

Hawks on Stage

These three Lake Howell High grads are turning the performing arts into profitable careers right here at home

by Jill Duff-Hoppes

Performers often dream about seeing their name in lights on a Broadway marquee, being a Grammy-winning recording artist, or starring in a Hollywood blockbuster.

New York City and Los Angeles aren't the only cities with seriously-talented performers, though. Central Florida boasts a wealth of actors, singers, and musicians who are carving out successful careers for themselves right here where they grew up.

Meet these three professional performers who cut their artistic teeth at Lake Howell High School and are now making their marks on local stages.

One-Man Band

Musician Christian Ryan sure knows how to hustle. At age 27, the multi-instrumentalist has already played more than 1,000 gigs, and that number just keeps ticking upward.

"Being a performing freelancer, everything is all up to you," says Christian, who plays saxophone, clarinet, and flute. "You've got to be 100 percent in. If you're slightly hesitant, or you just *kind of* want to perform, it's not going to work."

Christian began playing saxophone when he was an 11-year-old band student at Tuskawilla Middle School. He continued to play the sax at Lake Howell High for the next four years in the marching band, jazz band, and wind ensemble.

While still a student at Lake Howell, