



Sons of Serendip Bring "Christmas: Beyond the Lights" to South Orange Performing Arts Center

Transcript

Story by Christopher Benincasa

Chris Benincasa:

This is Chris Benincasa for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Classical crossover Ensemble Sons of Serendip broke onto the scene in 2014 after competing on America's Got Talent. And they've been going strong ever since. They're currently touring the country, spreading their signature style of holiday cheer, and South Orange Performing Arts Center is one of their stops. We recently spoke with lead vocalist Micah Christian and pianist Cordaro Rodriguez about how their call to make music brought Sons of Serendip together, and how their second album, "Christmas Beyond the Lights," has become a holiday tradition.

Cordaro Rodriguez:

My name is Cordaro Rodriguez. I'm from Charlotte, North Carolina. I play the piano and the group, and I've been playing piano since probably between fifth and sixth grade, so quite a while. And I'm happy to be on this journey.

Micah Christian:

My name is Micah Christian. I am from just outside of Boston, Massachusetts, in a town called Randolph, Massachusetts, and I'm the lead vocalist of the group. I started to sing back in middle school in the Randolph public school system and have fallen more and more in love with it over the years, and really just grateful to be on this journey with these guys. It's been amazing.

Chris Benincasa:

So this is a special time of year for you guys. Could you tell me what's different about performing material from "Christmas: Beyond the Lights" compared to the rest of your catalogue?

Cordaro Rodriguez:

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I think the Christmas show is our, one of my favorite, it's our favorite show to play, and so there's a lot of special moments in it. And it's funny because for me, I'm not a big Christmas music person. I found it <laugh> kind of found it a little cheesy, but I feel like we've really worked out something with this, with this show that I feel moved by. So yeah, I'm looking forward to this tour.

Micah Christian:

What we try to do is we create an experience for the audience, and it's not just about entertainment, but it's about like creating a moment together. So, the name of the album and the name of the tour that we do each year during the season is "Christmas: Beyond the Lights." And so it's about reflection as well and about celebration. But we try to make it as meaningful as possible. And so what we do is we do storytelling throughout the performance as well. And there's one particular thing that we do that I'm gonna leave, you know, as a surprise for, you know, the audience that haven't been to our Christmas show before. But it's a way to make it meaningful for them and so that they can go into the season not just thinking about the, you know, the consumer aspect of it, but also, you know, like what it's really about and, you know, the time with family and loved ones and even the spiritual side of it as well.

So, yeah, it's a lot of fun and and we enjoy this concert in particular. And I think another thing too that they can expect is that they're gonna hear a lot of their favorite Christmas tunes, but done in a way that we hope is unique and fresh. And the hope is that they feel like they're hearing their favorite tunes for the first time again.

Chris Benincasa:

Cordaro, you mentioned that you weren't always super into Christmas music, but the Sons of Serendip take on that type of music is so unique and so creative – you've sort of made these traditional songs your own. Which one do you enjoy performing in front of an audience the most?

Cordero Rodriguez:

I think O Holy Night might be my favorite one to perform.

Chris Benincasa:

Micah, how about you?

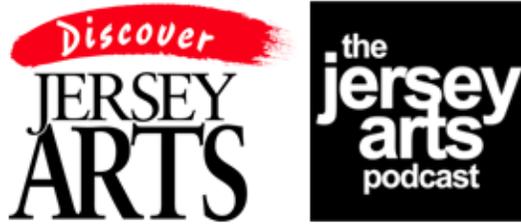
Micah Christian:

Yeah. O Holy Night, for sure.



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Chris Benincasa:

Okay, you both picked the same song, so we've got to hear it. Here is Sons of Serendip performing "O Holy Night."

Chris Benincasa:

Micah, you met Cordaro at Boston University, and at the time he was living with cellist Kendall Ramseur and harpist Mason Morton. And, of course, the four of you would eventually come together to form Sons of Serendip, even though that was never the plan. What happened the first time the four of you were in the same room?

Micah Christian:

I was like, guys, I'm a vocalist. Like, you know, maybe one day we could just put something together and just see what happens. And it was kind of like, oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. But then two and a half years later is when the America's Got Talent auditions came up, and that's when I asked them if they'd be interested in auditioning. And thankfully they said yes. And then during that time we started to unpack our story and to look back at what it was that brought us to Boston University and what it was that brought them to living together in the same house. And then we just started noticing, and this is before we actually had an official name, and then we started noticing all the serendipities, all the serendipitous moments that happened, you know, within our stories to get us to that point. And so we were looking at different words, and serendipity was one of the words that we were looking at that kind of captured that. And so we decided on the name Sons of Serendip based on like that conversation where we went into our story and we started, you know, noticing all the little moments that helped us to get to that point.

