



Christian Sands ***Embracing Dawn***

GRAMMY®-nominated pianist's new Mack Avenue concept album journeys through heartbreak and healing

Jazz history is filled with stirring torch songs and ballads — brilliant expressions of suffering after love has gone awry. The jazz record shelf even contains some classic album-long explorations of melancholy. But it's hard to find precedent in pianist **Christian Sands'** new ***Embracing Dawn***, his fifth full-length effort for Mack Avenue Records.

Sands' LP is nothing less than a cinematic narration of the stages of grief, crafted by one of jazz's finest young composers. It's a "breakup record," to be sure — composed while Sands was experiencing the hurt that only a sudden absence of love can deliver — but it's so much more. In its thoughtfully assembled nine tracks are a group therapy session, a guide to healing, and an understanding that Sands' deeply personal angst could apply to any person who has lost a partner, a job, a loved one, an opportunity, the list goes on. In other words, *Embracing Dawn* is for everyone.

"I actually tried *not* to write this record," Sands says with a laugh. "It was painful. I was going through heartbreak, and I didn't know what to do — and so I decided to put it all into music. But I knew I wasn't alone in this feeling. So why not create a safe space for people to go when they're having this feeling, when they're having these thoughts or questions?"

Embracing Dawn trails 2023's acclaimed *Christmas Stories* and 2020's GRAMMY-nominated *Be Water*. Following that album's release, the *New York Times* commented, "Equipped with a crisp but forceful touch, he seems always to be flowing in new directions, integrating elements of prog rock, gospel and Western classical into a forward-tumbling jazz conception." *Embracing Dawn* furthers Sands' uniquely cultivated jazz language, where agile post-bop meets soulful bluesy tinges and gorgeous swells of strings. Sands' love of classical orchestration, he explains, is rooted in his lifelong obsession with film.

Ultimately, Sands' sound and philosophy are informed by two of his most essential mentors: bass maestro Christian McBride, who, as Sands' longtime employer, taught him the importance of always being yourself; and the late piano legend Dr. Billy Taylor,

who stressed how crucial it is to connect jazz to a wide-ranging audience. “I want *Embracing Dawn* to be something where you gravitate toward it because of the story,” Sands says.

Supporting the pianist on this journey are some of his most trusted and admired collaborators. Of the bassist Yasushi Nakamura, Sands says simply, “I need that sound in my life.” On drums is Christian’s fiercely gifted younger brother, Ryan Sands, with whom he grew up in Connecticut. “When we perform, there are things that I don’t even have to say,” the pianist explains. “We literally share the same musical DNA.” One of a very few contemporary guitarists to truly hit the sweet spot between jazz and blues, Marvin Sewell, is a secret weapon here, as he is in any ensemble that features him. There’s a delightful “naturalism” in Sewell’s playing, Sands says, a sound that is “highly skilled and highly intelligent, but also rooted in the blues.” Two musicians who have graced Sands’ solo-project wishlist for years also turn up: vibraphone virtuoso Warren Wolf, Sands’ bandmate from Christian McBride’s *Inside Straight*, and Grégoire Maret, whose sunny harmonica provided the exact kind of measured optimism Sands was looking for in his closing title track.

Beyond the music, Sands’ players join him in the sense of empathy that defines *Embracing Dawn*’s mission. “We all have shared stories of hardship,” he says, “and we’ve all been there for each other when we’ve shared those hardships, whether it was on the road or picking up the phone. Specifically, these members were chosen because they were there for my struggles, and I was there for theirs.”

Like chapters in a novel — or, as Sands might prefer, scenes in a film — *Embracing Dawn* unfolds as a masterful example of musical storytelling. The song cycle begins with its lone standard, “Good Morning Heartache,” given an arrangement touched by neo- and alternative soul. Billie Holiday’s iconic 1946 recording was the first song Sands heard on the radio following his breakup. “And I actually understood it this time!” he says with a chuckle. “As opposed to hearing it just as a great song.” The dynamic midtempo swing and anxiety-laced melody of “Divergent Journeys” reflect, as Sands says, “that initial impact of the challenging experience, and the subsequent need to make choices between multiple paths. What do I do now? Where do I go?”

The funky, gospelish, almost New Orleanian groove of “Ain’t That the Same” serves as a reminder that even the darkest moments contain humor. “Thought Bubbles I (Can We Talk?)” is hued with an off-kilter, Monk-like tension and a shifting tempo — illustrating that moment when a text from you-know-who begins OK but leads to second-guessing and spiraling. A lushly arranged, loosely swinging ballad, “Serenade of an Angel” is that turning point when the sun pokes through the clouds — which, in Sands’ case, meant meeting a new love. “MMC” — or “Mom’s Mac and Cheese” — evokes acoustic

jazz-rock of The Bad Plus variety. (Funnily, its energy comes in part because the performance was counted off too fast in the studio.) “That tune’s about needing sustenance to get you through things,” Sands says, “not just for your body but for your soul.”

“Thought Bubbles II (Do Not Disturb)” is a nonchalant gem, with a hooky melody and a trap-style beat, that represents old problems (and people) cropping up after you’ve finally made progress. The darkly beautiful “Braises de Requiem I (The Embers Requiem, Mov. I)” argues Sands could be just as renowned in the contemporary-classical space, and signifies those embers, or last straggling pieces of hurt, that need to be stamped out before real peace can arrive. “Embracing Dawn” ends the album with even-keeled acceptance. A testament to Sands’ storytelling prowess, its melody is neither elated nor downcast; rather, it’s a pitch-perfect metaphor in sound for the maturity and equilibrium required to move on from trauma.

“As an artist, I’ve always told stories,” says Sands, looking back on the therapeutic process that became *Embracing Dawn*. “But I’ve always tried to tell the stories of other people, right? These are my stories here — but in a roundabout way, I ended up creating my most relatable, universal statement yet.”