

## Piano Days: a conversation with Apostle Jones' Mikey Silas

by Noah Auby



Mikey Silas, of Apostle Jones fame, is proud of what he and his band have been able to accomplish in such a short period of time. Formed in late 2018, Apostle Jones has been on an impressive run in the Cleveland music scene like no other. Over the last four years, they have managed to release a studio EP as well as four live performance compilations.

Speaking of live performance, Mikey Silas along with the rest of Apostle Jones will be performing on Friday, July 29th as part of Piano Cleveland's "PianoDays @CLE." Their 7:00pm "Rock the Classics" program takes place at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame's Union

Home Mortgage Plaza outdoor stage. The event will be free and open to the public.

During a recent Zoom conversation, I asked the Cleveland native about the upcoming show and his musical career.

*Noah Auby: How did Apostle Jones get involved in the Piano Cleveland project?*

Mikey Silas: We have a preexisting relationship with the Rock Hall, and during the pandemic, we played a couple of shows there when they were doing outdoor concerts. We feature keys in a lot of our songs and when Piano Cleveland reached out to the Rock Hall, we were one of the bands that they thought of. We're really excited to be in such great company.

*NA: What was your reaction to the invitation?*

MS: It's always exciting when you get a chance to perform, but for a rock and soul band, to play at the Rock Hall is extra exciting. Piano Cleveland is a whole new world for us so we're really excited to synergize our energy with theirs. I've been doing a little bit of reading and research into the organization's competitions, high pedigree of talent, and caliber of membership. So to say I'm a little nervous would be an understatement, but I'm really excited to just be ourselves and to show how versatile the piano can be.

*NA: I feel like nervousness and excitement are two sides of the same coin.*

MS: If you aren't nervous, what are you doing?!

*NA: Exactly. Will the whole band be performing? And what's on the play list?*

MS: The band is about nine or ten members at full strength, but since we're trying to be a little more intimate with our approach to this event, we're gonna whittle that down to a smaller ensemble. We'll feature some original songs that start in a more basic form than what they become once we add things like the horns and the background vocals.

Because the event is called "Rock the Classics," we made sure to throw a couple covers into the setlist as well. We'll pepper in some of my favorites like Elton John, Leonard Cohen, and if there's time, *Imagine* by John Lennon.

*NA: Wow, that's quite the classic right there. Speaking of covers, I noticed there were a couple of covers on Apostle Jones' last EP. What made you guys decide to cover the people and the songs you did?*

MS: It must've been eight years ago that I heard the song *Novacane* that we cover, and it just hit at a certain time in my life where it was unfortunately biographical to a certain extent. It's always been inspiring to me for its lyrics and simple arrangement. It's only three chords, and I really like the feel of it. We definitely have a different take on it.

If you listen to it expecting to hear Frank Ocean, you won't. And honestly, *Use Me* by Bill Withers is a song that for some reason was always conceptually out of my grasp, so I said, "we're gonna do this song and we're gonna get it." That was more a challenge and point of pride for me.

Like I mentioned, the band is at full strength with nine to ten people, and we all have distinct musical journeys behind us. Some of us come from a gospel background, some

of us come from the Jam band scene. I come from a theatrical, soul background. A lot of the covers that we do highlight the different strengths and dimensions of the band.

One of the things I really like about Apostle Jones as a project and as a performing body is that a lot of our shows have a different feel to them. Sometimes we can even do the same song from one gig to the next, and it'll have a different feel based on who's there and who our audience is, which I think might speak to my more theatrical background.

*NA: Performing becomes more improvisational in a way?*

MS: It can be for sure, especially when we stretch sections out or go back to the top of the song and throw it over some keys, horns, or a sax solo. That's a lot of fun, but I think it's also important to take into account who your audience is and what they're wanting, since we're as much entertainers as we are artists. It's really cool to balance those two worlds.

*NA: How long have you been doing vocals and keyboard? Did one come first?*

MS: Vocals came first, and I am primarily self-taught on piano. When I was little, I had a book with both *Ode to Joy* and *Camptown Races* in it. I took lessons with a family friend for only a few weeks or so when I was younger — a dear, wonderful lady named Evie Morris who just died earlier this year.

*NA: Sorry to hear that.*

MS: Yeah, she was a fighter, especially in the Cleveland music scene. She was a big musical influence in my youth. And there were musicals at the church and such, but I was primarily an athlete so throughout all this time, I started to really get into popular music. I would read charts and everything. I'd go to Sam Ash and buy these little sheet music singles. I'd go and buy the new N-Sync song or whatever.

*NA: Wait, that's real? They sold N-Sync sheet music?*

MS: Back in the day, I can assure you that they did. I didn't really know how to read music all that well, but I could understand a little bit of the musical alphabet. I knew where middle C was, so I would look at the guitar charts above the main score and try to figure out what the chords were. From there, I slowly started to piece those things together, blending chord charts and sheet music, and then adding a lot of feel and ear into the middle of all that. It hasn't been a very traditional path to learning music, but those trips to Sam Ash and other music stores to learn popular music allowed me to

string piano and singing together. And then ultimately, I went into theater as a way to solidify and expand upon the merging of these worlds.

*NA: That's awesome. Did you come from a musical background?*

MS: My mom can sing a little bit, and lord knows, my dad cannot sing or play any instruments. So I had to forge my own path into music and the performing arts. I grew up in Cleveland Heights, went to college in Chicago, and lived there for fifteen years before coming back to Cleveland not too long ago.

*NA: What made you decide to come back to Cleveland?*

MS: Family's definitely one reason, and living in Chicago is expensive. I did theater for a long time there, and then I switched more toward community events, programming, and writing my own music. I started picking up acoustic guitar and then family who had left Cleveland had all gone back, so it was kinda like a boomerang moment.



