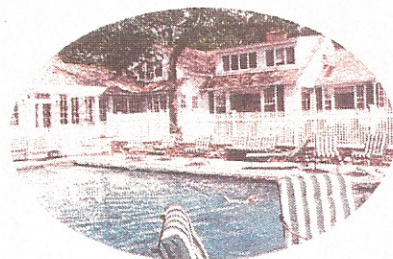


House Home

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Laura Resen for The New York Times

PLAYING IT COOL Can an R & B impresario find happiness in Martha Stewart's 'hood? Andre Harrell's



quasi-rustic hideaway on the Connecticut shore is "stylish, without trying too hard," said Mr. Harrell, left.

Harlem Renaissance Meets Martha Stewart

FIVE years ago in Harlem, Andre Harrell, then the president of Uptown Entertainment, a record label, had a design epiphany.

He went to a cocktail party at Graham Court, at 116th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard; walked into the apartment of Warner Johnson, the managing director of Axicom Online.com, a Web-based telephone company, and found the look that had been eluding him. Mr. Harrell had made stars of Mary J. Blige, Jodeci and Heavy D., but he was still a music producer in search of a design sensibility.

Then he saw Mr. Johnson's apartment. "It was Harlem Renaissance — classic, masculine," Mr. Harrell said recently as he sat in the kitchen of his country house in Westport, Conn., right across the street from Martha Stewart, whom he met a year ago but whom he hasn't bumped into since. "I remember the rooms," said Mr. Harrell, who is 37. "He had a pool table. Moldings. Warm wood. Dark blue walls. I liked the warmth. That's like my personality."

A music producer's wind-down home and country hideaway.

He paused. "Stylish," he said, "without trying too hard." Then he laughed.

If personality was judged by clothing, then he was what he wore: stylish and casual in a gray T-shirt, snug but not too snug, and beautifully cut Armani cream-colored silk pants that draped perfectly over his Gucci loafers.

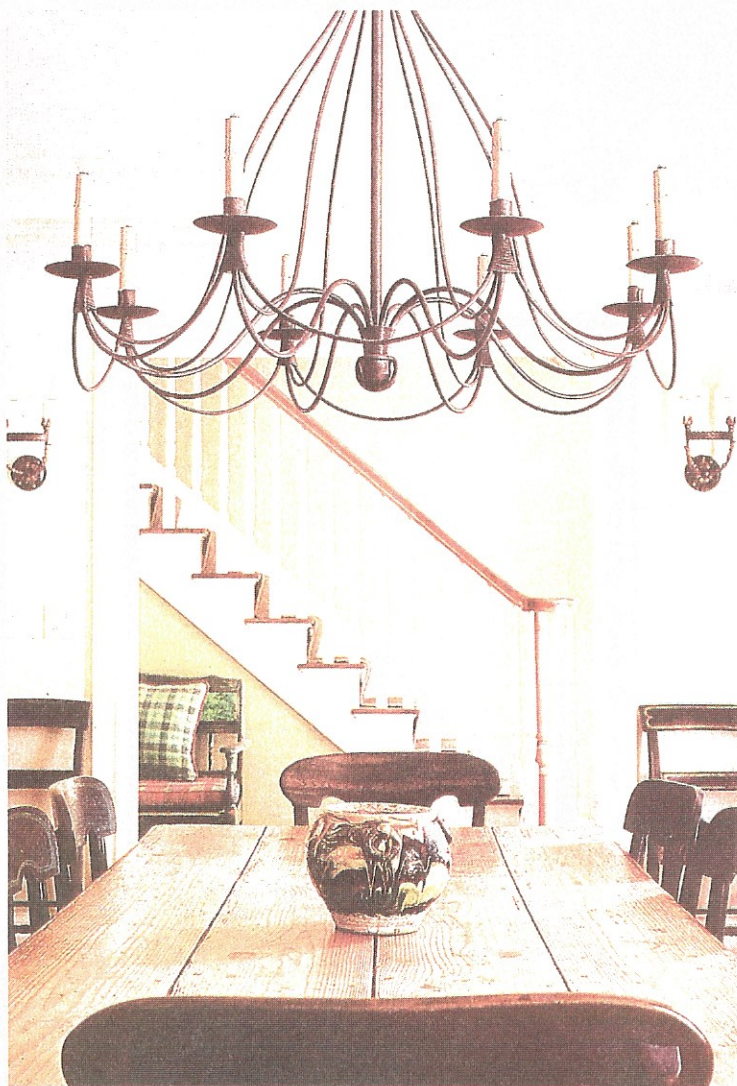
At the party, Mr. Harrell also met Sheila Bridges, an interior designer who lived in the building. "The apartment was a mix of bold, deep colors — dark reds and blues — and lots of furniture from Paris, like old velvet club chairs, lots of antiques — American Empire, Directoire — African mahogany paneling, sisal rugs," Ms. Bridges, 34, said. "It looked very rich. It looked like someone who is well traveled, who has knowledge of history." Mr. Harrell wanted his own version of a Harlem Renaissance.

"He said to me, 'If you find me an apartment, I'll let you decorate it,'" she said. She found one in two weeks. Still, it took 30 phone calls to close the deal. Since then, she has designed a second Manhattan apartment for Mr. Harrell and has just finished his white clapboard 1940's house in Westport, which he bought last year.

