Burbank, California

1997  
University of Redlands  
Redlands, California

2000 July  
New Federal Theatre  
Henry Street Settlement  
Abrons Arts Center  
New York, New York

2000 July 26-30  
Great Black One Acts Festival  
New York, New York

2003 April 15-19  
Bellamy Theatre  
Clemson University  
Clemson, South Carolina

2005 February 9-March 6  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company  
St. Louis, Missouri

2010 April 30-May 1  
Kennedy King College  
Chicago, Illinois

**Follow The Truth**

2000 November 6  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company/  
Touring Company  
St. Louis, Missouri

**He Who Endures**

1978  
Detroit Institute of Arts  
Detroit, Michigan

1992 May 28-30  
University of Michigan-Flint  
Flint, Michigan

2007 September 21-October 14  
Part of “Black Trilogy 2007”  
Stella Adler Theatre  
Hollywood, California

**“His Soul Goes Marching On: John Brown, Frederick Douglass, Detroit and the Path to Freedom: A Commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the Detroit Meeting of John Brown and Frederick Douglass.”**

2009 March 12  
Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History  
Detroit, Michigan

**Magic Bird - A Children's Puppet Play (Adaptation)**

1989  
Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History  
Detroit, Michigan

**NO LAND’S MAN: A Chapter in the Lives of Dred and Harriet Scott**

2007  
Staged in the Missouri Historical Society, Missouri  
Legislative Black Caucus, schools, public libraries, universities and the court house where the actual trial took place.  
Dred Scott Sesquicentennial Celebration  
St. Louis, Missouri

**No Use Crying**

1969 September 19  
The Louis Theatre  
Chicago, Illinois

1971  
Malcolm X College  
Chicago, Illinois

1971 March 30  
X-Bag: Experiential Black Artists Guild  
Parkway Community House Theatre  
Chicago, Illinois

1972 September 22-October 22  
Concept East Theatre  
Detroit, Michigan

1973  
Independent Professional Performing Artists  
Chicago, Illinois

1973 March 9-April 1  
Concept East Theatre  
Detroit, Michigan

1973 September 27-October 13  
Mwongi Arts Players  
McGregor Library  
Highland Park, Michigan

**Queen of Sheba**

1997  
Staged reading  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company  
St. Louis, Missouri

1997 June  
Staged reading  
Juneteenth Festival of New Works  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

1998 April 22-May 17  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company  
St. Louis, Missouri

2000 November 24-December 17  
Unity Players Ensemble  
Inglewood, California

2004 August 27-September 179  
Unity Players Ensemble  
Inglewood, California

**Riffs**

1995 March 31  
Premiere  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company  
St. Louis, Missouri

1995 November 1-12; November 22-December 10  
Seven Stages Theatre  
Atlanta, Georgia

1996 March  
Attic Theatre  
Detroit, Michigan

1998  
Staged reading  
The Robey Theatre Company  
Burbank, California

2000 June 1-July 2  
Houston Ensemble Theatre  
Houston, Texas

2000 September 21-November 5  
eta Creative Arts Theatre  
Chicago, Illinois

2001 March 23-April 23  
Penumbra Theatre  
St. Paul, Minnesota

**Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil**

1991  
Staged Reading  
National Black Theatre Network  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

1993  
National Black Theatre Network  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

1993 February 18-March 20  
New Federal Theatre  
Henry Street Settlement  
Abrons Arts Center  
New York, New York



1993 June 17-20;  
June 24-27; July 1-4  
New Federal Theatre  
Schomburg Center for  
Research in  
Black Culture  
New Public Library  
New York, New York

1995  
Radio play version  
(27 minutes)  
Public Radio  
Exit 3 Productions  
New York, New York

1995  
Staged reading  
The Met Theatre  
Carrie Productions  
Burbank, California

1996 February  
Jomandi Theatre  
Atlanta, Georgia

1997 January 23-February 9  
Human Race Theatre  
Dayton, Ohio

1997 March  
Phoenix Theatre  
Indianapolis, Indiana

1999 November  
Ujima Theatre  
Buffalo, New York

2000 November 9-26  
Memphis Black  
Repertory Theatre  
Memphis, Tennessee

2001 February 1-February 25  
African American Ensemble  
Miami, Florida

2001 June 22-July 1  
Hilberry Theatre  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

2001 September 7-  
October 28  
The Ensemble Theatre  
Houston, Texas

2003 February 26-28  
Cabaret Theatre  
University of La Verne  
La Verne, California

2003 April 23-May 18  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company  
St. Louis, Missouri

2003 October 26  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company  
St. Louis, Missouri

2004 February 7-21  
Lonny Chapman Group  
Repertory Theatre  
North Hollywood, California

2004 February 18-March 7  
Freedom Theatre  
John E. Allen, Jr. Theatre  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2005 June 30-August 14  
eta Creative Arts Theatre  
Chicago, Illinois

