

Upbeat

Byron Stripling makes concepts like crossover irrelevant. He attended Eastman School of Music to study classical trumpet—and became an in-demand master of jazz trumpet. He played with legendary jazz bands—and guested with scores of American orchestras. He led jazz bands, played with pops stars, cut albums with Aretha Franklin and Whitney Houston—and now he’s the principal pops conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. He takes the podium as Pittsburgh’s principal pops conductor this season, a year later than planned, due to the pandemic. Here, Stripling talks about his art and career, the country’s reckoning with racial injustice, and what he looks forward to when he—and the music—return live and in-person.



John Abbott

Classical music has always been an integral part of my life. My father was a classical singer, and I grew up going to see the Minnesota Orchestra, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and when I toured with a band, I’d go to see the Chicago Symphony and other orchestras. I studied at the Eastman School of Music, where my goal was to be a classical trumpet player, but then I got bitten by the jazz bug. Just as I was about to graduate from Eastman, I got calls to play in different bands—Lionel Hampton, Woody Herman, Count Basie—so I left college early to become a

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jazz musician.

My pops journey really took off with an offer to perform a tribute to Louis Armstrong with the Boston Pops and John Williams. Since then, I’ve worked with the Boston Pops a lot, and started doing orchestra gigs around the country. Jeff Tyzik, who is one of the premier pops conductors and arrangers, mentored me through this whole process. Playing with all those orchestras was amazing! Moving into conducting seemed natural to me since I have been conducting big bands forever and I wanted to convey a vision of what could be different, what could elevate music, what could uplift people. That’s the power of music—we need it now more than ever, and especially after COVID, we need orchestras.

As a musician I know that all genres

of music can be powerful. See, sometimes you don’t need a lecture, you need a song. In the 1960s and ’70s, I was hearing the Four Tops, the Temptations, and all this heartfelt, inspiring soul music. Then I heard James Brown sing, “Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud.” That one song raised my self-esteem, and became the affirmation that melted away all the teasing by the kids who taunted me with, “...your lips are too big, your hair is too nappy, your nose is too flat.” Once again it was the power of music that gave me hope, healing, belonging, and inspiration to persevere.

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COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd were major reckonings for our country and forced all institutions to deal with complex questions including equity and diversity. I feel that we can use music to ignite the passions of audiences and young musicians, then the next Itzhak Perlman or Anne-Sophie Mutter will certainly arise from the heart of our urban communities. In Pittsburgh, we build from the bottom up, starting with pre-school, and I’m very proud of that. That’s why I’m willing to go anywhere I can, as a principal pops conductor, and share the music with students and schools. Playing music is a gift but most importantly, it’s a gift that we give to others. **S**



Pittsburgh Symphony - Ed DeWmitt

Byron Stripling led his first concert as principal pops conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra this summer at Hartwood Acres Park.