2011
KRESGE
EMINENT
ARTIST

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION
The Kresge Eminent Artist Award honors an exceptional artist in the visual, performing or literary arts for lifelong professional achievements and contributions to Metropolitan Detroit’s cultural community.

Bill Harris is the 2011 Kresge Eminent Artist. This monograph commemorates his life and work.

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President and CEO
The Kresge Foundation

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Foreword

“

he 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 Detroiter — 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.

Rip Rapson
President and CEO
The Kresge Foundation
Your 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
At 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 muck 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 paean
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.
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.
"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 . . ."

Charlie has seen on older men, their mother had confided to a shield of nonchalance. A look without heat or a tinge of indifference, says nothing more.

"It's my daddy," Ikey adds. "See 'im when I want to. Anybody don't like it, just too black-ass bad."

Mannish! Mannish, Charlie thinks, the awe, his tone assuming the affecion blazing in his eyes, hot-bright as Kaycee's setting sun.

Ikey smiles, thinking he has won . . .

"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 guileless conviction; composed of intriguing desire and naked need. A tone he will hone, wield for that matter.

"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?"

Eyes groping; them nipples like drops of jeweled sweat.

Go on in there, boy. She'll give you one."

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

The woman, housecoat open, titties lulling in her dusky-pink slip, enters from where the victrola plays, enters, humming, through the glass-bead curtain — babbled 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 fleshly fruit, hefts, as if testing its nubile weight.

(Rooded, 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.

"Baby! your boy turns to me, rooted in the unkept yard, winks.

"Don't tell your mama where you got it."

Papa warns me after, "or this place'll be full of flies." Says it soft and easy, soft and easy as lullabies.

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."

Still too Mama's Boy.

"Mannish!" their mother had confided about her second son's latest stage. Next he'll be shooting pool.'

"Better,' Ikey, thinks. 'Mannish!' he didn't know was in his hand.

"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."

Mouth cotton-dry.

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Still too Mama's Boy.
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.
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.
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 y'all 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.

T. MIMS
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. MIMS
(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.
Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil


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?

GEORGIA: Second Cousin. That was all anybody called him. Second Cousin. Everybody.

KIMBROUGH: “To have a giant’s strength; but it is tyrannous

How could he have been north? What railroad he took.

STOKES: Sheriff claimed Smokey Junior did.

GEORGIA: Sheriff said he committed suicide.

STOKES: (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 remember a Bo-Peep, a Snooky, a Baby Boy and a woman named Barefoot.

STOKES: I knowed a Robert Smith one time. They called him Chicken Lips. White folks called him Four Toes after that.

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.

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.

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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.

CHARACTERS

STOKES: Blind piano player. 


LEM: A broken man in his late 30s, early 40s. Georgia's estranged husband.

ACT SETS: GEORGIA: A seer. unstated place, a home. And if he been north? what railroad he took. eastern Arkansas or Tennessee; whether he's a rambler or ain't never left (demonstrates.)

TENNESSEE.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Blind. 

1940. Lean. Blues singer.

JOHNSON: 40s. Her own woman.

CHARACTERS

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JOHNSON: 40s. Her own 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 wa 
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 threw off that trestle would've.
GEORGIA: Whole thing scared Hambone Red so bad that when it was over he didn't stutter no mor.
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 get 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 known 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 y'all 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 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, y'all 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 need anything, Stokes'll get it for you. You can pay him. (She exits.)
ROBERT: So I tell Willie Brown, “I’m gonna 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 hawl 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 swirling 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 I 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 himself. 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 around 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 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 folks’ 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 jored 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.)
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.")

DOX
The Detroit way.

SPOON
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.)
jazzer. 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 ripple; the sound of nylon 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 goes into his solo and takes off Cherokee, and is not about to be out run or out done. The crowd is shouting, “Blow!”

And they whispering back and forth.

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 Leap, 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?

(Laugh.)

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 1990. A portion of his remarks are printed here as they appeared in City Arts Quarterly, Volume IV, No. 12 – Special Double Issue: Celebrating Detroit, 1990.

One of the few things that I learned in 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.

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 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 sync 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 sync 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. And there were two things that I learned 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 asin’ and japi’, 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.
“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.

During 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.

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“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.

“Here’s the scene, “DeWitt said, “it’s exactly the way I remember it, only there was this one — whether they were or not.}

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.

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

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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 blew 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.”

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Again, the question was, “Why?”

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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.

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 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.

“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 stopping 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 roaming 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.

Winding near 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, brushed them off with a whisk broom after their haircut, and swept and mopped up at closing time.

Forrest, who had been doing, dummied 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 quiet 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 number’s players Encyclopedia Britannica and Bible. It was kept in the shoe shine 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”

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 Jordan. 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.

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.

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

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 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 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 community 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 wooden desks beneath peeling ceilings. A phalanx of understanding-educated blacks and whites coming from meetings, full of daylight enthusiasm for programs that amount to no more than drops. 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 fingerpointing, 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 minoritics. 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
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 12th, 14th, 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 anybody 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 revolt(olution) 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 14th 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 14th 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 12th 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 12th Street really gets to be 12th 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. 12th 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 12th, Small grocery stores, Benny’s Flamingo Barber Shop, ice cold beer and wine to take out. Pick up a 

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).

14th. 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 inside, site of an armed confrontation in March around. Outside the church is modern (redesigned by black architect Nathan Johnson).

