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**BASSIST/COMPOSER AVERY SHARPE TO RELEASE
400: AN AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSICAL PORTRAIT
EVOKING THE PAIN, HOPE AND TRIUMPH OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE ACROSS FOUR CENTURIES**

Featuring Sharpe with Kevin Eubanks & Duane Eubanks, Don Braden, Zaccai Curtis, Ronnie Burrage and the Extended Family Choir

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Avery Sharpe, longtime bassist with the McCoy Tyner Trio and a distinguished leader and recording artist for over 30 years, is proud to announce the release of **400: An African American Musical Portrait**. The album finds Sharpe and his sextet — with the **Extended Family Choir** on four tracks — marking 400 years, from 1619 to 2019, since the arrival of the first enslaved Africans to North America (specifically Point Comfort, or what is now Fort Monroe in Hampton, VA).

Organizing the program chronologically, Sharpe and his colleagues present original music — and one timeless protest song — that tells the harrowing yet inspiring tale, century by century. Drawing throughout on plantation music, blues, ragtime, gospel, classical, New Orleans second line and other deeply rooted historical styles, all refracted through the prism of modern jazz, Sharpe concludes with the riveting “500” — a complex and adventurous piece that points the way toward the future.

400 represents a logical next step after Sharpe’s recent releases *Sojourner Truth (Ain’t I a Woman?)*, *Sharpe Meets Tharpe: A Tribute to Sister Rosetta Tharpe*, *Running Man* (an homage to Jesse Owens) and also *Musical Selections from Raisin’ Cane* (subtitled *A Harlem Renaissance Odyssey*, a theatrical collaboration with Jasmine Guy). These efforts reflect Sharpe’s deep fascination with history and his programmatic focus on music that depicts these stories and furthers the legacy of these great figures. With **400**, Sharpe presents his most ambitious project yet, tracing the epic story of a people from the beginnings of chattel slavery to the Civil War and Reconstruction, through the Great Migration and the World Wars to the Civil Rights Era and the Obama presidency.

Along with Sharpe on this journey is veteran guitarist **Kevin Eubanks**, heard mainly on acoustic, biting and bluesy yet endlessly warm in tone, blending sonorously with **Don Braden** on tenor/soprano sax and flute and younger brother **Duane Eubanks** on trumpet. Sharpe specifically called for Eubanks to play acoustic, preferring that natural, woody sound (though electric guitar rears its head on the slow shuffle section of “Blues and World War II,” a track that also features **Davis Whitfield** on piano).

The leader, too, keeps to upright acoustic bass on this recording (he’s widely known for his inventive electric bass work as well, and his common practice of switching between

the two). Pianist **Zaccai Curtis** came onto Sharpe's radar working on faculty with the bassist and Braden at the Litchfield Jazz Camp. He brings a stunning range and expressive fire to the album, while drummer **Ronnie Burrage**, a defining presence on Sharpe's earliest albums dating back to *Unspoken Words* (1988), plays with grit and grace and continues to draw out all layers and shades of meaning in Sharpe's compositions.

The prevalence of acoustic sound suits the massed voices of the Extended Family Choir, featuring director/bass/tenor **Kevin Sharpe** (the leader's brother), soprano **Shaina Paris**, soprano/alto **Sofia Rivera** (Sharpe's niece), alto **Wanda Rivera** (his sister), tenor **Heshima Moja** and bass **Robert Rivera** (Sharpe's nephew). The stark, rousing yet intimate quality of these fine singers, evoking the travails of dislocation and bondage as they intone in Swahili during the opening "Arrival," and in Liberian dialect on "Is There a Way Home," pervades Century One, 1619-1719, the album's first portion. Both these opening tracks feature **Tendai Muparutsa** on the djembe.

The choir returns to great effect in "Antebellum" which leads off Century Three, 1819-1919. This wholly a cappella movement drives home the fact, as Sharpe succinctly puts it, that "there were no pianos in the fields." When the choir transitions from the plaintive initial hymn-like melody to the haunting and powerful call to "wake up, rise up," the effect is almost hair-raising. Picking up the through-line in Century Four, 1919-2019, the choir sounds the perennial Civil Rights anthem "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around," joined by the band in a relaxed and funky vein, with a politically charged spoken word from Sofia Rivera, speaking out on past and present injustice and the legacy of black protest from Muhammad Ali to Colin Kaepernick.

In Century Two, 1719-1819, Sharpe and the band first set out with "Colonial Life" — Eubanks' guitar in the forefront, with Braden on flute, depicting the plight of Africans prior to and just after the American Revolution. Then "Fiddler" introduces guest violinists **Kevin Zhou** and **Sophia Jeongyoon Han**, first interweaving with piano and bass in a courtly semi-classical waltz, then breaking into fiddle music in the plantation style, steadily accelerating in tempo with handclaps and Burrage's insistent beat. Here Sharpe's writing captures the flavor of the period, when slaves were permitted to play banjo and violin and often performed in these now archaic styles for slaveowners.

Curtis takes the spotlight on piano during Century Three with "A New Music," playing Sharpe's original, fully notated rag. He's joined by Braden on soprano and then Eubanks on trumpet in spirited unison, swerving toward bebop and "rhythm changes" yet somehow preserving the vintage ragtime feel, with no bass or drums. Burrage suddenly signals the turn toward New Orleans on snare drum as the full band (sans guitar) proceeds to blow joyously. In this piece they ponder the sweep of history, from the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction to the dawn of the 20th century.

In the end, **400** is about movement: from the Middle Passage to the Great Migration north, across to Europe in the World Wars and "home" again to the segregated U.S., to the upsurge of the freedom movement itself. Sharpe and this agile mixed ensemble move through it all, traversing 400 years of America's history through art, engaging politically as many jazz greats have done, pointing soberly but with hope to what's next — both in music and more broadly.