

Folk musician Ben Gage to visit CSO's Divergent Sounds series

by Jarrett Hoffman



One of the unique offerings of crossover music in Northeast Ohio is the Canton Symphony Orchestra's Divergent Sounds. The series pairs select bands and singer-songwriters from the area with their own hand-picked group of instruments from the Orchestra. Then arranger Kevin Martinez creates new chamber-ensemble versions of their songs to be performed at Zimmermann Symphony Center.

The next Divergent Sounds concert on Thursday, March 23 at 7:30 pm will feature the Ben Gage Band, led by Akron-based folk musician Ben Gage. Armed with guitar, harmonica, and his own voice, Gage will be joined by electric guitarist Dan Socha, double bassist Brant Novak, and drummer Spencer Cindia — plus an ensemble of clarinet, trumpet, trombone, and cello from the Canton Symphony. Also making appearances will be a trio of guest vocalists: Bethany Joy, Josee McGee, and Chrissy Strong. Tickets are available [here](#).

Both contemplative and down-to-earth, Gage is an absorbing conversationalist, as I found out during an interview earlier this week. Among the topics we touched on: his choice of instruments from the orchestra (influenced by a recent trip to New Orleans), writing songs about the area, growing up in rural Ashtabula County, sharing early versions of his songs on his website, and the people he meets while out on tour.

Jarrett Hoffman: Clarinet, trumpet, trombone, cello — how did you go about picking those instruments?

Ben Gage: You know, last year I spent a good amount of time in New Orleans just exploring the city, soaking up the music, and playing some shows. And trumpet and clarinet are huge down there — I gained a new appreciation for them as solo instruments. I feel like you don't hear them a ton in folk music, so I wanted to do a little crossover.



JH: As far as your setlist, what'll you be playing in Canton?

BG: We released two EP's over the last year and a half, so I wanted to pull those together and do this iteration of them.

JH: I know one of those EP's is called Cuyahoga, and that's not the only time you've referenced Northeast Ohio in your music. Could you talk a little bit about how you draw inspiration from the area?

BG: That's easy. I grew up in Ashtabula County, in a pretty rural setting. My dad grew up a dairy farmer and became an excavator, and we grew up on something like 100 acres, so I've always been around the outdoors and blue-collar hard workers. But I'm really in love with music. It's kind of interesting — maybe that's the wrong word — but there's this relationship between the arts and that blue-collar individual where sometimes those are two separate worlds that don't always appreciate the other one.

For me, I have experience with both. And one of my favorite things about music is how it can sort of bypass any barriers and bring people together. In Northeast Ohio, we have

such a pool of different kinds of people from different walks of life and social upbringings, so a lot of my songs are about the search for common ground. Not to get too political, but every year it seems like the divisions get wider and wider — it feels like if you're on this side, you're not allowed to associate with the people on the other side. And I think that's a real disservice to ourselves.

JH: You have a section on your website called "[Musings](#)" where you write about being an artist and just a person living in this world. You also show people different versions of your songs from along the path they were made.

BG: I think one of the reasons I'm a songwriter is that I love writing. I love weaving a narrative, whether it be based on fact, fiction, a partial feeling, an experience — whatever it is. And I guess those musings are also a kind of invitation to people. A lot of times in the creative world, people just see final products. And I can only speak for myself, but that almost makes things seem unattainable, because you're just seeing the culmination of hours and hours of work. You're not seeing that it's just one building block at a time.

I feel like there are so many people out there with dreams and passions that are kind of falling into — I don't know — status quo, societal pressure. Or maybe they're just overwhelmed and not sure where to start, so they put those things off to the side instead of making what really lights them up more of a priority. So part of my goal with those musings is to hopefully inspire somebody else. If you listen to those early versions of songs, they're pretty trash (laughs) but you can kind of see an outline there, and then you can see that being fleshed out, so it becomes a lot more approachable. Hopefully it inspires someone else to do something that lights them up.

JH: You were writing a little bit about this in your most recent post, about meeting people while you're out on tour.

BG: It's a crazy thing when you're a touring musician — you go to a place and people latch onto you. Some latch because they think what you're doing is cool. And other ones, there's this desperation in their eyes, like, 'Get me out of here.' But the thing is, they can do it, they don't need anybody to save them. That whole knight in shining armor thing — whatever analogy you want to use — is just make-believe. You can do it yourself. You don't need anyone to tell you that you're special.

JH: Speaking of touring, you're in the middle of a long run of [shows](#), some of them in Northeast Ohio, some of them around the country.

BG: I think it's April 12 when I leave for a five-week tour through the West — Kansas, Arizona, Texas, Colorado, Utah — and then I come up through the East Coast. Yeah, I'm on the road for a minute. It's going to be awesome.

Photos by Shelby Muter and J. Bartholomew, respectively

Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 15, 2023.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)