

Orlando Watson to host *United in Song at Severance*

by Mike Telin



“I’m working in Pittsburgh now, but I will forever be a Clevelander,” spoken word poet Orlando Watson said in a telephone conversation. “And coming home to partner with The Cleveland Orchestra and to be able to create in that glorious hall that has been around since 1931, is quite an honor.”

On Saturday, May 13 at 2:00 pm at Severance Music Center, Watson will host *United In Song*. The afternoon of vocal performances celebrates the rich diversity

of the Greater Cleveland community. Performing ensembles include the *Humbly Submitted* Gospel Chorus, Andy Andino and *Voces Hispanas*, Tri-C Vocal Arts Academy, The Cleveland Orchestra Children’s Chorus, and ensembles from Cleveland’s immigrant community. The event is free.

“I’m looking forward to the performance. I’ll be introducing each group in a poetic way and I’ve written two poems for the event itself that are centered around The American Dream,” Watson said from Pittsburgh where he is the Senior Director of Programming at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center. “I’ll also have a few things to say that hopefully will help bring the community together.”

Watson said that in order to unite a community people need to acknowledge that there are different perspectives on what the American Dream means. “It is one thing to acknowledge this but we have to have a conversation, not just for the sake of getting it off our chest, but to create solutions for moving past so much history. And to come together for a common cause that will help everybody, because it is so much easier to live in peace.”

He added that while we don't have to share the same lifestyle, come from the same neighborhoods, share the same religion, or believe in the same God, people do need to respect where others are on their journey. "Those are some of the things I'll be touching on."

Watson said he was surprised when he got the call asking if he would be interested in hosting the event. "Johnny Parker and I have had a long-standing relationship. I met him in 2014 when this young artist from Cleveland by the name of Geoffrey Golden won a reality show on BET called *Sunday's Best*. Anyway, Johnny had heard about me and asked me to open a show for Geoffrey and we've worked together on several projects since then. I'm onboard anytime Johnny asks me to do something."

Saturday will also mark the second time Watson has had the good fortune to perform at Severance Hall. "The first was with Bobby Selvaggio and the Kent State University Jazz Ensemble — I recited MLK's 'I have a Dream' speech. I'm honored that The Orchestra is trusting me to help bring *The American Dream Festival* to life."

Changing topic, I asked Watson what he tells people when they ask what a spoken word artist is? "That's funny because I don't know what to tell myself sometimes," he said, chuckling.

He went on to define a spoken word artist as someone who has mastered the craft of public speaking ranging from a preacher like T.D. Jakes, to a comedian like Dave Chappelle, and a poet like Amiri Baraka. "A spoken word artist is somebody who takes what they write and utilizes it to perform in public spaces," he said.

And how does he respond when he explains all of this to someone and they come back with 'Oh, so you're a rapper.'

"When that happens I don't necessarily take offense because I do utilize a lot of rhythm in how I structure my poetry. However I think there is a clear difference between spoken word poetry and Hip hop. I don't think that poetry has to rhyme but it has to be rhythmic — you have measure and beat, and emphasize things that make it flow. You also have those things in Hip hop, but Hip hop is always performed to music whereas spoken word doesn't have to be."

Watson said that he is an artist who enjoys putting his words to jazz or soul. "That's because I started as a drummer. I studied drums at Tri-C and Youngstown State before I switched my major. If you listen to me there is a lot of rhythm. I am a drummer at heart. That is my first love and passion."

If the truth be told, Watson does have the ability to rap, it's simply not his primary artistic focus. "There are so many people who want to rap, but being a spoken word poet, my words and my voice are my way of being able to stand out on my own little island."

Click [here](#) to view all *The American Dream Festival* events.

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