

Black Violin Talk New Album, Beginnings & Destroying Stereotypes (Interview)



Wil Baptiste and Kev Marcus started a unique journey years ago when they decided to become a pop-music playing violinist duo. They discovered their instruments by chance and soon went beyond their classical training and used their love of hip-hop and soul to give their strings new life. The combination of their virtuosity, improvisation and the overall unexpectedness of seeing two black men playing the violin in any context charms, intrigues and inspires their audiences. A history of playing with Alicia Keys, the Wu-Tang Clan and many other music industry names became a sort of launching pad for their own music. In this interview Baptiste talks about their beginnings, winning over the notoriously hard to please Apollo Theater audience and their new album *Take The Stairs*.

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How long was it after you and Kev met in high school before you formed Black Violin?

Probably we met in high school around â€™96 so went to college came back together maybe seven or eight years after since 2002, 2003, about 16 or 17 years been doing it for a while. It

wasn't right after high school when we started producing it wasn't really Black Violin you know we wanted to be the next big producer. The violin thing was just something we did we thought it was cool but we didn't think people would like it. It really didn't start until we started getting reactions from people touring with our people. So we started noticing how we were playing backing up these artists how the crowd was just really engaged. We started playing in clubs in Miami like a celebrity's birthday party. They would laugh at us at the door as soon as they said no we would just pull out the violins and we started playing on top of the radio we started drawing a crowd and they would say "That's cool come back." It was such a new concept you tell someone I got two big black guys and they're going to come play violin and hip-hop and it's a weird thing even now kind of funny but that's how it was back then we had to knock some doors down.

What is it that you like about the violin as opposed to another instrument specifically a stringed one? You could've picked up the guitar which is considered more "masculine" or you could've picked the bass.

I wanted to play the sax the reason I wanted to play the sax is because I liked to beat on the tables at lunchtime and the security guard would get really upset with me. He told me a quick story of how he used to play the sax make money on the weekends. I thought I would learn how to play the sax and make money. I went up to the band teacher I was really excited and I told him "I really want to play the sax" so he said go ahead and sign up. So I sign up the string teacher is in the same room so they basically had a bet they played golf and said whoever wins this golf game gets this class. The string teacher won the golf game and I got strings instead of band. So when I went to the class with these wood instruments I was confused but I was stuck with the class for three weeks it's like a summer program so I played it.

At first, I didn't care for it for three weeks I wanted to

play the sax Kev didn't like it either. It was the only thing they had left. I think over time it took me about a week maybe like two weeks to really feel like hmm ok it's kind of cool you know what I mean. The thing that really clicked for me I would hear music differently I would finally hear violins in music that I've been hearing all the time like TV shows I watch all of the time all of sudden I could hear the violins in that and I would pick up the viola and I would try to mimic viola sounds even then when I very first started I was hearing music differently and I started mimicking what I heard. What made me keep going because I was very untraditional my approach to that instrument was very untraditional from the get-go. I would literally go into a room by myself and play whatever I felt like I would go in the bathroom and play whatever I wanted to play makeup something.



How did you decide to not go the conventional route and incorporate hip-hop, pop and rock into your sound?

It's in us, we're hip-hop our environment where we grew up was very heavily influenced by hip-hop, reggae, so it was just very natural for us to pull those worlds together and it was definitely something that was organic naturally happening. Hip-Hop is about expressing yourself we had instruments so we had to but no we didn't have anyone to look there wasn't anyone doing what we were doing at that time but then again that's just as we've grown as we've gotten older started really packaging that the way.

Winning over an Apollo audience is not easy, what did that feel like? And how did things change after that?

We won the Apollo in 2005 it was three years after our introduction before Apollo we were just really grinding you know classical music kind of fades away we had these classical degrees with nothing to really show for itself so we started

playing clubs and stuff like that to make a few bucks and Apollo kind of came about We sent a tape out to the Apollo and they called us back like a year and a half later. We mailed it to a P.O. Box they never really checked somehow they checked and they literally responded to us. We didn't really think it was real because there were so many Apollos going around. So we went to Harlem and just killed it. Monique was the host at the time I would say that was the genesis but even then winning the Apollo at that time was like winning 20th place on American Idol. People weren't really watching Apollo at that time they were watching it but not the way they used to but we won anyway and it was a dope thing. We won some money had a website designed.

