

Jazz CD Review: “The Genius of Eddie Jefferson” — Performed by Allan Harris

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Singer Allan Harris clearly loves Eddie Jefferson’s music and performs it with sincerity and chops.



By Steve Provizer

Eddie Jefferson and Jon Hendricks are the foremost vocalese lyricists in jazz (vocalese=putting words to instrumental songs and solos). I'm always happy to bring attention to the music of either musician.

Eddie Jefferson was not really a singer; he was a musician who sang. Jefferson's voice is not quite raspy; call it sandy. His singing was filled with quirky inflections, including near-yodels, other guttural sounds, and far from perfect articulation. He didn't have anything like a professional singer's upper register, but that never stopped him from going up there, either singing falsetto or squeezing out something that sounded like a kind of emotional cry. He started out as a hooper, so his sense of time is always impeccable. He wouldn't get very far on America's Reality TV talent shows, but I'd take his exciting, funky, savvy, and emotional singing any day over a score of so-called "better" singers.

Now we have Allan Harris's disc in which he performs Eddie Jefferson's material. Unlike EJ, Harris is a "legit" singer, with a pleasant, light, smooth baritone. This contrast in voices presents a considerable critical challenge. How do I get Jefferson's voice out of my head and Harris's into it? Do I have to? I'll do my best to choose a path in-between, trying to take Harris's performance on its own terms, while using EJ's versions as a point of departure.

The musical framework for the vocals on *The Genius of Eddie Jefferson* (Resilience Music) is very similar to the original versions. Harris makes generally minor changes to EJ's arrangements; tempos and tune structures are similar; some intros are different and he sings in keys that are slightly lower than EJ's. Often there are tenor and alto saxes on a single track. EJ generally only used one — alto player Richie Cole, who also blows on this album. Apart from Cole, we have a number of stalwarts — tenor saxophonist Ralph Moore, pianist Eric Reed, drummer Willie Jones, and bassist George Delancey.

"So What" is among EJ's most well-known set of lyrics, written to a Miles Davis solo from the album *Kind of Blue*. Here, the rhythm section is calmer, more relaxed and, interestingly, the piano voicings are hipper than they are on *Kind of Blue* — the approach is infused by a post-'60s sensibility. Harris's voice is less sandy than EJ's, and mellower. His performance replicates EJ's very closely in terms of phrasing. This is an effective performance, presenting us with what is essentially a chiller version than the original.

Harris slows down Horace Silver's "Sister Sadie" a bit and the tag ending is slightly different in this version. Otherwise, this track follows the original closely. The quality of the vocal is very different, though. Harris doesn't go into falsetto as EJ does, and he doesn't have the latter's crackle. There are two smoking solos by Moore and Cole. Harris overdubs his own voice, singing "hey girl" in the background. The difference between Harris's and EJ's approaches is most noticeable in the funkier tunes, like this one.

Jefferson's collaboration with Dexter Gordon, "Dexter Diggin' In," included a horn intro, which is eschewed here and replaced with an a cappella opening. The tempo is slightly slower. Harris digs in and generates some good rhythmic propulsion; EJ's energy was a little more frantic. Piano, tenor, and alto all solo well. EJ trades 4's while scatting with the horns, but Harris does 4's using the lyrics. Scat doesn't seem to be as native a musical language to Harris as it was to EJ.

The Charlie Parker line "Billie's Bounce" is straight ahead, with a bop piano intro. Harris takes the tempo a tad faster than EJ; Harris handles the vocalese solo well, articulating nicely. Piano plays a strong solo, then does 4's with the drummer and back to the vocals and out.

EJ penned lyrics to Coleman Hawkins's famous solo for "Body and Soul." These words were then adapted by the Manhattan Transfer, with added new lyrics honoring EJ. This version starts off in a very slow tempo, with solo piano providing an intro to the verse. Kudos to Harris for maintaining his intonation and expressing the lines at such a slow tempo. This is the tune that seems best suited to Harris's silkier, more fluid style. It does seem a little odd to me that this version starts off so slowly and then speeds up, eventually landing in a tempo a little faster than EJ's.

"Jeanine," a Duke Pearson line made famous by Cannonball Adderley, is taken at a slower tempo than EJ's; it's more contemplative, more melancholy. This is not a mood EJ dips into often, and certainly not in this song. Even though the instrumental original and EJ's versions are both faster than Harris's take, I actually like this tempo better for EJ's wistful lyrics. Harris carries this tune off well, although he sounds somewhat tentative in his scatting, especially compared to EJ's damn-the-torpedoes approach.

Horace Silver's "Filthy McNasty" pretty much follows EJ's version. Harris does a fine job, but the weird nooks and crannies of EJ's voice are so right for this song. Harris can't give the name "Filthy McNasty" the dirty rasp it deserves, which is what EJ was born to do.

"Lester's Trip to the Moon" is a straight-up swinger based on a Lester Young solo. This is the only song on the album I'm not familiar with, so I can't compare it to EJ's version. The instrumentalists are given a lot of space here to stretch out and there are strong piano, bass, and drum solos. EJ's lyrics make this trip to outer space seem as comfortable as going to the neighbor's backyard for a BBQ.

"Memphis" is taken at an even slower tempo than EJ's. The rhythm section brings a bluesier style to this tune than the original — it is a better choice for Harris than EJ's funkier approach. The horn section and drummer lay out for the entire track. The sleeker setup works, although EJ's performance is pretty strongly implanted in my ears. We'll see whether Harris's version can dislodge it, or at least nudge it to the side.

Richie Cole's "Waltz For a Rainy Bebop Evening" starts off with a slow piano intro, replacing the original's "music makes the world go round" that EJ sings — no great loss for me. The performance then moves into a slightly faster tempo than the original — which is unusual for this album. Harris also jumps up to the same key that EJ uses, which stretches him a bit in the upper register, and adds a nice feeling. Cole plays what, for him, is a pretty restrained solo. Then the piano solos. After the solos on the original, EJ and company move onto a double-time section with some scat, but here Harris goes back directly to the original tempo and the chorus. He saves the "music makes the world go round" refrain for the end, with some gentle ad-libbing before the fade out.

Harris clearly loves this music and performs it with sincerity and chops. His voice, so different from EJ's, necessarily takes these songs in a new direction. At times, EJ's voice looms in the background and pulls you away, but sometimes, with his crystal clear articulation and judicious choice of tempos and arrangements, Harris makes EJ's music his own.