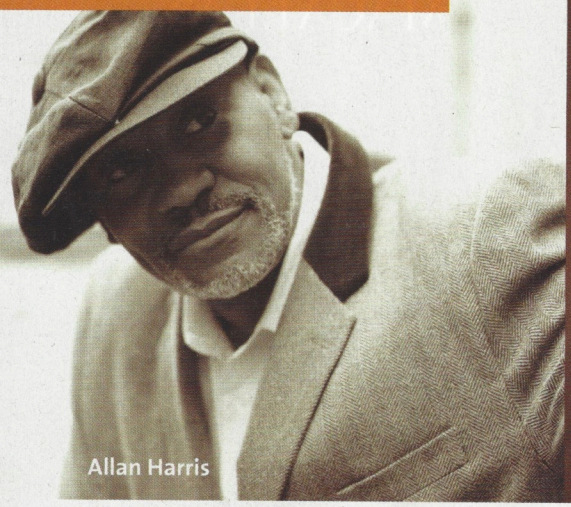
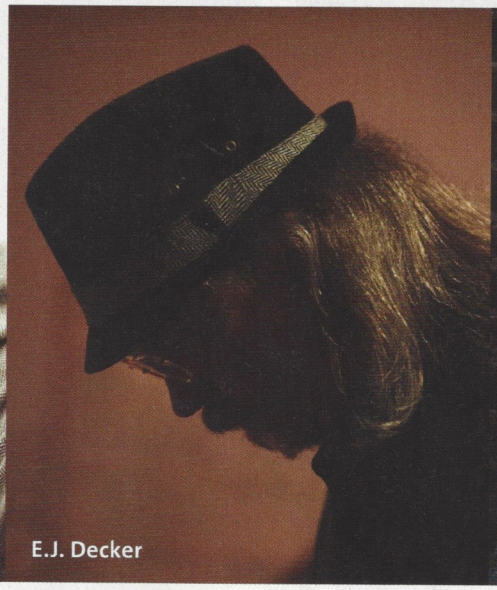
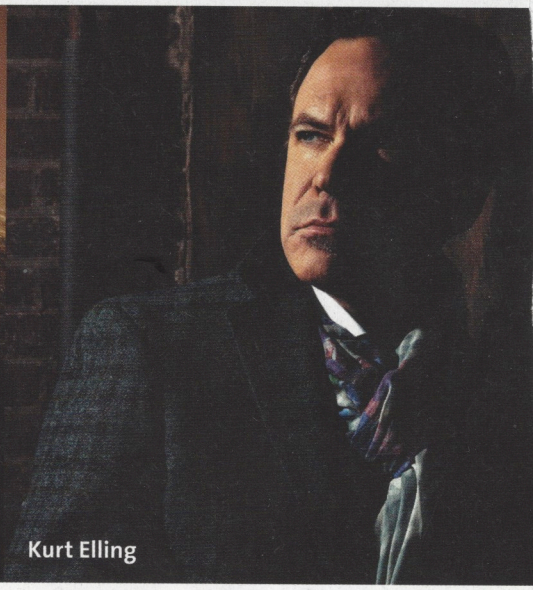

Allan Harris


E.J. Decker


Kurt Elling

Male Delivery

Allan Harris, E.J. Decker and Kurt Elling offer three views of a man and a microphone.

By Bob Weinberg

The fraternity of enduring male jazz voices is a fairly selective one. It encompasses singers who straddled the line between jazz and blues, like Big Joe Turner and Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, and others who had a foot in jazz and another in the pop world, like Billy Eckstine or Al Hibbler, whose roots were in the big bands of the 1930s and '40s. Nat "King" Cole and Frank Sinatra could lay claim to jazz and pop bona fides, as could Joe Williams and Johnny Hartman. And then there were innovators like Jon Hendricks and Eddie Jefferson, who honed a method to incorporate the breathless excitement of bebop into their singing, an approach that was labeled "vocalese."

