Matthew Whitaker Biography_CONNECTIONS

As more than a year of lockdown and collective isolation appears to be ending, Matthew Whitaker—the twenty-year old keyboardist from Hackensack, New Jersey—has released an exciting, expansive new recording entitled ***Connections***. Aptly titled for this pivotal moment, the sixteen-track collection is his third album and serves as both a bold declaration of Whitaker's maturity as a player, composer and bandleader, and as a statement of musical connection—and *re*-connection, as Whitaker points out.

"***Connections*** is really about this idea of community, of musicians and family and everyone really, coming back together after being separated for so long," Whitaker says. "It's about how grateful I am for the connections we have with each other musically and spiritually as well. More than my other albums, this one has music that was created in the studio, improv moments that happened live. A few of these songs I wrote during the pandemic so I'm happy we were able to record those, and I'm excited. This is more expansive than anything else I've done!"

Connections features music composed both before and during (and in reaction to) the pandemic, and recorded mostly between March 2 and 4, 2021. It includes a generous mix of original compositions with message-driven titles of uplift and instruction ("A New Day," "Acceptance," "It Will be Okay," "Stop Fighting"), balanced with familiar melodies by Whitaker's musical heroes, from Duke Ellington ("Don't Get Around Much Anymore"), Stevie Wonder ("Lately"), and gospel singer Richard Smallwood ("Trust Me"), to Duke Pearson ("Jeannine"), Chick Corea ("Spain"), and Thelonious Monk ("Bye-Ya")—this last one a sparkling, standout duet with pianist Jon Batiste.

The performances on ***Connections*** reveal Whitaker's burgeoning musical identity: one filled with deepening confidence, rhythmic vigor, and a marked melodic clarity. Dramatic entrances have become an aspect of his musical approach. Whether on piano, Hammond organ, Fender Rhodes or synthesizer, he doesn't kick off a tune or improvisation as much as *plunge* into the music, twisting time and navigating structural shifts with fluidity. Relative to past recordings, he now pulls from a noticeably wider palette of modern jazz, Latin, and R&B sounds, still with a heady top-note of gospel—staying true to his roots. Fittingly, Whitaker offers a version of the venerable spiritual "His Eye Is On The Sparrow" as the album's closing track.

On ***Connections***, Whitaker's prowess on a wide variety of keyboards is in full effect; "usually we'd go into the studio with whatever backline they have there," says Whitaker. "But this time I said, 'we're gonna bring everything,' and I was really able to do my thing." It is clearly a studio effort—evidence of Whitaker's growing maturity as a *recording* artist; some tunes were developed during sessions with improvised moments, some were constructed with layered textures and other flavors overdubbed later. Derrick Hodge, noted bassist and bandleader, produced ***Connections***, and added his distinctive, textural bass sound to a number of tracks. "Derrick was very active during the recording—that's what I love about him," adds Whitaker. "He had some wonderful ideas which really pushed me to experiment more as a composer and arranger. I was hoping he would play bass and after all the tracking was done, he did record on a few tracks."

Whitaker is buttressed on ***Connections*** by an A-level circle of talent that speaks to the pandemic-defying power of community. Many are familiar names in Whitaker's lineups—guitarist Marcos Robinson, bassists Karim Hutton and Endea Jones, and drummers Isaiah Johnson, Otis Brown III, and Johnathan Blake. Special guests include keyboardist Jon Batiste, violinist Regina Carter, drummer Alvester Garnett and trumpeter Steve Oquendo—who provided arrangements on, and leads the punchy horn ensemble on "Jeannine."

One of the most distinctive features on ***Connections*** is Whitaker's speaking voice, taken from snippets of interviews and speeches and layered onto a couple of tracks, sharpening the album's message-giving purpose. "The idea first came about when I was composing 'Stop Fighting'—I wanted to have spoken words in the beginning," remembers Whitaker. "Derrick took that idea and said, 'I think we can have that throughout the entire album.' So I sent him a bunch of audio files including my talk at a conference a few years ago about myself, with the doctors not having much hope for me, 'eleven surgeries later…'—all that stuff. If *Connections* has an overall message, I think one is "Why Not?" Why can't I do this, or that? Who says this is not possible? The other message of ***Connections*** is, this is who I am, now, at this moment when the world is coming back together."

