

## Christian Sands: The Natural

The pianist may be only 29, but he's been doing this jazz thing for a *long* time.

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**"T**he thing with Christian is that he's not always trying to be hip: He already *is* hip," says bassist Christian McBride of his young former pianist and namesake, Christian Sands. "There's a tendency with young musicians—I know I had this—a need to be accepted, so you're overeager. Whereas some young musicians are a little *too* comfortable with themselves. That comes off as being a little cocky.

"Christian is different. He's very comfortable with himself in a really non-invasive way."

Watching Sands on a small ballroom stage at the Christina Cultural Arts Center in Wilmington, Del., McBride's description of him is undeniable. He and his trio work out "Rebel Music," an original from his straight-ahead but adventurous new album *Facing Dragons* (Mack Avenue). As they improvise, bassist Yasushi Nakamura and drummer Jonathan Barker visibly wince with the demands of their instruments and ideas.

Sands, on the other hand, maintains a perfect laidback ease in his dark gray jacket and slacks over black T-shirt. His face is smiling, serene, and his arms move gracefully over the keyboard without superfluous motion. He struts a little in his seat on the soulful groove of Cedar Walton's "Bolivia"; otherwise, he's completely relaxed and in his element. It's as if playing jazz piano were the most natural thing in the world, and the universe were otherwise rolling off his back. He's even too cool to be cocky.

The 29-year-old Sands has had plenty of time to develop such poise. He's been at the piano since he was one year old, sitting on his parents' laps. By 11, he was making his first recording and playing cocktail gigs around his hometown of New Haven, Conn.; in high school, he was a protégé of Dr. Billy Taylor and took lessons from Dave Brubeck; at 23, he toured with Christian McBride. No wonder he arrived at this place of sublime confidence.

"The piano has been with him basically as long as he's been a person, so he doesn't feel self-conscious when he's there at the instrument," says Vijay Iyer, Sands' onetime teacher. "So he's got this gentleness and calm about him even though at the piano he can be this assassin."

"Ever since I first heard him, I was like, 'Oh, my God. This guy's gonna change the piano,'" says tenor saxophonist Marcus Strickland, a friend of Sands' who appears on *Facing Dragons*. "He's an incredible talent, and on top of that he's an incredibly hard-working and forward-thinking musician. He does his homework. He has all it takes."

Even so, Sands is still discovering his own artistic destiny. That's what the title of *Facing Dragons* references. "The dragon represents all the unknown things. The questions," he says. "Instead of running from the questions, or taking your time to puzzle them out, you have to face those questions. Questions like, 'Who am I as an artist? Where do I want this music to go, and who do I want to reach? What's the next step?' That's really what this record is about: answering those questions for myself."

**It was almost a given from his 1989 birth** that Sands would eventually take piano lessons. Both his parents played a little—it was how they got together, in fact—and kept an upright spinet in the house. Yet to hear him tell it, the start was much delayed. "It took a while to find a piano instructor," he says. "But I finally started taking official lessons when I was *three or four*." (Italics mine.) By five, he could play Mozart and, like Wolfgang Amadeus, had written his first composition.

Despite the obvious implications, though, Sands dislikes the word "prodigy." He was simply quicker than most, he says, in figuring out what he was good at. He was just as quick to discover an aptitude for improvisation: He'd riff on the études his teacher gave him, to her great consternation. When she couldn't get him to stop, she recommended that the seven-year-old move from classical to jazz studies.

At the turn of the 21st century, 11 years old and playing around New Haven with accompanists in their sixties, Sands wasn't just the youngest regularly working pianist in town; he was the only one. His teacher at the time, Rex Cadwallader, thought it was time to take advantage of that, suggesting to his parents that Christian make a recording. He cut *Footprints* (officially released in 2002, before his 13th birthday) as a trio session with two local players. "It was really just to document what I was doing at the time," Sands says. "We sent them out to family members, and then suddenly there were people asking for it. 'Hey, can I have this *Footprints* record?' It just became bigger and bigger, until that record paid for the second record [2004's *Harmonia*], which paid for the third [2007's *Risin'*]."

