

# Insider



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## ALBUM REVIEW

### Cousin Stizz stays true to his roots on 'Trying to Find My Next Thrill'



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It's a perfect opener for the album because "Trying to Find My Next Thrill" finds Cousin Stizz coming down from the initial high of being a celebrity. He uses the album to embrace the duality of his life. Half his heart is still in Dorchester, and the other half is exploring life in LA.

That said, LA's fingerprints are all over this album. On "Anonymous," Stizz enlists the help of LA-based producer Kenny Beats and brings St. Louis-turned-LA wordsmith Smino to the mic. On "Toast 2 That," Stizz teams up with Indiana's Freddie Gibbs to make a party-ready banger. At the same time, there are songs like "Two Face" and album closer "The Message" that show Stizz's maturity, minimal production style, and an earnest return to his ferocious and open-hearted bars. On "The Message," Stizz aims his words to some younger friends from back home: "I remember times when we thought we seen you doomed/Lost ones you love too soon/Messages from us, sent to you with love/Lessons that you learned will forever be taught."

On "Trying to Find My Next Thrill," Cousin Stizz has managed to find a perfect balance between the grittiness of projects like "Suffolk County" and commercial appeal of "One Night Only" while staying true to his roots.

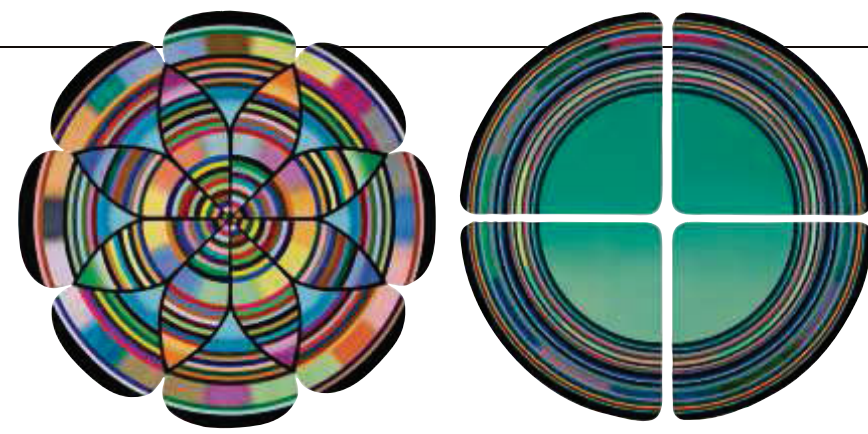
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Cousin Stizz treats his music like a diary. "[That's why]... all my projects have been pretty different from each other," Stizz told the Cleveland Scene in 2017. "My music is just about my life and where I am now. That's how I've always been."

Stizz, born Stephen Goss, has been putting Dorchester on the map for a while now. His 2015 mixtape "Suffolk County" gave listeners a first-hand look at what life is like when you're pushing drugs in Fields Corner, losing your friends to death and incarceration, and dealing with the pain it all brings.

His 2017 debut album "One Night Only" found Stizz in Los Angeles. Despite being his debut, the album served as a victory lap and a full embrace of fame. His lyrics were happier and more welcoming, his songs more radio friendly.

Now, Stizz has dropped his second studio album, "Trying to Find My Next Thrill," and it proves that no matter where Stephen Goss goes, he'll never let Dorchester go. The album opens with "Meds," a return to the stern lyricism that made "Suffolk County" such a hit. "Where I'm from living ain't for the weak/I'm tryna stack up/Take care of the family/Smoking that dope but I can't shake it off," he raps.



GALLERIES | CATE MCQUAID

## Whirls of pattern and color

Many of Mark Knoerzer's paintings, now up at M Fine Arts Galerie, resemble stained glass, or the view inside a kaleidoscope — whirling, warm colors and radiant patterns, often painted on cut wood panels. The Brooklyn artist coats in epoxy works with titles such as "Splendor" and "Floreo," giving them a glassy sheen, with soft pastels beneath shifting in concentric circles complicated by floral and stellar designs.

Knoerzer's aims are symmetry and the heightened pleasure of complex pattern plumped up with color — because, after all, symmetry palls if it doesn't have complications. Bands of red, violet, and green melt into one another, and in some works, large swaths of color deepen like the sky at twilight, tugging us into a dream of eternity.

There's much to appreciate in his flawless layers, which he also takes into three dimensions. Creating "Large Cube," a 32-inch wooden cube with a hole tunneling through the center, entailed laboriously adhering 44 cut panels together. On the remaining two side faces, he has painted a big, sky-blue porthole ringed with glowing tones. With satisfying rhythm, the piece sets up the painterly illusion of deep space with an actual space a child could crawl through.

Knoerzer's honed color sense, his fascination with space and design, and the pleasures of wood add up to pleasing and harmonious art. But he could, and here and there he does, raise the stakes.

In one of my favorite pieces, "Luminare," a pale teal circle cut into quadrants lightens at the bottom like the sky over a reflective sea. The white of the wall crosses between them, adding tension; the eye wants to pull them together. But here's the key: In multicolored arcs along the edge, one small fuchsia section at the top glitters. That gritty, sparkling visual texture stands out against the smooth epoxy, tingling like the memory of a kiss.

