

BAZAAR^{Harper's}

Jon Batiste and Alicia Graf Mack Want the Truth

By: Xavier Scott Marshall

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Over the past decade, Jon Batiste, the virtuoso musician, composer, and Juilliard graduate who since 2015 has served as bandleader on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*, has marched to the beat of his own improvisational drummer. Born into a legendary New Orleans musical family, Batiste grew up steeped in jazz, blues, gospel, and R&B, but his tastes run wide. His most recent album, 2021's *We Are*, explores a range of influences and genres while also tapping into the tenor and tension of a historical moment when culture and identity, race and reckoning, and the personal and political have all become inextricably bound. In the late spring and early summer of 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic entered its first peak and calls for social justice grew louder, he began performing songs from *We Are*, as well as hymnals and protest anthems, by himself at a series of street-side concerts in Brooklyn. The 35-year-old Batiste is nominated for 11 Grammy awards this month, including eight for *We Are* and three more for his Oscar-winning score for the Disney-Pixar animated film *Soul*. On May 7, Batiste is also scheduled to perform at Carnegie Hall to debut *American Symphony*, a tribute to Duke Ellington, James Reese Europe, Mahalia Jackson, Nina Simone, and other Black musical giants who have graced the venue's stage.

In 2018, Alicia Graf Mack joined the Juilliard School as director of the conservatory's dance department, the first woman of color to lead the division. During her tenure, the school has done away with gendered ballet classes and expanded the canon of music taught in its history and theory courses to include more works by composers of color. It's all part of what Graf Mack says is an effort to create an environment of belonging at Juilliard so people from any background can bring themselves fully into the space. The feeling of otherness is one that Graf Mack, 43, knows well; as a five-foot-ten ballerina, she didn't look like the other dancers she grew up training with as a teenager in suburban Maryland. Graf Mack would go on to perform with both Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, earning degrees in history from Columbia University and nonprofit management from Washington University in St. Louis along the way.

Batiste and Graf Mack first met in 2017, when they both performed at the Kennedy Center Honors to celebrate the groundbreaking actor, dancer, and choreographer Carmen de Lavallade. In mid-February, they reconnected at Juilliard to talk about reimagining the way we think about performing-arts education and why creativity and reinvention go hand in hand.

Alicia Graf Mack: I came up dancing at home, making up moves, and pulling curtains around myself to make costumes. I think that's how every child starts a journey in the arts. I wanted to be a ballerina so badly, but there were not many ballerinas of color at the time—and definitely not many ballerinas over five foot six. So it's been a journey to find my way in the dance world. Luckily, I was hired by Arthur Mitchell, who was the first Black principal at New York City Ballet and created Dance Theatre of Harlem. When I joined that company, it was the first time I'd ever stepped in a room with all people of color. We toured the world, sharing that love for ballet, but also the mission to show the world how beautiful Black people are. Then I danced for Alvin Ailey, which had a similar mission. So I feel like I've been blessed to be in positions where you're representing something larger than yourself.



Jon Batiste: Well, it's really special to represent something bigger than yourself. There's an essence to the music that I strive to make that's about ancestry, about lineage and identity. My mother was the reason I went to Juilliard. I was into



so many things when I was younger: gymnastics, tennis, chess, computer coding, painting. But she's the one who gave me the pamphlet for Juilliard and said, "You have a gift for music. Let's take this further." And then my dad was my first musical mentor. So from those two and then the lineage of my father and the Batiste family in New Orleans and all of the elders in that community, like Alvin Batiste, Ellis Marsalis Jr., Roger Dickerson ... there were so many Black people I was exposed to who were not like what you would ever see on television or represented in the media as what a Black person can be. I graduated high school a year early and did my undergraduate and master's degrees at Juilliard. My first few years were difficult because the perception of what a person like me represents in the institution of the arts wasn't so fully embraced or defined, even though there's a lineage of genius that's unsung. We have to define ourselves as artists and as people all the time, but then you have this added layer of institutional and societal perception that's against you. As a kid in that environment, away from my family and

everything I grew up around, there was an adjustment I had to make that I think made me who I am. It was such an important thing to come up against.

AGM: We talk about equity, diversity, and inclusion. But we sometimes don't talk enough about belonging—especially for artists who are trying to be their most authentic selves. Institutions often want to audition students and think of themselves almost like a company. But this is a place of education, so it's not actually my job to find students who all look the same or who are the same height or who we can present as part of something that looks like a professional company, even though we work at a very high level. My job is to populate the world with different types of talent and people who think like leaders.

JB: It's so interesting because that "company" mindset is really the antithesis of art, which is a superpower that's most potent when individuals are most like themselves and empowered in their being.

