

The Extraordinary, Extemporaneous Harold Payne

From an interview by Lori Zwerman for Empower Music & Arts

Harold Payne is a talented musician, but more than that, he's a very creative guy with a quick wit and an endless sense of mischief. As busy as Harold is, he graciously has taken time to tell us about his work and future plans.

First, I will admit that I've been stalking you a little bit, and the "Custom Song For You" idea is just fabulous. Can you tell us where you got this idea and how you got started?

HP: As far as Custom Songs goes, it really started for me with improv - which started with me not remembering lyrics and having fun with it. I would play some places that had a lot of birthdays, so instead of singing the same birthday song over and over, I started making up things. People would say, "oh my cousin is here from New Jersey and could you play a song for her?" It just evolved to me doing a little shtick with it. I would ask for a title from the audience, where it was a "I risk my reputation for your entertainment" kind of thing.

Slowly, glacier-like, thousands of gigs later, it started evolving into me going, wow this would be cool if I could do a custom song for a special event and make a little money doing it. 5 or 6 years ago it hit critical mass and I got a lot of event coordinators who saw me at some larger events and I started to get booked for special events.

What kind of events do you play?

HP: It usually is like a very specific event. Like last night, there's this (party for a gentleman, Charlie Gay who is the founder of an organization called HUB, Humanity Unites Brilliance. Faith Rivera recommended me. I did that for them.

And also, wherever I perform I often do improv where I will spontaneously make up a song about somebody or when somebody is leaving the room I'll go "tell me a little bit about them and I'll surprise them when they come back." I digitally record it and when they say they wished I had a recording of it, I ask for their email address and I'll send them a copy of it.

For a custom song there's all kinds of different facets. I've got about 20 different ways to do it. I work with public speakers, like Mark Victor Hansen from Chicken Soup for the Soul, and I'll go to their events. I'll do everything from lift the audience up with a real rousing song in the beginning, and then I'll do some special material and some custom songs and then I'll do what I call recap improv.

Recap improv? What is that?

HP: Where the speaker will go up and then I will do a song immediately afterward based on the talk. And I'll do that at churches, as well. In fact, often, people not kind of expect that of me and it's a little bit of pressure. I find myself hoping the talk is a little bit longer so I have more time.

So you can't sleep in church?

HP: No! I have different ways of doing it. So, if there's a band, and I'm making up a song, maybe instead I will take a song that I'm already doing and do a little verse up at the front by myself. I can get a little improv in there, or fill in a verse of the song customizing the event.

Has that ever backfired on you?

HP: You know, I have to say I've played so many different types of events and I've gotten pretty good at reading the audience. Knock on wood. I can't say that it has.

You mentioned HUB and Faith's recommendation. I'm not really familiar with the organization, so I looked at the website. Can you tell me a little bit about your involvement with them and where else you give of yourself?

HP: To be honest I joined to support my friends Faith and Nolan.

I haven't been involved that much, but they're an organization that does a lot of good in the world. They're a for profit organization, because they feel they can do things better that way. They form critical alliances with a lot of non-profits and other wonderful organizations, feeding children and that sort of thing. I'm a Time Tither.

Times when I haven't had the money to donate to situations, then I can do time tithing. I just feel that whenever there is an opportunity, and it is humanly possible, I like to give then. A lot of times it's through a school. I have a lot of friends who teach, and I'll either come in and talk about song writing or creativity or do a performance for the kids. Whatever it takes to inspire them. Whenever someone calls upon me and I think it's something worthwhile I'll try to do what I do to help out. It's a joy for me, too, to feel like I have something that somebody thinks is valuable enough to want to share.

You do a lot to motivate other people. What do you do to stay motivated?

HP: Well, at the risk of sounding corny...To find something that you love to do is an incredible blessing, and to be, if I may say, good at it. And then to make your living at it, it's real unbelievable. I think back to when I started playing music - I would kind of like, run to the car to go to the gig. I still do that. You know, I don't get tired of it.

