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NEWS RELEASE

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Guitarist/Composer Ken Hatfield Celebrates the Genius of Harlem Renaissance Poet Langston Hughes With *For Langston*, An Enthralling Song Cycle Drawn From His Blues-Steeped Verse

Featuring An All-Star Sextet With Hilary Gardner, Jamie Baum and Hans Glawischnig

To Be Released February 1, 2013, Langston's Birthday

A supremely lyrical guitarist and award-winning composer with a deep love of literature, **Ken Hatfield** is always on the lookout for texts ripe for musical interpretation. He found an ideal muse in the great American poet Langston Hughes, whose rhythmically agile verse, marked by penetrating observations about love, life and politics, takes flight on *For Langston*, due out on Arthur Circle Music on February 1, 2013, Langston's birthday. A chamber jazz work featuring a stellar cast of improvisers and the startlingly beautiful voice of **Hilary Gardner**, the album is a remarkable, deeply soulful achievement by a veteran jazz master whose name should be far better known.

For Langston encompasses many facets of Hatfield's far-flung musical resume, though he initially connected with Hughes' verse on a visceral level. He was particularly drawn to the way the poet's phrasing and unsentimental sensibility can evoke the blues, both as a musical form and as an essential expression of African-American culture. Rather than trying to encompass the poet's entire *oeuvre*, he carefully selected works that spoke to him musically. "As I'm reading them I'm hearing grooves and melodies and even chord changes," Hatfield says.

Structured as a song cycle complete with a stirring overture, the album flows together gracefully, despite drawing on numerous rhythms and forms. Hatfield's musical concept keyed on assembling a consistent ensemble for the entire project, one capable of improvising with gusto while exploring delicately hued passages in support of Hughes' verse and Hatfield's gorgeously calibrated nylon-string guitar work.

"I needed to have the same musicians on each track," Hatfield explains. "I wanted it to feel like an evening of music. And I wanted the guitar to be what George Van Eps called a lap piano."

Navigating Hatfield's music isn't for the faint of heart. He called on his frequent collaborator **Jamie Baum**, a brilliant player whose husky alto flute often parallels Gardner's soaring vocals. Percussionist **Steve Kroon** and drummer **Jeff Hirshfield** are both dynamically sensitive musicians who can swing with authority or play texturally as an arrangement requires. In many ways, the ensemble keys on the melodically inspired, rhythmically fluid bass of **Hans Glawischnig**, the Austrian-born master best known for his work with David Sanchez, Miguel Zenón and Bobby Watson. Hatfield has recorded extensively with Glawischnig, dating back to his acclaimed 1998 debut album *Music For Guitar and Bass*.

"Something about the way he plays really works with the way I play," Hatfield says. "It's like Bill Evans playing solo and he's the left hand and I'm the right hand. But everyone contributed an incredible amount to this music. I wrote a lot of the music with these players in mind. I could hear their sound and playing."

The album's discovery is Gardner, a sumptuous soprano with conservatory chops but the emotional range of a cabaret star and the rhythmic dexterity of a bebop saxophonist. She might be a new name to jazz fans, but she's already made a lasting impression in several arenas, including on Moby's hit 2009 album *Wait For Me*, and on Broadway, where she starred in Twyla Tharp's 2010 show *Come Fly Away*.

"The first thing I was looking for was someone who could sing in that register credibly as a jazz singer," Hatfield says. "I needed a singer who could sing in soprano range, but not sound operatic. The first rehearsal I had with her, she knocked it out of the park."

Exploring Hughes' verse in a jazz setting seems so obvious it's a wonder that so few composers have walked this path (though trumpeter Ron McCurdy revived the ambitious, unperformed jazz suite that Hughes wrote inspired by the civil rights struggle, *Ask Your Mama*). Born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902, and raised in Kansas, Hughes came of age creatively in the ferment of the Harlem Renaissance. Far more than a poet, he was an essayist, columnist, dramatist, and novelist deeply engaged with the struggle for civil rights in America and abroad. Deeply engaged with jazz and blues, he gained early notice for the vividly musical quality of his verse.

Hatfield cannily captures the sweep of Hughes' lines, opening with "Dream Boogie," a song woven artfully from three "Boogie" poems, including the oft-anthologized piece that contains the evocative phrase immortalized by Martin Luther King Jr., "a dream deferred." Kroon holds down an insinuating samba groove on "Not What Was," while Hatfield rechristens the cerebral-sounding "Poem for an Intellectual on the Way Up to Submit to His Lady" as "I Don't Believe in Titles," setting the piece to a rollicking Kansas City blues anchored by Glawischnig's earthy arco bass solo.

The sad and sympathetic "Lonely Nocturne" evokes the existential angst that is the writer's lot, dripping with late-night desperation. Rather than wallowing in the darkness, Hatfield resolves "In Time of Silver Rain" as a gleaming vision of newfound love, as if offering medicine for melancholy. He continues the emotional push and pull throughout the album, countering darker visions with glimpses of ecstatic light, culminating with the beatific ode "The Bells Toll Kindly." It's a celebratory song that makes an explicit claim on music as a spiritual balm, a thread running through the entire album. Like many of Hatfield's pieces, "Bells" combines intricately arranged passages with open space for improvisation. "When the written part is finished it's like jumping off the cliff, flapping your arms and hoping you fly," he says.

Born in Portsmouth, Virginia, Hatfield wasn't raised in a musical clan, but he was very aware of his family's deep roots in dark American soil. Directly related to Devil Anse Hatfield, a central figure in the notorious 19th century Hatfields and McCoys blood feud, he started studying guitar as a teenager with John Griggs. Before long he was performing regularly around the Tidewater region, which boasted a thriving jazz and R&B scene sustained by Norfolk's bustling navy base. He experienced a series of musical and social epiphanies in the late 1960s, most profoundly hearing Wes Montgomery's *Smokin' at the Half Note*.

Heading north to Boston after high school, he made such a powerful impression at Berklee that the school quickly hired him for a faculty position, a job he held for several years before answering the call of the road. He performed frequently with Charlie Byrd, and by 1976 had settled in New York City, where he quickly earned his stripes in organ combo settings with B3 legends Jimmy McGriff and Brother Jack McDuff. A member of Chico Hamilton's group Euphoria, he also toiled as a New York session player mentored by bassist Bob Cranshaw.

Feeling the need for growth Hatfield gravitated toward composing and arranging, a field in which he's distinguished himself. He's written chamber pieces, choral works and ballet scores, including commissions for the Washington Ballet Company, the Maurice Béjart Ballet Company, and Judith Jamison, former director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Hatfield was awarded the ASCAP Foundation Jazz Vanguard Award in 2006, and he's released several jazz guitar instruction books and seven albums on his Arthur Circle Music label, including 2002's acclaimed Brazilian jazz session *Phoenix Rising* with Glawischnig, pianist Dom Salvador, drummer Duduka da Fonseca, and trumpeter Claudio Roditi.

"Having a chance to write liberated me," Hatfield says. "When I went back to school for a degree in composition I gravitated back toward classical guitar. Steve Kroon recommended me for Dom Salvador's band and the nylon string was a perfect fit."

Hatfield's nylon string caress and vivid rhythmic palette provide him with the ideal tools for unleashing the musicality inherent in the jazzy verse of Langston Hughes. While *For Langston* is rife with innovation, the album feels like a homecoming for a jazz poetry patriarch eager to return the music's warm embrace.

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