

# AN ARTIST'S CORNER

*featuring*

## Christopher Bill



**Christopher Bill** is a trombonist, singer, and multi-instrumentalist based outside of NYC, but more accurately based on the internet. He has been playing piano since he was 6 years old, trombone since he was 10, and he has been composing/arranging since he was 12.

Christopher has a Bachelor of Music for classical trombone performance from the SUNY Purchase Conservatory of Music in New York. While at the conservatory he studied with critically acclaimed trombonists Weston Sprott (Metropolitan Opera), Denson Paul-Pollard (Metropolitan Opera), John Fedchock (Grammy Nominated Jazz Trombonist), and the absolutely incomparable Timothy Albright.

Christopher is best known for his all-trombone arrangements of popular songs. His YouTube Channel has been gaining popularity since the spring of 2014 when a cover of Pharrell "Happy" where Christopher uses a looping station to compose the song on the spot went viral. His videos have amassed over 25 million views and a following of over 150,000 subscribers. In April of 2014, Christopher independently released his first cover album, *Breakthrough*, which was followed by his Christmas album, *Smiling's My Favorite*. More recently, Christopher released an original pop album called *Half Man, Half Machine* which mixes acoustic sounds with electronic instruments.

Since graduating from the Purchase Conservatory, Christopher enjoys a busy schedule of performances, clinics, and masterclasses. In addition to producing a new video every Saturday for his YouTube Channel, he often performs at festivals such as the American Trombone Workshop, Midwest Clinic, Texas Bandmasters Association, Con Brio Festivals, Conn-Selmer Institute, Western International Band Clinic, and the International Trombone Festival.

***When did you start playing trombone? Did you play another instrument before?***

I was 10 years old when I started playing trombone, but had been taking piano lessons since I was 6 years old. All of my three older siblings were taking piano lessons and I was really just following suit. Nobody ever asked me to play music, which I think is important! Don't force kids to be creative, but if they are even the slightest bit curious about something, support it with everything you've got!

***What are some of the highlights of your career?***

I'm incredibly lucky to have had my professional career start literal weeks from graduating from the Purchase Conservatory of Music in May of 2014. It's crazy how many highlights already exist from a few short years, but my favorite is always meeting people from different backgrounds, in different places, with different economic upbringings, and seeing how we all want the same things in life, and for each other. The biggest eye-opener was when I performed in Moscow and met some of the most hospitable and gracious people I've ever had the pleasure of being around. Another highlight is being able to not only meet but work with some of my trombone-idols through the YouTube Channel. I've gotten to record some of the best trombonists in the world, and they're always so happy to do it! My job is crazy cool.

***What are your favorite solos written for another instrument?***

I love arias more than anything. Some gorgeous pieces I've borrowed are "Dalla Sua Pace" from Don Giovanni, "Voi Che Sapete" from The Marriage of Figaro, "M'Appari" from Martha, and there's an incredible piece taken from a melody from La Forza Del Destino called "Si Un Jour" sung by Natasha Marsh which I love more than anything.

***With whom did you study?***

Again, I was incredibly lucky. Some of the names I've been fortunate enough to study with are Timothy Albright, Weston Sprott, Denson Paul Pollard, John Fedchock, Marshall Gilkes, Ryan Keberle, Dan Levine, Graham Ashton, Jon Faddis, Pete Malinverni, Hal Galper, and Todd Coolman.

***How old were you when you decided that you were going to be a professional musician?***

When I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I knew I would pursue a career in music. At the time I thought the only career path that would involve music was being a music teacher, but over the next few years I realized I wanted to perform. I didn't know what I would be performing, and to be honest I still don't.

***How much do you practice on a typical day?***

My performance needs are very unstable. When I did my 2017 holiday tour I was playing five or six hours a day, just about every day, for three weeks. When I'm home, I need to record for a few hours about twice a week and that's all the playing I absolutely have to do. There's no such thing as a typical week! That said I'm definitely against a "practicing" mind-set, though it's so hard to get out of it. Like hitting record and trying to nail it on the first try. When we go into the practice room with the expectation that we're going to make mistakes, we're definitely going to make more mistakes than if we go into the practice room with a heightened sense of what you're trying to accomplish, and shooting for that goal on the very first try. Like I said, it's not an easy concept. (That's not to say I don't practice tricky sections and work on fundamentals- I just try to limit it to what I can't do correctly, not what I'm too lazy to do correctly.)

***Do you have a website? If so, what is the address?***

[www.classicaltrombone.com](http://www.classicaltrombone.com)

***Who are your main influences in your life (not just music!)?***

I follow all sorts of crazy people who are trying to save the world. People who are trying to save us from our destructive eating habits like Dr. Mark Fuhrman, Dr. Michael Greger, and Ray Cronise, to people who are trying to save us from our wasteful and consumerist behaviors like Lauren Singer, Daniel Silverstein, and Kathryn Kellogg. Their incredible stories and guidance through example have made me much healthier, happier, energetic, and optimistic about our collective future.

