

From Englewood Drummer to Grammy Winner, Keith Harris Talks Music Biz



By **Andrea V. Watson** | July 17, 2015 6:35am
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ENGLEWOOD — Two-time Grammy winner and Englewood native Keith Harris talked about his journey from the inner city to producing music for big-time artists on Wednesday night.

Harris, also a Juno Award-winning producer, recently was named music director of R&B star Miguel.

He told attendees at the launch of the Studio B event series to find their passion and stay true to it.

“You just have to be faithful to whatever it is that you’re called to do at that particular time because you never know what that is going to lead to,” he said.

Harris, who worked on hits like “American Boy” by Estelle and “Be Okay” by Chrisette Michele, has come a long way, but he said he will never forget his childhood.

“Growing up in Englewood during the early ‘80s was not bad,” he told DNAINfo Chicago. “You definitely didn’t hear about all the shootings and kids getting shot that you hear about now.”

He said he and his friends rode bikes and played sports like basketball and football all the time.

“It’s really sad that, nowadays, kids in the neighborhood that I grew up in, you don’t see them,” Harris said. “It’s like a ghost town, you don’t see kids in the playground as much.”

Like many musicians and singers in the African-American community, Harris got his start in church. He said he had a knack for rhythm, which seemed to travel through his body, seeking a release, and he began to play the drums at the age of 10.

“I didn’t have a lesson until college,” he said.



Executive Producer/Cast Member of the J Show on B96 and Studio B Event Series Host, Gabe Ramirez interview two-time Grammy and Juno Award winner Keith Harris.

Photo courtesy of Studio B Entertainment



Two-time Grammy and Juno Award winner Keith Harris and Bonnie Ott Founder/CEO of Studio B Entertainment and Creator of Studio B Event Series getting ready to kick off the evening

Photo courtesy of Studio B Entertainment

After graduating from Curie Metro High School in Archer Heights, Harris went to the renowned Berklee College of Music in Boston where he graduated with a degree in production and engineering. He was ready to launch his career, and the next step was to move to New York.

He took a job as an audio engineer for Bad Boy Records’ artist Richard “Younglord” Frierson. He was quickly starting to make a name for himself. Engineering wasn’t where he wanted to stay, though.

Harris was ready to take his career to the next level, but it wasn’t moving fast enough, he said. The musician was living in Boston and commuting twice a week to Brooklyn, where he worked as a musician at a local church. Those four-hour commutes went on for two years.

One day he got a call asking if he would be interested in playing the drums for the Black Eyed Peas and Fergie, he said. The three-month touring drummer job turned into an eight-year gig.

He credits God for his success.

Since the drumming tour gig, Harris has used his skills in writing, producing and playing music to work with the tops acts in the industry, including legends Michael Jackson, Madonna and James Brown. He’s best known for his work with Madonna, Usher, Nicki Minaj, Meghan Trainor and more.

“Your work precedes you, your name precedes you,” Harris said, adding that artists trust that he knows what he’s doing.

Jessica Simmons attended Wednesday’s event and afterward, as people mingled and sipped cocktails, she said Harris’ personal story really resonated with her. She said his perseverance and the long hours he put in really stood out to her. “It doesn’t matter what industry you’re in, [his advice] can translate into any industry,” she said.

Another attendee, Nicole Reed, said she was “very inspired” by Harris’ story.

“He started from humble beginnings and has been very successful,” she said. “I didn’t know much about him, but I really enjoyed his talk. I think he gave the good and the bad of the [music] industry.”

Harris said he recognizes that a lot of young people with budding talent want a chance to show off their skills. He said that not everyone will pursue higher education like he did, but that’s OK.

“I think that any creative outlet is OK, like your Soundclouds and YouTube, that’s the modern way of connecting,” he said.

He recommends that artists find something unique to make themselves stand out.

“There’s already a Nicki Minaj, there’s already a Lil Wayne, a Drake, or a John Legend, so you have to do something different. Even if it’s just getting more education or going to another city, because just you being from somewhere else gives you an advantage because you have a different sound.”

His advice to young aspiring musicians? Follow the “3 P’s,” he said: Prayer, practice and patience.

“The music industry will try you, will beat you down,” he said. “You can’t get anywhere without the prayer, practice and patience.”