

When Sean Mason speaks about music, you can hear the notes falling into place. The cadence of his ideas unfolds with deliberate tempo, each exploring and resolving tension like an inspired chord progression. On his debut album, *The Southern Suite*, he emerges as a guiding luminary, shining his introspective command as both a pianist and composer through the historic lens of jazz to create a work that distills the essence of the genre for our time even as it points the way forward.

“This album is situated at the intersection of ‘renaissance’ and ‘street culture’” explains Mason. “Each song represents a deviation from traditionalism and the cultural norms that I often felt forced to conform to, leading me to embrace the convergence of such paradoxical concepts and embody them through the musical language.” *The Southern Suite* portrays a resolution of these polar forces and is a bold statement of purpose from Mason, a generational talent well on his way to becoming a leading pianist/composer of his time.

Born and raised in Charlotte, North Carolina, Sean took to the piano at the late age of 13, teaching himself by ear to play the styles of music he was most attracted to. His approach quickly evolved into a highly original language. Sean’s unique voice in jazz is steeped in the sound of the South, allowing an extended time for groove while also displaying a vocabulary far beyond his years. As a bandleader, he leads the Sean Mason Quartet, a band assembled to play Sean’s original music, which has been described as highly melodic and infectious.

“I first got into music by going to church every Sunday, but the movie *Ray* was the catalyst for me to actually begin playing piano,” recalls Mason. “My grandmother gifted me a small Casio piano and from there I began teaching myself to play, studying for countless hours and devoting concentrated time on developing my sound.” During his time in North Carolina, Sean met jazz legend Branford Marsalis, who was immediately taken by Sean’s musicality and recommended he move to New York. “I told my brother [Wynton Marsalis], ‘Be on the lookout for this kid,’” Marsalis recalls. Upon his arrival, Sean hit the ground running, quickly securing performances and residencies at some of New York’s most prestigious jazz clubs, all while attending The Juilliard School.

The genesis of Sean’s debut album *The Southern Suite* came from an all-star quintet which Mason handpicked: Tony Glausi (trumpet), Chris Lewis (tenor saxophone), Felix Moseholm (bass), and Domo Branch (drums). Mason recalls, “It was during the first rehearsal that we realized how special of a group we were. We had only played through my first two songs when we all stopped, looked at each other, smiled... and said, ‘Whoa—we should record this.’ From there, I got the ball moving for us to record an

album, but before we ever got into the studio, we went on an incredible two-week tour. We were fortunate to have that time together, as it gave us a chance to fully internalize the music before recording.”

It helps that the melodies contained within *The Southern Suite* are timeless; they are as fresh as anything out there, and yet they sound so familiar. They take their influence from the jazz tradition and possess an x-factor that puts them in their own category—a magical junction of the lowdown blues joint, the wooden pew of the Black Baptist church, and the glamor of a Broadway score: uptown elegance intermingled with downtown grit.

Tracks like “Lullaby” directly invoke Sean’s respect for family and the Southern tradition. “I grew up with my grandmother living across the street from me, and we had a very close relationship,” Sean recalls. “After her passing, one way that I processed my grief was through composing ‘Lullaby’. This song is a reminder of the love we shared and the joy of her existence. I was intentional about composing a ballad that described love the way I experienced it in the South—from the understanding that ‘family always comes first.’”

The more up tempo “Closure” finds Mason again wrestling with duality, as the composition represents “... the end of a chapter. It communicates a ‘fuck you with a smile’, that I have the freedom to break the rules while still honoring my musical ancestors. It’s rooted in gospel nostalgia—intersecting the rhythm of swing with contrapuntal techniques of classical music.

The music on *The Southern Suite* is a rich evocation of life, including all its inherent contradictions and complexities—those of nuanced optimism and subtle melancholy. Mason contends, “This album is a nod to my influences while equally asserting that I won’t be constrained to one thing.”