

Interview with Christian McBride

Interviewers Dan Ouellette and Bob Danziger

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- **Dan Ouellette** - Hey Christian, how you doing?
- **Christian McBride** - Hey, how's it goin' man?
- **Dan Ouellette** - It's goin' man.
- **Dan Ouellette** - Thank you for doing this.
- **Christian McBride** - My pleasure.
- **Bob Danziger** About your commission piece, what can you tell me about it at this point and to what extent Monterey or other home influences, Philadelphia, New Jersey might be in it?
- **Christian McBride** - I'm writing a tribute to Roy Hargrove. Tim Jackson asked me quite some time ago, would I be interested in doing something for Roy? It made sense. The piece is called "Roy Anthony: The Fearless One." My big band will perform that for the commission piece. [Roy Hargrove is from Waco, Texas].
- **Bob Danziger** - You are quoted as saying, "You listen to the bass parts in Bach, the Brandenburg concertos, they're like bebop lines." I wonder if you could expand on that.
- **Christian McBride** - Well, what I mean is the linear motion of those lines. There's so much melodic content, and it's rhythmic. A lot of classical music from the romantic period, like the later classical and the romantic period--much of it is quite impressionistic. And as great as that is--because that certainly influenced a certain sound in jazz also--but, there's something about baroque composers, particularly Bach. His music is just rhythmic. It's rhythmic. It's linear. I get the sense that there were a lot of bebop musicians who paid attention to that. I'm not saying that they listened to the "Brandenburg Concerto" and said, "Oh, now I've got ideas to write a song." But, at least [jazz musicians have been influenced] in terms of the shape of the way Bach's lines formed. And, as a bass player, I can almost guarantee you any bass player who plays--any jazz bass players who knows even a little bit about classical music--they will tell you how much they love Bach because Bach always keeps the bass busy. That's another rarity I find in classical music.
- **Dan Ouellette** - Christian, what was your first experience working in Bach? Was that part of your upbringing or classical upbringing?
- **Christian McBride** - Very much so.

- **Dan Ouellette** - When did you first experience it?
- **Christian McBride** - Probably middle school, playing in the All City Orchestra, and we played--well, there were two Bach pieces that I remember. We played the "Brandenburg Concerto" number two, and then, we also played the Bach "Double Violin Concerto," which I wound up recording with Regina Carter many, many years later [note: "Fat Bach and Greens (2011)]. Middle school, maybe my freshman year in high school is when I got tuned in to [Bach].
- **Dan Ouellette** - Sometimes did it influence you? Obviously, you're very encyclopedic in terms of who you're listening to at that time, but, did you see the bridges there?
- **Christian McBride** - --No. No, it was just--no. At that time, I was just simply playing music that I enjoyed. I wasn't really consciously trying to point between the bridge of Bach and Bird and Trane. Later on, once I started to discover more classical music -- because all of this is a journey, right? You discover more and you learn more the older you get. So, at age 15 or 16 I had no idea or no interest in trying to bridge the gaps between those different styles. But, as I got older and learned more music, part of me went, "Wow, Bach really is a bad dude," because I'm not experiencing the same stimulation from playing a lot of other classical music the same way that I did Bach. So, that's when I kind of backtracked, and I went, "Wow, this dude is really something."
- **Bob Danziger** - The "Brandenburg" was the first thing that grabbed me that said, "you have to learn how to play this." Do you remember the first thing you heard where you went I have to learn how to play this? Remember what that song was?
- **Christian McBride** - Well, probably--the first time I played the Bach "Double Violin Concerto," I couldn't play it because I had never seen that many sixteenth notes on a bass part before. I had a lot of trouble struggling to learn that in middle school. But I liked the piece so much--and I'm always up for a challenge, something that stumps me. I'm the kind of person--I'm going to close myself off in my room and figure it out. So, that's what I did. I really wanted to figure out how to play all these sixteenth notes. And then, once I finally figured it out, I went, "Oh man, this is pretty incredible." And then, later on, when we played the "Brandenburg Concerto" number two, it wasn't quite as difficult because that's the beauty of practicing.
- **Bob Danziger** - Did you ever play the fourth concerto, by any chance?
- **Christian McBride** - Yes, yes, absolutely.
- **Bob Danziger** - That one's got a lot of notes in it.
- **Christian McBride** - Yes, it does. Yes, it does.
- **Bob Danziger** - The second Brandenburg Concerto is the first music on the "Golden Record" on the side of the Voyager Spacecraft.