Chris Benincasa:

Cordaro, do you remember how the group decided on the name Sons of Serendip?

Cordaro Rodriguez:

I do. AGT asked us to come up with a name and we had like an hour or so to do it. And so I, we just sat down and started Googling words, and, as Michael was saying, serendipity was one of those words. And, yeah, we looked it up. The origin of it comes from a 12th century Persian tale about called the Three Princes of Serendip, and they go on this journey and make a bunch of discoveries by accident that benefit their lives. And so we felt that that was something that, you know, resonated with our story. And



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so there were three princes, and there's four band members. So we decided we'll take out the three princes and say the Sons of Serendip. And yeah, that's how we came about it.

Chris Benincasa:

That's really cool. I've never heard of that story. I gotta check that out. So let's talk about your experience with America's Got Talent. You competed in season nine and were a huge hit, and that was a major turning point for you. Tell me what that was like.

Micah Christian:

Yeah, so once we decided that we were gonna audition for America's Got Talent, we got together, put together a tape and recorded - it was, I think it was like three songs we sent it in, and they ended up calling us back three weeks later and asked us if we want to audition in front of the judges for television. And so once we said yes to that, then it was a process of going through song after song, trying to find the one song that we were gonna do for the show. And, and that was a collaborative process with the producers. And so once we landed on Somewhere Only We Know, we got that ready. It was at Madison Square Garden, and we performed it, and we went into to the experience with no expectations.

Like, we intentionally told ourselves like, you know, this is one of those journeys that could be life changing. But it also could just, you know, just be a great experience. And so let's just go into it with, you know, as level as we can possibly be, you know, through this process, and just see what happens and take it, you know, day by day and, and be as present as possible through the experience. And the producers also reminded us that like, even if we get through, it's not a guarantee that we're gonna actually be on the show. So there was a lot of like, all right, awesome - we made it, now what, you know - a lot of waiting to see if we got approved to go through at the very beginning, you know, for those first few rounds.

And so as we were going through round by round, next thing you know, you know, we're in the live performances, and you know, the intensity kind of kicks up a little bit, but we still made it a point that it's like, guys, we don't know how far we're gonna go, but let's just enjoy this experience. This has been awesome so far. And let's just see what happens. And so we rehearsed like crazy during that time and because we hadn't been a group before that - just to get used to each other and develop that synergy - it took, you know, hours of just practice and practice and practice. Next thing you know, we're in, you know, the finale and we're like, how did we get here <laugh>, you know, like we just said yes to, to just auditioning. And then next thing you know, we were in the finale

Chris Benincasa:



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People, the audience and the judges, they really responded to you.

Micah Christian:

Yeah, they did. They were very encouraging, especially Howie Mandel and yeah - we got some really encouraging words from him behind the scenes. He was great.

Chris Benincasa:

So after America's Got Talent, you guys were able to quit your day jobs and just focus on your music - as I understand it. You were all already very skilled and talented musicians, obviously, but what was it like to, for the first time in your life, to be able to just do music?

Cordaro Rodriguez:

I think I just went into it with a sort of an open mind and open heart. The way that I approach life is like, if there's something in front of you that's good, do it to the best of your ability and see where it takes you. And you know, I was, you know, I was practicing law, but I wasn't I wasn't in the area of practice that I wanted to be in at the time. And then this opportunity came up and it was a good thing. And so I decided, you know, let me just see where it'll take me. And nine years later, I'm still doing it. And I, you know, I still keep my license in my back pocket just in case, but I'm, you know, I'm grateful that this journey is still continuing it. And I don't have any regrets or anything. It's just been great.

Chris Benincasa:

Micah, you've spoken about a period of disillusionment before the formation of the group. Would you talk about that?

Micah Christian:

Yeah, so for me, my wife and I were living in Peru after I graduated from Boston University, and didn't know where I wanted to go professionally. And so and my wife was in the same boat. And so we went to Peru and we were working with an organization called the Notre Dame Mission Volunteers. But I would say that at first it was very difficult because we were just having a tough time getting into the community where we were - a village in northern Peru. And during that year, you know, it was a, it was a lot of soul searching, a lot of deep reflection, a lot of journaling.