Knoerzer throws off consistency with that one gesture. His strategy is to drill down into increasingly layered design. When he breaks out of a painting's structure, even in a small way, the effect is like Cindy Crawford's beauty mark, enhancing the whole.

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Works of Mark Knoerzer on display include: "Floreo" (top left), "Luminare" (top right), and "Large Cube" (inset).

Conrad Tao has no memory of when he began to play music. From his family he knows that he started to play the piano when he was around 18 months old, trying to imitate the sounds his older sister made on the instrument. Having taught himself to pick out melodies, the Chicago area youth tried writing his own at 3. He made his concerto debut at age 8, began studying composition formally at 9, and had professional management by 12.

Recounting Tao's development this way gives it an astonishing trajectory, even in a field where prodigies are common. But to Tao, now 25, it didn't feel like that; it just felt natural that music had "just been in my life in some form from day one of my recorded memory."

"When I look back on it," he continued during a recent phone interview, "I'm struck by how logical it all seemed at the time. Why wouldn't I do this? It brought me joy, it was fun — it was play." Even when his activity began to take on what he called "the flavor of professional music making," it still seemed like the next logical step of something that had started before he could remember starting it.

"Then, by some wild set of miracles," he added, "I'm not only still doing it, but doing it my way."

He was partly joking when he said this, but the classical music world has a way of pushing prodigies into boxes and subtly dissuading them from venturing too far afield as they develop. But Tao — who makes his Boston Symphony Orchestra debut Aug. 23 at Tanglewood, replacing Ingrid Fliter as soloist in the Ravel Piano Concerto — is happily building a career shaped chiefly by his multifaceted interests and ever-expanding curiosity.

Over the past few seasons he has premiered a number of new works, including a piece for the New York Philharmonic; played a wide range of repertoire (by himself and others) in concert; extended his interest in electronics and improvisation; and collaborated with the dancer and choreographer Caleb Teicher on an eve-



Pianist Conrad Tao made his concerto debut at age 8.

BRANTLEY GUTIERREZ

CLASSICAL NOTES | DAVID WEININGER

## BSO soloist built a career that resists 'sound bites'

ning-length work called "More Forever," which the Celebrity Series of Boston will present in early 2020. In October he will release a new solo piano album called "American Rage."

"What I've been lucky enough to do is to not have to package my work into easily digestible sound bites," he said. "I just haven't felt that need."

It was not always so easy. Tao admitted during the interview that he went through a period of doubt during his teenage years, when the immediacy of his musical talents left him, paradoxically, uncertain about his authenticity. He was jealous of the clarity of purpose he sensed in composers who'd come to it later in life, rather than simply writing music their whole lives, as he had. He worried that he lacked "the street cred" to play new music because

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he hadn't spent his time "in the trenches, doing basement shows." He thought he would have to choose between piano and composition.

What he eventually realized was that "if I really cared about playing contemporary music, writing music, and also more broadly, being me... I was going to have to be impulsive. Like, I would put programs together, just put it out there and not worry too much about what I thought people wanted. Because otherwise I would always be able to think myself into an

anxious spiral of wondering whether today was the day the jig was up."

Evidence of Tao's confidence with the full range of his talents and interests could be seen most clearly this past September, when the New York Philharmonic premiered "Everything Must Go," an aural meditation on ideas of collapse and decay. Concurrent with the performances, he also curated Nightcap, a late-night cabaret-style concert hosted by the Philharmonic. Tao arranged a pair of Bruckner motets — one for Vocaloid (a vocal synthesizer), the other for himself at the piano and Teicher tap dancing. There was a wild yet beautiful improvisation by Tao on electronics and experimental vocalist Charmaine Lee. A soulful song he'd written to words by Delali Ayivor, "Heavy Rain," closed the evening.

The Nightcap concert might seem like a sidelight to the higher-profile orchestral premiere, but for Tao it was almost the opposite: the former exemplified his comfort in the full breadth of his artistry. "It was the first time that I had [publicly] shown a side that I used to think of as, 'This is the music making I do just for me, sharing with my friends.'" The feedback he got from listeners showed him that "pursuing a very specific and intimately personal point of view and committing myself to that — that opens up a new relationship with the audience."

The activities of composing and performing now seem more integrated, Tao said, like twinned creative processes. Looking at the music of others, he now finds himself searching for suggestions of the person behind the notes. This happened a few months ago when he spent a lot of time perusing Beethoven's manuscript for his First Piano Concerto, which Tao was preparing to perform with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. In it the composer can be seen scribbling things out, revising ideas, and making the decisions that would eventually coalesce into the finished work.

"In those manuscripts you see so many permutations of what that piece could have been," Tao explained. "And for me, being a composer myself, I get a powerful sense of, 'Oh, there's a person making choices on the other side.' That's incredibly moving, because you're not viewing art by trying to measure it against some sort of objective standard; you're trying to recognize all of the traces of the human who made the thing."

It's the act of making those connections that is likely to keep Tao busy well into the future. "I feel like I'm just getting started — just beginning to scratch the surface of what I really want to do," he said. "That doesn't mean I know what that looks like; it means I have a lot more faith that it's possible."

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