

CHRISTIAN McBRIDE

The finest musicians to spring from the world of jazz have clearly had an advantage when it comes to branching into other genres of music. Their mastery of composition, arranging and sight reading, coupled with their flair for improvisation and spontaneous creation, make them possibly the most seasoned and adaptable musicians in the art. Grammy Award-winner Christian McBride, chameleonic virtuoso of the acoustic and electric bass, stands tall at the top of this clique.

Beginning in 1989—the start of an amazing career in which he still has wider-reaching goals to attain—the Philadelphian has thus far been first-call-requested to accompany literally hundreds of fine artists, ranging in an impressive array from McCoy Tyner and Sting to Kathleen Battle and Diana Krall. However, it is his own recordings—albums that encompass a diverse canon of original compositions and imaginatively arranged covers—that reveal the totality of his musicianship. He currently leads one of the hottest bands in music—the propulsive Christian McBride Band (saxophonist Ron Blake, keyboardist Geoffrey Keezer and drummer Terreon Gully).

The most awe-inspiring thing about Christian McBride is that his prowess as a player is only half of what makes him such a respected, in-demand and mind-bogglingly busy individual. The portrait is completed by a mere mid-thirty-something man who carved out time to speak at former President Clinton's town hall meeting on "Racism in the Performing Arts." He holds Artistic Director posts at the Jazz Aspen Snowmass summer program and the Dave Brubeck Institute at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, CA. McBride participated in a Stanford University panel on "Black Performing Arts in Mainstream America." He's hosted insightful one-on-one "jazz chats" in Cyberspace on Sonicnet.com. He also scribed the foreword for pianist Jonny King's book, *What Jazz Is* (Walker & Co., New York).

2005 found him adding two more prestigious appointments to his resume. In January, he was named co-director of The Jazz Museum in Harlem. While assisting Leonard Garment and Loren Schoenberg in obtaining government grants and the participation of top flight historians/musicians, Christian will be focusing on a longtime concern: exposing jazz to young people.

"To a degree, jazz is non-existent in most major urban communities, which deeply saddens me," McBride states. "Kids don't understand who our jazz greats were. My contribution towards rectifying this will be getting them to check out free events at the museum by inviting jazz and non-jazz musicians, athletes and speakers that they can relate to."

While working for the museum in Harlem, McBride will be racking up frequent flyer miles as the second Creative Chair for Jazz for the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association. McBride, who succeeds jazz vocalist Dianne Reeves, will oversee jazz programming at Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Hollywood Bowl during his two-year tenure, starting with the Hollywood Bowl's 2006 season. He will work with the organization year-round, building on the Philharmonic's presence in the musical community as a leading presenter of jazz.

"I intend to continue the tradition that was started with Dianne Reeves of presenting great musicians in two of the world's most iconic venues—Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Hollywood Bowl," says McBride. "Being fortunate enough to work with numerous artists across many genres, this will be an opportunity to bring to fruition many ideas I've had for a very long time, and I'm humbled that the LA Phil considers me worthy of the job."

Naturally, there will be more collaborations and sideman gigs, which he scrutinizes extra carefully now due to his schedule. Most importantly, he will continue to lead the Christian McBride Band, which will release a live album on Rope-a-Dope Records in 2006. This album, ever revolutionary as only McBride would have it, was compiled from two nights—two shows apiece— recorded at the Manhattan/East Village hot spot, Tonic. A kinetic concert spirit was captured with both college students and hip hoppers in the crowd, resulting in a perfect atmosphere for experimentation. The first set each night featured just the band, but for the second sets, special guests blessed the stage: DJ Logic, Scratch (The Roots), guitarists Charlie Hunter and Eric Krasno (Soulive), pianist Jason Moran, trumpeter Rashawn Ross and violinist Jenny Scheinman (Bill Frisell).

Addressing how he manages to effectively keep his hands in so many exciting though daunting projects, McBride states, "I've always believed in the art of working with people. I feel you can always compensate for whatever skills you don't have just learning how to get along with—and communicate with—people. Herbie Hancock is a master of that...and Quincy Jones is the ultimate master. The first time I met him, he hugged me then said, 'I saw Ray Brown a couple of nights ago and told him we would be working together.' I didn't know he knew who I was—the contractor called me for the gig! Q studies people and figures out what to do with them like a great basketball coach."

