



Harris, Sam (b. 1961)

by Linda Rapp

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Singer, songwriter, actor, screenwriter, and producer Sam Harris came to national attention in 1983 when he emerged as the grand champion in the inaugural season of the television talent show *Star Search*. In addition to continuing his successful career in music, he has worked as an actor on both stage and screen and has also written and produced for television and theater.

Since coming out publicly in 1999, he has lent his voice to the cause of glbtq rights. He has recently released an anthem in support of marriage equality and civil rights.

Born June 4, 1961 in the small town of Cushing, Oklahoma, Harris grew up in the neighboring and even smaller community of Sand Springs. He was drawn to music and acting from his very early years. He was always ready to sing for any relatives or neighbors who would listen, and he first performed in a stage production at the tender age of four.

At fifteen, Harris decamped from Oklahoma to follow his dream of performing on stage. He first worked at the Six Flags amusement park in St. Louis and a year later moved on to Opryland in Nashville, where he had his first romantic relationship with another young man.

While Harris was pursuing his musical career, he was also completing his high school classes by correspondence. Once he received his diploma, he was accepted at the University of California at Los Angeles, where he studied for two years. At UCLA, he co-wrote and starred in an original musical and received the Frank Sinatra Pop Singing Award, which was presented to him by Sinatra himself.

For another two years he eked out a living playing in what he described to Jeffrey Epstein of *The Advocate* as "every divey, dumpy, nasty, horrifying club/restaurant/bowling alley/you-name-it" in the Los Angeles area.

Despite the fact that Harris was performing in distinctly modest venues, he was developing a sufficient fan following that he attracted the attention first of *Los Angeles Magazine* and then talent scouts for *Star Search*, a television program that was about to debut and that would showcase up-and-coming performers.

On *Star Search*, Harris delighted audiences with his good looks and bluesy renditions of classics such as "Over the Rainbow." He won week after week, eventually becoming the show's first grand champion in 1983 and pocketing the \$100,000 prize money.

Following his victory, Harris signed with Motown Records and released two highly successful albums, *Sam Harris* (1984) and *Sam-I-Am* (1986), both of which sold in excess of one million copies.

Harris's stylistic versatility is apparent in these early albums, where he combines pop, gospel, soul, and theatrical styles in deeply felt performances. Early in his career he exhibited, in addition to a powerful voice, an unusual ability to capture the emotional resonances of the lyrics he interprets.



Sam Harris in 2009.
Photograph by Greg Hernandez appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

Harris got his start in television comedy when he and Bruce H. Newberg, a friend from his college days, created and wrote the sitcom *Down to Earth*, the story of a woman who returns to earth from heaven in order to earn her wings as an angel. The program, which debuted on the WTBS (now TBS) network in 1984, had a respectable four-year run.

Following *Down to Earth*, Harris continued his musical career, touring extensively, and appearing at such venues as Carnegie Hall. He also wrote shows, produced in the Los Angeles area, in which he could appear, such as *Hard Copy* (1989), a musical inspired by an all-night news stand in which he portrayed six different characters, and *Different Hats: An Evening of Song and Dance*, which he debuted at the Pasadena Playhouse in 1992.

Although Harris had not issued an album since 1986, in 1994 he released three, *The Best of the Motown Sessions*, *Standard Time*, and *Different Stages*. The latter two, both arranged and produced by Peter Matz and recorded live with an orchestra, featured popular classics and Broadway tunes. They helped define Harris as not simply an outstanding vocalist, but also as a song-and-dance man, equally at home in the theater as in the recording studio.

Harris made it to Broadway in 1994, when he appeared in a revival of *Grease* (book, music, and lyrics by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey) directed by Tommy Tune, for which he received a Drama Desk Award nomination for outstanding supporting actor in a musical.

Harris subsequently spent fifteen months starring in a national touring company production of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* before returning to Broadway in 1997 in *The Life* (book by David Newman, Ira Gasman, and Cy Coleman, music by Coleman, lyrics by Gasman). His work earned him a Drama League Award as well as nominations for Tony and Drama Desk Awards.

He also developed a cabaret act in which he mixed humor and politics and music, a formula that has since characterized many of his subsequent appearances on stage and video.

The cabaret act that Harris and musical theater actress Laurie Beechman performed at New York's Rainbow and Stars in July 1996 was honored with a MAC award for outstanding achievement in cabaret by the Manhattan Association of Cabarets and Clubs.

