



## PRESS KIT

### *Journey To The Place Called There*

Rob Stephens and the New Renaissance Ensemble



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## Biography

Rob Stephens is a talented and versatile composer and music educator who fuses classical, avant-garde jazz, neo/soul, and gospel music into a voice all his own. Whether he's doing experimental avant-garde jazz, touring with R&B/Hip Hop artists like Ryan Leslie, turning out classical compositions and transcriptions, or doing live gospel recording sessions with people like Grammy award winner Donnie McClurkin, Rob brings great musical integrity and honesty to all of his work.

Rob was born in Savannah, Georgia, where his roots run deep: his maternal grandmother and aunt were both schoolteachers there, and his late uncle, Edward V. “Mickey” Stephens, served as a Georgia State Representative for Savannah. He has lived in Newark, NJ for most of his adult life (with stints in Brooklyn and Connecticut), and his very first professional recording session was with Rev. James Cleveland and the New Jersey Mass Choir at Symphony Hall in Newark — a city that has remained central to his musical life ever since.

Christine Myers of the Billings Gazette writes *“Robert Stephens III is one of those rare musical birds whose instincts are always right. The gifted player knows the difference between accompanying and soloing, and while he shines as an instrumentalist, he has a deft, perceptive touch as a member of the ensemble, listening for (Monroe) Kent's cues, following and enhancing, adept at pop, jazz, ballads, blues and ragtime...”* as Musical Director for the theater production of Unforgettable, The Nat King Cole Story.

Other musical theater credits include performing in the critically acclaimed musical “Low Down Dirty Blues” directed by Tony Award winner Randall Myer and featuring Tony Award nominee Felicia Fields (The Color Purple), Black to Broadway (the directorial debut of T.C. Carson of the sitcom Living Single), and many more.

He has also done arrangements and session work for Disney and ESPN's March Madness, and his string quartet arrangement of the classic hymn “Holy Holy Holy” has been performed by the Chamber Ensemble of the Virginia Symphony.

He has also recorded and performed with some of the finest artists in Gospel music, including Grammy Award winning artists Rev. James Cleveland and Rev. Timothy Wright, and has performed with Hezekiah Walker, along with Dorothy Norwood, The Harlem Gospel Singers, and many more.

Rob is the former Director of Music at Hamilton Park Montessori School in Jersey City, NJ, and continues to maintain an active private lesson studio.

## Genres

Jazz, Classical, Neo/Soul, Gospel, Progressive Rock (per one-sheet); funk, gospel, jazz, jazz fusion, neo-soul (Bandcamp tags)

## Influences

Quincy Jones, Herbie Hancock, George Duke (one-sheet); Debussy, Ravel, Thad Jones, Oscar Peterson, Villa-Lobos (album liner notes)

## Bio — Multiple Lengths

### Short (25 words):

Rob Stephens is a composer and educator fusing jazz, classical, neo-soul, and gospel. His debut album Journey to the Place Called There traces a diasporic journey from Ghana to Georgia.

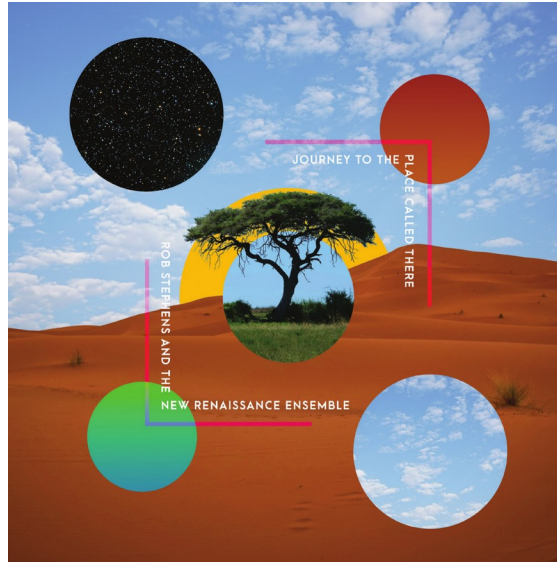
### Medium (50 words):

Rob Stephens is a versatile composer, educator, and performer who fuses classical, avant-garde jazz, neo-soul, and gospel into a voice all his own. His debut album with the New Renaissance Ensemble, Journey to the Place Called There, is a 20-piece orchestral work tracing a diasporic journey from Accra, Ghana to Savannah, Georgia.