2008 April 17-27  
Pro Arts Collective/  
Austin Community College  
Rollins Theatre  
Long Center for the  
Performing Arts  
Austin, Texas

2008 August 29-31;  
September 7  
Upstage Theatre Company  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

2010 June 6  
Staged reading  
“Great Black Plays and  
Playwrights” series  
National Black Theatre  
New York, New York

**Slave Narrative**

1991  
Education and Outreach  
Department  
Attic Theatre  
Detroit, Michigan

1992  
Charles H. Wright Museum  
of African American History  
Detroit, Michigan

1992  
Detroit Public Schools  
Detroit, Michigan

1992  
Fort Wayne Historical  
Museum  
Detroit, Michigan

1993  
Northland Center  
Southfield, Michigan

1997  
Production sponsored by  
The Michigan Psychoanalytic  
Foundation  
Charles H. Wright Museum  
of African American History  
Detroit, Michigan

1998-2001  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company /  
Touring Company  
St. Louis, Missouri

**Stories About the Old Days**

1986 May 14-June 1  
New Federal Theatre  
Henry Street Settlement  
Abrons Arts Center  
New York, New York

1988  
Staged Reading  
College of Life Long  
Learning Conference  
Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan

1988  
Oregon Theatre Company  
Portland, Oregon

1989  
Howard University  
Washington, DC

1990  
Freedom Theatre  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

1990  
Ohio Northern University  
Ada, Ohio

1991  
Bowery Theatre  
San Diego, California

1991  
Southern University  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

1992  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company  
St. Louis, Missouri

1992  
The Ensemble Theatre  
Houston, Texas

1992  
Karamu House  
Cleveland, Ohio

2001  
Act One (excerpt)  
North West Activities Center  
Holly Springs, Mississippi

2003  
North Carolina A&T  
State University  
Greensboro, North Carolina

2003 January 9-February 2  
North Coast  
Repertory Theatre  
Solano Beach, California

2005 February 9-March 6  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company  
St. Louis, Missouri

2005 April 1-3; 8-10; 15-17  
Department of Theatre  
Alumni Chapter  
North Carolina Central  
University  
Farrison-Newton  
Communications Building  
Durham, North Carolina

2005 May 5  
Bushfire Theatre  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2008 February 27-March 16  
African American  
Performing Arts  
Community Theatre  
Miami, Florida

2009 November 20-22  
New African Grove Theatre  
Atlanta, Georgia

**The Society of Men**

1989  
Single Performance  
Attic Theatre  
Detroit, Michigan

1990  
Charles H. Wright Museum  
of African American History  
Detroit, Michigan

**Thicker Than Water**

1999  
Staged reading  
National Black Theatre  
Festival  
Winston-Salem,  
North Carolina

**Trio**

1983  
New Federal Theatre  
Henry Street Settlement  
Abrons Arts Center  
New York, New York

**Up And Gone Again**

1996  
Staged Reading  
Carrie Productions  
Burbank, California

2000 February 25-April 2  
Unity Players Ensemble  
Inglewood, California

2003 July 21-July 27  
One Act Play Festival  
Obsidian Theatre  
New York, New York

2005 February 14-March 13  
Unity Players Ensemble  
Los Angeles, California

**Vamp**

2000 May 6  
New Play Series  
Staged Reading  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company  
Dillard University  
Atlanta, Georgia

**Warn The Wicked**

1974  
Indiana University  
Bloomington, Indiana

1992  
Parkway Community Theatre  
Chicago, Illinois

2003  
Children’s Repertory Theatre  
The Black Rep/St. Louis  
Black Repertory Company  
St. Louis, Missouri

**What Goes Around**

1981  
Staged reading  
Frank Silvera Drama  
Workshop  
New York, New York

1981  
Staged reading  
Negro Ensemble Company  
New York, New York

1989  
Staged reading  
Harmonie Park Playhouse  
Detroit, Michigan





# A Note from Richard L. Rogers

The College for Creative Studies is honored to partner with The Kresge Foundation in administering the Kresge Eminent Artist Award. The national spotlight is currently shining on Detroit’s artistic community as evidenced by the current surge in Detroit-centered media stories. We are grateful to The Kresge Foundation, which is helping to thrust our best and brightest talent onto the national stage. At CCS we recognize that one key to revitalizing this region is through the engagement of the creative community. Creativity drives innovation which leads to economic competitiveness and growth. That’s why the Kresge Arts in Detroit initiative is so important and why we are thrilled to be a part of it. CCS congratulates Bill Harris on being named the 2011 Kresge Eminent Artist. Bill’s exceptional career and ongoing commitment to our community deserve special recognition. He is an outstanding example of the richness of Detroit’s talent and the importance of that talent to Detroit’s vitality.



