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For immediate release:

## Stefon Harris Presents Music of Duke Ellington and More at the Mondavi Center

March 12, 2008; Davis, California—Vibraphonist **Stefon Harris** will lead a nine-piece band through stunning re-orchestrations of compositions by **Duke Ellington** as well as his own works in *African Tarantella Project: Dances with Duke* at the **Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts**. Harris' arrangements apply the wide range of tone colors offered by his unique nonet—clarinet, trombone, flute, viola, and cello, in addition to vibes, piano, bass, and drums—to form a richly textured sound that is at once vital and innovative yet true to Duke's vision in pieces from Ellington's *New Orleans Suite*, *The Queen's Suite*, and Harris' *The Gardiner Meditations*.

The performance will begin at 8 pm on April 10 in the Mondavi Center's Jackson Hall on the **UC Davis** campus. Tickets are available from the Mondavi Center Ticket Office at 530.754.ARTS (2787) or online at [MondaviArts.org](http://MondaviArts.org). The event is presented as part of the Mondavi Center's **90.9 KXJZ Improvisations Series**. There will be a **Pre-performance Lecture** featuring **Gary Vercelli**, director of jazz programming at KXJZ, at 7 pm in the Mondavi Center's Studio Theatre.

At age 34, Stefon Harris has already established himself as a master of the vibraphone and an heir to the tradition embodied by greats such as **Lionel Hampton**, **Milt Jackson**, and **Bobby Hutcherson**, whom Harris recently replaced as a member of the acclaimed **SFJAZZ Collective**. The *Los Angeles Times* has called him as "one of the most important young artists in jazz," and described his playing at one recent concert as "astonishing—moving through quick-time passages with eye-blurring rapidity, suddenly altering the space and time flow of his improvisation with interval-leaping starts and stops, somehow managing to do it all with a propulsive sense of swing."

The music from Harris' latest recording, *African Tarantella: Dances with Duke*, has drawn similar raves as he has toured with a nine-piece band playing his re-orchestrations of Ellington classics and his own works. "Harris colors these lyrical selections with subtle shadings and nuanced textures, accenting the rich harmonies and fertile beauty of Ellington's writing," notes *All About Jazz*. "He conducts the ensemble with graceful enthusiasm, stepping out as a soloist of buoyant ebullience. The opening trio of selections from Ellington's *New Orleans Suite* revealed the subtle innovations of Harris' arrangements. By deepening the chiaroscuro, amplifying the rhythmic drive, and brightening the harmonies, Harris brings Duke's music swinging into the twenty-first century."

A graduate of the **Manhattan School of Music**, Harris studied both classical music and jazz performance. He has recorded six albums under his own name for Blue Note Records, including *Black Action Figure* (1999), *Kindred* (2001), and *The Grand Unification Theory* (2003), all of which were nominated for Grammy Awards for Best Jazz Album. He has won numerous honors, including the prestigious Martin E. Segal Award from **Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts**, and is frequently named as the best on his instrument by jazz publications such as *Downbeat* and *Jazziz*. He has performed at many of the country's leading performance halls, including Lincoln Center's **Alice Tully Hall**, the **John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts**, Chicago's **Symphony Center**, and the Mondavi Center (where he performed in February 2001). Harris has recorded and toured with many of the greatest artists in jazz, including **Joe Henderson**, **Wynton Marsalis**, **Cassandra Wilson**, and many others, and is an active music educator, conducting more than 100 clinics and lectures annually at schools and universities throughout the country.

Harris is greatly influenced by Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (1899-1974), the pianist and bandleader who is widely credited as the greatest composer in the history of jazz and one of the most influential figures in American music. Born in Washington, D.C., and schooled in the stride piano style of masters like **James P. Johnson** and **Luckey Roberts**, Ellington quickly developed a compositional voice of his own, merging influences from ragtime, blues, popular songs, and dance music into an orchestral vision of jazz that was elegant and sophisticated, yet still not lacking in earthiness and sensuality.

Working primarily with a band of a dozen or so members—some of whom played with Ellington for decades—Ellington created a sound that was instantly recognizable for its resourceful use of tone colors, sophisticated harmony, and blues-based sense of swing. Though perhaps best-known for his popular swing era recordings such as "Sophisticated Lady," "Satin Doll," "In a Sentimental Mood," and "Cottontail," Ellington also wrote a stage musical, *Jump for Joy*, as well as several extended suites such as *Black, Brown, and Beige* and *The Far East Suite*, which have inspired several subsequent generations of musicians and composers with their scope and ambition.

Named for the *tarantella*, a whirling style of dance that originated in Italy, Harris' African Tarantella project was inspired by the invention and sophistication of Ellington's suites. "I'm inspired by the audacity of his work, that 'I-will-not-fit-into-anyone's-definition-and-move-forward-with-high-expectations-of-myself' type of pride," Harris has stated. "When I hear his music, I can see a clear reflection of my own aspirations as a young African-American man. It's something to aspire to, something to dream about. He epitomizes the elegant mastery of craft and self."

For the *African Tarantella* recording, issued on Blue Note in 2006, Harris utilized his regular working group of **Xavier Davis** (piano), **Derrick Hodges** (bass), and **Terreon Gully** (drums), and added trombone, flute, clarinet, viola, and cello to songs from Ellington's *New Orleans Suite* and *The Queen's Suite*, as well as his own three-part *The Gardiner Meditations*. "We don't have to play Ellington's music the way it was played in the past in order to be a part of his legacy," Harris has said of the recording. "I recognize that I'm a part of a great tradition, which has inspired an enormous sense of pride in me. This is the first time that I'm holistically embracing this art form, not just because it's beautiful music but also because it's a significant part of who I am."

For his Mondavi Center performance, Harris will play vibraphone and marimba, joined by Davis and Gully as well as **Roland Barber**, trombone; **Junah Chung**, viola; **Anne Drummond**, flute; **Louise Dubin**, cello; **Earl Travis**, bass; and **Mark Vinci**, clarinet.

"Stefon Harris' African Tarantella Project offers a rare opportunity to hear classic compositions from the great Duke Ellington in new orchestrations by one of today's most talented young jazz musicians," said **Don Roth**, the Mondavi Center's executive director. "This is an amazing show and an amazing ensemble. We're looking forward to hosting Stefon Harris with this nine-piece band."

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**What:**           **Stefon Harris Presents the African Tarantella Project:**  
*Dances with Duke*

**When:**        Thursday, April 10 • 8 pm

**Where:**       Jackson Hall  
Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts  
University of California, Davis

**Admission:**   \$42/\$37/\$32 Adults • \$21/\$18.50/\$16 Students & Children

**Tickets/Info:** 530.754.ARTS (2787)  
866.754.ARTS (toll-free)  
<http://www.MondaviArts.org>  
530.754.5402 [TDD]

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