Some people say, "If I play that song one more time I'm going to scream." They need to be working somewhere else, and playing music occasionally, perhaps. But for me, as opposed to digging a ditch or some other form of hard labor, I get to go play for people. It still blows my mind every single day.

If you don't have any songs that you hate and don't want to play any more, do you have a favorite song?

(HP Laughing) Well, I'm not saying that there aren't songs that I don't favor more than others. I really do a kind of unusual mix of things and that helps keep it fresh for me. It's a very diverse amount of things that I do. It's kind of rare to be a songwriter who has done as much songwriting as I have done, that I still like playing gigs where I do even cover songs.

My strategy, when I have time, is to do a couple-of-three nights in the middle of the week doing clubs, something that is really comfortable and fun where I'll play other people's songs and then mix in original songs, as well. That keeps me on my game... basically it's a way to not have to rehearse.

Ah! Now the truth comes out! So what is the rest of your schedule like?

HP: I do my improv stuff and keep that sharp. And I'm saying to myself, "This is unbelievable. Somebody is paying me to keep my act together." Then I leave the weekends for the private events that I do. Many of which are custom song gigs, or, some of them are corporate event things. And I do a lot of house concerts and then I play a different church every Sunday. Sometimes that gets tied in with various things like touring and stuff.

You have a pretty impressive bio...

HP LAUGHING: I made all that up.

Well, do you have any future goals or anyone that you would love to write a song for? I mean, would you like to write a song for the Dalai Lama?

HP: Do you mean custom songs, or songs for people to sing... I'd pick either one with the Dalai Lama.

I'll see if we can arrange something for you!

HP: Thank you.

I just want to continue what I'm doing, and keep doing it at a higher level - still keeping my feet planted on the ground. I think that people who love what they do, if somebody gave them a trillion dollars they'd just be doing more of it. I would probably hire people to organize and go through my songs, and I'd record every song I've ever written, like three different versions.

Do you have a lot of your work digitized now?

HP: A fair amount of it, yes. But you know, since I'm always making up new songs and a lot of it is improv - every Sunday practically - keeping track of it, and the good ideas, it's not organized.

You are busy.

HP: Yes. Like this month, I have 2 days off.

That makes our time with you that much more precious, thank you. What accomplishment are you most proud of?

HP: Any time that I can connect with somebody; I guess when I do special events where I can touch somebody's life or many people's lives. If it's writing a song for somebody that has just passed away, or at a special event celebrating something. It's so special to be able to get inside someone's personal life and lift them up.

It's touching and very honest that you're more proud of the actual honor of producing music for somebody rather than awards or accolades.

HP: It really is true. The other stuff, to be honest, is more for other people. In other words, my friends and other people get off on that stuff - wow, you got this, and this and that person recorded your songs. I am proud of that, and I'm proud that I can do a lot of different things, but for me, the rubber still meets the road when I get a chance to do something that makes people feel better going out than when they came in. Especially when it's really targeted and focused.

When people have asked me, "Do you want to be this or that. Do you want to be a star?" I look back and my answer has always been that I want to have enough of a constituency of people around the world that will support doing what I do, and anything beyond that is okay. If I can go to Holland, and to Kansas City or wherever and be able to play for intimate audiences? There's nothing better than that. I've been an opening act for large groups and they just go through and touch down for a couple of hours somewhere with the same people in a bus or whatever. It's fun but it's not the same as having the agility to go to places and hang with people a little bit and to reach people on a more intimate basis with just a few people or a few hundred people.

It's that connection.

HP: Yes.

For years now you have collaborated with Bobby Womack. What is the writing process like with him?

HP

: Well, the way we've evolved into working the best, since he's the artist that will be doing the songs, the musical beginnings come from him. It has to be something he feels comfortable singing. Like he'll have a chord structure or a melody and then

maybe a concept for the song, and I'll record him talking about it.

