



James Blood Ulmer
(left) and David
Murray in New
York City, March 7

DAVID
MURRAY
& JAMES
BLOOD
ULMER

TOTAL
FREEDOM

By Howard Mandel | Photography by Jack Vartoogian/FrontRowPhotos

A big, bearish man sat before a microphone at the lip of the stage, growling out simple, declarative rhymes while plucking raw discords and jagged melody fragments from a Gibson electric guitar in his lap. To his left, 15 cramped musicians fixed their eyes on the hand gestures and body language of their conductor, a somewhat smaller man in a blue suit and open-collar white shirt, who sometimes turned to face the audience and blow his tenor sax.

When he did so, he thrust his head forth and jaw out, puffed his cheeks, hunched his shoulders and, rocking in rhythm, projected a stream of burry notes that cut a broad path through the thicket of sound he'd just waved up from the musicians, demonstrating the myriad ways a song might turn or take off. His musicians responded with dense, bristly parts that mirrored the gutsiness of the vocalist and expanded along the lines their leader had set.

The singer-guitarist was James Blood Ulmer, the conductor-saxophonist David Murray, and the ensemble David Murray's Blues Big Band, raising a sweetly blistering ruckus in March at The Iridium jazz club in Midtown Manhattan. It was their second gig. The previous one had been in January at Teatro Manzoni in Milan.

Big band aside, Ulmer and Murray have worked together for more than 30 years, playing some of the most freely improvised small-group music imaginable. Big band convened, they were reinvigorating an aspect of the jazz tradition almost as old as jazz itself. Either way, they are a mutual admiration society.

"I love David—David was in the first band I got," Ulmer said during a conversation before

sound check on that day early last spring. "He was the first horn player to read my music off the score. When he'd just come to New York"—which was in 1978, as a graduate of Pomona College in California—"he played on six of my records, starting with *Are You Glad To Be In America?* and in the Music Revelation Ensemble, too.

"David studied music, and now he's got something he wants to do: to arrange. So he called me. He hooked up with the right person, because if I can get him to arrange my music from the standpoint of how I play my guitar, he could take arranging to a whole new level, adding to what Duke Ellington, Count Basie and the other brothers did before him."

"This project actually started when I was about 18 and saw Blood play with Ornette at the Keystone Korner in San Francisco," Murray mentioned during a break from the sound check at The Iridium. "It was my first time being up close with Ornette, and he introduced me to Blood. I loved their kind of music, the harmolodic thing," he said, referring to Coleman's concept of harmony, motion and melody moving as one for unfettered musical expression. "To me, Blood

is as much a part of harmolodics as Ornette. To me, harmolodics grew out of the way Blood plays naturally."

Ulmer's natural way of playing is earthy, rich with overtones, insistent yet also unpredictable. He grew up poor in St. Matthews, S.C., and first played a contraption his father made him. Ulmer recalled that it was built "out of a bow, a fat piece of wood and an old milk can, strung with some wires," adding, "I used to beat it with a stick—bing, bing, boom, *boom!*" As he remembered doing that some 70 years ago, his eyes sparkled and his face crinkled up along laugh lines.

Ulmer progressed to a real instrument (what he calls a "tempered guitar") and was gigging with soul bands by the early 1960s. By the early '70s he'd recorded with organists Hank Marr, John Patton and Larry Young. But he first unveiled the full extent of his strikingly original approach on *Tales Of Captain Black*, a scorching album from 1978 with Ornette Coleman on alto sax, his son Denardo Coleman on drums, and bass guitarist Jamaaladeen Tacuma. Blood had developed an open tuning for his instrument, in which he used its lowest string essentially as a drone.

The resulting sound was primal, something like the bold, blunt guitars on early Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf records. Ulmer's background, however, was in gospel music. The blues were strictly verboten by his religious family. Of course, the two forms are not so distant, representing the Saturday night and Sunday morning of African American vernacular song, and listeners have long claimed to hear the blues or its rural folk roots in Ulmer's sound. Yet the guitarist—who the night before the interview had played a tribute to Robert Johnson at a benefit for the Blues Foundation at the Apollo Theater—said that wasn't so: "I waited till 2000 to really try to play the blues. Vernon Reid got me into it."