***Please give some tips for freelancing.***

When I was in college, I decided I wanted to be a Broadway musician. I went online and found the name of every trombonist who opened in a Broadway orchestra in the past ten years, and it turned out there weren't that many different names. I found emails, Facebook pages, phone numbers and started sending out messages asking for guidance. Out of the 30 or 40 I reached out to, about 15 got

back to me and offered me advice, training, and even shadowing. I wrote down *everything* and was looking for what my next steps would be. One of the best pieces of advice I got from the whole experience was from Steve Armour who said something like- In the freelance world, people hire their friends. You have to be a great player, but you don't have to be the best. At a certain point you're not trying to "break into" the playing-gigs-for-money scene, you're trying to break into a tight knit circle of friends. The way to do that? You just have to be somebody people want to be around. It's a weird thing to say, but if you're not fun to be around, people aren't going to want to hire you, no matter how good you are. You can practice this stuff just like your music fundamentals, but it's all about being considerate, compassionate, open to new ideas, and even if other people are doing it- not speaking badly behind people's backs. My rule of thumb, if I have a chance to make somebody else look better, I always go out of my way to make it happen. They may or may not notice, but that stuff comes back to you big time.

***What are your feelings about students majoring in music education versus music performance?***

Some people have the heart and the drive to be a music teacher. I did not. Some people have the heart and the drive to be a performer. Others do not. They're completely different kinds of people, and there are the rare few who can do both really well. The biggest thing to note is that an education major is going to school to learn and get both a diploma and certification. A performance major leaves the school with only what they accomplished in those short few years. It's an investment and a gamble that really shouldn't be taken lightly.

***What is your favorite place that you have performed?***

I've performed around some gorgeous places. Moscow, Ski Mountains outside of Vancouver, the Philippines... These are places I've been grateful to have seen because of my music. That said, my favorite memories of places always have to do with the musicians I'm performing with.

***What advice would you give to someone interested in majoring in music in college?***

My best advice is for somebody considering a music performance degree. Do you think you could do it for work, and not just for fun? Right now you're good at it, and it's enjoyable just about every time you do it. If you want to be successful, and you do, you'll have to do it on good days, bad days, sick days, and everything in between. If there's something else you think you'll enjoy doing and be good at from 9-5, then you'll be able to continue to be in love with music for the rest of your life, and maybe even combine it with whatever that other passion may be.

However, if you think you love music enough to do it even when you don't want to, especially when you don't want to, when it's really not fun, and somehow still love it- then we'll see you out there. It can all be summed up in one (potentially unanswerable) question. Is it a passion you *have* to do or is it a hobby you enjoy doing? Either way you should never stop!

### ***Do you have a favorite genre of music?***

Funk is the music that speaks to me most. Whether it's the Earth Wind and Fire/Aretha Franklin/James Brown soul of the 60s and 70s, the Daft Punk/Jamiroquai acid funk of the 90s and 00s, or the Bruno Mars pop funk of today, funk in all of its forms brings me nothing but joy.

### ***Do you have any tips for preparing for auditions?***

I don't take many auditions, but I actually really love it. If there's sight reading, fine, you can be nervous, but otherwise you have literally everything you need! Most students I work with never reach the point of being truly comfortable with the music. Listen to the pieces way more, play it back slowly or in smaller chunks. Most people simply don't put in the time it takes to be comfortable. When you go to the audition, you're likely going to be a little nervous or uneasy, so adding unfamiliarity is not ideal. You want to be able to play this stuff quite well (not necessarily perfect) under the worst circumstances. Run up and down the stairs and then play it, because maybe you left your music in the warm-up room and you have to sprint up and get it right before your audition time. (It happened to me.) Try it cold, with no warm-up, because maybe they'll have screwed up the schedule and you go on right when you get there. (It happened to me.) You want the cards stacked in your favor, so no matter what life throws at you, you'll at least be able to be comfy by the second note because at that point you've done the work.

### ***If you couldn't have a career in music, what would you do instead?***

I was always interested in psychology, marketing, and computers. I keep finding new ways to combine all three with my music, but if not for my current path I'd probably be a psychologist.

### ***How could we make music education better?***

I think we need to listen to our students more. The music world is constantly changing, but the way we teach and perform has stayed the same for so long. Not only allowing students to be creative, but opening the lane and providing them with resources to thrive doing something new and exciting. They'll hit a wall, just like I did, and need to learn classical theory or jazz improvisation techniques in order to move forward. They'll have a clear goal in mind and be much more drive

to learn. I liken this style of teaching more toward a visual art class where each student has their own projects and creative expression, and the teacher is there to refine their technique and provide guidance when they hit a roadblock.

### **Do you like to teach? Why or why not?**

I actually love to teach. I don't think I could do it on a daily basis because of the restrictions of the school, other teachers, parents, the community, etc. but I do love helping students connect with each other and themselves through their own creativity. It's also really enjoyable for me right now because I'm young enough to connect with the students on a personal level, which makes the helpful nudge in the right direction a lot more organic rather than an obvious instructional tool.