BRIAN CULBERTSON

It's a rare feat for a recording artist to release 30 albums and score more than 40 ***Billboard*** No. 1 singles. It's even more exceptional for an artist to hit that milestone while firmly in their prime, continuing to grow and evolve with each release. Rarer still is for that genre-crossing songwriter, producer, and multi-instrumentalist to be a dynamic performer who presents their music in ways never before seen, both on stage and online. And beyond that, the artist has built a premium festival brand around unique fan experiences. **Brian Culbertson** checks every one of these boxes.

Culbertson's sonic approach has been to craft primarily instrumental music fusing jazz, R&B, funk, and pop. He's been doing it at the highest level since he exploded onto the scene after the release of his debut album, ***Long Night Out***, in 1994. That hit-filled set recorded in his college apartment in Chicago instantly established Culbertson as a core artist in the newly emerging smooth jazz genre. Now, on his 30th album, ***The Midnight Tapes***, Culbertson does something he's never done before: he played every single instrument* on the album himself.

Recording *The Midnight Tapes*

"It was exciting and terrifying at the same time! I knew it had to be as good as if session players played the parts," said Culbertson, who wrote, produced, arranged, engineered, and

performed the nine-song set entirely on his own. “What was particularly challenging was that the drums, guitar, trumpet, bass, and others are not my main instruments (like piano and trombone). But because I could work non-stop without waiting to schedule other sessions, it turned out to be the fastest album I’ve ever made — just three months from writing to fully mixed. I had a blast!”

The Midnight Tapes transports listeners to the 1970s, a different world sonically, while still being a modern sounding record. In the music video for the first single, “’76 Monte Carlo,” you’ll see a vintage reel-to-reel tape machine and it wasn’t just a prop like the old **Monte Carlo** keychain Culbertson found on **eBay** for the video shoot, or the **Polaroid** of him that was taken during the photo session for the album cover.

“I legitimately used tape in places on this album for effect,” said Culbertson, who is doubling down by making *The Midnight Tapes* available on cassette tape. “It gives the listener a totally different experience.”

Culbertson describes the recording process for *The Midnight Tapes* as “going forward and backward at the same time. I’m using new tech and old tech. It’s important to understand the gear, and what it can and cannot do. In terms of technology, what are the best things from the past, and how can I use it to make a modern record today?”

Culbertson says that he pushed himself compositionally on his previous outing, 2025’s ***Day Trip***, and that he’s pushing himself as a musician by playing everything using vintage instruments to record *The Midnight Tapes*.

“I can’t make the same record stylistically over and over as I’d get bored. I learn from each record I make and constantly build on what I’ve done in the past.”

The Midnight Tapes is primarily an R&B instrumental album featuring late-night soulful grooves, all with contemporary jazz flavors. The exception is the hot opening, "'76 Monte Carlo," a super funky retro joint that would be right at home in a 70s detective show.

But the genesis for the whole album was the second track, “Before We Kiss,” an atmospheric and sensual song that Culbertson recorded almost by accident while trying out the 50-year-old drum kit he had just bought. "While testing out the drums, I hit record, then kept adding parts on top. Before I knew it, I had a whole song really quick."

The next day, he played the track for musician friends **Nicholas Cole** and **Adrian Crutchfield**, who immediately encouraged Culbertson to record the entire album by himself.

“Cool With Me” continues the vibe that recalls **Sade** and **Maxwell**’s seductive grooves, but the vocal point is Culbertson’s trademark piano along with a flugelhorn feature. He also played a glockenspiel almost note for note with his piano hook melodies throughout the album which adds a nostalgic shimmering effect.

“The piano is the thread that brings all of my albums together no matter what direction I go musically,” said Culbertson. “I’m really particular about my piano sound because of that. I use the same Mason & Hamlin piano, the same mics, the same reverb, the

exact same audio equipment chain on every record so it sounds like *my* piano. That's the important part of keeping my loyal fanbase engaged even as I move around to different genres."

Friend and frequent collaborator **Bootsy Collins** invited Culbertson to remake the funk legend's "I'd Rather Be With You" to help celebrate its 50th anniversary, a track that erupts midpoint from romantic overture into classic funk. Says Collins of the remake, "When I first heard it, I thought Casper was gonna plaster a motha out. It's ooooooooon the one baba. Yeah!!!"

"You Got It" picks up the tempo and has all the makings of a fan favorite both in concert and on playlists. "Can't Stop Love" is a classic Culbertson quiet storm boudoir gem. "Let's Talk About It" gets heads and shoulders bouncing again with its slow and "slunky" vibe. The poetic beauty of "In Your Arms" is primarily a solo piano piece with sparse instrumental coloring. Culbertson spreads out to nearly seven minutes on "Shared Memories" to close the album with notes of reflection, remembrance, and reconnection.

