

# All About Jazz

## Christian Sands: Facing Dragons



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Christian Sands is already being hailed as the greatest jazz pianist of his generation. The question now is will he follow in the footsteps of piano virtuosos like [Art Tatum](#), [Oscar Peterson](#) and [Erroll Garner](#) and concentrate on keyboard fireworks? Or will he choose other outlets for his immense talent, *DownBeat* magazine seemingly paving the way for this by lauding him as "an imaginative composer" and "clever arranger."



Sands, born on May 22 1989, grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, later moving to nearby Orange. He started playing piano from a very early age, took lessons from the age of four (yes, four) and began composing at five (yes, five). He was mentored by Dr. Billy Taylor who allowed him, while still a teenager, to close a set he played at the Kennedy Center. Sands went on to study at the Manhattan School of Music.

He cut his first album, *Footprints*, at the age of 12 (yes, 12) in 2002 and says of the piano: "I grew up with it in the house, in the classroom and on stage so it has always been a huge part of my life."

After graduating, Sands toured internationally with Inside Straight, a band fronted by bassist [Christian McBride](#). Sands cites McBride as an influence, along with [Wynton Marsalis](#), Kenny Garrett and Marcus Roberts, because "they're coming from the tradition of bringing people into the music, but also moving it forward into new directions." *Facing Dragons* is his fourth album. He thanks "the world's ears" for it and advises listeners to "continue to face your dragons."

The album features eight originals and a slightly cluttered version of "Yesterday" by Lennon and McCartney. The lovely old Beatles' number—the Fab Four's first-ever attempt to shed the shackles of pop—raises another question concerning Sands' writing: does he understand yet that less is very often more?

"Fight For Freedom" is reminiscent of some of the music [Horace Silver](#) and [Art Blakey](#) laid down back in the hard bop era. Here Sands writes for a band as opposed to his own piano with other instruments tacked on. "Marcus Strickland brings a certain fire to the band," says Sands, "Especially on this track. He's got a rich and deep tone, so it was perfect for the earthy theme of the song."

But despite lauding all his musicians "for bringing so much love and light into the music," Sands doesn't really give them that much of a look-in. It's very much a piano album. It is also very much a studio album. It would be nice to hear him playing with a *real* band. That said, "Frankenstein" features some fine sax from Marcus Strickland and equally fine trumpet from Keyon Harrold. And Yasushi Nakamura too puts in some solid work on bass on the ballad "Her Song."

But Sands is a believer. On the sleeve he writes "I'd like to thank God the Creator, for allowing me to explore and share my gift with the world." So it's perhaps not surprising that the album's standout track should be "Sunday Mornings," a simple, soulful gospel number with "church" written all over it.