



Billy Harper

Billy Harper, saxophonist, composer, and band leader was born January 17, 1943 in Houston, Texas. His unique musical creativity was first noted at age five when he sang at sacred and secular functions. By age fourteen, he was playing in rhythm and blues bands and formed his first Billy Harper Quintet. In the early 1960's, Harper enrolled at North Texas State University, where he became (at that time) the only African-American member of the school's prestigious "One O' clock Lab Band." After earning his bachelor's degree he moved to New York where he led an ensemble that was featured on a NBC-TV special, "The Big Apple." Within a short time after arriving in New York, Harper started working with giants such as Lee Morgan and Donald Byrd. In 1967 he began a long-lasting association with the legendary arranger Gil Evans. Of particular interest is his association with some of the world's greatest drummers including Art Blakey, Elvin Jones, and Max Roach. Harper also became a regular member of the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Big Band. In the 1970's, Harper began recording under his own name for European labels. His album *Black Saint* (1975) was the first recording issued by the label of the same name; his *In Europe* (1979) inaugurated the Soul note label. Harper recorded relatively infrequently in the 1980's and 1990's, although he maintained an active performing career, mostly as a leader. He has enjoyed a parallel career as a music educator, teaching at Livingston College, Rutgers University, and the New School. He has received multiple grants from various arts agencies, including two from the National Endowment for the Arts. Harper's *Black Saint* LP was named Jazz Record of the Year-Voice Grand Prix, by the Modern Jazz League of Tokyo. Throughout his career, there has been a pattern of consistent growth and innovation, as can be seen in his powerfully intriguing spiritual compositions. Defining his artistic endeavors, Billy Harper states "My feeling is that music should have a purpose. In the past, it always has been used for healing and uplifting and meditation. And that's the way I see my music."