Harris came out publicly as a gay man in 1999. He explained to Epstein that he had been reluctant to speak out earlier, stating, "In the late '80s I saw a lot of people who were made poster boys because they were gay, and I didn't want to become that."

In addition, there had been pressure from Motown Records not only to remain closeted but also to project a heterosexual image. "I was asked to lie. I was asked to give a radio interview and talk about my girlfriend. But I never would do that. I couldn't do it," he declared.

At the time of his coming out, Harris was under contract to Finer Arts Records and had just released the album *Revival*, which included his twist on classics like Paul Simon's "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" and new works, including some he wrote himself, such as the title song and "Holding On," as well as a moving performance of David Friedman's "I'll Be Here with You," which he recorded in memory of his friend and collaborator Laurie Beechman, who had recently died of ovarian cancer.

He called the album a celebration of "openness and fearlessness." Embracing these qualities made his coming out inevitable.

"At this point in my life," he told Epstein, "I felt that to avoid the subject [would be] sort of shameful."

In addition to making the album, Harris affirmed his identity by playing a gay character in Michael Rauch's indie comedy film *In the Weeds* (2000).

In 2000, Harris released a well-received Christmas album, *On This Night*.

Although he is an Oklahoma native and has mostly resided in Los Angeles, Harris became memorably associated with New York when he appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to sing "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" and "You'll Never Walk Alone" days after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack.

In 2003, Harris came to terms with the threat of alcoholism and decided to stop drinking.

In 2006, he released a collection of love songs, *Always*; and also returned to television, co-starring in the CBS ensemble situation comedy *The Class*, which ran for only one season. On the show Harris played a man who was married to a woman and had children but whose flamboyant style and demeanor suggested that he was gay.

Harris became a married man himself on November 1, 2008, when he wed Danny Jacobsen, a director and presentation coach for several Blue Chip companies and his partner since 1994.

The couple soon became parents as well, adopting a son whom they named Cooper Atticus Harris-Jacobsen.

Harris had wanted to be a father for some time, especially since he gave up alcohol in 2003, but Jacobsen resisted for a while, despite encouragement from friends like Rosie O'Donnell. Finally, on September 17, 2007, he decided he was ready. The next day the couple consulted their lawyer and began the arduous process of qualifying to be adoptive parents.

Five months later, Harris and Jacobsen were chosen by an expectant mother planning to give up her child to be the parents of the baby. Both men were present in the delivery room and cut the umbilical cord after the birth. Harris described the profound emotion of the event, writing, "At the exact moment in which we were experiencing the greatest gift of our lifetime, this woman was experiencing the greatest loss in hers."

Harris also stated that once they had decided to adopt, "Danny and I fell more in love than ever We were going to be parents and we had to unite on a deeper level than we'd known." Of their lives as fathers, he wrote, "I could never have imagined the joy that is in my heart. It is the most important and unexplainable experience I've ever had."

"It doesn't hurt," he quipped, "that Cooper Atticus Harris-Jacobsen is stunningly handsome, intelligent, and, yes, even at this age, showing signs of incredible athleticism and wit. . . . At his first outing, a trip to the pediatrician, I noticed even then that all the other children were thoroughly unremarkable in comparison. And I know it isn't just me. My mom, who was visiting, was with us and concurred 100%."

In 2009, Harris was featured in a production of a new musical based on Olivia Goldsmith's novel and Hugh Wilson's 1996 film *The First Wives Club* (music by Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Eddie Holland; book by Rupert Holmes) at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego.

In 2010 Harris wrote and recorded "My Reclamation," described in *The Advocate* as "a rousing anthem for marriage equality, gay rights, and civil rights."

He explained that he composed the song because of a sense of urgency: "I wrote 'My Reclamation' because it is vital that we unite now, rally now, and pool our resources now to prepare for the next step to equality. This song is a declaration of rights. It is about faith that unity will triumph over adversity. . . . It's a call to action."

The song can be heard on Harris's well-maintained and well-stocked YouTube channel, SamHarrisCOM.

Also in 2010, Harris performed a reading of Sherman Yellin and Will Holt's new musical *Let Me Sing*, based on the life and music of Al Jolson. If the musical is actually produced on Broadway, and Harris stars as Jolson, that will be a kind of poetic justice, for in 1998 Harris was scheduled to star as Jolson in a Broadway production of a musical based on the 1927 film of *The Jazz Singer* only to see the project fall through when a major financial backer withdrew.

Harris has, over the years, not only been active in the fight against AIDS and in supporting marriage equality and other human rights, but also in raising funds for children's health organizations.

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