Pivotal Highlights and Turning Points

When a career spans 30 albums and decades of hits, there are a wealth of highlights and turning points. *Long Night Out*'s release on **Mesa/Bluemoon Records**, led by his first-ever single "City Lights," changed the trombone major's life from music student to professional recording artist as a keyboardist. That momentum, fueled by the successful reception of his next three albums and a move to major label **Atlantic Records,** ultimately pulled him

away from writing and recording commercial jingles in the Chicago advertising market while also prompting a relocation to Los Angeles.

A decade later, Culbertson had signed with **Verve/GRP** and released ***Bringing Back the Funk*** in 2008 with an all-star cast, executive produced by **Maurice White** of **Earth, Wind & Fire**. At that point, Culbertson was a marquee artist for smooth jazz radio, yet his musical interests went way beyond that limiting label

“Making a funk record was inspired by when I sat in with **Prince** at one of his famous all-night jam sessions in Vegas,” said Culbertson. “When I told my record label (a respected and revered jazz label) that I wanted to make a funk record, I had to fight to make that album happen. It really was a turning point for me, feeling free enough to experiment beyond the typical smooth jazz world. It turned out to be commercially successful and fans loved it.”

By 2010, the smooth jazz radio format had already peaked, and terrestrial radio stations quickly disappeared. Most stations signed off and flipped formats while some became online streamers. Culbertson took another major creative turn by recording an album of duets with R&B singers **Brian McKnight**, **Avant**, **Faith Evans**, and **Chuck Brown** for his 12th album, the aptly titled ***XII***.

“After *Bringing Back the Funk*, it seemed natural to record more of an R&B album and it also allowed me to cross over into another radio format since smooth jazz radio had gone away,” said Culbertson. “It’s still very authentic musically; it’s not chasing something that you think people want. Authenticity is key

for me to this day. I believe in every note that I'm playing and I feel it." Ironically, *XII* garnered six **Oasis Contemporary Jazz Awards**, including **Best Album**, even as Culbertson was pushing beyond the contemporary jazz format.

In 2014, Culbertson revisited his debut set by recording ***Another Long Night Out***. Since the original was recorded in his apartment on a shoestring budget, he always had hopes of remaking those early songs. So, armed with 20 years of accumulated knowledge and experience, he re-recorded the entire album using state-of-the-art technology and an all-star lineup of musicians, including **Lee Ritenour**, **Russ Freeman**, **Chuck Loeb**, **Eric Marienthal**, **Steve Lukather**, **Nathan East**, **Ray Parker Jr**., **Candy Dulfer**, **David Benoit**, **Jonathan Butler**, **Jimmy Haslip** and **Will Kennedy** of **Yellowjackets**, and Earth, Wind & Fire original member **Larry Dunn**.

"The music industry had changed in a big way and so I decided to go independent after 20 years on major labels (Atlantic, Warner Bros. and Universal). With the rise of the internet, **YouTube**, and social media, the business was vastly different, and I found new ways to connect with fans directly," said Culbertson. "Musically, I returned to my jazz fusion roots on *Another Long Night Out*. I follow musically what I'm feeling in the moment, as is the case now with *The Midnight Tapes*."

Finding A Way to *Hang* With Fans

When the world changed in 2020, Culbertson, like all the other musicians, was forced to stay home and away from connecting

with fans. He adapted by launching ***The Hang*****, a weekly livestream full of music and conversation on YouTube that has aired every Friday night since, now is its 7th Season.

“I wanted to bring high quality audio and visuals to jazz fans on a weekly one-hour TV show. When I first started, everyone was looking online for entertainment, humor, music, and, most importantly, comfort,” Culbertson explained. “There was a total void for high-end live content from contemporary jazz artists. When so many were simply using Facebook Live to broadcast from their phones, I invested heavily in the newest ‘streaming’ equipment. In addition to the high production value, I wanted to present a fun but tightly run show, complete with different musical segments, interviews, a theme song, wine tasting, and more.”

The best and most unexpected part of *The Hang* was the amazing community that was formed among all the fans that gather weekly in the 'chat.' "Not only does everyone catch up each week, but they have become great friends meeting up in person at live concerts too. Many people still tell me that *The Hang* really helped them get through one of the hardest times in their life. That's really special."

Meeting His Partner in Life

Shortly after *Long Night Out* was released in 1994, Culbertson met and fell in love with **Michelle**, a classically trained musician and vocalist who he’s been married to for 29 years. In addition to their marriage, the Culbertsons have formed a creative

partnership: Michelle serves as executive producer on every one of Brian's independently released albums. She also sings on many of his records, going all the way back to ***Modern Life*** in 1995.

