

The Columbus Dispatch

PROFILE | CHRISTIAN HOWES

‘KEEPING JAZZ ALIVE’

Violinist with dubious past seen as crossover artist for 21st century

Christian Howes will perform with pianist Bobby Floyd and drummer Reggie Jackson beginning at 2 p.m. today, at Via Vecchia Winery, 485 S. Front St.

For ticket information, call 614-500-3807 or visit citymusiccolumbus.org



Christian Howes, violin, with Hamilton Hardin, piano; Dean Hulett, bass and Cedric Easton, drums.

By **Nancy Gilson**

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At 17, he was a gifted violinist beginning his freshman year on a full scholarship in Ohio State University's School of Music.

At 20, he was in prison for dealing drugs.

His music would eventually triumph — and Christian Howes would turn the tough life lesson into a teaching tool.

“Prison is dehumanizing,” he said recently. “In that setting, I realized what a difference music makes. It’s a powerful, humanizing force.”

Two decades removed from the setback, the 44-year-old Howes has become a renowned jazz violinist.

He has released 14 albums — including "American Spirit," his latest, in October; he runs an instructional strings program that emphasizes creativity and improvisation; and, each summer in central Ohio, he presents a strings festival with dozens of free concerts.



Although he has an apartment in New York, Howes often spends time in the Columbus area, where he grew up. He will perform today in a gospel-style brunch concert at Via Vecchia Winery in the Brewery District. Appearing with him in an ensemble will be pianist and keyboardist Bobby Floyd, who met Howes right after Howes' release from prison.

"It was in the mid-1990s," Floyd said. "Chris approached me at the Granville Inn, told me he'd been in prison and had just gotten out, and wanted to sit in with the group. He did — and just blew everyone away.

"He's a great jazz violinist."

'A hotshot player'

Howes grew up in the Clintonville neighborhood and then Delaware, where he graduated from Hayes High School in 1989. His parents, both vocal music majors as students at Ohio State before they dropped out, scraped together money to enroll 5-year-old Christian — a prodigy — in Suzuki violin lessons.

During high school, Christian experimented with alcohol and marijuana but continued to excel with music and in his studies, eventually skipping a grade. Beginning at Ohio State in 1989, he continued in classical violin and set himself apart in the music school.

Karen Butler, now orchestra director at the Wellington School in Upper Arlington, was a music student at the same time, performing in the OSU orchestra with Howes.

"He was a fabulous violinist, a hotshot player — and he knew it," Butler said.

As a teenager, Howes won a blind audition for a spot in the professional chamber orchestra ProMusica.

"He became the youngest member ever of the orchestra," said Timothy Russell, the founding director of ProMusica. "He was just first-rate."

Howes also played jazz and rock gigs with older musicians in bars, through which he discovered a world with easy access to drugs. When he began selling mostly marijuana and some hallucinogens, he developed a new circle of young friends.

"I felt a social belonging," Howes said. "I got friends my own age."

In 1991, at 18, he was caught selling drugs to an undercover police officer. He pleaded guilty; drew a sentence of 6 to 25 years; and, in 1992, at the age of 20, was sent to the Ross Correctional Institution in Chillicothe.

"He was there at the music school, and all of a sudden he was gone," Butler recalled.

Russell said he had no idea that Howes had been dealing drugs.

"I was in shock, and I was saddened," he said. "I kept thinking: 'What a waste. There's an incredible talent, and he's sitting in a jail cell.'"

Many types of music

In prison, Howes wasn't without music.

His parents and music teachers had appealed — and were granted permission — for him to have his violin at Ross, where Ron Edwards, a progressive warden, created a nine-piece rhythm-and-blues band of inmates.

Howes began playing many types of music with self-taught musicians.

“It was a real change for me,” he said. “There were no other violins except for me. Someone might have a trumpet or a saxophone. There were beater guitars, harmonicas. People would beat out rhythms on picnic tables. There was hip-hop, men singing a cappella, bluegrass. I met an older guy who played George Benson-style. I played gospel church services on Sundays.”