By the time of *Risin'*, Sands had had a study session with Dave Brubeck, who lived not far away in Wilton, Conn. He'd had opportunities to play with Oscar Peterson and Hank Jones. He'd also attended Dr. Billy Taylor's Jazz in July program in Amherst, Mass.: "We created this bond where I would go with him anywhere he needed to go. Whether it was William Paterson, whether it was the Kennedy Center, I would carry his bags and just go with him. He would tell me all these stories about Teddy Wilson and Art Tatum and Erroll Garner, just the whole nine of being a jazz pianist and the development of jazz piano." It was Taylor, in fact, who produced *Risin'* (on which 18-year-old Sands had finagled another jazz celebrity, saxophonist Bill Evans, to play).

After high school, Sands enrolled at Manhattan School of Music to study with Kenny Barron. However, he soon received a notice that Barron had left the faculty. Instead, Jason Moran would be his teacher. Sands hadn't heard of him: Taylor had him neck-deep in the swing-and-bop school of Peterson and Ahmad Jamal. Still, he went to a Bandwagon gig in New Haven just a few weeks before school started. "The stage was all set up, and I didn't see a bass, but I saw the bass guitar that Tarus Mateen was playing. So already that was like, 'Okay, what is this?'" he recalls. "Then Jason started playing all these loops and these voices, and it was just so different. I couldn't wait to start studying with him."

As he suspected, Moran completely changed Sands' musical perspective. "I brought a tune into class and we went through it," he recalls. "He played it and added all this stuff. And I went, 'What is that?' And he said, 'Oh, I just decided to play the tune backwards.' My mind just blew up because I didn't think you could do that. And his reply is, 'Why not?' So Jason has influenced me in the 'why not' of these things. It's like studying with Jackson Pollock, where it's all chance and being in the moment."

Moran also emphasized that Sands needed to perpetually learn and get better. "One aspect we discussed was ... that he set artistic challenges up for himself," Moran says. "Making sure he had a band that pushed him, making sure he worked with musicians that could mentor him."

After Sands' junior year, Moran moved to the New England Conservatory; Vijay Iyer took his place at MSM. "He'd been playing since he was one, and his teachers were Billy Taylor and Dave Brubeck, and it's like, 'Okay, then what do you want from *me*?'" Iyer says. "What do you do with someone who's one of the most talented people you know? What can you do to activate their imagination?"

He opted for advanced listening sessions: new territory, like Cecil Taylor's *Silent Tongues*, along with familiar music like Monk and Geri Allen (who had worked with Taylor at Jazz in July, thus becoming another mentor to Sands), but freshly focused on details. Iyer also showed Sands his own compositions, which made a deep impression.

"Vijay's very thought-out," Sands says. "It's like playing Tetris. Everything is written out, but then all of a sudden he's flipping the pieces around to see how this fits here, that fits there. How do we move within this construct, how do we say what we want to say within these blocks?" Reconciling the Moran and Iyer approaches became key to Sands' own artistry.





Pianist Christian Sands (photo: Anna Webber)

Sands was preparing to graduate from MSM when he was offered an episode of *Piano Jazz*, the late Marian McPartland's show on National Public Radio. As it happened, McPartland couldn't do the show that week; her fill-in was Christian McBride, to whom she gave the skinny on his young guest.

As McBride arrived in the studio, he heard a piano player warming up. "He didn't sound anything like Dr. Billy Taylor or Hank Jones!" the bassist says. "He was playing a lot of angular patterns and surreal, advanced harmonies. I got excited, because I realized that he had a large breadth of jazz piano language. And when we finally played and talked, he told me that he had studied with Jason Moran and Vijay Iyer, and I went, 'Oh, man, this dude is the complete package!'"

Not long after, McBride had a booking in New York with his Inside Straight quintet, but his regular pianist, Peter Martin, had a conflict. McBride called Sands. He instantly impressed the older musicians—especially the drummer, Ulysses Owens Jr. "It was so special," Owens says. "He just had this certain kind of innate touch on the instrument and this musicality where we just knew he was a star: not in the sense that he's famous, but in that he's a bright light."

