Harold Mabern - Afro Blue (2015)

01. The Chief [05:07] 02. Afro Blue [05:25] 03. The Man from Hyde Park [05:51] 04. Fools Rush In [04:35] 05. Don't Misunderstand [04:22] 06. I'll Take Romance [03:49] 07. My One and Only Love [05:38] 08. Billie's Bounce [04:23] 09. Portrait of Jennie [05:38] 10. You Needed Me [04:01] 11. Such Is Life [05:07] 12. Do It Again [05:18] 13. Mozzin' [05:50] 14. Bobby, Benny, Jymie, Lee, Bu [04:28] Harold Mabern - Piano Eric Alexander - Sax (Tenor) Peter Bernstein - Guitar Alexis Cole - Vocals Kurt Eiling - Vocals Joe Farnsworth - Drums Norah Jones - Vocals Jane Monheit - Vocals Jeremy Pelt - Trumpet Gregory Porter - Vocals Steve Turre - Trombone John Webber – Bass

Though elder statesman Harold Mabern's blocky, aggressive piano style may seem better suited to the small army of horn players he's worked with—from Miles, Ornette and Freddie Hubbard to George Coleman and Eric Alexander—it's worth remembering that Mabern's early career also placed him with Betty Carter, Johnny Hartman, Sarah Vaughan and Joe Williams. At age 78 he remains a sterling vocal accompanist, as demonstrated across this album featuring five of the finest singers around: Kurt Elling, Gregory Porter, Jane Monheit, Norah Jones and Alexis Cole.

Alongside regular trio mates John Webber (bass) and Joe Farnsworth (drums), Mabern bookends the album with original instrumental tributes, opening with the propulsive "The Chief," for John Coltrane, with guests Alexander (on tenor) and trumpeter Jeremy Pelt, and closing with the ice-cool swinger "Bobby, Benny, Jymie, Lee, Bu."

Porter steps in for another salute, the Mabern-penned "The Man From Hyde Park," for Herbie Hancock, and a blistering treatment of the title track. Jones shines on "Fools Rush In" and the misty "Don't Misunderstand." Monheit's kittenish allure is gorgeously realized on a lilting "I'll Take Romance" and a satiny "My One and Only Love." Evincing strong echoes of Chris Connor,

Cole traverses another original, Mabern's breezily philosophic "Such Is Life." And Elling, distinctive as ever, helps define three widely diverse tracks: a sizzling, scat-fueled "Billie's Bounce"; a tenderly reflective "Portrait of Jennie"; and this project's biggest surprise, a near-anthemic rendering of the Anne Murray hit "You Needed Me." --- Christopher Loudon, jazztimes.com

One of several excellent hard bop pianists from the Memphis area, Harold Mabern has led relatively few dates through the years, but he has always been respected by his contemporaries. He played in Chicago with MJT + 3 in the late '50s and then moved to New York in 1959. Mabern worked with Jimmy Forrest, Lionel Hampton, the Jazztet (1961-1962), Donald Byrd, Miles Davis (1963), J.J. Johnson (1963-1965), Sonny Rollins, Freddie Hubbard, Wes Montgomery, Joe Williams (1966-1967), and Sarah Vaughan. During 1968-1970, Mabern led four albums for Prestige, he was with Lee Morgan in the early '70s, and in 1972, he recorded with Stanley Cowell's Piano Choir. Harold Mabern has recorded as a leader for DIW/Columbia and Sackville and toured with the Contemporary Piano Ensemble (1993-1995). ---Scott Yanow, Rovi

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