"Nothing gets finalized without Michelle's approval. She also co-founded and named the **Napa Valley Jazz Getaway**," said Culbertson. "Michelle has really been the biggest part of my story."

Influences on Becoming the Consummate Performer

Another key influence on Culbertson's work is Earth, Wind & Fire. "EWF's blueprint served as a role model for me to look up to ever since I saw them when I was a young musician. Their whole production – the music, the lights, the magic tricks, the costumes – really made an impression on me," recalled Culbertson. "They had just the right balance of incredible compositions, musicianship, and arrangements that were both technically sophisticated and massively commercial. So having the honor of working directly with Maurice (White) was truly unforgettable."

Earth, Wind & Fire's influence is reflected in Culbertson's live performances. Like "The Elements," Culbertson has a hit-filled catalog to pull from when creating his set list, but he goes to considerable lengths and expense to create an entirely new production to take on the road for each new album. Two of his elaborate tours have been filmed and released as concert videos: ***Colors of Love Tour: Live in Las Vegas*** (2019) and ***The Trilogy Tour: Live from Detroit*** (2025). Years before that, he recorded a

live performance video at iconic **Capital Records**, which was released as ***Live From The Inside*** (2009).

“It’s important to create a new show for each tour because the music changes so much. The mood and the vibes are different,” said Culbertson. “It all began once I could afford to hire a lighting designer. Another influence on my live shows was when I saw the **Pat Metheny Group**’s ***Still Life (Talking)*** tour. The lighting was perfectly timed to the music. That’s because their lighting designer was a musician, something I found out years later after working with the band’s bassist **Steve Rodby**. So, I always look for lighting designers who are also musicians.”

You’ve Got To See It To Believe It

Like Earth, Wind & Fire, who added elements to their concerts that no one had ever seen before, Culbertson has a segment in his shows that blows audience minds every time. Spoiler alert: he performs an extended piano solo during “On My Mind” backwards.

“The first time happened when I was performing at a jazz festival. I was just trying to get close to the audience who had come up front and were dancing right in front of me (there was no barricade at this show), so I walked out in front of my keyboard. With so many fans then surrounding me, I reached over and finished the song from the other side of the keyboard (backwards) and the crowd went crazy,” recalls Culbertson about the show-stopping segment that you have to see to believe. “It was a spontaneous moment that I never practiced, but it has

since become a fan favorite and recently gone viral, receiving over 50 million views across all the social platforms."

The Getaways

For 14 years, Culbertson has welcomed people from all over the world to California wine country for the Napa Valley Jazz Getaway, a star-studded, multi-day music and wine festival. Its success led to spinoff festivals in Chicago, New Orleans, Hawaii, and Boston.

"People are looking for more experiences, especially when shared with others who like the same music," said Culbertson. "Plus, it's not just about making records or playing shows from a distance anymore. It's about interacting with listeners and creating special moments that are bigger than just another concert."

Gratitude and the Magic of Making Music

As he prepares to share his 30th album with the world, Culbertson remains humble, grateful, and as passionate as ever about making music. Like some of his idols, he continues to push himself creatively, both in the studio and on stage, finding new ways to challenge himself and connect with his audience. Constantly learning and experimenting with each successive project propels his continued growth, authenticity, and evolution as a unique artist.

“I’m very grateful to still be in this business for over 32 years. I’m certainly not taking my foot off the pedal and, in fact, I’ve already started my 31st album even before *The Midnight Tapes* is released,” enthused Culbertson. “I love creating music. I still feel the same spark, the same feeling I had when I was 12 and wrote my first song. It’s magical.”

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**Technically, 44 individual instruments were used on The Midnight Tapes, including: Mason & Hamlin VXCC 9'4" Concert Grand Piano, Drums, Bass, Synth Bass, Guitar, Trumpet, Flugelhorn, Tenor Trombone, Bass Trombone, Euphonium, Glockenspiel, Fender Rhodes, Hohner E7 Clavinet, Hammond B3 Organ, Minimoog, Oberheim OB-6, Oberheim OB-X8, Sequential Prophet-10, Roland Super JX, Solina String Ensemble, Moog One, Finger Snaps, Claps, and various Percussion instruments, including: Congas, Bongos, Cowbells, Shakers, Triangles, Chimes, Caxixi, Djembe, Cabasa, Dumbek, Bell Tree, Agogo Bells, Wood Blocks, Flex-A-Tone, Vibraslap, Ocean Drum, Clave, Thunder Tube Drum, Crasher, Tambourine, and Wind Whistle.*

The Hang also streams additional shows on Monday and Wednesday nights exclusively for members of* ***The Hang Club*, powered by Patreon®. Brian streams The Hang every Friday night when not on tour.*