

# THE BLACK VIOLIN EXPERIENCE

FEB 28 / Cobb Great Hall

Wil Baptiste  
Viola, Vocals

Kev Marcus  
Violin

Nat Stokes  
Drums

DJ SPS  
Turntable

Liston Gregory  
Keys

This performance is sponsored by Sponsored by Delta Dental of Michigan and supported by the Arts Midwest GIG Fund, a program of Arts Midwest that is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, with additional contributions from the Michigan Arts and Culture Council; Jackson National Life Insurance Company; Lansing Board of Water & Light; MSU Federal Credit Union; Warner Norcross + Judd LLP; and White Law PLLC. Media Sponsor: Michigan Radio

Tonight's program will be announced from the stage.

This performance will run approximately 90 minutes, with no intermission.

## BLACK VIOLIN

"We had a wall that we wrote stuff on," says Wil Baptiste, describing the process that led to Black Violin's new album, *Take the Stairs*. "We had all the ideas about what story we were going to convey. And it kept coming back to the idea of hope—songs that spoke about going against the grain, carrying through struggle, being optimistic. We wanted to say, 'it's tough now, but hang in there.' "

Much like the ways their instruments interact on stage, Wil's creative collaborator Kev Marcus echoes this theme, and then expands it. "Hope is the thread that keeps this thing together, it's the heartbeat of this album," he says. "But then a lot of tentacles went different ways—the song 'Impossible is Possible' is about challenging people. So it went different directions from just being hopeful, we took it a little further."

The first single released ahead of *Take the Stairs* was the timely and inspiring "Dreamer," with a message that was immediately embraced by several commercial campaigns. "This is the day when I go all the way/I make it my own/Here's to the dreamers," sings Wil. "That just really hit home," says Kev. "It got to the heart of what we're about."

For more than a dozen years, Black Violin has been all about taking things further, exceeding expectations, challenging conventions. The classical-meets-hip-hop duo has steadily built a devoted following and a diverse touring base, while occupying a musical lane that's entirely its own.

Black Violin's work extends far beyond the stage, reaching deep into urban communities with numerous free performances for students and hands-on engagement with youth symphonies and community centers. Through the TurnAround Arts program, Wil and Kev connect with more than 100,000 students throughout the year, mostly at 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.

Wil expresses the idea that, no matter how unique Black Violin's music may be, it is ultimately more than just a creative enterprise. "It's really a movement," he says, "an organism that's its own thing and really feels necessary."

With *Take the Stairs*, Black Violin is striving to take their message of unity and inclusiveness even further, moving Wil's vocals further forward while continuing to explore the possibilities of merging classical virtuosity and structure with modern beats and tones. "We wanted something different, beautiful songs that could go to

radio,” says Wil. “I sing every night, so that’s nothing new, but we felt like we’ve never had that one song that can help elevate us to the next level. This album has records like ‘One Step’ that can appeal to everybody, so we lean a bit more on that, but we still had to keep that quintessential Black Violin sound.”

The members of Black Violin first met in Ft. Lauderdale and played together in the orchestra at the Dillard High School of the Performing Arts. (Baptiste originally wanted to play saxophone in the band, but the orchestra teacher got him assigned to his class by 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 Wil B 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 on the *Billboard* Awards. Other offers followed—they toured with

Mike Shinoda of Linkin Park, opened for the Wu-Tang Clan, scored an episode of *CSI: New York*. Individually and together, Wil and Kev have worked with everyone from Kanye West to Tom Petty, Lupe Fiasco to Aerosmith. 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.

Wil says that Black Violin isn't always explicit with its message, but that they don't have to be—that the creation of an audience that is multi-generational, ethnically and economically diverse, is a powerful statement of its own. “The stereotypes are always there, embedded so deep in our culture,” he says. “Just by nature of our existence—the idea that these black guys who could be football or basketball players are playing the violin—we challenge those ideas. It's a unique thing that brings people together who aren't usually in the same room, and in the current climate, it's good to bring people together.”

It's all wrapped up in the name of the album. “For sixteen years, we've slowly been taking the stairs,” says Kev. “It's a gradual kind of snowball where now we have control, we can tour in Alaska—we took the hard way for so many years, now we can look back and see what we've learned.

“You’ve got to work hard to get what you want. But you shouldn’t be looking for the easy way, anyway, because the hard way is where the real lessons are.”