**Long (150 words):**

Rob Stephens is a talented and versatile composer, performer, and educator who fuses classical, avant-garde jazz, neo-soul, and gospel music into a voice all his own. His professional theater credits include music director for the national tour of Unforgettable: The Nat King Cole Story, choral director for The Gospel at Colonus at Newark Symphony Hall, and musical director for the road production of Black to Broadway. As an arranger, his work includes two world tours with EMI Gospel artist Queen Esther Marrow and the Harlem Gospel Singers, a string quartet arrangement of "Holy Holy Holy" performed by the Chamber Ensemble of the Virginia Symphony, and commercial work for Disney and ESPN. He has recorded with Grammy winners Donnie McClurkin and Rev. James Cleveland, and has performed with Hezekiah Walker. Rob is the former Director of Music at Hamilton Park Montessori School in Jersey City, NJ, and continues to maintain an active private lesson studio.

# Journey To The Place Called There



Released November 28, 2025 | Distributed by United Masters | Available on all streaming platforms

**Listen now (all platforms):** [unttd.io/rob-stephens3543](https://unttd.io/rob-stephens3543)

**Bandcamp:** [robstephens1.bandcamp.com](https://robstephens1.bandcamp.com)

**YouTube Music:** [music.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy\\_kxnYYN-kg8XqXFmf6Lxvi30Jh-crCyqrk](https://music.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy_kxnYYN-kg8XqXFmf6Lxvi30Jh-crCyqrk)

Track 9, "The First Step," was previously released as a standalone single (Jan 2020) and has reached 64,142 all-time streams on its own — proven audience reach carried directly into this album.

Composer Rob Stephens opens his debut project with the New Renaissance Ensemble not with spectacle, but intention. *Journey To The Place Called There* begins with the sound of water, a deliberate choice that sets the tone for an album rooted in memory, movement, and lineage. The Atlantic Ocean serves as both symbol and structure, connecting Stephens's Savannah, Georgia roots to Accra, Ghana, and framing the work as a personal and cultural reckoning. This is not background listening. It is a compositional reflection on identity, inheritance, and where we all come from.

Musically, the album unfolds with patience and clarity. Stephens blends spirituals, electric jazz fusion, classical orchestration, gospel, and Neo-Soul into a cohesive narrative that feels lived-in rather than theoretical. At its core, *Journey To The Place Called There* is immersive and meditative, rewarding focused listening — particularly through headphones — where subtle shifts in texture and harmony reveal themselves over time.

The creation of this 20-piece studio orchestra project was as intentional as the music itself. Stephens began with handwritten sketches at the piano, later translating them into digital scores, recording with his core rhythm section before refining the arrangements through layered overdubs in his home studio. Though the album was completed over four years and slowed by the pandemic, many compositions had been developing internally for decades.

Looking ahead, Stephens is already expanding the album's life beyond the studio, with plans for live performances and a summer tour. His next major work, a choral symphony honoring Harriet Tubman, will further extend his commitment to storytelling at scale.

## Touring

**Touring Summer 2027.**

## Track Listing

| #  | Title                             | Duration | Notes       |
|----|-----------------------------------|----------|-------------|
| 1  | Journey to the Place Called There | 07:29    |             |
| 2  | Free Your Mind                    | 02:23    |             |
| 3  | The Sorcerer                      | 04:42    |             |
| 4  | Sweet                             | 07:54    |             |
| 5  | Epiphany                          | 06:52    |             |
| 6  | Where You Gonna Run To?           | 01:16    |             |
| 7  | Nowhere To Run                    | 08:50    |             |
| 8  | Fountain                          | 06:12    |             |
| 9  | The First Step                    | 05:23    |             |
| 10 | Window of Johari                  | 01:37    | Bonus track |

# Full Personnel & Credits

## Production

- Executive Producer: Rob Stephens
- Producer: John Isley
- Co-Producers: Dwayne "DW" Wright and JoMear Martin