Richard L. Rogers  
President  
College for Creative Studies

## Kresge Arts in Detroit 2010-2011 Advisory Council

Kresge Arts in Detroit is guided by an advisory council, a volunteer group of leaders in the Metropolitan Detroit cultural community who select review panels, nominate candidates for the Kresge Eminent Artist Award and provide external oversight to Kresge Arts in Detroit.

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# The Kresge Eminent Artist Award

Beginning in 2008, The Kresge Foundation each year honors an exceptional artist for lifelong professional achievements and contributions to the cultural community. The Kresge Eminent Artist Award, which includes a \$50,000 prize, acknowledges artistic innovation and rewards integrity, depth of vision, and singularity of purpose as judged by the Kresge Eminent Artist Panel. The College for Creative Studies administers the Kresge Eminent Artist Award on behalf of the Kresge Foundation.

The Eminent Artist Award together with the Kresge Artists Fellowships and Kresge Arts Support constitute Kresge Arts in Detroit, a coordinated effort to support Metropolitan Detroit’s tri-county arts and cultural community — Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.

## Kresge Eminent Artist Award Winners



Charles McGee  
*2008 Kresge Eminent Artist*

Charles McGee’s distinguished career spans six decades and encompasses the kind of doing that astounds in its quality and volume.

McGee’s work has been celebrated in hundreds of exhibitions from Detroit to New York to Bangkok; he has been a teacher and mentor to thousands of young artists; he has founded galleries and arts organizations, creating opportunities for others to share their work and ideas; his work has been commissioned and collected by institutions and individuals around the world; he has advised the State of Michigan, the City of Detroit and our arts institutions on countless cultural initiatives; and he has done it all with humility, reverence and a sense of wonder at the power and triumph of art.



Marcus Belgrave  
*2009 Kresge Eminent Artist*

An internationally recognized trumpeter who long ago chose Detroit as his home, Marcus Belgrave is an icon to musicians and lovers of jazz. After more than five decades,

his tireless work, amazing technical abilities, and the joy and spontaneity with which he creates distinguishes him worldwide as an admired and respected jazz master. By spreading the language of jazz to generations of students, he has remained a beloved mentor to young musicians, many of whom have gone on to become great artists themselves. Belgrave’s energy, dedication and virtuosity epitomize the distinguishing qualities of a Kresge Eminent Artist.

## About The Kresge Foundation

The Kresge Foundation is a \$3.1 billion private, national foundation that seeks to influence the quality of life for future generations by creating access and opportunity in underserved communities, improving the health of low-income people, supporting artistic expression, increasing college achievement, assisting in the revitalization of Detroit, and advancing methods for addressing global climate change. The foundation works in seven program areas: arts and culture, community development, Detroit, education, the environment, health, and human services. For more information, visit [kresge.org](http://kresge.org).

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We would also like to thank George Tysh for his evocative essay on Bill Harris and shared times in the Detroit of the 50s and 60s; to Gloria House for her considered portrait of her fellow writer and to Thomas Park for his original poem of tribute.

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A number of the photos used throughout this monograph come from the personal collection of Bill and Carole Harris. Every effort has been made to locate the holders of copyrighted material. The following have graciously given their permission to print and/or reprint the following material.

Michelle Andonian for photo appearing on pg. 79; Lia Chang for photo appearing on pg. 40; courtesy of Bill and Carole Harris for photos appearing on pgs. 4, 14, 15, 36, 40, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 71, 73, 77 and 80; Bill Harris for photos appearing on pgs. 30, 49, 50, 51, 53, 66, 67, 71, 73, 77; Justin Maconochie for photo appearing on pg. 79; Leni Sinclair for photo appearing on pg. 8; the estate of Curtis Woodson for photo appearing on pg. 69; Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University for photo appearing on pg. 4.



**About Paul Davis:** A graduate of the School of Visual Arts and alumni of the groundbreaking Push Pin Studios, Paul Davis is one of America's most influential illustrators. In 1987, the Drama Desk created a special award to recognize Davis' iconic posters for Joseph Papp's Public Theater,

and he is in the Hall of Fame of both the Art Directors Club and The Society of Illustrators. Classic Davis posters include those for "Hamlet," "The Threepenny Opera" and "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf."