- **Christian McBride** - --Right, of course. That's one of those top 40 classical pieces--.
- **Bob Danziger** - Do you remember the first piece of music you heard when you were a kid, of any kind, and said, "I just have to learn how to play that."
- **Christian McBride** - I'm sure it was a Motown piece, probably something by The Temptations or Smokey Robinson and the Miracles or something like that, but probably something by The Temptations.
- **Bob Danziger** - Have you ever tried to apply "Brandenburg" or Bach directly to funk or jazz or other things where you go, "Let me try this combination," you know, if you put it in a different rhythmic context?
- **Christian McBride** - Not really. It stands so strongly on its own. I don't think it needs any other type of rhythm behind it, I mean, unless you just want to have some fun experimenting with it.
- **Bob Danziger** - Wynton Marsalis did a nice straight up classical version of the second "Brandenburg Concerto."
- **Christian McBride** - Oh, yeah. Sure, sure. My eyes squinted for a minute. I went, "Really? I didn't know he did that with one of his--with Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra?" But it was in the classical version you were referring to.
- **Bob Danziger** - Yeah, exactly.
- **Christian McBride** - I'm glad that didn't sneak by me.
- **Bob Danziger** - You're the artistic director of Newport Jazz Festival and perhaps has the best overview of anybody. Also as the voice of jazz, which you do an astounding job at, what can we do to support [MJF Artistic Director] Tim Jackson, support the jazz festival as a university, either within or outside of the music program. What do you think we could do to be more supportive of the Jazz Festival?
- **Christian McBride** - Oh man. I'm sure whatever answer I give you, it's--it'll be incomplete and not as good as it will be probably in another year. But I'll do the best I can. I always feel like the jazz world in general is really, really small. It's like there's probably 0.5 degrees of separation between the most popular person in all of jazz, most powerful, most popular person in all of jazz and someone who just discovered today that they like jazz. And when you look at the entire landscape of the United States, there's probably only a small handful of towns that have real, true dedicated, effective jazz studies programs or just jazz programs in general. And there's probably even fewer that have major jazz festivals. So, I've always thought that collaboration and really trying to help each other out the best we can.

Here - I live in Montclair, New Jersey, I still think of it as New York because we're so close to New York, and culturally speaking, it's close to New York. Just here alone, you have Jazz at Lincoln Center, you have the National Jazz Museum in Harlem, you have Jazz Foundation of America, you have the Juilliard School, the New School, Manhattan School of Music, the Vision Festival, the Brick Festival in Brooklyn. And then, out in Jersey, you have New Jersey Performing Arts Center, which has their own jazz education program as well, you have us, Jazz House Kids, and there's another jazz program that Julius Tolentino just started right down the road. That's only in New York. Now, you get to places like Detroit, you get northern California, you get southern California, you got maybe Chicago--there's probably not that much going on. So, I think the best way to really help this music in general with all of these different individual organizations that really do a wonderful job in helping the music, I'm always one for collaboration. It's much better to have a big nation as opposed to having small sovereign nations. And sometimes I think in jazz we take ourselves a little too seriously.

The biggest job jazz always has is trying to get more people into the music. And ultimately, at the end of the day, that's what every last single one of these organizations are trying to do. So, if we sort of all had the exact same goal, then we should all come together. We still do our work separately.