Allan Harris also fits into more than one of these categories, his selection of material covering jazz standards, blues, rock, R&B and even cowboy music, during his 20-plus-year career. Anticipating Jefferson's centennial in August, Harris salutes the late singer on his most ambitious jazz recording yet, *The Genius of Eddie Jefferson* (Resilience Music Alliance). Harris had dipped a toe into the Jefferson songbook with his read of "I've Got the Blues" — Jefferson's take on Lester Young's "Lester Leaps In" — on his 2015 release *Black Bar Jukebox*, and tackled the late lyricist's best-known work, "Moody's Mood for Love," on his 2016 follow-up *Nobody's Gonna Love You Better*. But *Genius* represents Harris' first full immersion into Jefferson's signature style of singing lyrics to instrumental solos from classic jazz tunes.

As usual, the Brooklyn-based singer displays impeccable taste, selecting illustrative examples of Jefferson's deft wordcraft. And while he's frequently fulfilled the role of balladeer and blues singer, Harris more than rises to the challenges of this tongue-tangling material. Dig his dexterous rip through "Dexter Digs In" or his breath-defying leap into "Billie's Bounce," as he versifies the quicksilver solos of Dexter Gordon and Charlie Parker, respectively. He's aided in this task by an accommodating rhythm section of pianist Eric Reed, bassist George DeLancey and drummer Willie Jones III, and spurred on by the twin saxophones of tenorist Ralph Moore and altoist Richie Cole. As a close associate of Jefferson's — he was with him on the early morning that he was gunned down outside a club in Detroit in 1979 — Cole provided Harris with plenty of insight and encouragement.

Jefferson clearly communicated affection and esteem for jazz artists who had indelibly stamped the genre with their highly personalized voices. He defended Miles Davis' surly indifference toward audiences with his lyrics to "So What?"; paid loving homage to Coleman Hawkins with his lyric to "Body and Soul"; and saluted Pres' lyrical take on "It's Only a Paper Moon" with "Lester's Trip to the Moon," all of which Harris explores here. On "Body and Soul," Harris makes the most of his smoky, expressive instrument, accompanied solely by Reed's elegant piano. Jefferson's hipness extended to hard bop and soul jazz, too — he appropriated Duke Pearson's "Jeannine" and Horace Silver's "Sister Sadie" and "Filthy McNasty," all of which provide exciting highlights of Harris' album, as well.

While Jefferson seems eternally cool, passing time and changing tastes have somewhat obscured the legacy of balladeer Arthur Prysock. Following the example of Eckstine, Prysock worked his mellow baritone magic on some of the most romantic songs imaginable. His mature style is evident from early recordings with Buddy Johnson's big band in the 1940s,

Photo of Harris by Sandrine Lee, Decker by Enid Farber and Elling by Anna Webber

although his artistry ripened throughout a long career that survived rock and roll and disco. Now, vocalist **E.J. Decker** brings renewed attention to Prysock with his recording *Blue Velvet* (Candela), a collection of songs associated with the singer, who died in 1997.

The son of a baritone big-band singer himself, Decker certainly possesses the timbre necessary for such an undertaking. His reads of Prysock staples such as "Autumn in New York" and "(I Don't Stand) A Ghost of a Chance" connect with the underlying emotions of the material, even if some of his phrasing seems a bit forced — at least as compared to Prysock's easy manner. The singer truly hits the sweet spot on swinging renditions of songbook staples "What a Difference a Day Made" and "On the Street Where You Live," and he sounds quite at home on blues numbers such as "You Had Better Change Your Ways" and "It's Too Late (Baby Too Late)." Throughout, Decker receives excellent support from pianist Les Kurtz, bassist Saadi Zain and drummer Tom Melito. Baritone saxophonist Claire Daly, guitarist Chris Bergson and trombonist Elizabeth Frascoia all make outstanding contributions, as well.

