



## Jazz's James Austin, Jr. Celebrates Stevie Wonder

MADDIE ORTON (00:02):

Hi, I'm Maddie Orton, and you're listening to the Jersey Arts Podcast. If you're a Stevie Wonder fan, you have to give jazz pianist and bandleader James Austin, Jr.'s music a listen. His 2018 debut album, *Songs in the Key of Wonder*, reinterprets Stevie Wonder's beloved catalog with a Jazz spin – creating really beautiful new tracks.

Originally from Chicago and based in New Jersey, James began playing piano at age 3, went on to study under acclaimed jazz teacher Barry Harris, and was a semi-finalist in the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Piano competition

In addition to performing and carrying on his mentor's work in Jazz education, James is also the curator of NJPAC's monthly Jazz Jam Sessions. Before you listen to our interview, I suggest you play some of James' music on your favorite streaming site or via [JamesAustinJr.com](http://JamesAustinJr.com) – it's really a treat. And now, without further ado, here's my conversation with James Austin, Jr.

James, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today. I really appreciate it.

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (01:04):

It's my pleasure. Thanks, Maddie.

MADDIE ORTON (01:06):

I have to tell you, it has been so much fun listening to your music. I am such a fan, and it's just been a complete pleasure.

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (01:13):

Thank you. We had a lot of fun putting that together as our debut project and tributing one of our heroes, Stevie Wonder, who is, in my opinion, one of our all-time great composers in American history,

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the **New Jersey State Council on the Arts**. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the **National Endowment for the Arts**.





and we're lucky that he's still with us, and he's made so many, many great songs. I mean, we did a project where we just picked 10 as sort of a volume one, I guess you could say, but literally we could probably do 20 more volumes and not run out of good material because he wrote such great music, music that stands the test of time. So we had a lot of fun doing it and putting our sort of jazz twist on his repertoire, and we're really delighted that the project has been so well received throughout the States and even internationally. We've gotten some really great reviews, and I've been touring on it for a few years now, so it's time for me to do the next project soon. But we're really thrilled that that project has been so well received.

MADDIE ORTON (02:06):

It's such a pleasure, and it's one of those things where I was listening to, and let me pause and say, anybody who has not listened to this should go online and listen to Songs in the Key of Wonder so that they know what we're talking about, but also so that they can just enjoy it because it's terrific. Listening to "My Cheri Amour" in particular, I was like, this feels like it was kind of always meant to be this way to me. I don't know. I thought it was really hearing the song in a totally different way, and I was wondering how you determined how to translate different Stevie Wonder songs into different jazz aesthetics. How did you decide what song should be translated in what way?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (02:49):

It was a really trial and error. I mean, it's ironic that you mentioned "My Cheri Amour." That was the very one. That's the very first Stevie tune that I started to play. That was the first Stevie Tune in my repertoire, and that's probably the song that sort of kicked off this whole thing because years and years and years ago, when I started playing that song and sort of started adding it into my repertoire, I noticed that audiences would respond to it a certain way. When you're a jazz musician, especially when you're of a younger age and you're playing the jazz repertoire, a lot of the audiences, some of them are not old enough to really appreciate some of the repertoire that was popular back in the thirties, forties, fifties. When you start playing songs that were a little bit more recent, you are able to build a bigger audience, I think, and get people to kind of gravitate towards it.

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (03:36):

So anyway, I started with "My Cheri Amour" and kind had sort of a jazzy flare to it. Some of the other songs was just trial and error, so I may have said, 'Let me try a Latin vibe on this song. Let me try a swing straight ahead.' Some of them seemed to just really fall, like lend themselves to a certain kind of thing.

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the **New Jersey State Council on the Arts**. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the **National Endowment for the Arts**.





