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Charmed, I'm sure: An interview with Rob Christian

The up-and-coming Toronto jazz musician talks U of T, life experience, and why success means happiness

Elizabeth Haq

Alcohol, cigarettes, energy drinks, women: Rob Christian, a 21-year-old saxophone-toting, flute-playing jazz prodigy, loves it all.

“Oh, and music too!” he clarifies as he downs a shot-sized boost of caffeine and sugar.

As a frequenter of Toronto’s Annual Beaches Jazz Festival for the last couple years, I had made a point to catch the slender, effortlessly skilled multi-instrumentalist blaze through set after set, admiring his ease in front of a crowd and, I’ll admit it, falling somewhat prey to his palpable charm. It was always obvious that Christian’s undeniable skill was not the only thing that drew audiences to his little corner of Queen Street East every summer. My three-hour jaunt with the Markham-born musician ended up being as much a serious, journalistic assignment as it was the realization of a back-burnered fixation with an artist who is just as entertaining trading snaps with the festival crowd as he is pumping out innovatively remixed standards and pop-synthed original pieces.

Christian’s path to prominence in Toronto’s music scene began early: he got involved with the Beaches Jazz Festival at the age of 14, stunning old pros with his fresh approach and self-assuredness. Gathering fans and gaining prowess, Rob flexed musical muscle on the piano and with vocals and toyed with the temptation of expanding his repertoire beyond jazz and blues. He released mixtapes and samplers, assisted by his brother Scott Christian, a U of T graduate, and Juno-award-winning producer Eddie Bullen. Rob applied to U of T’s jazz music program and was awarded the Moe Koffman Memorial Scholarship, a prestigious award granted to



Rob Christian strikes a pose with one of his many great loves. DAVID PIKE/The Varsity



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one first-year student in honour of the Canadian jazz legend. The program however, often touted as the best in the country, turned out to be not-so-great for the teen. Halfway through his third year, he dropped out.



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“The place I am at with music didn’t jive with U of T. U of T is a straight-ahead jazz program and my interests are in a different place.” While Christian recognized that his time at U of T made him technically proficient, and he detected a “night and day difference” between the beginning and end of his first year in school, he could not justify the time and effort spent in class while the other aspects of his career were taking off at such an extraordinary pace. “I would have all of these amazing experiences and was making all of these great connections, and then I’d be back in class. It just didn’t feel right.”

Christian explains that he is comfortable making unorthodox decisions because of his life experiences thus far. “No matter what you think you like or what your tastes are, make sure you maintain an open mind. You can learn from everyone, no matter their skill level. At U of T, I was a part of a closed-minded mentality because it was such a specific program, but you should be open to learning everything, it’ll only help you.”

And there aren’t a lot of learning opportunities that Christian hasn’t considered. He consciously surrounds himself with diverse influences — from aspiring local rappers, one of whom guest spots on “Cat Meow,” an original tune off of his latest release called Mixtape; to Eddie Bullen’s son Quincy, a close friend and bandmate who has followed in his father’s jazz and blues footsteps; to Haley Small, an R&B songstress who boasts Christian’s seal

of approval. Deliberate about diversifying his influences and striving for a sound that is both relatable and original, he sidestepped the standardization that often accompanies formal training in the arts. "I don't even want people to be able to hear the Toronto in my music, much less the U of T."

Taking swigs of his pint, Christian explains that success means happiness, which translates to the ability to support and lift up those around you. The idea that so-called musical integrity goes hand-in-hand with obscurity and little to no financial return, the mantra of many in this increasingly Bieberified age, is not a mentality to which Christian subscribes. "Pride gets you hurt," he says simply, as if this single belief governs his entire life. He peppers conversation with detailed references to jazz and hip-hop legends, then laughs excitedly when he's told he has a Justin Bieber vibe: "Really? Well, he is the man...."

At once self-aware and self-doubting, Christian is the kind of 21-year-old that spends Bonnaroo hopped up on drugs to the point of near unconsciousness and plays a gig at Lee's Palace on his birthday, throwing up all those good-times minutes before taking the stage. He's also the kind to take a few moments to explain how much he loves his mom (who doubles as his manager) and rave like a proud parent about a particular 11-year-old he tutors in saxophone. He challenges his students with pieces far beyond their skill level, but doesn't tell them that: "It removes that mental block, that obstacle in your mind that's really just an illusion. These kids are doing the same stuff I'm doing. And they're doing it well."

I reach for my wallet as we prepare to leave, and he waves me away without a second thought. "You get the next one," he says, and I get the unshakable feeling that I am part of something big.

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