Christian McBride was born on May 31, 1972 in Philadelphia. Electric bass was Christian's first instrument, which he began playing at age 9, followed by acoustic bass two years later. His first mentors on the instrument were his father, Lee Smith (a renowned bassist in Philly) and his great uncle, Howard Cooper (a disciple of the jazz avant-garde). While intensely studying classical music, McBride's love for jazz also blossomed. Upon his 1989 graduation from Philadelphia's fertile High School for the Creative and Performing Arts (C.A.P.A.), he was awarded a partial scholarship to attend the world-renowned Juilliard School in New York City to study with the legendary bassist, Homer Mensch. That summer, before making the move to the Big Apple, the already in-demand bassist got his first taste of touring going to Europe with the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra, and traveling the U.S. with the classical jazz fusion group, Free Flight.

McBride never had a chance to settle into his Juilliard studies. Within the first two weeks of the semester, he joined saxophonist Bobby Watson's band, Horizon. He also started working around New York at clubs such as Bradley's and the Village Gate with John Hicks, Kenny Barron, Larry Willis and Gary Bartz. After one year at Juilliard, McBride made a critical decision to leave school to tour with trumpeter Roy Hargrove's first band, electing "experience with as many musicians as possible" as the best teacher. In August of 1990, he landed a coveted position in trumpeter Freddie Hubbard's band until January of 1993.

In 1991, legendary bassist Ray Brown invited the young wunderkind to join him and John Clayton in the trio SuperBass. After being hailed "Hot Jazz Artist" of 1992 by *Rolling Stone*, McBride continued to prove it as a member of guitarist Pat Metheny's "Special Quartet," which included drum master Billy Higgins and saxophonist Joshua Redman. While recording and touring with Redman the following year, McBride signed to Verve Records in the summer of 1994, recording his first CD as a leader, *Gettin' to It*. He also graced the big screen playing bass in director Robert Altman's 1940's period piece, *Kansas City* (1996).

McBride recorded three more career-shaping albums at Verve: *Number Two Express* (1996), the soul-jazz fusion project *A Family Affair* (1998—featuring Christian's first two songs as a lyricist), and the critically acclaimed *SCI-FI* (2000), marking the inaugural execution of McBride's concept of music being boundless by genre. The following year, he continued to expand his audience with two endeavors. He dipped into hip hop with a side project dubbed *The Philadelphia Experiment*, a "jam band"-inspired CD that reunited McBride with his high school friend, drummer Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson (leader of The Roots) and featured keyboardist Uri Caine and guitarist Pat Martino.

Later that year, pop star Sting invited McBride to become a key figure in his 2001 *All This Time* CD, DVD and tour. Then in 2002, McBride supported George Duke by becoming a member of his band and recording on his

landmark album *Face the Music*, the legendary keyboardist's first album on his own recording label, BPM. "Christian is a monster on that bass," Duke states with pride. "It isn't often these days to find a young musician so dedicated to his craft. Christian is my kind of musician, one that is open to new ideas, good at playing different styles, reads music prolifically and is dedicated to furthering the growth of music not only as a musician, but as a young representative of his profession. There isn't anyone better. And besides that, he's a great cat!"

In 2003, McBride released one album on Warner Bros. Records titled *Vertical Vision*, a blazing recording that introduced the current incarnation of the Christian McBride Band. Over the years, McBride has been featured on hundreds of albums, touring and/or recording with artists such as David Sanborn, Chick Corea, Chaka Khan, Natalie Cole, George Benson, and the late greats Joe Henderson, Betty Carter and Milt Jackson. He also undertook his first pop Musical Directorship at the helm of a Christmas show featuring gospel royalty BeBe Winans and pop star Carly Simon. The event marked stage-shy Simon's first New York concert appearance in a decade and she expressly insisted that only McBride could be her MD.

Finally, as a composer, McBride has achieved several high watermarks. Among them is a commission from Jazz at Lincoln Center to compose "Bluesin' in Alphabet City," performed by Wynton Marsalis with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. And in 1998, the Portland (ME) Arts Society and the National Endowment for the Arts awarded McBride with a commission to write "The Movement, Revisited," McBride's dramatic musical portrait of the civil rights struggle of the 1960's written and arranged for quartet and a 30-piece gospel choir.

There have been very few artists who truly embody the genuine, heart-felt passion for music in all areas as has Christian McBride. By boldly continuing to leave his mark in areas of musical performance, composition, education and advocacy, he is destined to be a force in music for decades to come.