## Recording

Recorded at: Kaleidoscope Sound (Union City, NJ); Reisinger Concert Hall at Sarah Lawrence College (Yonkers, NY); Engine Room Sound (NYC); Lucky Studios (Morristown, NJ)

Pre-Production Engineers: Alvin Jones (ALJO Studio, Queens, NY) and JoMear Martin (Lucky Studios, Morristown, NJ)

Recording Engineers: John Isley (Kaleidoscope and Reisinger Hall sessions); Patrick Frehuling (Engine Room sessions)

Assistant Recording Engineers: Jeremy Delaney (Kaleidoscope sessions); Caleb Flood (Engine Room sessions)

Mixed and edited by: John Isley

Mastering Engineer: Nathan James, Vault Mastering Studios (Chandler, AZ)

## Visual

Album Artwork: Mike McCauslin

Photography: Allison Brown for AVB Studio, NJ

## Arrangements

Horn arrangements for "Fountain," "Nowhere To Run," and "The Sorcerer": Theljon Allen

All other arrangements and orchestration: Rob Stephens

"Window of Johari" (bonus track): music by Rob Stephens, lyrics by Jay Karnell (BadKidz) — all instruments performed by Rob Stephens

## The New Renaissance Ensemble

### Woodwinds

- Charles Pillow — Alto Sax, Flute, Oboe
- David Lee Jones — Alto Sax, Flute
- Patricia Billings-Stephens — Bb Clarinet, Tenor Sax, Bass Clarinet (Rob's wife — the two married during the making of this album)
- John Isley — Tenor and Baritone Saxes, C and Alto Flutes
- Mike Rabinowitz — Bassoon

### Brass

- John Clark — Horns
- Theljon Allen — Trumpets, Flugelhorns
- Angelisha Rogers — Trumpet
- Corey Wallace — Trombones, Bass Trombone

### Rhythm Section

- Rob Stephens — Acoustic and Electric Piano, Synthesizers, Fretless Bass (on "Sweet")

- Dwayne "DW" Wright — Electric Bass (musical director for Jill Scott; son of Grammy-nominated gospel legend Rev. Timothy Wright; best man at Rob's wedding)
- Steve Count — Acoustic Bass
- Charles Norris III — Drums (now musical director for Ari Lennox; brother of vocalist/lyricist Jay Karnell)
- Aaron Draper — Percussion

### **Strings**

- Jonathan Dinklage — Violins, Violas (concertmaster, Hamilton)
- Adele Stein — Cellos
- Steve Count — Double Bass

### **Vocals**

- Dawn Tallman, Marcia Sapp, and Jay Karnell (BadKidz — co-writer of "Window of Johari")

## Story Angles for Pitches

- Savannah, Georgia — the album's starting point — isn't a thematic choice, it's Rob's actual hometown. His maternal grandmother and aunt were both schoolteachers there, and his late uncle, Edward V. “Mickey” Stephens, served as a Georgia State Representative for Savannah. Journey To The Place Called There is, quite literally, Rob's own family history.
- "The First Step," now track 9 on Journey To The Place Called There, was originally released as a standalone single in January 2020 — and has since reached 64,142 all-time streams, more than 20x the current total of the new album. This is genuine, proven audience reach from years before this project began: not a hypothetical or a hope, but a track that already found tens of thousands of real listeners once and can plausibly do so again now that it's part of a larger, more ambitious work.
- Patricia Billings-Stephens (woodwinds) is Rob's wife. The two married during the making of this album — a genuine "the band that plays together" story.
- Dwayne "DW" Wright (co-producer, electric bass, musical director for Jill Scott) was the best man at Rob's wedding. DW is the son of Grammy-nominated gospel legend Rev. Timothy Wright — Rob recorded on Rev. Wright's final four recordings before his passing, connecting this album directly to a multi-generational gospel lineage.
- "Window of Johari" is a bonus track: lyrics by Jay Karnell (of BadKidz), music by Rob Stephens, with Rob playing all instruments on the track himself.
- Jay Karnell is the brother of drummer Charles Norris III (now musical director for Ari Lennox) — a family connection running through the ensemble's rhythm and songwriting.
- Rob met his wife Patricia at a rehearsal for Nine Live, the nonet led by French horn player John Clark — Rob had just recorded with the group on Clark's 2016 release *Sonus Inenarrabilis* (Mulatta Records). Clark, whom Rob considers one of his most trusted mentors, has also served as copyist for several of Rob's other composition projects.
- Nine Live conductor Thomas Carlo Bo (Composers Concordance, New York) was one of Rob's professors at New Jersey City University — a teacher-turned-collaborator relationship that ran full circle when the two later shared the stage on *Sonus Inenarrabilis*. Bo also directed a music festival in Hudson, NY that Rob performed at.
- Rob was introduced to Composers Concordance, the NYC new-music collective, by Thomas Carlo Bo and fellow NJCU classmate/composer Zack Seely.
- Rob is planning to release Patricia Billings-Stephens's debut solo record on Composers Concordance Records, working with label director Gene Pritsker — bringing the Nine Live/Composers Concordance relationship full circle into a family project.

