

# SMOKE SESSIONS

**Pianist Harold Mabern Assembles  
All Star Lineup for *Afro Blue* -  
Available April 14 on Smoke Sessions Records**

**Album Features Special Guests Gregory Porter,  
Norah Jones, Jane Monheit, Kurt Elling,  
Alexis Cole, Among Others**

With *Afro Blue*, his second album for **Smoke Sessions Records**, **Harold Mabern** has taken a compelling new angle on his exceptionally creative musical vision. But for those who are truly familiar with this extraordinary pianist's talents, it is a project that is long overdue. While he may be best known for his powerful playing while soloing or driving so many of jazz' finest hornmen to spectacular heights of fire and thunder, Mabern has enjoyed a reputation among vocalists as one of the music's most sensitive and stimulating accompanists for more than 50 years - ever since his early days playing with the unparalleled Betty Carter.

On this album, Mabern has selected five of his favorite vocalists -- who also just happen to be some of the most popular and respected singers on today's scene -- and is featuring them as special guests in the company of his own outstanding ensemble. **Gregory Porter, Norah Jones, Jane Monheit, Kurt Elling** and **Alexis Cole** perform individually alongside Mabern's regular ensemble of **Eric Alexander** on tenor sax and the bass/drums tandem of **John Webber** and **Joe Farnsworth**; plus additional guests, trombonist **Steve Turre** and trumpeter **Jeremy Pelt** on four and six tracks respectively. Eminent guitarist **Peter Bernstein** is featured on one track as well.

"I love to play for singers," explains the pianist. "I feel honored and flattered that these wonderful vocalists would want to be part of my little project. I feel good when singers say they love the way you play. That's a very special compliment."

Despite the wide variety of personnel, the album is fully cohesive and artfully conceived, with Mabern's soulful, blues-rooted style of piano expression as its radiant nucleus. The repertoire of 14 pieces is a fascinating assemblage of standards, jazz classics, Mabern originals and a couple of unexpected contemporary hit songs - all performed in captivating fashion and constructed upon marvelous arrangements. Of the four Mabern originals, three are dedications to jazz immortals.

The album opens and closes with two of the homages - both instrumentals. "The Chief" (for John Coltrane) is for quintet, appropriately modal and fiery; and the trio piece "Bobby, Benny, Jymie, Lee, Bu" closes with a tribute to that edition of Blakey's Jazz Messengers in the funky hard bop flavor those five giants brought to their classic version of Bobby Timmons' "Moanin'". The trio is also featured on a sizzling rendition of John 'Moz' Farnsworth's "Mozzin'" fired up by his brother's drumming. The other instrumental, Steely Dan's biggest hit "Do It Again," is a feature for Bernstein's guitar wizardry. A third Mabern original, "Such Is Life," features Alexis Cole deftly handling Mabern's lyrics and infectious melody, with the three horns providing a backdrop somewhere between calypso and highlife.

Gregory Porter is featured on two pieces, a vividly smoking take on the Mongo Santamaria/Oscar

Brown Jr. title cut, with Mabern stoking in classic Afro-Cuban piano mode; and in a delightful easy groove on the fourth Mabern original "The Man from Hyde Park" - a dedication to Herbie Hancock. Norah Jones brings her highly personal style to Bloom & Mercer's "Fools Rush In," smoothly swinging over Blakey-ish horns; and in an enchanting, intimate duet with Mabern on Gordon Parks' lovely "Don't Misunderstand." Jane Monheit is buoyantly spirited on Oakland & Hammerstein's "I'll Take Romance," and mesmerizing on Wood & Mellin's gorgeous "My One and Only Love." Bird's bop icon "Billie's Bounce" is a rip-roaring sojourn in scat by the remarkable Kurt Elling, while the acclaimed vocalist aptly demonstrates his ballad mastery with a most poignant take on Robinson & Burdge's exquisite "Portrait of Jennie." A fortunate serendipity on the Anne Murray mega-hit, Randy Goodrum's "You Needed Me" - which was slated to be an instrumental feature for Alexander's robust tenor - caused Mabern to call an audible when he heard Elling sing the first few words as he was about to depart the studio. The deeply moving results show how magic can be born by chance.

Mabern is unequivocally enthusiastic about this new album: "Wow! I can't believe we pulled all of it off. Everybody involved did a ten-star job. Simply beautiful!"

Dazzling vocal artistry, impeccable musicianship, imaginative soloing, and that elusive substance of true synergy focused by the singular vision of a brilliant artist make **Afro Blue** a truly special experience. For **Harold Mabern**, whose enormous accomplishments as a leader are sometimes eclipsed by his reputation for helping so many Jazz heavyweights realize their own musical visions, **Afro Blue** is further testimony to his own legend.

**Harold Mabern · Afro Blue**  
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For more information on **Harold Mabern**, please visit [HaroldMabern.JazzGiants.net](http://HaroldMabern.JazzGiants.net)

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