Christian Sands
REACH

With his debut Mack Avenue Records recording, ***REACH***, singularly talented pianist and five-time Grammy® Award nominee **Christian Sands** is stretching into exciting progressive territory as he breaks new ground traversing from the straight-ahead zone into fresh-sounding music influenced by a range of styles, from Afro-Cuban rhythms to hip-hop beats to dirty blues with an edge. That's impressive for a youngster who is just 27. "The collection here is about reaching new ideas and reaching new music," he says. "I'm reaching from past recordings to bring in the future, which is really all about finding myself. It's a chance to express my experience."

REACH becomes one more milestone in Sands' auspicious career that stretches back to his New Haven, Connecticut upbringing. Beginning music classes and composing his first piece at age five, he quickly became a professional by ten. Sands was well-prepared to attend such prestigious schools as the Neighborhood Music School and the Educational Center for the Arts in New Haven (he later received bachelor's and master's degrees from the Manhattan School of Music).

But a key moment came when he attended the Jazz in July summer workshop at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst when he was in high school. That was where he met and began his mentorship with Dr. Billy Taylor. "I was 13 or 14 and I studied with Dr. Taylor," Sands says. "After the first week, he asked me to stay a second. I went on to take private lessons with him and master classes. He became my music grandfather; I went to his house in the Bronx and we'd talk about different music such as his piano heroes like Art Tatum and then bands I was listening to, including The Roots, A Tribe Called Quest, John Legend and he was hip to all this."

The recording is co-produced by Grammy® Award-winning producer **Al Pryor** and famed bassist **Christian McBride**, who Sands has collaborated with in his Grammy® Award-winning trio, as well as some of McBride's other groups, since 2009. "Upon first meeting Christian, I could feel a cool connection," Sands recalls. "From when I first sat in with his Inside Straight band, I realized that we think about music in the same way. When I got signed to Mack Avenue, I asked if Christian could produce me, as someone who knows my playing and what I want to accomplish in my music."

Sands has assembled a stellar trio here, including bassist **Yasushi Nakamura** and drummer **Marcus Baylor**. The album also features guests **Gilad Hekselman** on guitar, **Marcus Strickland** on tenor saxophone and bass clarinet and percussionist **Cristian Rivera**. He even convinced McBride to make a cameo appearance, bowing his bass at the end of the slow tempo "Use Me."

With a record deal in hand, Sands set out to make a grand artistic entry with ***REACH***, which includes eight originals and two covers. He opens the album with the upbeat piano trio tune, "Armando's Song," with its dazzling keys, rhythmic drive and overall ebullience. Inspired by Chick Corea, the song features a catchy melody and piano counterpoint and flies through different keys and strikes with rhythmic hits. More piano ecstasy follows with the blues-tinged "Song of the Rainbow People," again a trio trip. "This is a song about bringing people together in the midst of all the racial and religious tension, hate and misunderstanding in the world today," Sands says.

The swinging "Pointing West," written when Sands was attending the Manhattan School of Music and playing piano in the practice room overlooking the West Side Highway and the Hudson River beyond, features an inspired collaboration with Strickland that features remarkable harmonizing and trading. The pair links up again in the cosmic "Freefall," with more intertwining of piano and sax and new colors: the bright synthesized electronics and the dark-toned bass clarinet that speak to the song's theme of chasing an elusive apparition.

Informed by his Afro-Cuban music experiences in Bobby Sanabria's band, as well as playing in Los Hombres Calientes and in local Latin bands in Hartford, Connecticut, Sands sizzles on the firestorm "Óyeme," which features Rivera taking wild freedom with his percussion runs. "I love the groove, the dance," explains Sands. "This is about having a fiesta. This

is what music should be like. Not going too deep, but having a lot of ridiculous fun." That's followed by a cooking and bouncing trio swing on "Bud's Tune," Sands' homage to Bud Powell and Herbie Nichols.

The next three songs showcase guitarist Hekselman, whom Sands has worked with for several years, especially in bassist Ben Williams' band. "I wrote 'Reaching for the Sun' with Gilad in mind," Sands says. "He's so easy to play with and we never get in each other's way." The tune is another easy-going dance with the guitar adding a cool tonal color above the percolating rhythms and an excited fleet-fingered piano solo. Hekselman delivers a rock-edged, bending-note solo on the blues-drenched "Use Me" and helps drive the rhythm on the moving hip-hop grooved "Gangstalude." Of the former, Sands says that he was a big fan of soul music growing up, with one of his biggest influences being Bill Withers. "I always loved that tune 'Use Me,'" he says. "Originally I was just going to cover it, but then I started to bend and move the rhythm and extended and stretched the bass and melody lines." As for "Gangstalude," Sands says it was originally designed to just be a short swing interlude about gangsters--he loves mob movies like *The Godfather*--but then he came up with a bridge and brought the hip-hop flow into the mix.

The album ends on a romantic note with a non-original tune, the melodic gem "Somewhere Out There." Composed by James Horner, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, the original recording, sung by Linda Ronstadt and James Ingram, won Grammy® Awards for "Song of the Year" and "Best Song for Film" from its appearance in the 1986 animated film *An American Tail*. "I was looking for a ballad and I didn't want to do Strayhorn or Porter," Sands says. "I wanted to play something that was not that familiar. So I was talking to my mother and she said, 'What about the song from the movie with the mouse that you used to watch when you were a kid?' She used to sing it to me when I was four or five years old and my dad would play piano. So I told her she was genius; I don't think this has ever been done as an instrumental. When people hear this, I'm hoping they go, 'Oh, yeah, I remember this.'"

The end song is yet another example of how Sands shifts musical gears with a variety of styles on ***REACH***. "Actually, my biggest influence in making this album was Michael Jackson's *Bad* record," he says. "There are so many different kinds of tunes on that, so many changes. So that's what I was setting out to do."

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