

BIOGRAPHY

CHRISTIAN SCOTT

Yesterday You Said Tomorrow

When trumpeter Christian Scott was growing up in New Orleans in the late '80s and early '90s, his grandfather gave him and his brother Kiel extra reading assignments each week as a supplement to their assigned schoolwork. If the young students failed to finish their books within the week, their grandfather would say, "Yesterday you said tomorrow..." It was the older man's way of emphasizing the importance of recognizing the work at hand, and making the most of the available time to complete it.

In the end, the two brothers graduated at the top of their high school class at the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts. Armed with a full scholarship, Christian headed north to Berklee College of Music, where he earned two degrees in two years and eventually launched a music career that has positioned him as one of the great innovators of his generation. But along the way, Scott has learned that there's still much work to be done – not just within the jazz idiom, but also in the larger world in which jazz exists. *Yesterday You Said Tomorrow*, his March 30, 2010, release on Concord Jazz, reflects the legacy of some of his musical heroes of the '60s, and at the same time wields the music as a tool to address some of the very important issues of contemporary culture.

"I've never worked on an album as hard as I've worked on this one," says Scott, who did the session work in April 2009 at Van Gelder Recording Studios in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Scott co-produced with Chris Dunn, and veteran jazz engineer Rudy Van Gelder engineered the album. "I wanted to create a musical backdrop that referenced everything I liked about the music from the '60s – Miles Davis' second quintet, Coltrane's quartet, Mingus' band – coupled with music made by people like Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix. The music from that era just had more depth, whether it was jazz or rock or folk or whatever. The political and social climate at the time was much heavier, and there were a few musicians who weren't afraid to reference that climate in their work. The ones who did that – and at the same time captivated people in a way that referenced their own humanity – were the ones who ended up lasting the longest."

That perspective may sound unusual for someone born in 1983, but Scott has always been acutely aware of the legacy of jazz and its role within the broader context of 20th century history. He learned much of it first hand from his uncle, saxophonist Donald Harrison, an alum of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. "Some people start with bebop, some people start with post-bop, some people start with fusion," says Scott, who first picked up the trumpet when he was 12. "My uncle took me back to the very beginning of the music. He taught me stuff that Buddy Bolden was playing in the early 1900s."

Scott was already proficient enough to join his uncle's band when he was 13, and he played on Harrison's 2000 recording, *Paradise Found*, when he was 16 – all of which gave him a considerable head start in relation to his peers in high school and at Berklee. In 2002 he made

his solo debut with his self-released and self-titled album, *Christian Scott*. In 2006, after earning significant attention and landing a record deal with Concord Jazz, Scott released *Rewind That*, an album whose mixture of modern jazz, rock and R&B garnered both criticism and praise – but ultimately a Grammy nomination. *Anthem*, released the following year, was in large part a statement about the political and social dynamics that enabled many people to ignore the ravages of Hurricane Katrina. *Live at Newport*, released at the end of 2008, captures Scott and his four-piece ensemble performing at the JVC Jazz Festival in Rhode Island earlier that year.

Yesterday You Said Tomorrow, like *Anthem*, takes aim at certain injustices persistent in society. The difference this time is in scope. “With *Anthem*, you had this microcosmic experience – the hurricane and the resulting devastation to a specific region,” says Scott. “With this album, it’s a more macrocosmic view of all the broader issues and dilemmas that challenge us today.”

Aided by guitarist Matthew Stevens, pianist Milton Fletcher, Jr., bassist Kristopher Keith Funn and drummer Jamire Williams, Scott addresses the issues head on, regardless of how uncomfortable the subject matter may be. He opens the set with “K.K.P.D.,” a track full of dark harmonies and tense, competing polyrhythms. The title stands for “Ku Klux Police Department,” a reference to what Scott calls the “phenomenally dark and evil” attitude by the local police toward African American citizens of New Orleans when he was growing up – and the similar dynamic that persists there and in other cities to this day. “If you’re black, and you get caught in the wrong place on the wrong night, they may do some Klan stuff to you,” he says. “That’s always the thought in the back of your mind.”

Scott wipes away some of the darker shades in “Eraser,” the melodic followup track penned by singer-songwriter Thom Yorke, co-founder and frontman of Radiohead (the song is the title track to Yorke’s solo debut, released in 2006). The aptly titled piece resets the tone of the overall recording, says Scott. “With that song, we’re erasing the issue that was raised in the previous song, and then the album starts,” he says. “Those first two songs are very much a part of the album, but they’re there to establish an environment where you’re willing to listen to whatever else we have to say, because you’ve been opened up to the validity of the original argument.”

Further in, “Angola, LA & The 13th Amendment” is fueled by Scott’s alternately melancholy and soaring trumpet lines and Williams’ crashing drums, and punctuated by Stevens’ plaintive guitar. The song equates certain aspects of the prison system with slavery. “You go to places like Angola, and you see these convicts doing very daunting manual labor,” says Scott. “Of course, if you’ve been convicted of a crime and you’re guilty, then you should be punished. And you should be rehabilitated. But I know personally that there are people there who are not guilty, and for that to be their plight shames me as an American.”

The introspective “The Last Broken Heart” was inspired by the debate over gay marriage. “It’s a very challenging song to play, but the small dissonances within the song make it very captivating,” says Scott. “What could be more beautiful than two people deciding to love each other? It’s better than two people deciding to hate each other, but somehow that’s more acceptable.”

Pitting a melodic trumpet line against a tense rhythmic undercurrent, “The American’t” is a reflection on the negativity that persists in the aftermath of the history-making presidential election of 2008. “There was so much hope and positivity, but at the same time, there were

people who insisted on taking a really dark view of the events,” says Scott. “The song is about how people can harbor some very negative aspirations for our country, all under the guise of patriotism.”

The closer, “The Roe Effect,” employs a bit of musical sleight-of-hand to pose a hypothesis about abortion. “I had written this melody that was really captivating,” says Scott. “Then we decided to play it backwards. It turned out to be equally as beautiful – if not more beautiful – than the original melody.” The song is constructed around a thought-provoking question: what happens over the next few generations as parents who oppose abortion raise their children with similar values, and then those children grow up and vote, while adults who choose the abortion option raise no voters at all? “By playing the song backwards in the second half,” says Scott, “we illuminate how the erasing of the process is more beautiful than the creation of it.”

Scott freely admits that the subject matter within *Yesterday You Said Tomorrow* is anything but lighthearted. But like his grandfather, he has little patience for falling behind on the important work at hand that can’t wait. “There’s no better time than right now to fix all of the problems and issues that we face as individuals and as a society,” he says. “The problems that some of the musicians of the ‘60s addressed still exist. They may look a little different, but they’re still around. The intent of the album was to make a document that illuminated that fact, and illuminated the means to change the dynamics and solve the problems.”

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