

When the Grammy-nominated classical-meets-hip-hop duo Black Violin set out to record their sixth album *Full Circle*, they were searching for a new direction, a fresh approach. They found that the answer was right in front of them.

“We took the whole band into the studio and we created together, which is something we hadn’t really done,” says violist/vocalist Wil Baptiste. “It was definitely more collaborative, which was great, because a lot of times on stage, we’re doing soundcheck and just goofing around, freestyling, coming up with really dope stuff. These guys [DJ SPS, drummer/percussionist Nat Stokes, and keyboardist/programmer Liston Gregory] are amazing musicians—we’re blessed to have them, and they helped bring this vision to its highest heights.”

The group enlisted longtime collaborator and LA-based producer Phil Beaudreau (Dr. Dre, Justin Bieber, The Game, Lalah Hathaway), who worked with the group on their 2019 Grammy nominated album, *Take the Stairs*. For the latest album, Beaudreau brought his full array of skills as producer, programmer, multi-instrumentalist and mixer, allowing Kev and Wil the freedom for exploration and experimentation in the music without losing its shape. The result is *Full Circle*, Black Violin’s most rich and varied collection to date. With indelible melodies, boom-bap rhythms, and rich orchestration, and lyrics full of hope and persistence, the songs reveal the range and depth of a project that the members call “more a movement than a brand.”

“The key is that we have to make sure we’re putting in the sound that makes us who we are,” says Baptiste. “An aggressive, hard-hitting beat with beautiful, lush violin on top of it, that has to be the foundation. As long as we have that, we can experiment with other things.”

Baptiste’s creative partner, violinist Kev Marcus, admits that initially he struggled to find motivation to make new music. “Personally, artistically, I felt like I didn’t have anything left to say after 20 years and five albums,” he says. The *Take the Stairs* album had been nominated for Best Contemporary Instrumental Album at the 2020 Grammys, but it was their visit to the 2023 ceremony, where they were nominated in the Best Americana Performance category for a collaboration with the Blind Boys of Alabama, that turned him around.

“I was walking around the red carpet, and I felt like I belonged there,” says Marcus. “After that, I was inspired—like, what else is there now? It kind of jump-started me. I wanted to get back to exploring the artistic limits like we’ve always been doing.”

Black Violin has always been about taking things further, exceeding expectations, challenging conventions. The duo has steadily built a devoted following and a diverse touring base—culminating in such triumphs as two sold-out shows at the Kennedy Center with the National

Symphony Orchestra commemorating the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s death, and appearances on the *Today Show*, *CBS Mornings*, and *PBS Newshour*—while occupying a musical lane that's entirely its own.

Black Violin's work extends far beyond the stage, reaching deep into communities nationwide with numerous free performances for students and hands-on engagement with youth symphonies and community centers. Through collaborations with local and national education programs such as Turnaround Arts, Baptiste and Marcus connect with more than 100,000 students throughout the year, including low-income and Title 1 schools, and adopted Bethune Elementary, in Florida's Broward County (near where they grew up) to initiate an ongoing mentorship program.

The members of Black Violin met on the first day of orchestra class in 1996 at Dillard High School of the Performing Arts in Fort Lauderdale. (Baptiste originally wanted to play saxophone in the band, but the orchestra teacher got him assigned to his class after winning a golf bet with the band instructor.) Classically trained by day, they faithfully put on their headphones and listened to the hottest rap records each night. They went to different colleges—Marcus attended Florida International University and Baptiste went to Florida State—but then reconvened, moved into an apartment together, and started trying to produce other musicians.

They developed an act covering hip-hop songs on their violins, which became popular in local clubs. Two years after sending in a tape to *Showtime at the Apollo*, they were invited to appear on the show—which they won, and kept winning.

They were approached by the manager of Alicia Keys, who asked them to perform with the singer at the Billboard Awards. Other offers followed—they toured with Mike Shinoda of Linkin Park, opened for the Wu-Tang Clan, and worked with the likes of Alessia Cara, 2 Chainz, and Lil Wayne. All the while, Black Violin continued touring non-stop (playing as many as 200 shows a year) and released two independent, self-financed albums before putting out the acclaimed *Stereotypes* in 2016, followed by 2019's *Take the Stairs*.

"Wil and I are similar, but we approach music in different ways," notes Marcus. "He says that he searches for music that feels good but oftentimes, music that feels good isn't music that necessarily transcends anything. With Black Violin, I look for music that challenges people—for me, number one, it has to be like, *what the f**k is this?* If you get that reaction the first time you feel it, you'll never forget us. And that, to me, has been the whole thing. It has to be disruptive; it has to be chaotic beauty. What can I do that no one else thought was possible? That's the driving force for me as a creator."

So Marcus goes for the tense, slinky "Smoke" when asked to pick a song on *Full Circle* that's central for him. "Nothing has ever been recorded like that song," he says. "There is no song in

the history of songs that's a viola solo like that. I watch a lot of *Beat Bobby Flay*, and the chefs are like, 'This is me on a plate'—this is Wil on a track. It's what the viola has always wanted, since the days of Bach, to be able to shine in a melodic, super-soulful way, and no one else in the world could make that song but us." (He does also acknowledge the "big pop vocal" on "Live My Life," saying "my daughter pulled up in her car yesterday and she was banging that one, so that's kind of cool.")

Baptiste, in contrast, points to the loose joy of "Beautiful Day" as a defining track. "We were in the studio, just vibing, and I started singing this melody," he says. "That moment was just like, 'Oh, man, this is fun, this is cool—I'm in my element, I'm calm, I'm relaxed, I'm having a good time.' We were just chilling, being creative, and magic happens when that happens."

Elsewhere on the album, the music ranges from the tension and cinematic intricacy of "Drama" ("that song sounds like you're sipping from a firehose," says Marcus, "it's almost like science and you gotta put a little acid on the plate") to the head-nodding groove and scratching on "The Illest." Baptiste mentions "To the Top," which he initially conceived with a New Orleans-style vibe, as an example of the band's input. "The little nuances that LG, our keyboardist, plays, the things that he does, are just so dope," he says. "I love listening to that song just to hear the musicians."

While *Full Circle* illustrates the group's creative expansion, Baptiste and Marcus have also committed to extending the impact of Black Violin, and all that it represents, beyond the music in a substantial way. In 2019, the duo launched Black Violin Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering youth by working with them in their communities to provide access to quality music programs that encourage creativity and innovation.

"Black Violin is so much bigger than just the music," says Baptiste. "I think of the people that we influence, I think of looking at little kids' eyes as they see us perform. Aunties come to our show, and they're just so proud, like, 'Oh my God, I can't wait to bring my son and my nieces to see you.' You inspire people to be better versions of themselves, and that's incredible. It's less about us individually than it is about this entity that we've created, and as we continue to move and to grow, to add on different nuances and work with the Foundation, it's just going to be magnified even more."

"People are so proud of it," says Marcus. "They want to attach themselves, they want to bring people to see it. And I never looked at it as they're coming to see me, I never thought of it like that. They come to see this energy, this thing we've created. I feel like we just sit back and steer the ship, but we're building something that will live far beyond us."