

 **Holiday Arts Preview**

Jazz pianist Christian Sands loves a good Christmas story

By **Bill Beuttler** Globe correspondent, Updated November 10, 2023, **1 hour ago**



Christian Sands will perform a pair of holiday-themed shows at Scullers Dec. 8. RAJ NAIK

Holiday season is, inevitably, holiday-album season, its predictable passel of

Christmas albums rolling out each year. Many are of negligible interest. But not “Christmas Stories” by the estimable young pianist and composer Christian Sands, released last month by Mack Avenue Records. And Sands will be at Scullers on Dec. 8 for a record release celebration, joined by three musicians on the album: his longtime bassist Yasushi Nakamura, guitarist Max Light, and his brother, Ryan Sands, on drums.

Sands, 34, is a fabulously gifted instrumentalist, a piano protege of Dr. Billy Taylor, Geri Allen, Jason Moran, and Vijay Iyer — the last two of whom were his primary instructors as he earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees at the Manhattan School of Music.

Christian McBride hired Sands to fill in with his band Inside Straight while Sands was still in school, and Sands went on to regular berths in McBride’s trio and big band, earning the first of his pair of Grammy nominations with the trio for the 2013 album “Out Here.” Sands earned his second nomination, for best instrumental composition, for the lush, classical-sounding and strings-enhanced track “Be Water II” from his 2020 album “Be Water.” He also recently completed tenures as artist-in-residence at the Monterey Jazz Festival and creative ambassador for the Erroll Garner Foundation.

Aside from those musical chops, Sands has accumulated Christmas-show savvy. This will mark his third straight year performing Christmas-themed shows at Scullers, the first a “Nat King Cole Christmas” show led by Terri Lyne Carrington in 2021; last year he led a set with the same title. He has also done Christmas-themed gigs at Lincoln Center and abroad, beginning in Paris several years ago.

“I am a Christmas guy,” Sands confirms with a laugh in a Zoom interview earlier this week. “I mean, it’s not necessarily about Christmas. It’s really more about family.”

Sands, [whose website](#) includes a [social media section](#) titled @The_Styled_Gentleman, is dapper even when dressed down for Zoom, wearing a muted yellow hoodie and a black LA Dodgers baseball cap. An open piano sits behind him in the frame as he explains that Christmas is a time when musicians get a day or two off from touring.

“I’ve always wanted to do [a Christmas album], because it reminded me of good times — food and celebration and all of that,” he explains. “But I was always kind of, ‘I’ll make it when the time is right.’”

That time arrived while discussing new projects with his label earlier this year. He already had an album in the works but they asked themselves, “What else can we do? How else can we spread more of my music?”

Sands’s answer: “Let’s get some friends and make an album that is more about the feeling of the holidays, the feeling of Christmas. Particular songs that I love, but also just people that I love. I got Yasushi Nakamura, Marvin Sewell, my brother, Max Light, [saxophonist] Jimmy Greene, [vibraphonist] Stefon Harris, [percussionist] Keita Ogawa — all those guys I’ve actually been a fan of, and they are my extended family as well.”

The album opens with [“Jingle Bells,”](#) which conjures Sands’s childhood memories of bells in the Connecticut countryside or on trips to Macy’s in New York City, but with a twist. His group had once opened the tune at a Lincoln Center performance improvising a vamp that resembled “All Blues,” from the classic Miles Davis album “Kind of Blue.” The audience loved it, and Sands suggested they repeat it in the studio.

“It’s something that grooves really hard,” says Sands. “I think it’s a great idea to start a

record with a blues. It gets the energy going and everything's aligned.”

Another of the five classic Christmas tunes on the album stems from a Paris performance, where the band had 10 minutes to fill at the end of the set and chose [“Good Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen”](#); on the album, it takes on a Spanish tinge, with Ogawa featured on percussion.

Sands also included five originals on the album. “I think there should be more original Christmas music, as opposed to the usual ‘oldies and goodies,’” he says. “Which is a hard thing to do, to stand up against Bing Crosby and all them.” He laughs. “But hey, I like challenges, so . . .”

The first two form a paired set rooted in Sands’s childhood. [“Snow Dayz,”](#) featuring Light’s guitar, celebrates a child’s exhilaration in discovering that heavy snowfall means a day off from school. “This 1990s backbeat kind of thing, right?” Sands notes. “I wanted that, in particular, because I grew up in the ‘90s, and I wanted to resemble that snow day that a kid has when they wake up and there is no school.”

The next piece features the scraping sound of snow being shoveled and brings things back to reality. [“Shoveling”](#) is that time, after you’ve played, after getting all the jitters out, now you have to shovel, because you have to go to school tomorrow, parents have to go to work tomorrow,” Sands explains. “But it’s also a moment of reflection, too, because it is cold. Now it’s a little darker. The wind is blowing . . .

“You know, I grew up in Connecticut, so I’m used to the way snow changes throughout the day. It starts out really nice and pretty and fluffy and fun. And then after a while the ice settles, temperature drops, and it just gets crunchy.”

“So ‘Shoveling’ is about that. It’s about shoveling through your emotions, and

reflecting on the time of Christmas, and whatever you're thinking of while you're shoveling out there.”

He recorded other tracks that didn't make the album, including a Hanukkah tune. But Sands says they may be worked into the Scullers show (which will take place on the first night of Hanukkah). It's possible a guest artist or two might drop by as well.

CHRISTIAN SANDS'S CHRISTMAS STORIES

At Scullers. Dec. 8 at 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. \$40-\$55. scullersjazz.com/upcoming-events

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