

Ottawa Citizen

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Take Five: Chris Donnelly

By [phum](#) 11-11-2008 [Thriving on a riff](#)



Seven or eight years ago, I was playing piano with [Charley Gordon](#) at the now defunct Byward Market bar Bourbons. A pianist still in his teens -- Chris Donnelly -- was in the room. He knew Charley from the Jazzworks jazz camp, and after a break Chris took over on the piano. He sounded good, and he had yet to go to university for jazz studies.

Two or three years ago, I went to the Avant-Garde Bar to hear Quinsin Nachoff's Fender Rhodes Trio. Subbing for Dave Restivo on electric piano was Donnelly. Dang, but he sounded great. He'd clearly made the most of the University of Toronto's jazz program, and was already swimming ably with the big fish like Nachoff.

Last month, Donnelly's first CD, a solo outing called *Solo*, landed on my desk. It's really, really good (my review of it is [here](#)). Donnelly, as I learned, had definitely arrived. He took second place last year at the Great American Jazz Piano Competition. Upon graduating from U of T, he won an award for the student deemed to have the potential to make an important contribution to music. He just 25, and he's on faculty at U of T.

He's be playing at Cafe Paradiso this Friday. You will too, right? (If you need further convincing, read this [article](#) in today's Citizen by my colleague Doug Fischer.)

Here are Chris' answers to the blog's usual questions.

1) What's the difference between good music and bad music?

The listener!

I originally wrote a few paragraphs to sum up my rationale, but it was getting a little too technical and bulky. Hopefully the minimalists will appreciate!

2) What jazz musician past or present would you like to have dinner with, and why?

I've always said that if I were to meet any musician/artist, it would be J.S. Bach. Yes, he's not a jazz musician, but we derive so much from his history and tradition. So let's say I travel back in time and have dinner with Bach. Hopefully I'd also get to watch him work! And improvise! I'd have so many questions. How did you do that? Why do you play music? What's the difference between good music and bad music? What do you think of Thelonious Monk? What musician would YOU like to have dinner with?

3) What's one thing that you're practicing or studying these days?

I'm currently working on a few things. I'm composing music for a concept album based on the works on M.C. Escher. Lately I've been leaning and memorizing Gershwin's piano arrangements of his popular tunes. I'm also studying various right hand and left hand improv exercises.

4) Name three of your desert island recordings

1. Glenn Gould - *The Well Tempered Clavier, Book I*
2. Steve Reich - *Music for 18 Musicians*

3. John Coltrane - *A Love Supreme*

5) What would you have done with your life if you were not a jazz musician?

I've thought about this question before. I'd probably start up a business, maybe in the music industry, maybe not. I've also had thoughts about being in politics or law enforcement. I've had many hobbies and areas of interest over the years, but to be honest, if I didn't have music I'd be lost.

Chris Donnelly performs at Cafe Paradiso, 199 Bank St., on Friday, Nov. 14. The first of three sets starts at 9:30 p.m. There is no cover charge. Reservations: 613-565-0657.

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