Among the most gifted vocalists of his generation, **Kurt Elling** embodies the best of what Jefferson and Prysock had to offer, consistently displaying an ability to plumb a song's musical and textural depths. With a range as vast as the Himalayas, the Chicago-born singer can engage in vocal gymnastics and deliver a lyric with devastating emotional force. Those skills are in abundance on *The Questions* (OKeh), Elling's most recent album exploring existential queries, affairs of the heart and what could be construed as political matters with equal passion.

Even when he swings and misses, as on a read of Bob Dylan's timeless "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," you have to applaud his chutzpah. Elling's emotional plaint, which begins a cappella, runs counter to Dylan's world-weary delivery, at times overwhelming the lyric. With lines such as "I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children," Dylan understood that a hard sell was unnecessary. As were backing musicians — Dylan originally performed it unaccompanied on acoustic guitar. And as good as they are, Elling's bandmates add a surfacy sheen that seems out-of-synch with the song's intent.

Elling's much more successful on Paul Simon's "American Tune," his remarkable instrument going from hushed and intimate to soaring and inspirational. Like "Hard Rain," the song resonates with current times as it explores what it means to be American. Elling delivers goosebumps in abundance as he takes flight on the bridge, capturing the dreamlike out-of-body imagery that takes him floating past the Statue of Liberty.

The singer may have left divinity school before completing his master's, but he continues to examine the Big Issues. Life and love, death and what comes next are poetically vetted on songs such as "A Happy Thought," on which Elling sets Franz Wright's verse to music composed by the set's pianist, Stu Mindeman; and on a poignant cover of Peter Gabriel's "Washing of the Water." And, providing an album highlight, Elling sings self-penned lyrics to Jaco Pastorius' lilting "Three Views of a Secret." Taking his inspiration from the 13th-century romantic poet Rumi, he concludes that what might all culminate in a "cosmic swan dive" is worth enduring when true love is the reward. ■

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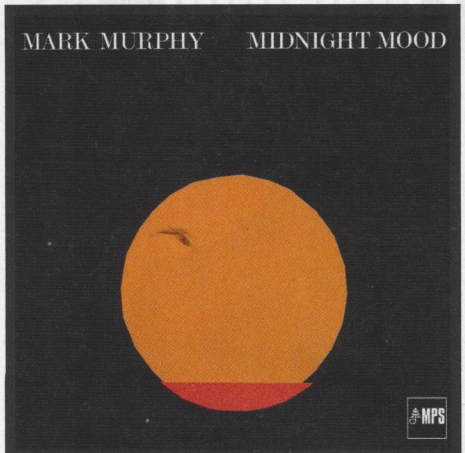

Mark Murphy *Midnight Moon* (MPS) — Recorded in Germany in 1967, and recently re-released, this session captures one-of-a-kind vocalist Murphy at the peak of his interpretive powers. The American singer, who was living in Europe at the time, sounds completely relaxed, alternately playful and poignant as he navigates standards and originals penned by his associates on the date, namely, members of the Kenny Clarke-Francy Boland Big Band. Murphy's expressive tenor opens the album-opening Ellington/Webster classic "Jump for Joy" a cappella before the superb octet leaps in. The bluesy "I Don't Want Nothin'," written by Clarke and bassist Jimmy Woode, and the breezily grooving "Why and How," a collaboration between trumpeter Jimmy Deuchar and Murphy, provide highlights, as does a blithe yet moving read of Cy Coleman's "You Fascinate Me So." And, of course, Murphy delivers the shivers on an intimate "My Ship."

Stephanie Richards
Fullmoon (Relative Pitch)
Thollem/DuRoche/StJames Trio
Live in Our Time (ESP-Disk)
Syrinx Effect
A Sky You Could Strike a Match On (self-released)
Hal Galper Quartet featuring Jerry Bergonzi
Cubist (Origin)

personal taste