The cover of "Bill Harris 2011 Kresge Eminent Artist" began as do all of Davis' realistic portraits — with a photograph. Harris was shot by Davis in Manhattan during the February 2011 rehearsals of "Cool Blues."



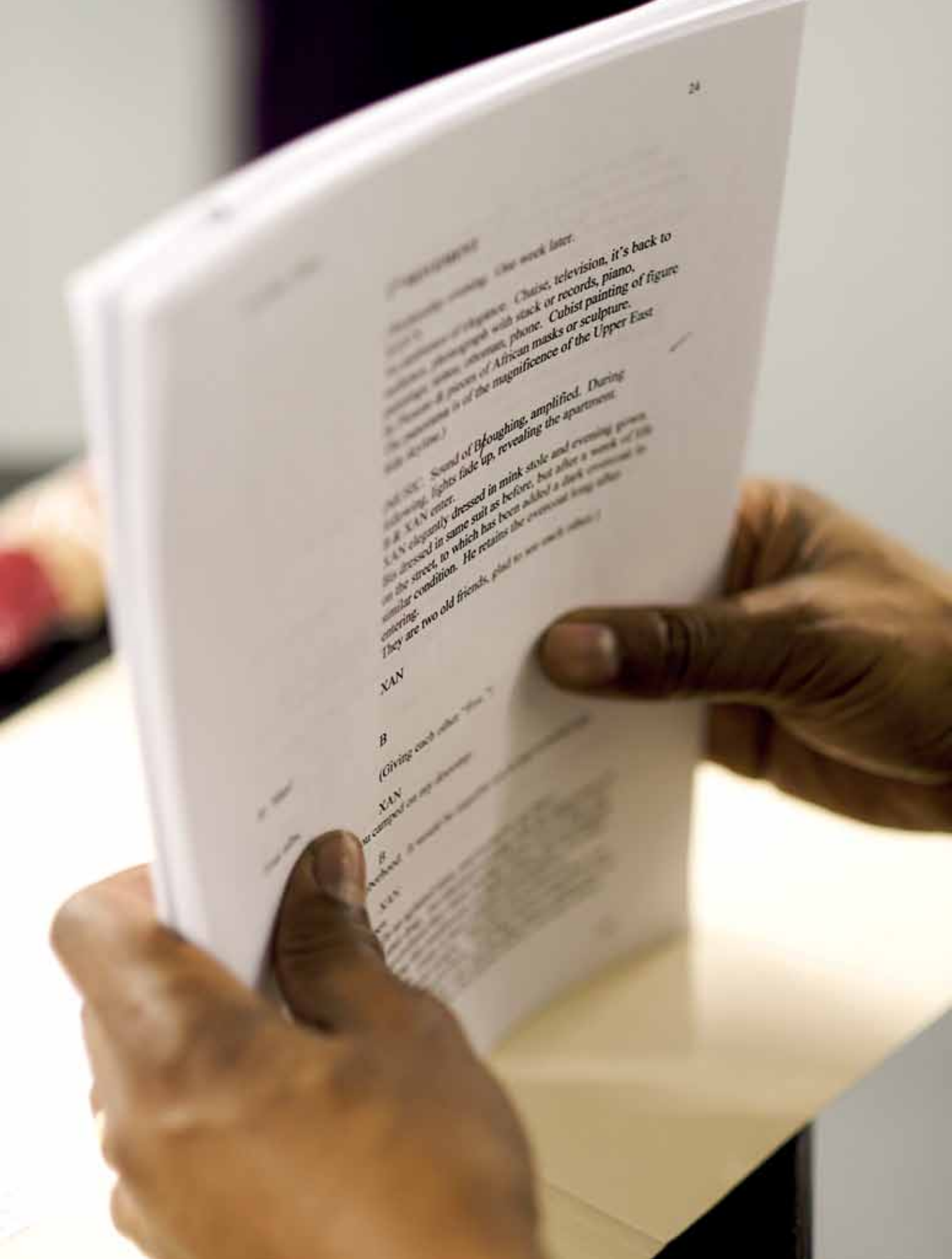
**About Carole Harris:** The rhythmically constructed, non-traditional tapestries of artist Carole Harris are as melodic and improvisational as the work of her husband, writer Bill Harris. Her award-winning works are composed of hundreds of richly colored fabrics that

are cut, overlaid, applied, pieced and quilted to stunning effect. Her work is in major collections, including the White House, Washington, DC; Michigan State University Museum of Folk Art, East Lansing, Mich.; Harris Bank and Trust, and John H. Groger Cook County Hospital, Chicago; Detroit Receiving Hospital, Detroit. Ms. Harris has kindly allowed for use of her work throughout "Bill Harris 2011 Kresge Eminent Artist."



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