

Justin Kauflin:

FINDING HIS VOICE

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It's a fall day, early afternoon, and Justin Kauflin is in the small music room of his family's Virginia Beach home, sitting at the piano, searching for a sound.

His hands glide across the keys like water over stones, fast but not rushed. His face is in a grimace.

The music is beautiful. And unmistakably jazz. But it's not perfect. As Kauflin finishes, he delivers an apology. "It's just something I'm working on," he says. "It's not ready yet."

Music has always spoken to Kauflin. As a small child, he reached up to the family piano and tapped along until familiar melodies emerged. Then came music lessons: first violin, then piano. By the time he started at the Governor's School for the Arts in Norfolk, it was clear he had a gift.

Still, gifts require development, and he impressed parents and teachers alike with a work ethic rarely found in someone so young. But, lately the 27-year old has pushed himself harder than ever.

This fall he heads to Los Angeles to begin the months-long work of recording a CD with Quincy Jones, the legendary producer, conductor and arranger who has worked with some of the biggest names in music. And for the first time in his life, Kauflin is being asked not to interpret someone else's music but to make a serious attempt at writing his own.

So here he is, sitting at the piano, searching for something original and special and entirely his own, searching for his voice.

Of course, in a way, Kauflin has been doing that for 16 years — ever since he lost his sight.

Kauflin was diagnosed young with familial exudative vitreoretinopathy, a hereditary disorder that can cause progressive vision loss. He was completely blind by the age of 11.

It's easy to imagine that children in that circumstance might feel sorry for themselves and question an unfair world. But, Phyllis Kauflin's son was different. "The first thing he did was come to me and say, 'I need to find something to do for a job,' she says.

He was the middle of five children, all of whom were musical. And despite a lifetime of poor vision, he had already showed tremendous promise at the piano. He learned music quickly, by ear, and remembered anything he heard.

"His brain is like a computer," his mother says. In fact, years later he would shock teachers by doing calculus and AP physics without a calculator.

Immediately after losing his sight, Kauflin dedicated himself to the piano. The decision was in some part pragmatic - unable to play sports and video games, he filled his time with practice. "Everybody was rollerblading and running around, so I naturally found myself at the piano, really for lack of anything better to do. In a weird way, losing my sight helped me realize how important music was for me."

He auditioned for the Governor's School. The instructors thought he would be a good fit for jazz. Classical required too much sight reading; jazz was an oral tradition with a lot of skilled improvisation.

"This is something I can do," he thought.

Jae Sinnett was teaching jazz at the governor's magnet school when he first met Kauflin.

The experienced jazz drummer says the young man was mature beyond his years and hungry to learn. Kauflin would listen to Sinnett's radio show — Sinnett in Session on WHRV - and try to learn the music on the spot.

"He would call me up and ask me to listen. Then he would play over the phone the song I just had on the air. It was amazing."

Kauflin did well in high school and continued his music education at William Paterson University of New Jersey. There he met Clark Terry, a jazz trumpeter who played with Duke Ellington and Count Basie. Terry, now 93, is a legend for several reasons, not the least of which is his role as Quincy Jones' first instructor.

Terry was a sort of adjunct professor at the university. Kauflin and his friends started going to Terry's home to play music and learn about jazz from a master. "Those are the kinds of opportunities you just can't pass up," Kauflin says.

After school he moved to Brooklyn in hopes of making a living there as a musician. But he found life in the city tough and filled with anxiety. Something as simple and necessary as a subway ride could be frightening.

Making matters worse, getting gigs was tough. People assumed Kauflin's blindness made it harder for him to learn their music. "I would tell them, "Just give me the chord changes. It will take me five minutes." But it was a pretty constant issue," he says.

After three years of watching his money dwindle, he returned home to his family in Virginia Beach and started performing in the area, sometimes with Sinnett. He kept in touch with Terry, who had moved to Arkansas to be with family. Last August he flew down to visit his old friend and met Jones, who was also there visiting. Kauflin spent the day with the two legends.

A few months later Jones invited Kauflin and other young performers on tour. The jazz great was celebrating his 80th birthday and using the occasion to host a series of concerts in Switzerland, South Korea and Japan. Kauflin so impressed Jones that the producer invited him out to the West Coast to do some studio work on some of Kauflin's originals.

It's a big opportunity and an even bigger challenge for the young musician.

"That's his next great step," Sinnett says. "He is explosive as a player, but now he has to look deep inside himself and find another level. He has to find out what he wants to say with his music. And that is maybe the toughest thing to do for a musician, even a really good one like Justin."

Which is why Kauflin has been working so hard lately. He knows what he wants to say; he's just working out how to say it.

He says you have to live a full life to make music. And though young, Kaufflin has faced his share of challenges. But when he thinks about his life, he sees the hand of God at work.

“Would I be a musician now if I had not lost my sight?” he says, “Probably not. And now I would not know what to do without it. Faith has been very important to me. A source of comfort and strength. I want my music to reflect that. I want it to be a prayer I can share with people.”