So “Another Star” just seemed for us to just really, really fall nicely in a Latin kind of vibe, and that's kind of how we performed it. Another thing I'll say is that Stevie Wonder has been loved and appreciated by people of all stripes and all demographics, all ages. So his music has been covered by a lot of great jazz musicians. So I'm sure we took some inspiration from over the years hearing so many other folks. I mean, straight ahead musicians, smooth jazz musicians. No matter what your genre is, everybody likes Stevie, right? So yeah, we were inspired by things that we've heard over the years, but I think for us, putting the record together, it was really a matter of trial and error.

MADDIE ORTON (04:34):

Were there any songs where you tried it a certain way and then you completely flipped it and tried a different way and said, it's actually this instead?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (04:41):

For sure. So the one that I think we really like how it came out was “You are the Sunshine of my Life.” We ended up performing that one in seven, which is not a typical way, and a lot of people, when we released it, a lot of people were like, ‘Wow, I was surprised that it worked so well in seven.’ People weren't expecting that. But as we came up with the arrangement initially, we were going to just do it sort of in a straight 4/4 meter, but as we started playing it in seven, it's like, this feels really good. It feels really natural. It feels like this is the way maybe she goes.

MADDIE ORTON (05:13):

For those who haven't heard it, you, I don't want to put you on the spot, but can you sort of show me what it would sound like in four versus what it sounds like in seven?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (05:21):

So, you are the Sunshine of my life, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, that kind of vibe. And seven is: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 1, 2, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 1, 2. That's why I always be sort of that vibe. Right? Yeah, it's great. Yeah. Yeah. It's sort of kind of gives it a whole different twist, but it worked, and it felt good, and it's been one that people have commented on that they really dig.

MADDIE ORTON (05:54):

If this has gotten back to Stevie Wonder at all, does he know about this?

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the **New Jersey State Council on the Arts**. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the **National Endowment for the Arts**.





JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (05:58):

I don't. But whenever I perform, I always make a point to say that I ask people in the audience if you know him, and I'll say to your listening audience, if you know him, call him up. Tell him that you heard this great tribute album called Songs in The Key of Wonder, and I would love to have him let us know. I had the opportunity, and I tell the story often. I had the opportunity to meet Stevie one time. I competed in a prestigious jazz piano competition called the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Piano Competition, and that was where I had the opportunity to meet Stevie Wonder. Yeah, yeah. It was sort of my 15 seconds of fame, I guess you could say. So yeah, really a meaningful opportunity.

MADDIE ORTON (06:37):

What did that feel like? Was that a big moment?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (06:40):

It was huge. Yeah. I mean, there were a lot of luminaries. The person that introduced me was Billy D. Williams...

MADDIE ORTON (06:47):

Oh my gosh.

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (06:47):

And Quincy Jones was there, and there were just a lot of luminaries there. So it was a great experience.

MADDIE ORTON (06:57):

So how did you get into jazz originally? Your parents are both musicians, right?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (07:02):

Yeah, my dad was a musician. My mom was more of a vocalist, but they were both really into music. And I come from a musical family. My uncle was a really, really special musician and really influential in our area. So yeah, I was in music all of my life. We had pianos and instruments in the house, and as young as two or three years old, I would go up to the instruments and bang around and bang on the piano, and my parents decided that if you're going to bang, then you're going to learn how to play it. So they put me in lessons. I was just shy of my fourth birthday, still three years old, but I guess you could say three and a half and maybe a couple months shy of my fourth birthday when I started formal piano

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the **New Jersey State Council on the Arts**. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the **National Endowment for the Arts**.





lessons. I soon stopped enjoying it, the lessons, because when you're a kid and you're making noise, it's all fun and games, but when you realize that there's actual real work involved, you don't want to do the real work anymore.

MADDIE ORTON (07:54):

Yeah, I think that's like the piano lesson tale as old as time.

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (07:58):

That's right. Yeah. The thing that saved me is that my parents just insisted, even when I didn't want to do it, even when I said, 'I don't want to practice,' my parents just said, 'No, you're going to do it.' And now looking back, I am grateful for it because I love it. I mean, I love it more than anything at this point. But yeah, there were times where I didn't want to practice. I didn't want to because it wasn't all fun anymore. It was like real work. You got to get up and you got to get to it, and you got to prepare and that kind of thing.

