



DOWNBEAT – February 2016

Players: CHRISTIAN HOWES – Purpose & Power



For Christian Howes, jazz defies definition. The violinist’s new album, American Spirit (Resonance Records), is a beautifully eclectic work that speaks to his disdain for pedantic debates over what jazz is. It’s also a celebration of the United States’ deep musical heritage, influenced by Howes’ U.S. State Department visit to strife-torn Ukraine in 2014.

“No matter what opinion you have on whatever issue, you should feel proud that you are American,” said Howes. “If we focus on the things we share, the qualities we agree are important, then we can get rid of some of the polarization, the nitpicking. Which is the same thing I’m saying about music. Why are we nitpicking about what’s jazz and what’s not jazz?” he said. “It’s about music, and music is about spirit.”

Mixing traditional jazz, modern jazz, r&b, blues, folk and classical music, Howes’ new CD represents an effort by the 43-year-old to come to terms with changing life priorities. The married father of two is a critically acclaimed jazzman with a diverse musical range comparable to that of Jean-Luc Ponty. He also is an educator committed to breaking down established notions about the violin’s role in improvising and composition.

From age 5, however, the prime focus of Howes’ upbringing in Columbus, Ohio, was preparing for a career as a classical violinist. Then, at 19, Howes’ life took an unexpected turn: He was arrested for LSD trafficking and sentenced to spend six to 25 years in jail. It was a frightening development. But being incarcerated expanded his understanding of humanity, and it broadened his musical palette. Playing a range of tunes for the prison church congregation gratified a long-suppressed urge to explore different musical styles.

He was released after four years on good behavior. Soon afterward, he decided to reject an offer of full-time employment with the Columbus Symphony to throw himself into gigging at local clubs and restaurants.

For a State Department concert in Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, Howes and a youth orchestra teamed up to perform Scott Routenberg’s “Concerto For Jazz Violin.” It was a tense time, as a violent, deadly battle raged between government forces and pro-Russian rebels. Howes was astounded as spectators, giving the orchestra and him a standing ovation, suddenly broke into a rendition of Ukraine’s anthem of solidarity.

Back in the studio, Howes focused on short solos rather than virtuosic displays when recording American Spirit.

“The desire [during the sessions was] to express exactly what needs to be expressed and nothing less,” said bassist Ben Williams, part of a lineup that included pianist Josh Nelson, organist/pianist Hamilton Hardin, drummer Gregory Hutchinson and vocalist Polly Gibbons. “A lot of music today is a little too self-gratifying.”

For Howes, the album speaks to music’s purpose and power: “When I was younger, it was all about climbing the ladder of success and proving myself. Now, I want my energy directed toward something bigger, something meaningful. If I play music, there’s a bigger reason [for doing it]. It’s about creating meaning for people, it’s about making people feel good. It’s about expressing humanity.” —Michael Barris