Connections serves as an impressive reminder of how far Whitaker has come, and how he has defied the odds from the outset. He was born in 2001 in Hackensack, New Jersey, premature by three months and blind, fighting his way to health through his earliest years. By age three, he exhibited an unusual musical acuity—picking out nursery rhymes on a toy piano—and by five, blessed with perfect pitch, he began piano lessons at The Filomen M. D'Agostino Greenberg Music School in New York City where he learned to play and read Braille music as well. To this day, he credits piano teacher Dalia Sakas and the FMDG experience in general for providing him the guidance at the start of his career.

While still a pre-teen, Whitaker started to perform with the band at the New Hope Baptist Church which his family attended. "I really grew up in that church—I first started playing drums while the drummer was on tour, and when the organist would show up late, I would fill in for him. Then our pastor at the time said, 'Matthew you're the organist' and I've been the organist there for five years now. We're online every Sunday with live streams now."

Whitaker's childhood transformed the word "premature" into a term of strength and accomplishment. He continued his studies at the Harlem School of the Arts and with Montlclair, NJ's Jazz House Kids program through his adolescent years, and word of this talented child began to spread. At the age of 9, he enrolled in the Manhattan School of Music's Pre-College Jazz program with support from the Jazz Foundation of America. A year later, he was chosen to perform as the opener for Stevie Wonder's induction into the Apollo Theater's Hall of Fame. At the age of 12, he was the subject of *Thrive*, a mini-documentary focused on his uncanny talent and brief journey so far. By 13, he became the youngest player ever endorsed by Hammond USA, manufacturers of the

organ he had begun to play only four years before; at 15, he became an official Yamaha Artist, becoming the youngest musician to join that elite group of pianists.

By his early teenage years, with jazz as his primary focus and an ear open to a number of styles—from deep, African American roots to modern classical and even hard rock—Whitaker was leading his own bands and developing a sound that often called upon the energy and spirit of his Baptist upbringing. In 2016, he performed Stevie Wonder's classic "I Wish" on FOX TV's *Showtime at the Apollo*, and in early 2017, he released his debut album *Outta The Box* on the Jazz Foundation's own label. It received wide critical acclaim, inside and far beyond the jazz world. One critic praised how the recording "showcases his vast influences and range" and labeled him "a prominent young voice in today's jazz scene."

With comet-like velocity, Whitaker's musical growth continued as his star ascended. From 2017 through 2018, he headlined major theaters and music festivals with a tight, energetic group. He performed publicly with a dizzying array of top talent from Ray Chew, Christian McBride, Dr. Lonnie Smith, Rhoda Scott, Regina Carter and Jason Moran, to Jon Batiste, Cory Henry, Marc Cary, Arturo O'Farrill, James Carter, Roy Ayers, and even The New York Pops Orchestra. He appeared on the *Today Show*, *Ellen Degeneres Show* and the *Harry Connick, Jr. Show*.

In 2019, Whitaker released his sophomore album—*Now Hear This*—on the independent label Resilience Music Alliance. *Downbeat* awarded it four stars, calling his "spirit-raising ecstasy…a perfect launchpad for all that's yet to come from this exceptional pianist." CBS's *60 Minutes* program decided to report on Whitaker, shooting him at a headlining gig at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, and consulting a neuroscientist who used an MRI to examine his brain activity and better understand his prodigious skills. The story aired nationwide in December 2020 in the midst of a global music industry lockdown brought on by the COVID pandemic.

In early 2021, as the world neared one full year of lockdown, the decision was made to return to the studio; ***Connections*** is an album made possible by, and in defiance of all that this pandemic has engendered. "For me, life has always been about rising to challenges," Whitaker says.