Two years into his sentence, Howes was transferred to the London Correctional Institution — where, he said, no such music program existed.

In 1996, after serving four years total, he was released — at age 24.

Howes remained in central Ohio, moving in with his parents in Delaware. He was stunned and grateful, he said, when Ohio State reinstated his scholarship. He soon returned to college, majoring not in music but philosophy.

“After four years in prison,” he said, “I had my own ideas about what I wanted to learn.”

Still, he served as concertmaster in the OSU orchestra and began playing as a substitute musician with the Columbus Symphony. He learned how to create a business for himself, performing as a jazz violinist at Lindey’s, Max & Erma’s and other restaurants. He became a friend and colleague of Bobby Floyd’s.

“He’s come a long way since I met him,” Floyd said. “I think he probably learned a discipline in prison that he applied to his music.

“He’s a virtuoso, but he’s not the type of musician who wants the spotlight only on him. He’s a great ambassador for jazz.”

An emphasis on multiculturalism

Prison, Howes said, transformed his beliefs about and priorities in music.

“I think the culture of music in our society largely persists like gated communities,” he said. “In academics, music studies are just not in line with multiculturalism. To not recognize the tradition of jazz is ignorant.”

To put his philosophy of music into practice, Howes in 2001 founded the Creative Strings Workshop and Festival, based at Ohio Wesleyan. The nonprofit organization, which includes an online home-study course, focuses on improvisation, composition and styles outside classical music.

The 15th annual festival, set for July 3 to 9, will feature more than 100 strings players presenting about 30 free concerts in locations throughout central Ohio.

“We want to get white people to come listen to music in a black church at this festival,” Howes said. “I think sometimes we’re scared to cross the tracks. Artists are people who can be leading the way in diversity.”

Multicultural music can be found on Howes’ albums, including “American Spirit.” The new album includes the title song written by Howes as well as Joni Mitchell’s “Both Sides Now,” Fats Waller’s “Ain’t Nobody’s Business,” Leonard Bernstein’s “America” and jazz takes on “Shenandoah” and “Just a Closer Walk.”

The music was inspired largely by Howes’ travels in 2015 to the Ukraine and Montenegro, part of a goodwill campaign organized by the State Department.

The Ukraine trip coincided with Howes’ daughter, Camille, beginning her freshman year at Oberlin College. He had stayed in central Ohio in order to be close to his daughter, who lived with her mother (to whom Howes was not married). He also has a 6-year-old son, with his wife, Colleen Dalton.

'An incredible life'

Howes is upfront about his personal story.

He appears at elementary, middle and high schools as well as colleges and universities, incorporating musical instruction and performance with a cautionary tale.

Karen Butler has presented him at the Wellington School.

Pam Braddy, activities therapist administrator at the Pickaway Correctional Institution, said he has told his story to inmates, who “were very receptive and open to listening to him.”

“He’s a good person, trying to give back to the guys,” Braddy said.

In 2014, more than two decades after he witnessed the talented young violinist leave his orchestra for prison, Russell reconnected with Howes.

A music professor at Arizona State University at the time, Russell invited Howes to demonstrate improvisation to undergraduate and graduate classical string players.

“He was kind of like the pied piper for jazz string playing for the uninitiated,” Russell said. “The students were fascinated. But he also told them how his life worked out. Talk about a bunch of eyes wide-open.

Professionally, too, Russell serves as a good example, Russell said.

“Christian has become an important model of how you can be a classically trained musician who’s crossed over into jazz. But he’s also an entrepreneur When you think of how the world is changing and classical musicians and artists in the 21st century are changing, he really is this new kind of crossover artist who didn’t exist in the past.

“He’s not just a person who went from the dark side to the light — but from the 20th to the 21st century.”

Floyd credits Howes with “introducing young people to jazz and helping them find ways to perform it – keeping jazz alive.”

For his part, Howes sees an upside to his wayward youth.

“If it wouldn’t have been for me going to prison, I wouldn’t have been enriched by these multicultural areas,” he said. “I feel like I have had an incredible life. I get up every morning, and I love what I do.”

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