But it's beautiful that you even asked that question, like, "You know, what can we do to help Tim Jackson?" I mean, I know that, when I think of Tim, it kind of all runs together. I start thinking about the Kuumbwa. I start thinking of Monterey. I start thinking of Next Gen. I'm sure if I sat down and really thought about it, I'd be able to know what separates them all. But I tend to think of just the northern California areas as one of these deeply important regions to the entire scope of jazz. Just--I guess the best way to help Tim or any of these organizations is to simply ask that question. "What can we do to help?"

- **Christian McBride** - I had thought of something pretty simple that could also be quite effective. I tell this to audiences often when I play. Usually when I see parents or grandparents, whoever it is, when they bring their child with them or they bring their grandchild or their son or their daughter-- I always point them out--I always say, "Listen, whoever you are, we deeply appreciate you because you are helping us cultivate the next generation of supporters for this music." So, I look around the audience. I say, "Now, listen, you probably have someone in your family or you know somebody or maybe you don't know someone who's between the ages of 16 and 30 who you probably look at and go, 'Man, they don't know anything about good music.' Well then, be proactive and take them to something that you think is good music. Bring your child. Bring your nephews. Bring the young person who you know needs to see this, like these people did." And I always thought that if you just simply bring a young person with you to expose them--and I know from personal experience, sometimes you go see something as a kid, and, of course, you probably don't like it or something that--"My mom is dragging me to this concert. Oh man, I don't want to do this." But, much later on, it starts to--it creeps on you. You're like, "Man, that was great." Exposure to the people who you know need it, I think, is probably really important. And I don't think it's that hard.

- **Bob Danziger** - Weren't you both awarded the African American Classical Music Award from the New Jersey Chapter of the Spelman College National Alumnae Association?
- **Christian McBride** - That was quite some time we got that. Frankly, we were surprised because we didn't know that Spelman has an alumni chapter in Montclair. Every year, they do this event at the Montclair Art Museum, and they chose Melissa and I as the recipients. We were thrilled. Neither one of us have a tie to Spelman. But we were quite flattered to get that.
- **Bob Danziger** - Learning that about you two led me to look into black composers and stuff that I wasn't really familiar with.
- **Christian McBride** - Well, George Walker lived in Montclair for many years. And there was another woman who lived in Montclair. She just moved out of here maybe two or three years ago. She took a job at Washington D.C. But she casually mentioned that her grandfather was William Grant Still. And I say, "Are you kidding me?" "Have you ever heard of him?" I said, "What? Of course I've heard of him." So, yeah, that was a fun conversation.
- **Bob Danziger** - By the way, Al McKibben said that Charlie Parker used to call him up at three or four o'clock in the morning with the "Brandenburg" playing in the background and him improvising over it.
- **Christian McBride** - Oh, I believe it.
- **Bob Danziger** - That had to be a hell of a phone call.
- **Christian McBride** - Well, it's a pretty known fact that Bird was quite the classical music aficionado. So, that doesn't surprise me at all.
- **Bob Danziger** - Christian, one of the standard questions I ask everybody that I interview is, what lullabies their parents or grandparents sang to them what you may sing to your kids. But I was wondering what lullabies your parents or grandparents, or others might have sung to you?
- **Christian McBride** - I remember my grandmother singing--you know, the general one on one stuff-- [like] -- "Frere Jacques." But, my mom's a hit mom. So, the lullaby she sang to me was "Dance to the Music" [by] Sly and the Family Stone.
- **Bob Danziger** - Perfect. Now, I know why you're a bass player.
- **Christian McBride** - Right.
- **Bob Danziger** - Thank you, Christian.
- **Dan Ouellette** - Good talking to you, Christian. We'll see you in Monterey

- **Christian McBride** - I'm definitely looking forward to that.
- **Dan Ouellette** - Good talking to you, Christian.
- **Christian McBride** - Alright, gentlemen. My pleasure.