MADDIE ORTON (08:26):

And you started playing in church, right?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (08:28):

Yeah, that was the first, I mean--my first exposure to music was in church, come from a big gospel tradition in Chicago. Yeah. But like I said, I had formal instruction, so the formal instruction was in just basic piano skills and the classical repertoire. Definitely not a classical musician, but I received the basic training.

MADDIE ORTON (08:52):

Between the classical and the gospel, where did you find jazz? How old were you? Do you remember your first introduction to it?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (08:59):

I mentioned, I alluded to having an uncle who was a really special musician, even though he was a gospel musician, his style was very, very jazzy. He was really influenced by the likes of people like Art Tatum, Oscar Peterson, Hank Jones, Nat King Cole, Tommy Flanagans, Barry Harris', Hank Jones' of the

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the **New Jersey State Council on the Arts**. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the **National Endowment for the Arts**.





world. He had that kind of sensibility. So even though I was hearing him play in church, I didn't know it, but I was getting a jazz education every week just from listening to my uncle.

MADDIE ORTON  
That's great.

JAMES AUSTIN, JR.

But then eventually, once as I got older and grammar school and in high school, I eventually got exposed to other kinds of music. And in high school and college, that's when I really fell in love with jazz. And college is where, at about the age of 19 years old, is when I met my teacher and dear friend who we lost just a few years ago, his name is Dr. Barry Harris. And Barry Harris is one of the most special jazz bebop pianists of all time. But even more important than that, he's probably the preeminent teacher of jazz, or was until his death, was the most prominent teacher of jazz. He had his own unique pedagogical approach that was special.

And one of the things that I like about talking about Barry and his teaching was that he had been doing it since he was like, he started teaching maybe when he was in his twenties, and some of the people that started up under him are some of the biggest names in the history of the music. Literally, like Paul Chambers, Barry used to always talk about Paul Chambers, who was the great bass player, one of the great bass players of all time. He came to fame, obviously playing with Miles Davis and a lot of other—you know, John Coltrane...

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (10:35):

He played with everybody. But Paul Chambers started, I think, I believe around the age of 15 on the bass with Barry. And Barry, we always tell the story, how he remembered when he first got his start, and he was coming to Barry. And so many great musicians over the years. Charles McPherson, who's still with us, was a young student of Barry's, even all the way to this day, Samara Joy, who just won those Grammy awards, the young vocalist, she was a devotee of Barry's. She would come to his classes all the time. And the one thing that happened when he passed away a couple years ago, I just thought, 'Boy, if he could have just hung on one or two more years to see her win those Grammys.' Yeah, she won two Grammy awards. So yeah. Anyway, he was the reason why I really got baptized in jazz, essentially after I met him in college.

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the **New Jersey State Council on the Arts**. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the **National Endowment for the Arts**.





MADDIE ORTON (11:25):

What a legacy. What was his approach that made his pedagogical style different?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (11:31):

So he had a number of different things, but harmonically, he was all about, when I talk about jazz harmony, he was all about chord movements. And he would find all kinds of creative ways to teach young pianists and young guitarists how to move chords using scales. And some of these scales are scales that he kind of was the father of. He had his own six diminished scales and different variations on those scales. And by the way, we have an organization that--it's dedicating his honor—it's called called the Barry Harris Institute of Jazz, and we're keeping up his legacy. So we're teaching these things that we're talking about. We're teaching at Rutgers University at The New School.

MADDIE ORTON (12:09):

That's so great.

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (12:10):

We're developing partnerships with other places. But harmonically, he was all about chord movements and using scales as vehicles for movements. I say improvisationally, he would teach you how to come up with phrases and how to use scales to build solos, and how to really understand the harmonic structure and melodic structure of songs so that you're not just blowing wind, but you're actually able to play lines and phrases that really make sense in the context of a song. It's hard to articulate in just a few minutes his approach, but that's I guess in a nutshell, sort of the couple of strands.

