

Ben Harper



With the March 20th release of his seventh studio album, the double-disc Both Sides of the Gun, Ben Harper offers his signature mix of rock, soul, and folk music, while also venturing into new territory. "I was hoping I could come back to the root of my earlier records, the sparseness and intimacy," he says, "and also branch out further in a produced sound than ever before." From the blazing Curtis Mayfield/Stevie Wonder-style funk of "Black Rain" to the gentle sway of "Morning Yearning" to the

full-on power ballad "Waiting for You," the eighteen songs on Both Sides reveal a master stylist at the peak of his game.

Harper says that what was most exciting about the sessions for this album was a newfound sense of "absolute fearlessness - just diving into a song and ripping it wide open, with a lot of one-take vocals and guitar solos that are nasty, loose, raw, immediate." The raging "Please Don't Talk About Murder While I'm Eating" went from dinner conversation to finished track in one night; the vocal for the delicate "Picture in a Frame" was done in just one shot, straight through.

For the first time, the singer/songwriter/multi-instrumentalist decided that the strongest way to present his new material was on two discs. "I've always found some way to blend the different ways that music plays down - hard songs, fast songs, soul songs, folk, rock, reggae, ballads," he says. "But this time I couldn't find it. When I'd come out of a ballad into something hard, it was too much like getting hit in the face with a cold bucket of water." And so despite his initial hesitations ("double records come with such baggage about being overindulgent and unfocused"), he looked up one day and realized that he had chosen nine harder songs and nine ballad-based songs for this album, and that, conveniently, one of them had the title "Both Sides of the Gun" - and the structure of the album became clear.

"I hate to call it the hard disc and the soft disc," he says, "because sometimes the soft stuff hits you harder than anything else." With each disc clocking in at just over 30 minutes, Harper compares the experience to listening to old-school vinyl; "It's like flipping a record, turning it over to the next side."

Since debuting in 1994 with Welcome to the Cruel World, Ben Harper has established himself as one of the world's most versatile and hard-working musicians - and one of its top concert draws. Even by his standards, though, the years since releasing his last album, 2003's world-music-inflected Diamonds on the Inside, have been hectic.



After completing his usual extensive tour, Harper had started writing and was preparing to make his next album when he got a call from the legendary gospel dynasty the Blind Boys of Alabama. "They asked me to produce a couple of songs," he says, "and that quickly turned into its own world."

The "world" it became was the critically acclaimed, 2X Grammy-winning 2004 collaboration There Will Be a Light, which was in turn followed by the riveting Live at the Apollo DVD. Harper says that working with these legends, on stage and in the studio, quite simply altered his entire approach to making music. "Before the Blind Boys, I used to sing," he says. "With and after the Blind Boys, I may have become a singer."

All the while, he kept writing new songs. "I've been so hungry to make this album, we're lucky it's not a triple record!," he says. "I'm glad I waited, though, because if I had gone in right away, it would have sounded too much like Diamonds. The Blind Boys thing came along like a bolt of lightning and gave me a much clearer vision of how I wanted to make my next record." Beyond a newfound confidence, he claims that working with the Blind Boys - and a subsequent session with the incomparable Funk Brothers for the Standing in the Shadows of Motown film - gave him the sense of immediacy and urgency that underscores Both Sides of the Gun.

That attitude is perhaps best exemplified by "Black Rain," a song written as a direct response to the days following Hurricane Katrina. "I had to make the picture as clear as the event," says Harper of the string-powered slice of soul. "Because if that can happen here - that disregard for human life - and we allow that to happen to the citizens of this country, then all bets are off. And if there's no justice in day-to-day living, there's for damn sure gonna be some justice in my music."



Throughout his career, Harper has bounced between recording on his own, with other musicians, and with his long-time partners, the Innocent Criminals; on Both Sides he utilized all three configurations. "The songs themselves lead the charge," he says, "but there were some songs I didn't want to check in with anybody on, because I could hear them so clearly." As always, though, he's excited to take the new songs out and road test them with the band. "The amazing thing about the Innocent

Criminals," he says, "is that everything always gets ramped up by about the second or third month we've been hitting it. It takes on new life."

The album marks the third time that Harper has taken sole production credit for a full project. This time, he felt the responsibility had to be his own. "How do I motivate myself, push myself?" he asks, and then answers himself. "I'm driven - pure and simple. There has to come a point in your creative world where you're the only one that can raise the bar."

With Both Sides of the Gun, Ben Harper has raised that bar to new heights. For him, though, it's just one more step in a career that's still building. "I've never made a record that didn't feel like it was my first," he says, "with the same excitement, the same enthusiasm and intensity." Of course, in the dozen years since that first record, he's built a loyal fan base around the globe, but he sees the expectations of his audience as a challenge, not a limitation.

"Expectations are there for a reason," Harper says. "To be surpassed."