Mr. Harrell grew up in the Bronxdale housing project, in the Soundview section of the Bronx. "It was standard project décor," he said. "Plastic slipcovers on the velvet couch." In 1983, when he was 22, he rented his first apartment, a studio in LeFrak City in Rego Park, Queens. His roommate was Russell Simmons — from Queens. Mr. Simmons, the rap impresario, remembers that apartment complex. "The pool never had water — ever," he said.

By 1990, he had acquired another roommate: hip-hopper Sean (Puffy) Combs, then an intern at Mr. Harrell's company. "He told me he and his mother were arguing, and could he move into my house," Mr. Harrell said. He was supposed to stay a week; he stayed six months.

During those years, Mr. Harrell had moved from one rented apartment to another, from the outer boroughs to Manhattan to a house in Closter, N.J., where in 1992 he gave a Champagne brunch for 300 peo-



Photographs by Laura Resen for The New York Times

LANGSTON HUGHES GONE RUSTIC In

Andre Harrell's dining room, above, a tinware chandelier hangs over a 19th-century pine farm table and painted side chairs. The sunlight-filled



living room, left, is rich in his favorite colors, red and green, all softly muted. Gordon Parks photographs, including one of Muhammad Ali in 1966, hang to the right of an American Empire cupboard. Sheila Bridges, right, who just finished decorating the house. Top left, at the pool.



ple for Whitney Houston and Bobby Brown the day after their wedding.

As he became more successful, Mr. Harrell's taste evolved. One apartment was French Art Deco, "very young jet set, shiny red and yellow like the Mondrian Hotel." The New Jersey house was Italian modern. "I was trying to get something esthetically pleasing to my eye," he said. After he saw

Mr. Johnson's home in Harlem, he knew he wanted his own version of what he calls "high Negro." "What I like about working with Sheila," he said, "is she takes the time to educate you. She'd come with books, and we'd look at pictures."

"I liked Tricia Guild," he said, referring to the British designer, who is known for bold colors.

He also liked red and green, plaids and stripes, big sofas and old painted furniture. Ms. Bridges showed him fabrics and colors. There was always a debate. "I want them bright, she wants them quiet," he said.

In the end, they compromised. She gave him lots of reds and greens but in subtle shades, like milk-painted tables, striped sofas, weathered sideboards and chairs — set against a soothing background of khaki, cream, taupe and white.

The result: Harlem Renaissance, country style. An easy-to-live-in quasi-rural perfection: classic moldings glow under fresh white paint, rustic iron chandeliers hang over distressed painted tables, chairs have faded stenciling, and art by African-Americans — paintings by Danny Simmons (Russell's brother), photographs by Gordon Parks — hang on the walls.

The two-story, four-bedroom house is a home that a child can run around in, where a visitor can entertain himself. There's a pool, bikes to be ridden, and soon there will be a tennis court. The scale is masculine — big sofas and chairs, even big oval bars of soap. But the details — the topiaries in the kitchen, the painted cupboard, the striped satiny cottons — warm the house. It's the kind of place Martha Stewart would love.

The kitchen has polished granite counters. Against the wall is a gently beat-up blue wood cupboard. On the shelves sit thick handblown Mexican glasses edged in cobalt. It's a generous kitchen where there's plenty of room to peer into the stockpot and see what's cooking.

In the living room, the same palette prevails: peach and cream, tranquil reds and greens. Windows face the pool and the newly planted garden. Purple cosmos, pale pink roses and yellow rudbeckia, which look like small sunflowers with furry brown centers, stand upright, so new to the ground that they haven't begun to nod.

"This is a wind-down home, my private hideaway," Mr. Harrell said. His son, Gianni, who is 3½, and Gianni's mother, Wendy Credle, who is studying for the bar exam, retreat there. Mr. Simmons, too.

Mr. Harrell's favorite spot is the family room. Here, too, the furniture is red or green, but few would notice, so deft is Ms. Bridges's hand: the green leather chair is the color of evergreens on a cloudy day.

Cream-colored cabinets hide his favorite toy: a 900-channel television fed by a satellite dish. As he surfed the channels, skipping through the 400 series, which are about sex, "Hot Body" flashed by. "Some things you don't want to watch," he said.

Settling into an easy chair, Mr. Harrell is serene, even though a \$25 million deal with Sony fell through this year, and last year he resigned from Motown Records after a troubled 22 months. "The record biz is no walk in the garden," he said. "I'm going back to managing artists. I enjoy working with new artists, but I get excited about working with big stars."

That afternoon, he would be driving to Manhattan to have lunch with Chris Rock. He said he was talking to Mariah Carey. Maybe he'd buy a house in Florida and build a recording studio there.

When a visitor mentioned that Spike Lee was leaving Brooklyn and had bought a town house in Manhattan, Mr. Harrell asked where in Manhattan. When told it was on the Upper East Side, he laughed.

"All that about keeping real — they're faking!" he said. "They want to keep it fabulous!"

Then he laughed again. It was a cloudless day, and in the distance through a window, Long Island Sound was only slightly obscured by a sun-lighted haze. "I never claimed not to want to live well," he said.



COOL A Napoleon III bedroom chair and an American blanket chest.



CALM In the study, a 19th-century French daybed in cotton check.



COLLECTED Painted kitchen tables and stenciled Hitchcock chairs.