

Brown Butterfly

“Moving clockwise, continuing that famed shuffle of his, Clay- with his hands down...looks like a dancer up there, the way he bobs and weaves, for a man of 212 pounds.”

Announcer Les Keiter at the start of the Ali- Cleveland Williams fight.

The music in this two-CD collection is a tribute to the genius of Muhammad Ali.

And much more.

Brown Butterfly is Craig Harris’s tribute to the magical attributes that have sustained African Americans for more than 400 years: Weightlessness, grace, speed an ability to walk in space.

“I’m telling the story about one of my greatest heroes,” Harris says. “I’m celebrating the physical contributions of this sound architect. Muhammad Ali was a composer.”

In preparation for recording the music in this collection, Harris studied several aspects of Ali’s life. He studied his personal life and his religious beliefs. He took fight films apart, watched them in slow motion and watched the fights speeded up.

Craig assembled footage of several Ali fights and watched them without the sound. He wanted to take in the breath-taking magic of Ali’s dance. “He was like music in motion,” Harris says.

As Harris watched fight film, he jotted down rhythms that corresponded with Ali’s feints, jabs and shuffles. With the rhythmic patterns on paper, Harris added melody and harmony, then he gave the charts to his band. During rehearsals, he had the musicians look at the film and allowed them to improvise their own interpretation of the ballet they were watching.

When Ali made a particularly incredible move, Harris pointed it out and shouted “Play that! Play that! “What I had to convey was that this was about a dance not a fight. It’s a dance. His physical gestures are so musical. He’s just not boxing, he’s an extension of the African American continuum, which comes out of Africa.”

Brown Butterfly is the reflective journey that every African American living in the United States must make if he or she is to be truly free. A journey through fear, through brainwashing and finally to embracing the power and majesty of blackness. Harris, 63, took that journey, for as a young boy growing up on Long Island, he was afraid of Ali. Many blacks were. “He scared me at first,” Harris says, “I’d never seen an African American talk that much shit.”

Ali took the heavyweight title from Sonny Liston in February 1964, in a fight that remains one of the great upsets in boxing history.

More than a title changed hands.

Muhammad Ali changed boxing the way Charlie Parker and John Coltrane changed music.

Harris’s family--his uncles in particular--were Sonny Liston fans.

Liston was the Bear, powerful, lumbering menacing. He was an ex-bouncer, an enforcer with possible mob ties. Liston was the classic heavyweight, out of the Joe Louis mold, who looked to knock out an opponent as quickly as possible.

Liston lumbered.

“Ali was unorthodox, he did it all wrong. Moving backward and throwing punches. No fighter ever moved backwards throwing punches,” Harris says. “People told him ‘You’re going to get knocked out.’ That’s what really drew me to him: fighting with his hands down, his whole style, his innovation as a heavyweight boxer.”

Ali represented a new, unapologetic view of boxing and blackness. “Ali broke the mold,” Harris says. “He comes along with this whole other kind of look. He scared a lot of people.”

I have watched that 1964 fight with Liston several times over the years.

What I didn’t see until recently was that Ali ignored the parade of fighters being brought into the ring during the introductions--until the great Sugar Ray Robinson was introduced. When Robinson went over to Ali’s corner, Ali bowed—twice—in deference and respect to Robinson.

Sugar Ray Robinson was to Muhammad Ali as Lester Young had been to Charlie Parker. Speed up many of Lester Young’s solos and you hear Bird.

“Charlie Parker took inspiration from Lester Young’s rhythmic innovations and added notes and velocity,” Harris says.

“All Ali did was take Sugar Ray Robinson’s style and put it on his 6 foot 3 inch 225 pound frame,” Harris explains. “That is the essence of innovation and, Harris argues, the African American creative mystique. “Our goal is to take something and do something with it,” Harris says. “That’s what we do. It’s the Hoodoo that we do, with that past present and future view.”

For all the history of the 1964 Ali-Liston fight, Craig said his favorite

fight was Ali’s November 14th bout with Cleveland “Big Cat” Williams.