Guitarist Reid had been on the bill of that Johnson tribute with his band Living Colour, along with Taj Mahal, Keb Mo, Bette LaVette, Shemekia Copeland, Todd Rundgren and Otis Taylor. "I learned so much playing in this blues thing," Ulmer mused. "Everybody was playing Robert Johnson style. Trying to. It's hard. I think Robert Johnson was the first true harmolodic blues guitar player. But I wasn't looking to sound like him on guitar. I was just singing his story. I played it *my* style."

In truth, Ulmer's embrace of the blues pre-dates 2000. He recorded *Forbidden Blues* for the Japanese DIW label in 1996; he cut *Blue Blood* with bassist Bill Laswell in 2000. Both albums spotlighted his original tunes. On *Memphis*

Ulmer (left) plays guitar while Murray conducts at The Iridium



Blood: The Sun Sessions, produced in 2001 by Reid (who played second lead guitar), Ulmer switched to covering songs by Waters, Wolf, John Lee Hooker, Willie Dixon and Son House. The repertoire was a perfect fit. Ulmer and Reid followed up with *No Escape From The Blues: The Electric Lady Sessions* and *Bad Blood In The City: The Piety Street Sessions*, which included some songs—Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues," for one—that Murray has reconfigured for Blood

to sing in front of the Blues Big Band.

Murray first thought of putting Ulmer up to that task after seeing a video of George Benson with the Count Basie Orchestra. "Benson came on and played his guitar for a couple of numbers," he recalled, "then walked off and the band did a number. Then he came back and just sang with the band. It was out-of-sight. And I thought, 'I'd like to do that with someone in my generation now, and Blood is the perfect cat.'"



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Murray blowing saxophone with the 17-member big band



The blues singer/big band format reaches back at least as far as 1926, when Bessie Smith cut “Gin House Blues” with Fletcher Henderson’s Orchestra. Basic’s band famously featured blues singers, including Jimmy Rushing, Big Joe Turner and Joe Williams. None of them, however, played guitar. Nor has a Murray big band, of which there’ve been several iterations, ever before had a singer or focused on the blues genre.

Murray’s collaborations with Ulmer typically have been akin to free-funk, hard-driving but with little attention to conventional chord progressions. “I’ve played with Blood in many situations,” the saxophonist said, “but I’ve always wanted to build a big band around him. This was our chance.”

This chance arose as Murray has turned increasingly to writing and arranging during the past year, most notably the 19 parts for strings, brass and rhythm on the 2011 album *David Murray Cuban Ensemble Plays Nat King Cole En Español* (Motéma). “I’ve kinda flipped into being a music director now,” he said. “I’m writing for Macy Gray.” Indeed, the David Murray Blues Orchestra tours with Gray this summer and fall, starting in Finland and ending in Turkey. He’s on the r&b/soul singer’s new album, *Covered* (429 Records), and Gray told the *New York Times*, “Whenever I do horns now, I’m going to send them his way.” Murray also has recently scored an Afro-beat project for Tony Allen, a drummer who played with Fela Kuti; Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson’s Afro-Picks revue; and a Detroit Motor City Remix with Amp Fiddler. The latter two projects took place in Paris, where Murray resides. “All this stuff writing for horns seems to have come to me,” he said, feigning surprise, “from weird situations I

wouldn’t have expected.”

It’s inevitable that Murray would get these calls, since at age 57 he has become an acknowledged champion of the jazz sax legacy, able to address its lineage from Ben Webster to Albert Ayler and beyond. Hailed early in his career for launching an avant-gutbucket movement, Murray has now demonstrated his mastery of tenor sax and bass clarinet in solo, duo, trio, quartet, quintet, octet and big band formations of his own design. In 1991 he won Denmark’s Jazzpar Prize and recorded with Pierre Dörge’s New Jungle Orchestra; he’s made five albums with the Gwo-Ka Masters hand-drummers; and he’s a mainstay of the World Saxophone Quartet, penning charts for himself with James Carter, Oliver Lake and Hamiet Bluiett.

Give Murray a challenge and he delivers. Leave him alone and he challenges himself. Melding the blues’ eternal three-chord progression and harmolodics’ implicit embrace of a limitless vocabulary may be his most daring feat yet.

“The whole idea of harmolodic music is to allow you total freedom,” Murray said. “It allows you to play in other people’s harmonics—that’s the beauty of it. As a player, once you understand it, you become completely free. That’s an objective for me in playing with Blood—to become totally free. I couldn’t do that before.”

