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## **12-Year-Old Jazz Prodigy Joey Alexander Turns to Composing**

By Michael Siconolfi



One of the jazz world's youngest prodigies is maturing at a breakneck pace.

By age 10, Joey Alexander was wowing audiences with swinging interpretations of jazz standards such as "My Favorite Things," "Lush Life" and "Round Midnight." Now 12 years old, the Bali-born pianist is writing more of his own tunes.

At a recent performance overlooking the Atlantic Ocean in Rockport, Mass., he introduced two of his compositions that reflect the swift growth of an artist whose sneakers and small frame belie his giant talent.

“Sunday Waltz” had a foot-tapping gospel feel, inspired by a visit to a Maryland church. “I was asked to play there, and I played ‘Amazing Grace,’ ” Alexander said. “Days after we got home, the melody just came out and I wanted to reflect that feeling of being in church.”

“City Lights” is a nod to his adopted hometown. “I enjoyed the lights and connected that with the energy I feel in New York City,” he said.

His composing takes an instinctive approach. It usually begins with the rhythm. He doesn’t read music and says he never brings lead sheets to rehearsals. “I always communicate musically,” he said. “I want my band not only to learn the form and feel of the song by ear like I do, but also have the freedom to contribute.”

The power of that interaction was on display at his performance at Rockport’s Shalin Liu Performance Center. His sneaker tapping to telegraph his moves, Alexander grinned and occasionally stood as he and drummer Mark Whitfield, Jr., traded solos and bassist Dan Chmielinski tastefully rounded out the rhythm.

By now, many music lovers know the basics of Alexander’s journey. His dad, an amateur pianist, played jazz while Joey was growing up in Indonesia. Joey began playing at age six, inspired by Thelonious Monk’s “Well You Needn’t,” which he picked up by ear. After winning an international improvisation contest in Ukraine, he was promoted by jazz greats Herbie Hancock and Wynton Marsalis.

In May, Alexander released a debut CD, “My Favorite Things.” It is sprinkled with jazz and popular standards and one of his own tunes, “Ma Blues.” He just finished a tour in Switzerland and will continue to perform throughout the U.S.

The Rockport gig showcased Alexander’s love of jazz giants John Coltrane (“Spiritual”), Wayne Shorter (“Footprints”) and of course Monk (“I Mean You”). Amid the applause for an encore, he returned alone onstage saying, “I hear you want some more.” He then did a soulful solo rendition of the standard “Everything Happens to Me,” sprinkled with stride piano choruses straight from the ballad school of Monk.

Alexander prefaces his piano practice by playing a gospel tune “as a ritual to thank God for the gift I have been given.” His dad prepares the practice menu, which changes day to day. Two to three hours are spent at the piano but more time is spent talking, or as the young pianist said, “learning away from the instrument.” Joey Alexander believes “the best practice is on stage,” where there is “time to develop while creating music in the moment.”

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