And at some point during that year, about halfway through the year, is when I realized that because I was hitting a low internally, emotionally, during that time. And I just realized that I needed to start doing

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things that brought me joy again. And one of those things was music, because music had been pushed to the margins of my life while I was in my studies, and doing some traveling. But at that time I was like, you know what? I'm gonna bring music back to being a more central part of my life. And because I did it for my own wellbeing - because it made me happy and it brought me joy. And so I called Cordaro and I was like, Cordaro, when I get back, like, let's make music, let's make music. And he was like, yep, yep. When we get back, we're gonna like, right when you get back, let's make music. And so I started writing, you know, more songs when I was out there. And then when I got back is when the America's Got Talent auditions came up and everything changed.

Chris Benincasa:

And Cordaro, where were you at when you got that call?

Cordaro Rodriguez:

I think I was sitting in front of my computer because at that time I lived with Mason and Kendall, and I remember Micah asking me if we wanted to do it. And for me it was, it was a quick, I was like, yeah, let's do it. Just kind of off the cuff. And then he asked if Kendall and Mason would want to do it, and I said, Kendall would probably wanna do it. And asked him, he said, yes, but I had a little reservation. I wasn't sure about Mason, because in the past we've tried to do something with Mason and I guess at the time he was super busy, so I said, it might be more of a tough sell with Mason, but Mason was like, yeah, let's do it. So, oh, all right. And yeah, so that's how, that's how it went down.

Chris Benincasa:

I really enjoy how you make songs your own, and I'm really curious about your process.

Micah Christian:

So oftentimes it'll, you know, like, we'll listen to a bunch of different songs, and I'm looking personally for, for lyrics that are meaningful, that I feel like I could sing and I could share with an audience in an authentic way. And then also I look for melodies that I like and songs that have kind of like an underlying ache to them in some way. When we decide, all right, we're gonna do this song, then usually Cordaro will start it and then, Cordaro, you can talk about the process of arranging.

Cordaro Rodriguez:



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Yeah, so once we go through that initial process of song selection I'll, like, I'll listen to the music and I'll try to see if there's any kind of chord substitutions I can make. And so then I'll kind of lay out a mood on the piano. And the way we've traditionally been doing it is we each improvise. I write out the chords and I'll give it to everybody, and then each of us will improv together as a group and workshop it. And if somebody does something that's really, really good, we'll say yes, keep doing that. We come up with an arrangement that that we think works. And so yeah, that's the basic process.

Chris Benincasa:

Okay. So you are just starting this holiday season tour. Any parting thoughts on this tour, this music, before you go?

Cordaro Rodriguez:

Generally, like, I feel like it's my job to just do my job to the best of my ability, the best of our ability. And I'll say, yeah, let God kind of have the the final effect. We're just the tool and I just hope that we do a job well done, and that the evidence of it will be reflected in the hearts of the people who hear it.

Micah Christian:

Every time that we have, you know, to get out there and get on a stage and be in front of audiences, especially during the holiday season - we don't take it for granted. And it's just always a great, meaningful experience.

Chris Benincasa:

Micah Christian and Cordaro Rodriguez, thank you so much for doing the podcast.

Micah Christian:

Thank you, Chris.

Chris Benincasa:

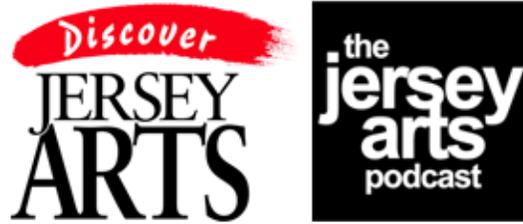
Sons of Serendip will perform at South Orange Performing Arts Center next Wednesday, December 7th. For more information, visit sopacnow.org. For more info on Sons of Serendip, go to sonsofserendip.com. If you like this episode, be sure to review, subscribe, and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast, links relevant to the story, and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found at jerseyarts.com. The Jersey Arts Podcast is presented by Art Pride New Jersey, advancing a state of creativity since 1986. The

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show was 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. This episode was hosted and produced by Chris Benincasa. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Cie Stroud. I'm Chris Benincasa for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

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