> One thing I take away from this lockdown is don't be afraid to keep developing as a person and still be creating, even if you're by yourself. I'm grateful that I have the resources available to do my thing even from home. We've been doing live streams from home and from church. I've also had a long time to think with so much going on in politics and protests and the world. I've learned to let the music speak—that goes with everything that I play. Let the music speak and you can hear it tell you how to think about this topic or another. That's really what ***Connections*** is about.

***Connections* Track-by-Track Comments by Matthew Whitaker**

1. Journey Uptown

“Journey Uptown” is a song I originally composed for one of my friends, Gabe Stone Shayer who’s a dancer. He and his partner Skylar Brandt reached out to me because they were creating a dance for an event and obviously whatever I compose they have to work with, because I can’t see what they’re doing. We were on Zoom coming up with different ideas of how to do this. They said things like, “Make sure the piano is in the forefront” and “Add some percussion parts” and “Make it like you’re somewhere in New York, feeling and hearing the city.” I immediately went upstairs to the piano and this polyrhythm came into my head, different layers on top of one another. Everything came out of that pulse, different sections and sounds. The original song for the dancers is in 4/4 time and a bit faster and more energetic. which is different from the version on the album. When we got to the studio and were still getting the sound together, Alvester started playing this groove in 7 and I went, “Oh! That’s it, that’s it!” It also gave the song more of a sigh of relief between the sections and helped the song weave a bit more. So when Johnathan played it on the record, I showed him what Alvester had come up with and he said, “Okay.”

2. A New Day
This song is something I wrote and worked out before the pandemic and just added some finishing touches since I had more time to do so. The title is basically in response to all of this negativity going on in the world, the idea that when tomorrow comes it’s a new day. Musically I wanted it to be an organ trio with me, guitar and drums, in that tradition. Playing with Johnathan was really cool because he plays with Dr. Lonnie Smith too, who’s one of my favorites on the organ. This is sort of a tribute to him but it’s also my original, so it’s catching two birds with one stone. It was really fun putting this song together—I came up with this one melodic line on organ and it grew from there.

3. Bye-Ya
This is part of a longer 20-minute improvisation Jon Batiste and I did one morning in the studio with each other that goes many different places. “Connections” is from another part of that jam. Jon introduced me to this song when we played together a few years ago. All of a sudden he played it and I had never heard it before. I’m like, “Hey! What’s that?” “‘Bye-Ya’ by Thelonious Monk.” I was thinking, “OK. I love that—that’s going on the record!” I met Jon when I was about 10—I saw him perform at Jazz at Lincoln Center in the Allen Room, and I went up to him, “Hey, I love your playing, I want to play with you!” That was me at 10 years old. Later he invited me to one of his shows with Stay Human and ever since he’s invited me up to perform with him onstage, including on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*.

4. Spain
Chick Corea is really one of the masters—another hero. He and Herbie Hancock and McCoy Tyner are similar in a way to me because they played keyboards and their music is very experimental, compared to bebop guys like Bud Powell and Barry Harris and Mulgrew Miller. I get inspiration from all of them, really. My very first introduction to Chick was hearing him do “Spain”—I think it was when my dad showed me a video of him playing it when I was 8. Man, I was so young back then! Chick passed in February and we were in the studio a month later, and one evening we just decided we’re doing “Spain.” My band already does an arrangement of this song so it was easy to track.

There's a piano part that is inspired by Bobby Enriquez who put that in his own arrangement, but the rest of the notes, that's all me. I like that texture of the Hammond in the intro. Derrick had the idea of doing the intro on organ while the primary instrument on the meat of the song is the Rhodes.

5. Connections
This tune grew naturally from Jon and I starting with "Bye Ya"—another of the moments in that 20-minute session. You can hear how it came together in this recording I was playing on some notes and he was playing on other notes, a very reflective kind of vibe. The next day OT—Otis Brown III—came by, so we decided to get him in on drums on the track and it was just magical. Then Derrick, after the recording dates were over, went to his home studio and added the multiple basses playing in harmony. That's rare to hear and it's so great he came up with that. The last part with me speaking about "Stop Fighting" before we hear that song, was also Derrick's idea. I ask, why all the negativity in the world, why all the shooting, why are we doing all this for no reason? "JUST STOP"—I say at the end. Cue the reverb.