*Strong angles for feature-style outlets (NPR, The Root, Essence, Journal of Gospel Music, local Jersey City press) wanting a narrative hook beyond the music itself.*

## Press Quotes on File

*“Robert Stephens III is one of those rare musical birds whose instincts are always right. The gifted player knows the difference between accompanying and soloing, and while he shines as an instrumentalist, he has a deft, perceptive touch as a member of the ensemble.”*

— Christine Myers, **Billings Gazette** (Billings, Montana)

*“Touches like Robert Stephens' glistening piano melody on a sunny, Stevie Wonder-ish read of Bill Withers' ‘Lovely Day’...provide just the right counterpoint.”*

— **JazzTimes**, review of **Luico Hopper's Reflections (2001)**, on which Rob played piano

*Note: an existing quote/feature history with JazzTimes means outreach there should reference this prior coverage rather than approach cold.*

## Selected Career Credits

### Musical Theater

- Music Director — national tour, Unforgettable: The Nat King Cole Story
- Choral Director — The Gospel at Colonus (Tony Award-winning musical), Newark Symphony Hall
- Musical Director — road production of Black to Broadway (directorial debut of T.C. Carson, Living Single)
- Performer — Low Down Dirty Blues, dir. Tony Award winner Randall Myer, feat. Tony nominee Felicia Fields (The Color Purple)

### Arranging & Session Work

- Arrangements, synth programming & sequencing for EMI Gospel artist Queen Esther Marrow and the Harlem Gospel Singers — two world tours
- String quartet arrangement of "Holy Holy Holy," performed by the Chamber Ensemble of the Virginia Symphony
- Commercial/jingle work for Walt Disney and ESPN (incl. March Madness)
- Transcription and vocal arrangement work for the University of Connecticut

### Formal Training

- Classical piano — Dr. John Gorman, Joseph Bilotti, Dr. Min Kim
- Orchestration & jazz big band arrangement — Dr. Jose Bevia
- Jazz piano — Joel Weiskopf
- Composition/piano — Thomas Carlo Bo, New Jersey City University (later a collaborator and conductor on Sonus Inenarrabilis)

### Gospel Performance & Recording History

- Recorded with Grammy-winning artists Donnie McClurkin and Rev. James Cleveland
- Recorded on Rev. Timothy Wright's final four recordings before his passing — a direct personal and musical link to co-producer Dwayne "DW" Wright, his son
- Performed with Hezekiah Walker, Dorothy Norwood, and The Harlem Gospel Singers

### Chamber & Contemporary Jazz Work

- Pianist on Luico Hopper's Reflections (Ralston Hill Records, 2001) — JazzTimes singled out Rob's piano work by name in its review (see Press Quotes)
- Keyboardist on Sonus Inenarrabilis (Mulatta Records, 2016), John Clark's nonet Nine Live — praised in reviews for his solo piano introduction on "Sibilia Colubri"
- John Clark — French horn player, composer, and Manhattan School of Music faculty member — is a trusted mentor to Rob and has served as copyist on several of his other composition projects



## Contact

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