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## **Rich in music: Modern-day Joshua lowers walls**

by Chris Slattery | Staff Writer

In the Bible, Joshua blew his trumpet and the walls of Jericho fell. In the modern world Joshua — Joshua Rich, that is — had his own musical-religious experience the first time he played the piano.

“My main memory,” says Rich, who lives in DC, “was being at a party, and my dad brought me in to the piano, and I sat on his lap.

“He played, and then I played,” Rich says, adding that, “I always felt like I was remembering, not learning.”

Growing up in Massachusetts, Rich never once took a music lesson. His parents — dad was “kind of a frustrated musician,” mom, an actress before they got married — split up when he was 12.

“It was a combination of a lot of things,” the pianist says carefully. Sure, the divorce and its aftermath made things like piano lessons seem less important. But it was the ’70s, too (Rich is 45) when parents tended to hover less and kids were not as regimented as they are today.

“It was just that time,” he shrugs. “Parents weren’t as interested in structuring every minute of their kids lives.”

It was OK, he insists in retrospect.

“I’m a very individual, creative-natured person. I loved teaching myself.”

He remembers listening to his parents’ music collections on reel-to-reel tapes.

“The Beatles!” he cries. “Elton John was huge — I ate him up. And Billy Joel.

“Those are my three.”

### **New Age**

“I feel like I was born into the wrong era,” the pianist sighs. “I love jazz and old movies — Buster Keaton, the whole vaudeville era: Ragtime, Scott Joplin.”

But perhaps he was born in exactly the right era and didn’t know it: Rich describes himself as “very deeply spiritual,” and it’s no surprise that he found himself on the West Coast, releasing a debut CD categorized as New Age.

“I really didn’t do much” in high school, he says. “I did a semester of jazz band, which was fun — being around some structure of music.

“I didn’t love structure, though. I just needed to work.”

And work he did — there was no college, just part-time jobs until he followed a “young and vibrant” junior high teacher to California.

“She gave me my start, a place to stay,” he says. “I started working, accompanying singers, playing on cruise ships.

“Once I play a song, I memorize it completely — I have a photographic memory — so I got work in piano bars.”

It was a musician’s life, and the New Age CD “Discovery” was out, and he’d married and soon had two sons.

“This,” says Rich, “is where my life takes a turn.”

### **Signs of life**

The turn is pretty typical: He’d married a California girl, but wanted to come back East to raise his family. He loved the East Coast, but not the New England weather, so he settled in Maryland. Billy Joel could supply the rest: “They got a divorce as a matter of course, and they parted the closest of friends” is how he describes Brenda and Eddie in “Scenes From an Italian Restaurant.” Rich’s marriage broke up, too.

But Montgomery County has some tricks up its sleeve when it comes to bewitching musicians and encouraging them to stay. For Rich, it was Bethesda Academy of Performing Arts — now known as Imagination Stage — that got him started.

“From 2000 until now has been this great journey,” he says. “I got into musical theater with kids; I got out of the office world.”

He found a mentor in Sidwell Friends drama teacher Tim Reagan. He wrote the Deaf Access anthem “Dreams to Sign,” for Tim’s wife Lisa Agliotti to perform with her Deaf Access Teen performing troupe, and which later served as the inspiration for a book and video of the same name. He began working as a composer, accompanist and music and drama teacher at BAPA’s White Flint Stage.

“That was a special time,” he says. “It’s half of what I’m passionate about.”

One half, of course, is music; the other half is teaching kids. (Rich has two sons now, 20 and 18, and a 9-year-old daughter.) And his next Montgomery County performance, on Saturday in the F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre in Rockville, combines a bit of both passions. It’s a benefit, and it features dance performances by the Poetry N Motion troupe. But it also features Rich on piano.

“It’s mostly dance performances,” he says. “I’m kind of the one thing that’s different from the rest.”

But he’s OK with being different — indeed, that’s how Rich defines himself.

“I always say I’m a hybrid artist,” he explains. “Folk, jazz, New Age, show tunes, Broadway.

“I’ve been compared to Mozart and Dr. John — it depends on what I’m doing!”

Seriously, though, it’s hard to pick a Joshua Rich genre. He thinks he’s jazz, yet smooth jazz stations play his music and he’s grateful. It’s emotional, he says, and heartfelt — and his target audience is anyone who wants the music to move them.

“I think I have universal appeal,” says Rich. “I’m not trying to sound immodest. I’m happy.

“I’m someone who can help bridge people through music,” he adds. “Which is something this country — this world — can use.”

Building bridges, breaking down walls. It’s all about the power of music — and the inspiration of Joshua.

*Joshua Rich appears as a special guest performer for a benefit put on by the Poetry N Motion dance company at 7:30 p.m. Saturday in the F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre, 603 Edmonston Drive, Rockville. Tickets are \$15. Call 240-314-8690.*