AGM: Back when I was training, I was told, "You are an instrument for a choreographer. You're not supposed to speak. You don't question the person at the front of the room. You just do. And if you're in pain or if your feet are bleeding, then you keep going. That's your job." Thankfully, we don't think that way anymore. The work is so much more collaborative now. We're training dancers to be artistic generators, to think entrepreneurially and have skills outside of making poses for people. We're doing that because when you're asked to learn that way, you have to bring yourself into the space.

JB: Being able to give people what they want but 1,000 percent on your own terms is the sweet spot.

Dance, for me, is not about steps or positions or making pretty poses. It's about being able to move into a space and shift the atmosphere. - Alicia Graf Mack

AGM: Dance, for me, is not about steps or positions or making pretty poses. It's about being able to move into a space and shift the atmosphere. It's really about the transference of energy from one person to another. I love to think of dance as a technology, almost like scales and chords—building blocks that you can use to create other things. The history of classical ballet is fraught with discrimination, racism, and institutionalized challenges. But I want people to be able to step into their training and not feel that they have to fit into a certain box. We have so many students here who are gender nonbinary or fluid and dancers who don't always identify with the look of their bodies. Well, dance is so much about the look, and the way classical ballet has been taught has always been gendered: Women dance en pointe, they dance in tutus and men do not, and then you had what was called "men's class" for the men. But I want to teach dance as a technology, so if dancers want to take pointe, however they identify—if they want to learn to strengthen their feet and dance on their toes—then they can. Our ballet students are now required to take either "pointe" class or "allegro," which is big jumps and turns, because that's what you're doing. So many dancers have so many skills to explore but aren't allowed because of the way that we have traditionally taught ballet. We're looking at that idea very closely—and not just in the training but in the work that we present. I want to make



sure that choreographers of color, who have been so important to the fabric of dance in this country and around the world, that their voices are not left out and that we're looking at music history not just from a Western perspective.

I think a lot of what we do as musicians, as artists, as creative forces, is drive at the truth. - Jon Batiste

JB: This is a concept about creativity I've had for a long time, and it hasn't been thwarted yet in my creative practice, so I hold onto it: it's that an idea has a time. I think a lot of my practice is about being a vessel for these ideas and putting them in places that are organized so that when it's time for them to be expressed I can let them be free in the world. A lot of the songs and vision for We Are really started coming to me years back—not that the songs were written or studio sessions were happening, but just the inspiration. And people who are close with me will see just that pattern in my life. When I was a student at Juilliard, we did an album that we recorded in two or three days on the subways and street corners of New York. We did that for a whole summer. And that was like an example of, "I feel like this will never happen again." Two or three years later I was on The Late Show and life changed. But that project captured a certain moment. We Are was like that. I was working on it at the same time I was working on the music for Soul, and it was just its time. There is a time for certain things to happen that I really believe dictates for me when to finish them or when they should be the focus. That's why I love what you were saying about art as technology, as these sets of tools that allow you to filter ideas through new technologies that you are developing.



AGM: Because my first love is ballet and I'm a very unlikely person to have made a life in that field, I always wear brown pointe shoes and tights to match my skin color. It's not only to make the line more aesthetically beautiful, but as a statement that anyone can embody this art form and make it my own. Dance can tell so many stories and it's our job to be able to share those stories authentically. At Alvin Ailey, we would perform "Revelations" every night and it never got old because there was so much to say in that work. You think about Alvin Ailey's upbringing in rural Texas during the Depression and how he experienced so much segregation and challenges with his own identity and how that all comes out in the work. And then there is this celebration of life when you see the baptism scene. We would perform this work in Russia, in China, and you would hear the gospel music and spirituals. You know it's not the audience's language. It's not of their culture. But there is something about it all that resonates. There is a spirit of humanity.

JB: The truth is that humanity is a broad spectrum. I think a lot of what we do as musicians, as artists, as creative forces, is drive at the truth. Today, that kind of work is sometimes perceived as progressive. It's perceived as activism or as being a provocateur or coloring outside of the lines. But, really, the lines don't exist. It's just truth. That's all that I'm trying to get at and what I think has led me to exploring all these different spaces.

AGM: You're constantly reinventing.

JB: We're constructing who we are every day: the way you pick up a fork; the speech patterns you grow up hearing and the way they change or stay the same or blend with the new things you're hearing; the clothes you choose to wear. Your view of the world and what that means to you as you experience losses and gains, as you have all these different ways of life that you can't at all control happening to you and for you and with you and against you. Reinvention is keeping pace with all that, with an eye toward perfection.

AGM: A lot of times in dance, people notice the poses or big ideas or big moves, but the most brilliant dancers understand transition. It's not always about the place that you land—it's how you transition from one place to another.

JB: It's like that with music too. That transition is everything, because when you're in a space of improvisation, there's no wrong way to be. But it's how you connect that moment to the next one that constructs the story you're telling over the course of the night.