Linwood isn’t the Civil Rights Commission in a building with a Virginia Park. Soul food and just about the slowest between Euclid and Greenleaf’s Restaurant on Taylor.

The whole situation. Inter Faith Center. Judge George Crockett, emerged out of the 69. One policeman dead, 140 black men, women inside, site of an armed confrontation in March around. Euclid. 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, a resale shop, and TV repair. John’s House of Creations 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, a resale shop, and TV repair.


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 atmosphere.

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

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 atmosphere.

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Another Jewish holdover. Le Player’s Men’s Wear and the business section goes respectable residential on down to Deivison. Kirkwood 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, Middrum. 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, etc. 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 12th 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.
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.


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 works 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.


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 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

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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.


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.

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 the whole pedestal. He’s just an excellent he never puts himself up on a pedestal. He takes time with people

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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 12th 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 of 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 hipped 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

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 a professor in the Wayne State University English Department, certainly hundreds of students have benefited 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.

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

Other Voices: Reflections

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

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– Thomas Park, poet, educator

Mr. Park wrote his original poem expressly for this publication in honor of his former teacher, Bill Harris.
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
Director
Kresge Arts in Detroit
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 Detroiter 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.” In deed, 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.

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
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.”

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 unforgottably 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...
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.”

“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 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 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.”

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Bill 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, Coney’s, 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...
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 Aminé 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 dice was cast, and young artists, musicians, and writers began to interlock orbits in the Cass Corridor. When poets Robin Eichele, John Sinclair and my husband, 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, 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
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

Selected Honors/Awards
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/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
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 of the Detroit Institute of Arts
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
Selected Bibliography

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 Nation 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
Detroit, Michigan

That Ought To Hold You, chapter excerpted from “Just Like in the Movies.”
Royals Literary Review
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 Our 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
40222, A Detroit Book of Poetry
Detroit, Michigan

According to the Pattern
Kick Out the Jams, Detroit’s Gas Corridor 1963-1977
Detroit, Michigan

Griot De La Grand
Black Scholar Journal of Black Studies and Research
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 Callalo
A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters
Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore, Maryland

Romare Bearden – Suite For Reclining Nudes
Crandock 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
Eyehall
Number 3, 1994, pp. 9-10

Birth of a Nation
DETROIT
Volume 2, Doorjamb Press
Detroit, Michigan, 1998

Allie McGhee Runs the New View Down
Markizine.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
Mahn Gallery
New York, New York, 2002

WAR: An altered found poem.
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

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 & Blasé African American Plays for Today
Bedfield Publishing
Detroit, Michigan, 1991

Coda (2 excerpts)
Voices of Color: 50 Senses 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

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Selected Productions


Choreopoem-a Tribute to Langston Hughes 1988 One performance Produced by Your Heritage House Bonstelle Theatre Wayne State University Detroit, Michigan


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

Productions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Production Details</th>
</tr>
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| 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 |
| 2013 | Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone  
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  
Carré Productions  
Burbank, California |
| 1997 | University of Redlands  
Redlands, California |
| 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  
Staged reading  
Sunteenth 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 17  
Unity Players Ensemble  
Inglewood, California

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

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

1996 March  
Artic Theatre  
Detroi, Michigan

1999  
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
SELECTED PRODUCTIONS

Houston, Texas
The Ensemble Theatre
2001 September 7-

Wayne State University

Miami, Florida
African American Ensemble

Memphis, Tennessee
Repertory Theatre
Memphis Black

Buffalo, New York
Ujima Theatre

Indianapolis, Indiana
Phoenix Theatre

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

2004 July 2-21
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

2006 April 17-27
Pro Arts Collective/ Austen 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 Playwright” series
National Black Theatre
New York, New York

Slave Narrative
1991
Education and Outreach Department
Artic Theatre
Detroit, Michigan

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

1992
Detroit Public Schools
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
Afrons 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
Parrington-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

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
Harmony Park Playhouse
Detroit, Michigan

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
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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Kresge Arts in Detroit

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Arts League of Michigan

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President
Shortcut Books

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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.

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.

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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.
Acknowledgments

With Very Special Thanks to: Bill and Carole Harris for their enthusiasm and generosity throughout this project. As the author and/or photographer, Bill Harris has graciously granted permission to The Kresge Foundation to print, either as excerpts or in their entirety, his plays, poems, essays, works of fiction, nonfiction and photography for appearance in this publication.

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.

With additional thanks to Sheldon Annis; Marcus Belgrave; Terry Blackhawk; Castillo Theatre, a program of the All Stars Project; Haystack Mountain School of Crafts; W. Kim Heron; Ron Himes; Woodie King, Jr.; Cynthia Krokikowski, Librarians III, and Nardina Meza, Ph.D.; Wayne State University Library Systems; Charles L. Latimer; M.L. Liebler; Naomi Long Madgett; Charles McGer; Harriet Sturkey; Dennis Teischer; and Hilda Vext for their kind contributions.

Credits

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Thomas Park
George Tysh

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Printer
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Photography
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Creative Director; Editor

Julie Pincus
Art Director; Graphic Designer

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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:

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The estate of Curtis Woodson for photo appearing on pg. 69; Walter F. Reuther Library, Wayne State University for photo appearing on pg. 4.

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Madison Heights, Michigan

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The estate of Curtis Woodson for photo appearing on pg. 69; Walter F. 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. Davis posters include those for “Hamlet,” “The Three Penny 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. Gruber 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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