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Justin Kauflin's Live Adventure

SINCE APPEARING IN THE MOVING 2014 documentary *Keep On Keepin' On*, about his relationship with trumpet legend Clark Terry, pianist and composer Justin Kauflin has been lauded as a prodigy with a soulful approach.

But the prodigy label can paint such a lofty portrait of Kauflin, even as it aptly describes the Yamaha Artist's exceptional musical skill. Kauflin, deeply kind and humbled by the praise and caliber of musicians in his orbit, is — as he puts it — just a “simple guy.”

“I feel like that comes through in the music,” he said. “If it's a good melody, I'm pretty happy.”

On *Live At Sam First*, Kauflin's new album and his first-ever live recording, it's this simplicity, expressed through his pure heart, relaxed delivery and tender melodic sense, that makes for magic.

Born with a rare degenerative condition called exudative retinopathy, Kauflin went completely blind by age 11. As he lost his sight, he dove into the world of music, eventually finding jazz. “It became a fast passion because it was something I didn't feel limited in,” Kauflin said.

He then attended William Paterson University, where he studied with Mulgrew Miller and Clark Terry. His time at the university also brought about *Keep On Keepin' On*, a documentary about Kauflin's journey as Terry's protégé, which led to the pianist signing with Quincy Jones' management roster.

“[Terry and Mulgrew] were really wonderful, naturally humble people that just emanated love for the music but also for the people around them,” Kauflin said. “[Clark] showed me the value of who a person is as a human being is reflected in their music.”

A testament to his mentor's lesson, *Live At Sam First* teems with Kauflin's soulfulness and genuine goodness, and stands as one of his most relaxed and free recording dates. In the live format, Kauflin felt more able to let things breathe and coalesce organically.

“When you're in the studio you're always automatically thinking ... how I'm going to feel when I'm listening back to this later,” Kauflin said. “[With this record] I didn't have to think about the time that it took to play the song. I could be a little bit indulgent and not worry.”

For Kauflin, who has long dealt with severe stage fright, this easy embrace of the moment, and of imperfection, is a testament to the live setting, as well as to 36-year-old's growth since his portrayal in *Keep On Keepin' On*. In many ways, the pandemic was a forced pause that helped him recalibrate and get back to basics.

“The movie came out, which really helped exposure and allowed me ... to book gigs in Europe. That was exciting, but I just wasn't in the right place; I couldn't really enjoy it. And having the break allowed me to be like, no, that's definitely *not* how it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to enjoy this,” Kauflin said. “[I'm] going to take the time to fall in love with the thing that I'm doing again.”

In this way, *Live At Sam First* marks a new phase for Kauflin, as he tapped old friends, bassist David Robaire and drummer Mark Ferber. Recorded at the club Sam First Jazz in Los Angeles, the project came to fruition after Robaire, a producer for the Sam First Label, approached Kauflin to perform a streamed concert during the pandemic. From there, Kauflin was asked to do this live album, which they

recorded in 2021.

While the set features almost all previously recorded material (except “Candy,” a sweet tribute to Kauflin's guide dog who passed away in 2021), Kauflin's originals like “Coming Home” and “Country Fried” sound refreshed, reframed and uplifted, partly due to his easy headspace and approach to the new work, and based on his heavy listening of symphonies during the pandemic.

With the flow of a symphony in mind, Kauflin brings the idea of four movements into the way he tracked and played the set at Sam First. This loose framework gives the album momentum as it climbs toward the climax, “No Matter,” a bluesy ballad about “how life works out no matter what” from his 2015 debut *Dedication*.

“No Matter” is the third movement in a three-song series Kauflin wrote for *Dedication*, which chronicled the simultaneous discovery of jazz and his spirituality, the comedown from revelation and the remembrance of faith. This passionate connection to spirit comes out on other *Live At Sam First* tracks, including “Come Thou Fount Of Every Blessing” and “Thank You Lord.”

After the album is released, instead of touring, Kauflin is taking time to tend to his health. He'll also be composing for film and focusing on a new teaching job at his alma mater, Governor's School for the Performing Arts, which his mentor Terry would undoubtedly support.

“When I got in there, things really clicked, everything Clark had told me,” Kauflin said. “I get to share what makes my life feel so enriched. Hopefully, it'll click for one of [my students] and they'll be able to turn to music the same way I did.”

—Alexa Peters