

Stefon Harris and Blackout

Friday, December 18, 2009

11 a.m.–12 p.m. ET

Grades 4–8

Curriculum Connections: American History
National Standards for Music: 6, 7, 8, 9.



Stefon Harris (vibraphone, marimba), Marc Cary (piano), Ben Williams (bass), Casey Benjamin (saxophone) and Terreon Gully (drums).

About the Program

During this session, vibraphonist-composer Stefon Harris along with his band Blackout teaches students what to listen for in jazz. Heralded as "one of the most important young artists in jazz" (*Los Angeles Times*), Harris leads students through a series of listening exercises as the ensemble demonstrates their eclectic sound—a hybrid of acoustic music and progressive sounds. In this program, students develop a heightened awareness for jazz music while learning the art of active listening and how to interpret music.

Jazz: An Evolving Art Form

Jazz is a truly American musical form—and many people consider it one of America's best contributions to the world of music. Jazz first emerged about 100 years ago in the American south, most distinctly in New Orleans, Louisiana. This seaport city served as home to people of African, French, English, Caribbean, and other backgrounds. It became a melting pot for music from many traditions as well. Black musicians fused elements of ragtime, blues, classical, and big brass band sounds to create a distinct new type of music—jazz.

After the first jazz recordings were made in 1917, jazz spread across the nation. It also evolved over the decades, helped along by influential musicians. Among them, trumpeter Louis Armstrong (1920s) introduced improvised solos; Duke Ellington (1920s) popularized big band jazz; Charlie Parker (1940s) broke ground with a faster style called bebop; Miles Davis (1950s) influenced jazz first with his softer, complex "cool" style and later in the late 1960s with fusion jazz; and John Coltrane (1960s) helped pioneer using sounds derived from half-steps, called modal jazz.

Since then, artists—including Stefon Harris and Blackout—have continued to explore and expand the musical genre.

About Stefon Harris and Blackout

- ♪ Harris, from upstate New York, has been interested in music since childhood (he tried playing by ear with television cartoons like *The Pink Panther*).
- ♪ Although he can play almost every instrument, Harris chose to specialize on the vibraphone after a percussion-playing mentor inspired him.
- ♪ For Harris, the real tradition of jazz comes from authenticity and spontaneity—creating music that reflects what's happening right now.
- ♪ Radiohead, Stravinsky, and Stevie Wonder—how's that for diversity?—have all influenced Harris' work.
- ♪ All the Blackout members help write or arrange songs on their albums.
- ♪ Blackout member Ben Williams grew up in Washington, D.C., where he played in local go-go bands, one of the musical influences you can hear in the band's music.

About Stefon Harris and Blackout, cont.

- ♪ Saxophonist Casey Benjamin also plays the **vocoder** (the abbreviation for voice encoder), an electronic device that alters the voice—think *Star Wars*' Darth Vader.
- ♪ Harris has earned three Grammy nominations (one of music's highest honors).



Jazz: What to Listen and Look For

Improvisation—creating music or song spontaneously, a technique that requires great musical skill and creativity. Listen carefully to the melody at the beginning of a piece. This is usually the musical material that will be repeated, developed, and extended throughout the work. Listen carefully when musicians are playing solos, during which they often improvise. Try to follow the solo from beginning to end, and hear how the solo differs from the basic melody.

Tempo—the speed of the music. Are individual pieces consistently fast or slow throughout, or does the tempo change in certain sections of the music?

Syncopation—stressing a note in an unexpected place, between beats, or on a weak

Rhythm—music made up of strong and soft beats played in a repeating pattern. Move your hands and feet to the different rhythms of each instrument. Listen for how the bass player and drummer keep the pulse of the music.

Soloing—when a musician performs alone. The musician's individual personality is reflected when musicians create a unique, personal sound while playing their instruments.

Ensemble—refers to the way musicians in a group like Blackout work together. Observe how the musicians communicate with one another, physically and musically. Do they exchange glances? Follow the players as they alternate taking the “lead.”

Instructional Activities

Instrumental jazz is musical conversation without words. During the program, Stefon Harris uses nonsense syllables to communicate with his band members to demonstrate how his ensemble interacts when playing. In this activity communication will occur through improvised sound. Divide the class into small groups of 2, 3 or 4 students. Prior to the exercise, the instructor creates a list of possible scenarios and characters for the students to improvise. For example, a student wants to convince his dad to give him the keys to the car. Or, a student wants a teacher to change a grade on a test. Each group will use nonsense syllables, rhythms, and other non-verbal sounds or gestures to act out their scene. After the scene, see if the other students can guess what the conversation was about.

Resources

Internet Resources:

History of Jazz: artsedge.kennedy-center.org/jazzintime

Jazz in DC: artsedge.kennedy-center.org/jazzindc

Stefon Harris & Blackout: www.stefonharris.com

Select Recordings:

Stefon Harris & Blackout. *Urbanus*. (Concord Records, Beverly Hills) 2009.

Stefon Harris & Blackout. *Evolution*. (Blue Note Records, New York) 2004.