

Joey Alexander New album 'Celestial Keeper'

by Trevor Hodgett 11 September 2026

Balinese pianist Joey Alexander was one of the most virtuosic and musically mature prodigies in the history of jazz. Indeed Wynton Marsalis said of him, shortly after he had emigrated to New York City in 2014, aged ten, that "We've never had anyone like him in this music ... I wasn't anywhere near his sophistication at his age, nor has anyone I know ever been. I love everything about his playing ..."



Alexander is now twenty three and has recently returned to live in Bali. He remains a musician of breathtaking gifts, as is evident on his latest album *Celestial Keeper*, but he acknowledges that spending his childhood in the spotlight, playing complex, improvised music in front of large audiences, has been challenging. "Yeah, starting young can take a lot of toll on you. The reason I moved back to Bali was because of that. In New York you're always being pushed and I also pushed myself to be playing with great musicians and that propelled me to where I am creatively. I'm grateful for that and that I got to live in New York and I still enjoy playing music but I needed time away from that creative scene, to remember why I fell in love with the music in the first place. And being in Bali helps me to relax and be in peace."



One would assume that playing major concerts alongside the world's greatest jazz musicians while still a child would have required almost superhuman, ironclad self-confidence. But Alexander admits that he found it stressful – and still does. "I do get nervous. But it helps me focus. It creates tension which helps me to be alert, to be assertive and to be analytical of my music."

Recording *Celestial Keeper* was a positive experience for Alexander. "I enjoyed the process of making the album and I'm very happy with it because of the impeccable talent of the group and the energy that we bring. So far, every time I perform the music there's been a good reception and as long as the audience love it, I'm happy."

The album begins with 'Bemused (solo improv 1)' and includes also 'Bemused Again (solo improv 11)'. "We'd just finished a session and everybody went home and my producer [Jason Olaine] said, 'Just play something you want to play,'" says Alexander. "I'd been working on that theme so I decided to do it, just spontaneously. It's just what I was thinking in the here and now."

Alexander is backed on most tracks by his road band, bassist Kris Funn and drummer Jonathan Barber, but saxophonist Jaleel Shaw augments on three tracks. "Jaleel's sound was just what I was looking for," he says. "I'd road-tested the music with the trio and I'd sent Jaleel some excerpts but he had never played the music. So we discussed it and there was a lot of back and forward because jazz is a democracy and we agree on some and we don't agree on some ... but I really enjoy his creativity and the musical choices he makes and I'm very happy with what we created."



One of the tracks that Shaw plays on is 'Aversion'. Alexander explains why he gave the piece that title: "It's not that I'm standing away from the tradition of jazz but since I've been composing I've been exploring different elements. I try to be brave and have my own sound – but that can be scary. I have doubts if people will like it, I have doubts [about] being a composer, so that's why I called that track 'Aversion', a very strong word."

'Alicenna (Bmore)' is named for a street in Baltimore, a city Alexander lived in for a few years between leaving New York and returning to Bali. "That's a street I walked during my morning walks," he says. "For me it was a special place 'cos it's quiet and by the water and very calming – and I find strength in that calmness. And I found out after I wrote it that it holds a place in history because [nineteenth century abolitionist and former slave] Frederick Douglass also walked that same street before he fled to New York."

Alexander has actually recorded the song before, on his 2023 album *Continuance*. "I loved the first version but it was slow and I thought maybe I could play it more upbeat. It was a last minute thing on the album but I enjoyed that track very much."

Celestial Keeper features two tracks recorded with singers: 'Whispers Of Love' is sung by Alita Moses, who co-wrote the song with Alexander, and 'My Funny Valentine' is sung by Lisa Fischer. "I've never recorded with singers so – coming back to the word 'aversion' – I thought it was time for me to step out of that doubt and try something new," says Alexander. "I thought, 'Let me write a song and have someone put lyrics to it.' I happened to do a five night run at Birdland in New York, where Alita lives, so she performed with us – I basically auditioned her – and I was very impressed so I asked her to write the lyrics and then we recorded it."

Lisa Fischer was suggested by producer Jason Olaine. "I was a fan but I'd never met her and when you invite a big-time singer you don't know how they'll react to someone like me. But she was very humble and graceful and she really gave her all. It was inspiring to me to see that."

Fischer is best known of course as having been a backing singer for the Rolling Stones between 1989 and 2015. Has Alexander ever, perchance, listened to the Stones? "No," he answers. "Well I love music so of course the Beatles and ... I may have listened to some Rolling Stones. And Lisa brings that rock and r'n'b element so I love that."

Alexander found playing with singers satisfying. "It was really musically fulfilling to do something different because I've been playing with a trio all this time. Playing behind a singer definitely takes a special skill and I think it helped me become a more complete musician."

Fischer's 'My Funny Valentine' aside, 'Stella By Starlight' is the only standard on *Celestial Keeper*. "Even before I started playing [aged six] I was listening to Miles Davis and that was one of the songs I was listening to. The beautiful playing of Bill Evans was just mindboggling," says Alexander. "And it was actually one of the first songs I ever played on the piano and I've been playing it for years with the band but I've never recorded it. So it was very nostalgic for me and it was important for me that I record it – I thought it was about time."

The album concludes with Alexander, a man of strong Christian faith, playing a solo version of the venerable hymn 'How Great Thou Art'. "I've enjoyed playing old hymns ever since I started," he says. "That's definitely part of my repertoire and it was nice to close the album by me basically playing for myself."

But has he ever heard probably the most famous interpretation of the hymn, by Elvis Presley? "I have not," he laughs. "My dad told me he did a gospel album but I haven't checked it out. I will, though!"

Alexander and his musicians pray together before every gig. "What do I pray for? For gratitude. God put me here to play music, to be a good force, and I always give back to the Creator – the Creator that gave me this talent."

<https://ukjazznews.com/joey-alexander/>



But what if a band member were to say, 'Look, mate, I'm not a believer, I'll just go and grab a beer while you lot are praying.' Would that be a problem for Alexander? "I haven't had that encounter yet," he muses. "I've had bandmates who don't share the same faith but they would still join in and pray with me. It's important for me to do that before a show but I don't force it on anyone. It has to come from the heart."

Alexander has often spoken about how he has been influenced not only by jazz musicians like Duke Ellington and Herbie Hancock but also by classical composers like Ravel and Satie. "Jazz is a music that takes a lot of elements and as a jazz musician I'm like a sponge," he says. "For me listening to great classical composers is about the importance of melody and it has enriched me as a musician. I'm always trying to open myself up by listening to those great composers and as a composer I really delve into that. So, yeah, I'm inspired by other things than jazz."

Including, perhaps surprisingly, by Eddie Van Halen, flamboyant guitarist with hard rock gods Van Halen. "I can relate to Eddie 'cos Eddie's self-taught," chuckles Alexander. "The way he creates his own formula of playing is definitely a jazz attitude and he creates something that is unique and keeps perfecting it. I was inspired by that. He's not only technically amazing – everyone can see that he's a wizard – but it's his musical palette and the choices he makes in the moment. And also, fun fact, his mum is Indonesian!"

Alexander is clear about how he will judge the success of Celestial Keeper. "I'm not trying to have record-breaking sales but as long as people play it on the radio and come to my shows, as long as I have that support and people are still with me on this journey, because this is my eighth album, for me that's success."

RELEASE DATE 17 July 2026

BAND ON 'CELESTIAL KEEPER'

Joey Alexander: Piano or Fender Rhodes

Kris Funn: Bass

Jonathan Barber: Drums

Jaleel Shaw: Saxophones

Alita Moses, Lisa Fischer: Vocals

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