

Keyon Harrold - *Foreverland*

When Keyon Harrold is listing the influences that he turned to during the creation of his rich and evocative new album *Foreverland* (January 2024 / Concord), he cites the likes of Radiohead, Fleet Foxes, Fela Kuti, John Coltrane, and, for a second, he becomes vulnerable — the list is too basic, too *serious music listener* starter pack. But, out of that moment of insecurity, he spins an indelible flex: “You are what you eat, and I have a pretty strict diet in *dope shit*.”

Taking in Keyon Harrold’s career to-date, it’s clear that the “world-class trumpeter” (Essence) and composer is very serious about that diet. He’s a jazz musician but in the most expansive sense, working with a list of dream collaborators: generational legends Keith Richards and Diana Ross; rap stars like Mac Miller and Nas; neo-soul icons Erykah Badu and D’Angelo; and modern soul stars Black Pumas and Leon Bridges. His circle of regular collaborators is formidable and includes his music industry mentor Common (who hired him for his first touring gig), his New School classmate Robert Glasper, and GRAMMY winners Maxwell, PJ Morton, Gregory Porter, and YEBBA.

There’s also his extensive touring and recording work with pop music royalty, Jay-Z and Beyonce. And, while it’s perhaps lazy to compare Keyon to Miles Davis, the connection is a little more apropos than at first glance: Harrold contributed all of the trumpet playing in Don Cheadle’s GRAMMY-winning Miles Davis biopic *Miles Ahead*, playing to match Cheadle’s on-screen performances.

Keyon has recorded two acclaimed solo records, 2009’s *Introducing Keyon Harrold* and 2017’s breakthrough release *The Mugician*, which established Keyon as “a certified legend in the game” (Okayplayer). Featuring Pharoahe Monch, Gary Clark, Jr., Big K.R.I.T., Guy Torry, Georgia Anne Muldrow and Robert Glasper, the record garnered praise from The New York Times (“stirring...consolidates elegy and exhortation”) and Billboard (“equal parts music and magic”).

However, the origins of *Foreverland* begin not at the crest of a professional and artistic high but in the doldrums of COVID-19 lockdown. A pandemic birthday found Keyon adrift. It was a period of stagnation, of exhaustion in the wake of challenges both universal (global health catastrophe, racial injustice) and personal (the passing of his mother, the highly publicized and racially charged assault of his 14-year-old son).

Looking for a break and a fresh perspective, a recommendation from his brother and a friend had him headed to Vegas. But instead of the tables, Keyon hit the studio. After months of isolation, it was invigorating to reconnect with friends after so long apart. This

camaraderie was the creative spark Keyon needed. The sessions were loose and exploratory, but with an artistic focus he hadn't felt in years.

The resulting music was mesmerizing. Keyon embraced a less-is-more attitude: "It was almost minimalist in a way. I wanted it to sound as if it's easy but there's more complexity deep within, to pull melody and beauty out of the abstract." He allowed harmonic structures to vamp, slowly thickening harmonies for maximum emotional impact.

"Each song has a harmony that evokes a mood," Keyon says. "I invite you to live in this tonality with me. It's not about a million notes a second, it's about finding the right mood to open people's chakras. The color of each mood gives me solace — it allowed me to reignite the hopes I had, to begin digging out of a down period."

With live music on pause, the rare luxury of time allowed Keyon to sculpt these largely improvised sounds into a shape that evoked and conveyed each emotion he was grasping at. It was a deliberate and thoughtful process. Says Keyon: "It took me a long time to say what I want to say, to really hone in on what I do. I want to make songs that hit like pop radio but have a depth of color and character, to embrace the genius in simplicity."

Foreverland is reflective, immediate and uplifting. Keyon harnesses the raw expression of those original Vegas takes and creates a dreamy yet tactile landscape of sound. It provides the perfect canvas for his playing, his tone projecting a creamy clarity but navigating ambiguous waters with an open-hearted hopefulness. "What I can offer as a musician who plays an instrument with no words is an honest conveyance of emotion," says Keyon. "Some of these notes, I play them because there's not a better word."

Foreverland is a family affair — pretty much every musician who appears on the record is a longtime friend, and Keyon accounts the record's warmth to this dynamic. "It's like the ingredients of a great meal: you don't need just any pepper, you need a certain kind. Every musician on this record is a rare and essential element."

Each collaboration brings *Foreverland* into further focus. PJ Morton lends a wistful vocal to the nostalgic "Beautiful Day," a track that radiates positivity as it revels in the gifts of everyday existence. Elsewhere, Common and Robert Glasper contribute to the sweep and poetry of the almost mystical album opener "Find Your Peace," a track that exhorts listeners to embrace their own agency and summon their inner strength. Meanwhile, the Laura Mvula-featuring title track is the very quintessence of the word lush — stacks of

vocal harmonies stretch endlessly in a spiritual merger between Pharoah Sanders' skybound jazz odysseys and the warm invitation of vintage soul.

“Don't Lie,” which features the emerging young singer Malaya, pairs a levitating keyboard figure with a stuttering rhythm that's part Art Blakey drum fill, part J Dilla sample chop. Against much of the album's tranquility, it portrays an internal tumult — the kind that Keyon feels is necessary for growth. “The operative word in testimony is test. The troubles are troublesome but they're part of my walk, and there's value in having a different experience, good or bad. It gives me a deeper context to pull from and enrich the message of my music.”

“Pictures,” *Foreverland's* penultimate track, is the sonic articulation of the internal recalibration that follows these tests. Keyon's yearning singing on the track is ever more poignant when considering his mother's passing: “*When I miss you, images shout in a quiet room / I'll atone / I'll fix everything that's wrong.*”

Even apart from its compositional intricacies and stylistic innovations, *Foreverland* is a triumph of resilience and empowerment. “What will be said when you're gone?,” says Keyon. “If you're not living life — getting beat up, getting your heart broken, winning, losing — what are you doing? What about your life can people learn from? If you don't put yourself in the ring sometimes, there won't be anything.” On *Foreverland*, Keyon takes life's challenges head-on — and emerges, in both music and in life, with a renewed sense of purpose.

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