



## GENE HARRIS

**LIVE IN LONDON.** Resonance Records HCD2001. 207 N. Oakhurst Dr., Beverly Hills, CA 90210. [www.resonancerecords.org](http://www.resonancerecords.org). *There Is No Greater Love, Blue Monk, My Funny Valentine, In a Mellow Tone, Misty, Blues Closer.*

**PERSONNEL:** Gene Harris, piano; Jim Mullen, guitar; Andrew Cleynert, bass; Martin Drew, drums.

By Bill Donaldson

This would appear to be a perilous year to start a recording company. After all, some of the biggest corporations in the recording and entertainment industries have undergone significant restructurings only recently. Striving to remain profitable, they have been challenged by on-line music availability and the democratization of (free) performance access through various media. However, Resonance Records, based near Los Angeles is venturing into the marketing of jazz recordings with a creative business plan that allows the company to focus on the artists, rather than on its profits. Instead of spending excessive amounts of time fretting about stockholder returns, the parent company of Resonance Records organized as a 501(C)(3) non-profit entity to make sure that its mission of promoting quality music remains firmly in sight and within reach.

Resonance Records' first two releases suggest what to expect as the label grows. As the first entry in its Heirloom Series, Gene Harris's *Live in London* is a previously unreleased recording of his European

group, reinforcing his reputation for hard-swinging groove, as irresistible as was his ebullience. Second, another talented pianist, John Beasley, recorded a tribute to one of his primary influences, Herbie Hancock, thereby indicating how Resonance will promote the work of jazz talent deserving a larger audience.

Recorded at the Pizza Express Jazz Club four years before his passing, Harris's *Live in London* confirms that his musical energy and his free-flowing technique—along with his undoubted joy in the act of performing—remained undiminished, nay, attained its peak, during the nineties, as Concord Records previously documented. The distinction of the Resonance Records release is that it includes the only recording of Harris with his London quartet. Fortunately, Harris's widow, Janie, retained the tapes of the performance and made them available to Resonance when she heard of the company's innovative promotional plans. The listener's initial impression, repeatedly validated throughout *Live in London*, concerns the tightness of the group as it locks as one into a groove on each track. The first track, "There Is No Greater Love," demonstrates Harris's leadership and how the groups he leads became unified in concept and in entertaining an audience. With a teasing solo introduction involving the song's chords but briefly initially avoiding its melody, Harris eases into it with a crescendo and minor-key classical borrowings. Then, sure enough, the Gene Harris we expect takes off, engaging the drums and bass in his sweep in a bright contrast to the rubato intro. Not only does Harris play the song; he makes it his own as chorus after chorus builds into a culmination that captures the audience's imagination. Bassist Andrew Cleynert and drummer Martin Drew do more than just keep up, though Harris no doubt could have left lesser rhythm sections in his wake. They engage Harris, making his successive improvisations more vital than they would have been without a rhythm section. Harris also includes as another voice guitarist Jim Mullen in his torrential presentation. Mellow and without such forceful volume as Harris, Mullen gives the pianist

the opportunity to lay back and accompany. On "Blue Monk," Harris has no interest in copying Thelonious Monk's style. Harris instead mines the bluesiness underlying the piece, transforming it into an infectious shuffle with buoyant tremolos and his own calls-and-responses and bursts of vamps from his strong left-hand. Harris's ability to win over an audience comes through in the recording, Resonance's *Live in London*, for it becomes obvious that those attending the Pizza Express concert couldn't help but be caught up in Harris's music. "My Funny Valentine" slows things down, letting the audience catch its breath, as Harris plays it solo with a degree of sensitivity unlike the faster pieces. Bridging the two styles, Harris starts "In a Mellow Tone" slowly, at approximately the same tempo as "My Funny Valentine," until he enters into swing again, as if drawn to it by a magnet. Harris's tribute to Erroll Garner through his version of "Misty" reveals the similarities between the two pianists: the fact that both remained powerful even when playing ballads and their irrepressible inclination to draw in an audience's attention even when appearing to be subdued. On this track, Mullen's support becomes even more important as he adds emotional bearing to the song. Harris's finally exciting ending draws on some of Garner's signature technique, particularly his firm left-hand quarter-note rhythm and his upper-register tremolos that support the high points of the song—though Harris interjects his own light-hearted blues-derived conclusion. The final impression among the Londoners who attended was a hard-swinging, imitable Gene Harris piece, aptly entitled "Blues Closer," as hand-clap-inspiring and infectious as Harris is remembered.

The commitment of Resonance Records to the perpetuation of high-quality jazz certainly is evident on its first two releases, both in terms of production expertise and artistic selection. With future recordings from Bill Cunliffe, Claudio Roditi, Christian Howes and Toninho Horta, among others, jazz listeners have much to anticipate as that rare entity of 2008, a new record label, establishes itself. ■