

HIGHNOTE
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TOM HARRELL INFINITY





TOM HARRELL

Trumpet & Flugelhorn

MARK TURNER

Tenor Saxophone

CHARLES ALTURA

Electric & Acoustic Guitars

BEN STREET

Bass

JOHNATHAN BLAKE

Drums

ADAM CRUZ

Percussion (track 3 only)

- | | |
|----------------------|------|
| 1. THE FAST | 6:38 |
| 2. DUBLIN | 9:40 |
| 3. HOPE | 7:30 |
| 4. CORONATION | 6:56 |
| 5. FOLK SONG | 6:03 |
| 6. BLUE | 5:40 |
| 7. GROUND | 7:18 |
| 8. THE ISLE | 8:25 |
| 9. DUET | 1:41 |
| 10. TAURUS | 6:01 |



When pianist Bill Charlap featured Tom Harrell at a recent gig with his trio at New York's Jazz Standard, he summarized the trumpeter's genius as concisely as anyone could. "It is our honor and privilege," he announced, "To share the bandstand with a man who is a living, breathing melody."

Chances are that if you're reading these notes, you're at least somewhat familiar with that melody, and with Harrell's beautiful expression of it on trumpet and flugelhorn (two closely related instruments whose distinctions he blurs yet further with his sweet, mellow sound on both). With *Infinity*, he finds yet another context for that expression: a new quintet with tenor saxophonist Mark Turner, guitarist Charles Altura, bassist Ben Street, and drummer Johnathan Blake.

Their importance in molding this music should not be downplayed. It's his first outing not only with this ensemble, but this instrumentation—a trumpet-tenor-guitar front line and pianoless rhythm section. That combination, and specifically Turner and Altura, had powerful effects on the work. Add the extraordinary rhythm section of Street and Blake (with Altura moving between both lines), and the formula is one that Harrell describes as "overwhelmingly beautiful. A spectrum of beautiful colors and feels.

"All of these musicians are part of a network, kind of a family circle," he adds. "Family is the most important thing in the universe."

The universe is much on Harrell's mind: he ponders his place within the infinity of creation. It's a subtext to all his music, whether composed or improvised, and a preoccupation of his life off the bandstand as well. The striking photograph on the cover (taken by Harrell's wife, Angela) reminded him of that preoccupation, with himself situated in a context that has no evident beginning or ending. Hence, *Infinity*, the title of this album.

Again, though, that's mostly a subtext. The album is the product of much more direct musical influences.

First and foremost, as mentioned, it centers around this quintet lineup. "Blue" was written for their July 2018 debut at the Village Vanguard in New York. It's not a blues form; it has 32 bars, with two separate 12-bar structures and an 8-bar section for the blowing, and rather more than three chords. But the feeling of the blues is written all over it.

"The Isle" was also written for this assemblage (as was "Hope," more about which below). Harrell is part Irish, and this is one of many tunes in his substantial catalogue

that, for him, evokes the mystique of Eire. The band's interpretation moved him deeply: "The feeling is overwhelming to me. Everyone solos really beautifully on it, especially Charles and Mark: they play incredible solos." That description also goes for his own dreamy, Harmon-muted solo.

The tender "Folk Song" is slightly older than the quintet, but Harrell wrote a new arrangement for them that centers on Altura's gorgeous guitar. As its title suggests, it also has a connection to traditional music, in this case Eastern European. As a teenager, Harrell responded strongly to the music of Bartók, and injected this composition with motifs from both the composer's native Hungary and the Romani culture that fascinated him.

Infinity's other determining factor is Harrell's increasing dedication to through-composed music. "My biggest inspirations are Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, and Mingus," he says, particularly noting the impact of the seminal 1950 LP *Masterpieces by Ellington*. "They wrote extended forms where the form keeps evolving; it's not always the same 32 bars or 12 bars repeated over and over. I'm attracted to fresh sounds and unusual structures that move away from the stereotype."

Harrell fans may remember some examples across his long career. Recent ones include the title track from *Moving Pictures* (HighNote HCD 7301); "Trances," from *Something Gold, Something Blue* (HCD 7289); and the six-part suite "Adventures of a Quixotic Character," from *Trip* (HighNote HCD 7261).

Here, "Dublin" and "Hope" are the major through-composed pieces. The former, with its bewitching acoustic guitar introduction, its irregular thematic form and its multiple sections, is another like "The Isle" that has the qualities of Irish folk music and calls to the Gaelic part of Harrell's heritage. The latter, which features the bells, shakers, and congas of percussionist Adam Cruz (another member of Harrell's tight-knit family circle), has no connection to Greek folklore, but changes shape as suddenly and frequently as the mythical Proteus in a pursuer's grasp. Even the trumpeter's own horn shifts from muted to open as the piece progresses.

"Duet" also falls into this category. The tune dates to Harrell's early 1990s tenure in Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra. It was originally a duet for two trumpets, and he first performed it with section mate Earl Gardner. For the new band it has undergone a

refit, with Harrell playing the harmony to Turner's lead; a remarkable number of miniatures are packed into its less than two minutes.

The other four compositions come from various times and wellsprings. "The Fast," written about a year ago, touches on the titular concept of infinity, and on Harrell's exploration of it through daily meditation. "Fasting is sometimes combined with prayer and meditation, and all-night vigils and trance states, in search of enlightenment," he says. "It's a very beautiful thing." He celebrates it with a fast tempo; tight, determined melody; and superb solos by himself, Altura, Turner, and Blake.

"Coronation" has multiple associations. Its groove is a stately, proud one, perhaps like a royal procession; its melody has a simple but regal bearing, with a fanfare-like quality in its final section. Harrell also links it to the high honor—the *nobility*, if you like—of being a trumpet player. In his younger days, he heard Dizzy Gillespie tell Roy Eldridge that he, Harrell, was a link to the legacy of Clifford Brown. That, indeed, was a coronation all its own.

Originally written for the ensemble that recorded 2013's *Colors of a Dream* (HighNote HCD 7254), "Ground" features an insistent, pulsing groove—Harrell's idiosyncratic take on boogie-woogie—that Street and Altura maintain and that Blake embellishes fantastically with his concluding solo. Altura also plays the melody, joining Harrell and Turner in three-part harmony; this required guitar overdubs, another of Harrell's innovations on *Infinity*.

Something about the charging swing of the album closer made Harrell think of a bull, thus inspiring the title "Taurus." (Incidentally, Taurus is also his wife's birth sign, inevitably making it a positive in Harrell's eyes.) Although he once again plays with a Harmon mute on his trumpet, it does little to blunt the tune's momentum, especially given the intensity of Harrell's and Turner's respective solo attacks.

This multiplicity of ideas and approaches in this music suggests that perhaps there is more than subtext to *Infinity's* title after all. In grappling with his place in the universe, Harrell has chanced to create a universe of his own: one with room for infinite creativity, concepts, and inspirations. This recording is just one of the many exemplifications of that universe. What else would you expect from a man who is a living, breathing melody?

—Michael J. West is a jazz journalist in Washington, D.C.

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