I'll ask, "What do you see for this?" He'll talk about it, and we'll kick some things around. Then I'll go home and come back with a rough draft which may take his direction, or I may go completely another direction. Musically, maybe I'll write a bridge for it or come up with a melody that goes with the chord structure. Maybe I'll leave it exactly as it was. We'll kick that around, get some feedback on where it went. We'll talk about it and I'll finish it or we'll finish it together.

Is it harder, writing songs this way as opposed to writing on your own?

HP: With some people it feels comfortable to write together in the room at the same time. Other people, you fire at different rates. "How about this, what about that, and you can't get your own ideas out. Or sometimes I fire too fast for other people and the flow isn't natural. So either you do the "alone-together" thing by going in separate rooms for a while, or in the case with Bobby, over the years, it's just worked where we've gotten together and kicked around an idea and I'd come back a few days later. In fact, the very first time we got together, that's how it was. He brought me in the studio, and he had a track and a chorus idea. I took it from there.

You write for and with other people, you play solo, and you also play with your band called Gravity 180?

HP: It was called Gravity for decades and we just changed it to Gravity 180. It's really special. Once again, I'm really blessed to be able to do both. I like the solo thing because of the freedom of getting extemporaneous and changing things. But to play with a group, it adds a lot. Especially in this case, we've all played together so long, we know when the other one is going to blink. We're like a family.

We went through some of the stuff that bands go through, where if somebody did something outside of the group it was (seen as) a threat, but then we realized, no this is a lifetime group. Whether we play two dates a year or two hundred, you know, we're always going to be a group.

They're like my brother and sister, and we love to play together. It goes through periods of waxing and waning, but we have a new CD and we're going to get going with that. We're very close. It's Clydene Jackson (vocals/keyboards), who is an incredible singer. She does a lot of session work. Just about every major movie that comes out, she's on. She did an album that Ray Charles produced, just her solo. Oliver Brown (percussion), was an original member of KC and the Sunshine band, and has toured with everybody and just lights up the stage. We came together, a percussionist, a singer and an acoustic guitar player, back in the day when that was a strange configuration.

It's worked for you all this time. How many years have you been together?

HP: I'll have to count. Over 25.

Long enough to grow on each other.

HP: Yes.

Thank you for talking with us. I have one other question for you on behalf of our emPower members. Can you give new artists some advice on starting out or building themselves as musicians?

HP: Nike! Just do it. As corny as that sounds, when people say, "I've been wanting to do this," especially on the performance side, (they should) find a coffee house. Just log time playing because it's like going to school. Whether it's a coffee house somewhere, or your neighbor's house - getting someone in

the neighborhood to have a little house concert. Anything. Just find some place to park yourself, so you can learn. Jana Stanfield talks about playing for existing audiences. You know, I got my first following at a Tupperware party.

Harold, what were you doing at a Tupperware party?

HP: I was invited to play for it.

My brother had said, "Why don't you play at this Tupperware party." So I extended myself and played for free. It wasn't my first gig, but it was one of my first gigs where I really captured an audience. At that time, I didn't yet have the concept that you were supposed to bring bodies into a place when you played there, if you wanted to really secure your spot. I thought you'd just show up - and some places are like that and that's great.

So somebody recommended me to play at this one place. When I played there, I brought maybe 2 people in. And the guy said, you know, I'm sorry but we're going to have to get somebody else. Before he said that, when I saw that the place was empty, I said why don't you give me one more week. The next time when I showed up, there were 120 people there (from the Tupperware party); they were just this really active group of people. The networking thing had gone through the roof.

The 2nd thing I'd suggest for new artists is if you can play solo, that gives you more opportunities because you're not dependent on somebody else. Or if you have a group, get a core group that is going to be dedicated. Even if it's just 2 people or 3 people. You can always add on to that, but if you have your core group of people you won't be looking for more.

Harold, I have really enjoyed talking with you. Thank you once again for taking the time to do this interview and we wish you the best of everything in all that you do.