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## Christian Sands Follows His Wild Muse On 'Facing Dragons'

September 13, 2018 · 5:00 AM ET



FROM 88.3 WBG

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Precocity has long been a defining feature in the career of [Christian Sands](#). Growing up around New Haven, Conn., he was a boy wonder on piano; by his early teens he was a protégé of the eminent jazz educator [Dr. Billy Taylor](#). Most jazz observers today know him as a dazzling presence in bands led by bassist [Christian McBride](#), who had a similar trajectory as a rising talent around the time Sands was busy being born.

Like McBride and others in the cohort formerly known as Young Lions, Sands has embraced the jazz tradition while carefully evading any sense of restrictive obligation. He made his official debut as a leader last year with *Reach*, whose title expresses a mission statement. (He followed it up this spring with *Reach Further*, a five-track EP.) On the cusp of 30 now, having successfully made the case for his breadth of style, Sands is free to follow his muse where it leads.



And on the evidence of *Facing Dragons*, his crisply assured new album, he's betting on a mode of soulful eclecticism that expresses new ideas without abandoning the old. Built around the core of his working trio, with bassist Yasushi Nakamura and drummer Jerome Jennings, it's a well-rounded program of gospel reassurances ("Sunday Morning"), state-of-the-art jazz balladry ("Her Song") and the odd redrawn pop standard ([The Beatles'](#) "Yesterday"). The opening track, "Rebel Music," has the plot-twisty character of a tune by [Chick Corea](#), whom Sands seems to acknowledge in his piano solo, without losing his bearings.

A savvy composer-arranger, Sands elsewhere enlists a front line with [Keyon Harrold](#) on trumpet and [Marcus Strickland](#) on tenor saxophone. On "Fight for Freedom," joined by guitarist Caio Afune, they bring muscular poise to a melody that recalls the hard-bop heroics of [Art Blakey](#) and the Jazz Messengers. They do the same on "Frankenstein," which feels deftly stitched together using pages from the mid-1960s playbook of [Herbie Hancock](#) and [Wayne Shorter](#).

Sands isn't boxed in by these jazz-historical allusions; he expresses himself freely at every turn. And with "Sanguero Soul," which features Afune alongside two Latin percussionists, Cristian Rivera and Roberto Quintero, he fashions a tune at once accessible and ambitious. Don't miss the piano-and-percussion breakdown that starts about three-and-a-half minutes in — it's a display of casual ebullience that would impress at any age.



STUDIO SESSIONS

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