MADDIE ORTON (12:41):

Yeah, that's one of those things about when you see jazz live, I am always blown away that people are able to improvise so perfectly. Obviously, there's so much music theory involved in that, but I think I would just be so terrified. Is that part of what makes it doable is just having the theory so deeply in you that you're not going to go off in a way that's not going to fit with the music?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (13:07):

Well, I'm so glad you said that because Barry was really--what you just said is a probably better way than I could articulate it. What matters is that what you play fits with the music. I mean, I'm stealing your phrase. What one should play, should fit with the music, and that's what he was all about.

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the **New Jersey State Council on the Arts**. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the **National Endowment for the Arts**.





MADDIE ORTON (13:23):

That makes me feel great, by the way, James, because I was like--music theory was my absolute worst subject next to chemistry, so I appreciate you saying that. Thank you.

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (13:30):

But even without going music theory, you have the sense to know that what you're listening to should fit some kind of way. I mean, I just think that that's a perfect way to think about it, and everybody won't agree with what we're saying here because there are some people that think that you should just be free to play whatever you feel, and however the notes come out, let that be what it is. And I appreciate that there are different perspectives, but Barry was really all about finding phrases, finding things that fit with the context of the song. So the song was written, somebody wrote "How High the Moon" for a reason, the way that they wrote it. And if you're going to play that song, you should try to come up with phrases that are true to the general structure of the song. And to be clear, I tried to do that with the Stevie Wonder stuff, right?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (14:13):

I mean, someone that knows those songs, when they hear us play them, they'll still recognize the song. Even in our improvisation, they should still be able to know, 'Okay, he's playing 'Isn't she lovely?' Or he's playing 'My Cheri Amour,' or he's playing 'Golden Lady.'" Even if I'm doing my own thing, even if I'm playing my own creative phrases, we've tried to stay true to the material and not just be playing random things that have nothing to do with the harmonic structure of the song. And Barry was all about teaching us how to have the things in our toolbox, how to use phrases, how to use scales, how to use arpeggios, how to use things that take some of the mystery out of improvisation, because some people think improvisation is just, you just wake up and you start blowing. No. Improvisation is something that you spend years and years studying and coming up with things in your toolbox, scales and arpeggios and other devices, ways that you--creative things that you do with scales so that you have material that you can use to create a solo. It's really like a good public speaker. I mean, if you hear a great speech by a good politician or a good minister or a good rabbi or whatever, if you hear a great speech and you see how they take words and they put them together, and they're smooth with their delivery and they have a certain style, I mean, that's really what it's like. They're creating a solo. It's like you have to have these devices that you use, whether it's humor or alliteration or whatever it is.

MADDIE ORTON (15:33):

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the **New Jersey State Council on the Arts**. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the **National Endowment for the Arts**.







That's such an interesting comparison. I've never thought of it that way, but that makes the concept of it more accessible to me, I think.

JAMES AUSTIN, JR.  
Mm-hm. Yeah.

MADDIE ORTON  
And so you're teaching now as well?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (15:43):  
I am. Yeah. I teach in a few different programs. One is NJPAC, the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. There's a program called our Jazz for Teens Program where we teach young high schoolers jazz. We teach them improvisation, we teach them repertoire, jazz, harmony, theory, and then they have opportunities to perform. So I teach there. As I mentioned, we have the Bay Harris Institute of Jazz and partnerships with The New school and partnerships with Rutgers University at Express Newark, which is downtown Newark, New Jersey. We teach there. And for more information about that, you can go to the website, [BarryHarrisInstituteOfJazz.org](http://BarryHarrisInstituteOfJazz.org). I also teach young people, mostly teenage students at the Thurnauer School of Music, which is a part of the Jewish Cultural Community Center in Tenafly, New Jersey. So yeah. Yeah, just trying to spread this message and trying to get young folks interested, have their interest piqued about the music and about keeping it alive, keep it going.