6. Stop Fighting
This is one of the tunes I wrote during the pandemic and this was the last song we tracked on that first day in the studio, then we let the song sit for a few days and I did all my overdubs on it a few days after—all of them, each in one take. I wrote it because obviously we had the recent killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and now a lot of other people for no reason whatsoever. I originally was going to do it on Rhodes but after I tried it on piano, I thought that fit much better. The rest of it came to me from the part that's repeating through the song. The beginning part is this moment of reflecting on all that's happened in the past 400 years with slavery and after, and how many people who have been taken from us. The middle section is the protest moment. We had just been working on it and stopped to listen, and when we were stepping back into the live room and I was already at the piano and all of a sudden Endea Owens, the bass player walks in and I could hear a march in her footsteps. I was like, "That's it, that's it! That's going on there." So we set up the microphone and recorded all of us stomping—which is about Black Lives Matter and people marching, and what it really says is that we march for the freedom, and *not* to fight. Then the last part, that's saying, "Okay, we've achieved a victory—we're free." Freedom, freedom, freedom, freedom! I'm sorry, I get emotional when I talk about this stuff—this is who I am.

7. Lately
From "Stop Fighting" into "Lately", we sequenced those two on purpose, meaning it's all happening recently and sill now. I've usually played this song live on solo piano and we first tried that, but Derrick had the idea of layering different keyboards like we did and the bass sound we used, to get the whole Stevie, '70s vibe. At first I was thinking, "Oh, this is going to be too much musically, too much going on." But it ended up working out great. Derrick knows what he's doing. I met Stevie back when I was 10 at the Apollo Theater—he gave me one of his harmonicas, an A flat, single-key. I still have it.

8. I'm Sorry
This song is pretty interesting. We were just improvising on the spot and Derrick asked me to start something and told everyone else, "Just follow Matthew." I was coming up

with some ideas on organ, and it grew from there. Derrick and my dad came up with the title because it has that old R&B, Barry White feel going on, you know—[sings “I’m Sorry” in Barry White voice.] No planning, no nothing. That song was pure improvisation. We actually did another take of it that was even more relaxed, but we ended up using this one because we liked the flow better.

9. Jeannine
I’ve known about this tune since I was at Jazz House Kids and heard a lot of kids playing it, and later I arranged it for my theory class in Julliard. The assignment was to take a jazz standard and make it a Latin tune. I did all the parts—drums, bass, piano, horns. When I showed it to Derrick, he was right on it. “This is definitely going on the record.” I had the idea of asking Steve Oquendo and his trio to help out. I met Steve at the Harlem School of the Arts when I was about 8. He was my first ensemble teacher and taught me a lot about Latin piano. We tracked the band first, and then Steve and his crew came over and they did the horns and I sat in with them. This is another tribute to more heroes—Cannonball, Duke Pearson—and also my family, because my mom was born in the Dominican Republic and my relatives on her side, they all listen to a lot of Latin music.

10. Don’t Get Around Much Anymore
My manager introduced me to Miss Regina at the Monterey Jazz Festival, where she invited me to perform with her on stage. We did a different Ellington song then, and we’ve been trying to get together ever since, so this is the first song we’ve recorded together in the studio. It was her and me, with Alvester on drums, Endea on bass, and we based it on that version from the album of Duke Ellington with different violinists. It was super cool to do this, pay tribute to Duke and, as we say, there’s so much *grease* on that song, you know [bends note soulfully on synthesizer.] It was fun. I’m really happy how this song turned out.