*NA: Cool how things work out like that. Has there been a defining moment in your career?*

MS: One was playing at the House of Blues last October. After a good couple of years of working with the band, getting some consistency in our gigs, releasing a few live albums, and doing a studio EP, bringing the full band to the House of Blues stage felt

iconic and like a real accomplishment. That felt like a big upgrade from where we typically play.

When you're working in a band or with other people, you're always looking for ways to grow and evolve. Those moments of discovery or accomplishment happen when you have an open mind about collaboration and working with other people in a bigger concept.

*NA: So I'm gathering that you're always going to have new defining moments in your career.*

MS: Yeah, and I think that's important. Not just as artists but as people, I think we should all have that approach to things. We can always find ways to make things better. I heard something on the radio this morning about how America isn't perfect by any means and yet it's a country that still looks for ways to improve via conversation and debate.

Laws can be changed. Movements can be started. The past can be reversed. Something about that just resonated with me and reminded me what it takes to grow as an artist. It's essential to understand that not everything is going to be perfect, but that we always have the chance everyday to do something to make it more meaningful or harmonious with the way that we live our lives.

*NA: On that note, is there anything you've learned from your projects that you hope to bring with you to your next one?*

MS: As a vocalist, singing in a studio setting is so different from singing onstage. The range and the amount of detail you can put into a studio recording is something I'm really excited to keep going. Some of the stuff we're working on right now, building off what we've done before, is like painting with a tinier brush when it comes to vocal choices and carving out moments.

I'm teaching voice a couple of days a week at the School of Rock in Cleveland, and one thing I talk to my students about is the concept of singing so that a blind person can sense the emotion you're conveying. Because if you listen very closely to tiny moments like breaths and little imperfections, that's something very different from what I was taught in college as a classical baritone.

Rewriting these rules by embracing a bit of imperfection while also maintaining things like pitch, breath, phrasing, and intonation allows you to celebrate the things that make a

voice unique and emotionally relatable without sacrificing what makes the voice such a great instrument.

*NA: Is there any performer that you'd like to mention as your biggest inspiration or influence?*

MS: David Bowie. He's someone who wanted to connect with his audience so badly through his music that he'd push his voice, words, timing, cadence, and tone to a level that just had such texture and was so multidimensional. There's always something you can discover going back and relistening to any David Bowie record. He wasn't afraid to change his process either, which I really admire and respect. He not only evolved with the times, he evolved with himself as he grew into a more mature artist and human being while maintaining that sense of freedom in his artistry and expression.

There's just so much to take away from him that you don't have to become a Bowie copycat to embrace the essence of what he brought to the arts. I think that's why they call it Glam Rock. It just sits above expectations a little bit.

*NA: I think Bowie was even listening to Kendrick Lamar when he was writing Blackstar, which just goes to show how much he was in touch with the times. Your approach definitely seems in line with that in terms of maintaining an open ear to what's current.*

MS: It's funny you say Kendrick Lamar because I sometimes get asked where the name Apostle Jones came from. There is a specific reason which involves Kendrick, but sometimes I'll just make stuff up since it's just fun.

I'm a huge Tom Jones fan. As a singer and performer he's just top notch, even into his eighties. So that's where "Jones" came from, and then it became "David Jones" from David Bowie. Then we thought maybe "Apostle Jones" could be sort of like the gospel of Tom Jones and David Bowie.

*NA: Then how does Kendrick come into play?*

MS: So the real story is that I had just moved back to Cleveland around 2017, and I was sitting there trying to imagine "what kind of art do I wanted to make." I've always loved blues music. I think there's a certain freedom in how you can express yourself in a way that means something to you, but there was something limiting about just singing about themes of "woe is me" and "this is what the world has done to me." And while I personally identify with a lot of those themes, there was a certain part of that which didn't feel like the type of music that I ultimately wanted to share Enter Kendrick Lamar.

At the time, Kendrick had just come out with his new album *DAMN.*, and one of the top searches on Google was “conscious hip-hop” and this idea of hip-hop searching for higher ideals. Although that’s not the first time that’s been done, the timing of me thinking about becoming a blues artist while seeing this guy doing hip-hop in a different way made me think, “what if blues music also explored some of these higher ideals and more of a spiritual awakening type of thing?”

Somehow “conscious blues” became “Apostle Jones.” So then I made a little logo, slapped it on Instagram, and thought to myself, “I don’t know if this will mean anything to anybody.”

A year later, I started a project called Mirrors with a former close friend named Anthony Hitch. We were zodiac opposites of each other. I was a Leo sun, Aquarius rising and he was an Aquarius sun, Leo rising, so we were mirrors of each other in a lot of ways. We then quickly realized there were literally thousands of bands with the name Mirrors out there. One Google search and I was like, “I don’t think this is it, bro.” So then we just swapped it out for Apostle Jones, and it’s just been growing and evolving since then.

*NA: Before we wrap things up, is there anything else you’d like to add?*

MS: I’m really excited to play this event. Honestly, me being a sad boy with a piano in a rehearsal room in Chicago’s Harold Washington Library is where I kind of started this musical journey I’m on now. Just going there, grabbing sheet music and books, learning my favorite Bon Iver songs, and dipping into Aretha Franklin classics. The piano has always been there for me.

I remember my dad being a house painter when I was little. He was working on a house once, and they gave him an upright piano. The ivories were all chipped, and it was slightly out of tune — a lot out of tune. And that was the piano I gravitated towards, learned how to play on, and fell in love with. I would pound on the keys and sing my heart out. I’m really excited for the opportunity to bring those moments full circle to the Piano Cleveland event at the Rock Hall later this month.

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