The Williams fight marked the first time Harris became aware of the magic of Ali’s movement. Here was a 6 foot 3 inch, 212 pound heavyweight boxer moving like the wind. In the pre-fight hype, writers pointed out that Big Cat Williams, at 6 foot 3, 225

pounds, was fast and quick for his size. Hence the nickname, Big Cat.

Ali made Williams look like a tortoise and knocked him out in the second round.

“I said ‘this is it. This cat is really bad.’”

Less than a year after that fight, in June 1967, Ali was convicted of draft evasion and was sentenced to five years in prison. He was a pariah to some, a hero to many more.

As the former heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson said much later when asked the difference between himself and Ali, “I was a boxer. Ali was history.”

So it was for 12-year-old Craig Harris, who began to see Ali in a totally different light. “When he refused to be drafted, he became an icon.”

Harris joined the Sun Ra Arkestra in 1976 at age 22. His tenure in the band set the stage for a convergence of artistic genres: dance, poetry drama. A year after Harris joined Sun Ra. The Arkestra went to Nigeria to participate in FESTAC 1977. FESTAC celebrated African culture.

While he was in Nigeria Harris saw a man about 5 foot 4 run up the side of a wall. “He went about 10 feet, straight up the wall. No gimmicks, no nothing.” Harris says. “He defied gravity and ran up that wall—perpendicular.

“This was more than athleticism. It’s the coming together of the body and the mind-- and you have to have technique to do that. You defy nature. That’s what Ali did. That’s what Connie Hawkins did and Elgin Baylor and Michael Jordan and LeBron James did.”

The FESTAC experience put Harris on a path that eventually led to the creation of Brown Butterfly. He began to see Ali-- and other black innovators—through an entirely different prism. “I began looking at Charlie Parker artistically, I began looking at what these people do, not just the technical thing. It’s about the magic and spirit of what they do.”

Harris returned from that trip to Africa with a widened worldview of the African creative instinct and a deep appreciation for creating one’s own shot. “Its not enough to just imitate, you have to create. Imitation is fine, but in our world, that ain’t it. What do you add to the Continuum?”

The foundation of Craig’s inspiration from Ali is summed up by the phrase “Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee.” This is more than a clever slogan. It is the national anthem of the black presence in sports.

Defying physics.

It’s the 300-pound lineman who can run down a speedy

halfback—the 7-footer who is as nimble as a 5-foot 11 player; the 5 foot 11 player who dunks. .

But it’s also John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins. It’s JJ. Johnson, the innovator on Craig’s instrument, the trombone, playing fast, graceful lines. It’s that innovation that we create as African people.”

In 1988, Harris began writing pieces that went outside the so-called straight jazz world.

He went beyond playing traditional concerts and started incorporating other disciplines into his music and reaching out to younger artists. He was combining forms and discovering powerful ways to attract a wider audience without compromising the music.

“Our audience was dwindling. A good way to expand the audience for the music is to start working in other genres: modern dance, poetry theater,” Harris says. Today Harris Harris is dedicated to passing the torch through teaching, expanding the audience beyond category and labels.

“Craig has always tried to remain open to everything that’s happening simultaneously,” says musician/producer Bill Toles. “He’s a really good vehicle for younger performers.”

Toles was a member of the Black Rock Coalition in 1988 when he met Harris. Toles played a major role in the original stage production of Brown Butterfly in 2002.

“When we first did Brown Butterfly we had a young saxophonist with us who was just incredible.” Toles said. “Craig hunts these people, out in the tradition of Art Blakey and all the people who made sure that they’re relating to the next generation and pulling them through this music.”

Says Harris: “That’s what we’re supposed to be doing. Reaching out to the next generation and telling our stories. I always go into the heritage of African Americans to find work, and I’m unapologetic about it because if I don’t do the piece on Ali, who’s going to do it? If we don’t tell these stories, who’s going to do it?”

In this collection Craig Harris tells a convincing story. Brown Butterfly is a timeless soundtrack to Muhammad Ali’s divine, eternal dance.