11. Blue Rondo à la Turk
Fun fact: we actually did *five* takes of this song. We were trying to figure out which vibe we liked the best, and which flute solo we liked of Gabby’s [Gabrielle Garo] and we ended up choosing the final take. A few days after that, I added my own drums. Of so many Brubeck tunes, why did I choose this one? Because that’s the first tune I ever heard him playing, from the CD my dad had, *Time Out*. I remember we were in the car listening to it and that came on. Fast forward a few years and I was on a concert for the Lighthouse Music School for the Blind and Visionally Impaired at the Metropolitan Museum and I played it straight up, just like the record, with drums, bass, and saxophone. Then a few years later I decided to arrange it during the pandemic and shared it first with my piano instructor and he loved it, so I showed it to Derrick, and he said it again: we’re doing that. The part at the very end where it gets very calm, we had Gabby do some harmonies on the flute and added parts of a speech I made. It’s really fun to play. I can’t wait to do this one live.

12. Trust Me
“Trust Me,” “Lately” and “His Eye Is On The Sparrow” were all from that session with me alone, going song by song by song, nine or ten minutes of me just playing melodies I was feeling and not stopping. It was a natural thing—that’s what we were going for.

Later we separated it into three songs and placed them throughout the record. “Trust Me” was the first one I recorded and how I ended up choosing it was I had been watching a live stream of a church service and they played that song. I love the lyrics and the music, and I remembered having a chance to see Richard Smallwood and Vision perform two years ago on the Capital Jazz Supercruise and they did that song. I was like, “Okay, hit the record button!” and I just went into that song.

13. It Will Be Okay
That’s the message: no matter what you’re going through, it will be okay. I wrote this one Sunday morning at church. We had done some pre-recordings for the live stream of the services, and I went downstairs after to the organ and came up with these chords and melody. The whole song came to me just like that. When I did the demo track the tune actually ended, but Derrick asked, “What if we just went like this [plays organ] and fade out there?”

14. Garden Wall
This is my tribute to the whole Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock idea of multiple keyboards in layers, heavy rhythms and the whole shredding type thing. When I was at the Harlem School of the Arts my drum teacher gave me a CD of Dave Weckl called *Master Plan* and this song was on it. I kept listening to it over and over and over! A bunch of years later I was in rehearsal with my band and I said, “Hey guys, you all know this song “Garden Wall”? They were like, “I think so.” But they didn’t know it. So I arranged it and taught it to them and we’ve been playing it live ever since. Since this album features my regular band, I knew we had to record it. We added Nêgah on percussion and I did some auxiliary, atmospheric stuff and sound effects in the background—stuff you don’t notice but then you do. Those were my ideas.

15. Acceptance
The original title of this one was “Stop Fighting Interlude” because this is another one of those improv moments that happened during the sessions, when we were recording “Stop Fighting.” Derrick heard what we were doing, and started to arrange it: “Marcos, play these chords that were on the bridge of ‘Stop Fighting’ and the rest of you come in whenever you feel like. Matthew, I want you to start with something random.” I had three keyboards in front of me, and I used the looper on one and we got that going. Marcos had his pedals with him on his guitar and Isaiah was just going crazy on drums. None of this was done to tracks—it’s all live! In fact, the reason Karim comes in on bass in the middle was that we had started while he was in the bathroom. He walked back into the room and jumped in and it sounded right. It was nine minutes long but we cut it down to a little less than 6 minutes so it will fit in CD format. Derrick came up with the title—it’s a continuation of the thinking behind “Stop Fighting,” enough is enough—acceptance of that idea. Accept that we don’t need to be fighting. It’s the angry, emotional side of that argument—so the music has a “tension and release” thing going on, and that’s why it fades like that. All those guys I mentioned including Herbie and Chick have influenced me playing this way, and another amazing keyboard guy I’ve been inspired by a lot—Jordan Rudess who’s with the band Dream Theater.

16. His Eye Is On The Sparrow

There are a number of moments on the album where I play all the instruments, and so it made sense to end that way with “His Eye Is On The Sparrow.” I did the piano first and then tracked the organ and drums. Let’s face it, we’ve heard countless recordings of this song and it was originally going to be an organ-focused song. But when Derrick and I were at my house after rehearsal, just talking about the songs, he asked me to play “Lately.” And all of a sudden, without thinking, I just went into this song. No plan. We both knew it then. We’re doing this one too.