Sands became Inside Straight's main substitute pianist, even playing on the band's second album, 2013's *People Music*. That same summer, not only Martin but saxophonist Steve Wilson and vibraphonist Warren Wolf begged off of touring Europe in support of the record. McBride didn't see the point of hiring three subs out of five players and still calling the group Inside Straight, so he took Sands and Owens and simply changed the billing to the Christian McBride Trio. "I never really wanted to have a trio," McBride says. "But I actually wound up liking it." They became his new working unit and made two albums, the 2013 studio date *Out Here* and the 2015 *Live at the Village Vanguard*.

**Through these recordings, Sands got the attention** of McBride's label, Mack Avenue Records. He signed in 2015, just in time to join that year's iteration of the Mack Avenue Superband, but he took his time, working in the interim with bassist Ben Williams and saxophonist Marcus Strickland's *Twi-Life*, before recording and releasing *Reach* in 2017. It wasn't his first album as an adult; he'd recorded a 2014 gig at Copenhagen's Jazzhus Montmartre with a local rhythm section and released it (as *Take One*) on Denmark's Storyville label. He nevertheless considers it his first mature statement.

"*Reach* was ... the beginning of the next chapter," he says. "It was me being aware of myself as an artist: who I was becoming, who I was before, the difference between now and then, and really just trying to recycle all the things that I'd learned into becoming this artist and this man."

That quest continues with *Facing Dragons*, which Sands had originally titled *Chasing Dragons*. At first, he explains, he thought of the work as "more like a chasing of the answers. But the realization, after experience and touring and playing with different musicians, was that it wasn't about chasing the answers anymore. It was about facing and accepting what is already there and that things will move forward from that."

With one exception (the Beatles' "Yesterday"), Sands wrote every tune on the album. This, too, is a key part of his grappling with his own artistic identity; his compositional process involves what one might call "creative second-guessing." "I do a lot of composing in the car, because I'm always traveling," he explains. "But once I sit with it for a while, I'll really just deconstruct it. Put the melody in the left hand, the bass, and then play it backwards. Try these things and see what I like and what I don't like."

As an example, he cites "Frankenstein," a shapeshifting tune on *Facing Dragons* that cycles through several keys and modes. "That was just me trying to find a key that I liked," he laughs. "And I ended up liking all of them."

Just as in his childhood, though, it's in improvisation where Sands feels most at home. Many of his most fecund ideas come out of jams with his friends and trio mates. "During soundchecks, that's when we do a lot of experimenting," says Jerome Jennings, the regular drummer in Sands' trio (along with Nakamura on bass). "That's where things can come to fruition, just hearing him mess around on piano. Or him hearing me mess around on drums. Right before he made [*Facing Dragons*], he came over to my place and we just jammed for almost three hours.

"I'm actually recording in December, and I asked if he would come in and bless the record," Jennings adds. "He said, 'Yeah, man. And let me know when you want me to come on by, and we can get that jam happening again! It's a beautiful thing.'"

**Like any improvising musician worth his salt**, Sands can't tell you what he'll come up with next. Part of it is that he's increasingly busy. Along with his own gigs and sideman work, he's inherited the mantle of creative ambassador for the Erroll Garner Estate from his late friend Geri Allen. (He produced the recent Garner vault release, *Nightconcert*, under those auspices.) He's also just become the artistic director for the Monterey Jazz Festival on Tour's 60th-anniversary edition, assembling a crack band that includes trumpeter Bria Skonberg, saxophonist Melissa Aldana, drummer Jamison Ross, and vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant, along with himself and Nakamura.

More to the point, though, to predict his artistic future would mean that it's predictable—exactly what he doesn't want. He wants to live out the advice he got from mentors like Taylor and Moran, to be in the moment and seek out challenges. "I'm just constantly working on new products and new collaborations with people," he says. "So you never know what's going to happen."

Whatever it is, the musicians surrounding him know it will be something special. "I cannot tell you just how proud I am," McBride says. "I knew it was gonna happen; some things you just kinda know. Some people just have it. They just have that thing."

"Christian has the foundation," Strickland adds. "He has a forward-thinking mindset, thinking of who he is in the context of all this instead of just trying to regurgitate what's happened. Those ingredients are what's necessary to become someone that we will look at in retrospect and say, 'This guy is very important.'"

"He is music."