Murray’s saxophone solos are recognized for raging unhampered from the horn’s honking bottom to shrill overblown effects. But isn’t it hard to free up the blues’ rhythmic DNA, its fundamental 4/4 backbeat?

“Well,” Murray replied, “with this band, our aggregation, we’re not trying to take it *really* far out, because the harmonies are so far out already. We play a lot of meter, yes, a lot of shuffles. With

a big band, to change meter or delete meter under a singer—you’re asking for trouble. There are little moments where we do that, but I can’t base a whole hour program on that. You might hear five minutes of us sliding around, but we need to hold it together.

“Blood and I both have done stuff so far out you can’t even guess where the one [downbeat] might be. And that’s great. But when you’ve got 17 people on the stage, somebody needs to know where that thing is.”

The 15 somebodies in Murray’s big band at The Iridium all knew, thanks in part to the stability and flexibility of a rhythm team comprising the leader’s faithful bassist Jaribu Shahid, drummer Chris Beck and pianist Steve Colson. Though usually identified as a member of the experimental Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), Colson has worked with Murray off and on since ’85. He didn’t find the blues-harmolodics hybrid to be a stretch at all.

“I’ve been playing blues quite a while,” the pianist stated. “Muhai [Richard Abrams, frequent conductor of the AACM Experimental Band] would go from era to era and often get into some romping blues mixed with more avant-garde type stuff. This is a more stable projection, because Blood is such a blues guy. But still, the Ornette thing is in it. So it’s kind of crazy but a lot of fun.”

Trumpeter Shareef Clayton, whose solos with the Blues Big Band demonstrated deep understanding of the use of mutes, agreed. “It’s always fun to solo with a big band,” he said. “I play in David’s Cuban Ensemble, too, and in his big band where we do his own compositions. You have to watch David closely, though—if

you miss a hit that he's conducted, he definitely doesn't like it."

Clayton has worked with Stevie Wonder, The Roots and Bobby Sanabria's big band, among others, and from that vantage point was impressed with Ulmer's power. "I pick up mainly on his singing; that's what I try to emulate, although he's singing through his guitar playing, too," Clayton said. "The little things he does, the details—not necessarily the notes he plays, but his emphasis, how he feels it, how he lays back on certain things—that's what makes people get into it more. Details distinguish one musician from the next. I mean, anybody can get up to sing the blues, but can you *really* sing it?"

The band member most impressed with Ulmer may be Mingus Murray, David's son. His image as a toddler may be familiar to devotees from the cover of the saxophonist's 1991 octet album *Hope Scope*, but now Mingus is a 23-year-old guitarist and visual artist who has released his own album, *Mingus*. He has been playing with his father for three years, having taken lessons from some of David's colleagues, such as Kelvyn Bell and Ulmer, whom he called "a big inspiration."

"He's one of the guys who's leading the way for guitar players," Mingus said. "After Jimi Hendrix, it's him. I wouldn't say he's experimental—he's just interesting. He's thought out what he does." So has Mingus, whose rhythm chords added to the Blues Big Band's James Brown-like groove, never obscured anything, always meshed with and supported Blood.

Ulmer was appreciative of Mingus, too. "He's a young harmolodic soldier," said the older guitarist. "That's what I call them, 'harmolodic soldiers,' all the brothers who've rebelled against Western European music and have tried to transform their instruments into other sounds than the way they were given. Believe me, this is happening. Cats come up to me and say, 'Blood, I want to be a harmolodic soldier.' I tell them, 'You *are* a harmolodic soldier!'"

Which makes David Murray a senior officer, if not a general, of a harmolodic army, though he seemed sensitive to scaring off potential audiences of his Blues Big Band (a.k.a. "Blues Orchestra") with that description.

"What I'm trying to concentrate on here is the blues aspect," Murray noted before stepping onstage for a rehearsal, "which actually brings the music more inside than what I usually do. It sounds 'out there,' anyway. But I had to go back to school in terms of the blues to do this project. I think we've come up with something that people who appreciate both my and Blood's musics can enjoy, together, plus maybe bring some new people in, too. Some people who don't like the blues might like what we're doing, and people who don't like jazz might like what we're doing. It's not a matter of selling out—it's a matter of making music people might like. Including myself."

With that, the avant-gutbucketeer went up to command his troop of irregulars through a quick review of their harmolodic-blues paces. **DB**

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