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Were you all Black Violin at that point did you have the name?

Yes. Before we even did a show we had the name Black Violin. The name Black Violin came because people used to call us The Black Dudes. Black Violin is the name of an album by a guy his name is Stuff Smith and he was a black violinist back in the 1900s very bebopish very different. And that album is called *Black Violin* that album was given to Kev Marcus on his first day at college so that's kind of where that name comes from. It was very unanimous when we started putting ourselves out doing shows we didn't even think about what our name would be it wasn't a lot of thinking "What do we call ourselves" so that album really helped to truly motivate us.

How did things change after the Apollo is that when you began to collaborate with people like the Wu-Tang Clan?

Yeah, after the Apollo we went to Alicia Keys' manager's office and met him doing a show in Miami and we played for him

in his office went back home and he called us maybe a few days later and said would you guys like to perform with Alicia Keys at the Billboard Awards we were like yes. We played with her at a few award shows and then her music director was directing Linkin Park's side project called Fort Minor and we toured with them around the world for about two years so that's kind of how it happened. We got tired of doing that playing with artists we wanted to be our own thing and tour and play our own music.

What does the title Take The Stairs mean?

The title Take The Stairs simply means basically it's kind of like taking an elevator where we literally have control of our destiny it's tough taking the stairs but it's worthwhile when you get to that next step you're stronger a lot of times as individuals. You come across opportunities that we probably shouldn't take because it's kind of like quick cash but it doesn't last. At some point, you're going to have to be able to take the stairs and strengthen your legs cause the real world just doesn't work that way. That's the concept behind that title. We always took the hard road because it's more worthwhile.

Can you tell me about "Lost In The Garden"?

So "Lost In The Garden" happened when we worked with Salaam Remi in Miami and Curtis Mayfield was one of my favorite artists of all time. He was asking us who's your favorite artist and we just started playing music Curtis Mayfield then we kind of left that alone and came back and we started vibing and I started plucking the main melody to the song and doing the beat and he started playing the bass boom there's the song. And then maybe a couple of months after that I started I just kind of like started writing and there you have it. It's a song about being lost and trying to find your way.

How would describe the album's sound?

When we first started working on this album we wanted to project the idea of hope. We didn't necessarily want to be preachy. We wanted to project optimism, hope, strength and sonically it's a lot going on but ultimately the violin pulls everything together. There's a song that kind of has an Imagine Dragons energy epic sound then there are songs that kind of have a Curtis Mayfield type vibe. It's a very empowering album.

[youtube id="Tb5z070ybPg"]

Have you ever experienced criticism from the classical community or anyone about playing popular music on the violin?

No, not really I definitely wouldn't care if there were criticism. As far as the classical community classical music and classical musicians they envy sometimes our ability because you can find one of the best violinists in the world he is not or she is not able for the most part to sit there and play. They can't just hear a beat or they're just not taught to be that so for us we can do that always you can just throw us in a band like a guitar player it's unheard of so musicians look at us like wow how are you able to do that. And on the flip side people that are not classical they look at it like man this instrument is supposed to be made for this for classical music how are you doing this with this instrument that's made for this. It's almost like stereotypes we're showing you what this instrument can do.

I know you do so many shows per year for kids in communities around America what do they say the most after they see you and Kev perform as Black Violin?

They say I want to play the violin now and I think it's because they have this main perception about the violin and what it's supposed to be for and who normally plays it. When you see two black guys playing this instrument playing it well

and doing it in a very cool way with hip-hop they just go crazy. Theyâ€™re just like wow what can I do. It just really empowers them it makes them think if I like anything thatâ€™s not deemed cool maybe I can do what I want. Some of our best shows are for kids and they just go crazy. They never thought coming to that concert they were going to experience that.

Keep up with Black Violin at their [Official Site](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#). Take The Stairs comes out November 1st.Â