MADDIE ORTON (16:42):  
You also are the curator of the Jazz Jam sessions at NJPAC, right?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (16:47):  
That's right. That's something that we've been doing for approximately a decade or so. We've been doing Jazz Jam Sessions. We found in the last six, seven years or so, we found a permanent home. Before we used to bounce around to different venues in New Jersey, we found a permanent home at Rutgers University at a place called Clement's Place,

MADDIE ORTON (17:06):  
Which is named after Clement Price?

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for [JerseyArts.com](http://JerseyArts.com) content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (17:08):

That's right. That's right. It's named after him, who was a great figure in the community and a lover of jazz. And that place named after him called Clement's Place is where we host every third Thursday, 10 months out of the year. Every third Thursday, we host the NJPAC Jazz Jam Sessions. The two months that we don't do it is July and August--there's a summer break for the university that we observe, but starting again in September and continuing through June, every third Thursday, we're there at Clement's Place with the NJPAC Jazz Jam sessions. And it's something that we're really proud of. It's been really well-received. We have a full house every time we do it, and it's opportunity for us to present really, really high quality musicians. A house band is made up of really tier A musicians, but then we opened it up for anyone who wants to perform with us, any musicians, and audience.

MADDIE ORTON (18:00):

That's so cool.

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (18:00):

Yeah, it's a really nice.

MADDIE ORTON (18:02):

Do you ever get sort of younger, emerging musicians who take the opportunity to jam with somebody like you?

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (18:08):

All the time. All the time. We get really young folks that come up and take the opportunity, and quite frankly, we get some really old folks that do the same too!

MADDIE ORTON

That's great. I love that!

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (18:17):

So, we get a big mix of folks. Yeah.

MADDIE ORTON (18:20):

That's so terrific. And tell me a little bit about your upcoming concert.

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the **New Jersey State Council on the Arts**. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the **National Endowment for the Arts**.





JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (18:24):

So on May 19th, we're going to be at the Grunin Center, and we're looking forward to that. We have Jarrard Harris, who's a longtime friend of mine, and an associate who's based in the Chicago area. He's actually on the faculty of Purdue University--in the jazz faculty, but he's flying out to join us. And we're going to have a quartet with Jarrard on the front line, and Ben Rubens on bass, and a great drummer, Kayvon Gordon. And we're going to play a mix of songs, some of the Stevie Wonder repertoire for sure, but also some songs from the Jazz classics, and songs from the Great American Songbook, some standards. So yeah, we're looking forward to that and hoping that those who can will join us. Grunin, we've performed there before, and it's a really, really fantastic institution and a great place to play. And if you can get there, meet us there on Sunday, May 19th.

MADDIE ORTON (19:10):

That sounds so awesome. Thanks so much, James. It was such a pleasure talking to you.

JAMES AUSTIN, JR. (19:14):

Same. Thank you, Maddie.

MADDIE ORTON (19:17):

James Austin, Jr. will perform at the Grunin Center for the Arts on Sunday, May 19th. For more information on the concert, visit [GruninCenter.org](http://GruninCenter.org) – that's G-R-U-N-I-N center.org. And to hear more of James's music, check out his website: [JamesAustinJr.com](http://JamesAustinJr.com).

If you'd liked this episode, be sure to give us a review, subscribe, and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast, as well as links to related content and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found on [JerseyArts.com](http://JerseyArts.com).

The Jersey Arts Podcast is presented by ArtPride New Jersey, advancing a state of creativity since 1986. The show is co-founded by, and currently supported by funds from, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.





This episode was hosted, produced and edited by yours truly, Maddie Orton. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Isaac Serna-Diez. Special thanks to James Austin, Jr.

I'm Maddie Orton for the Jersey Arts Podcast, thanks for listening.

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

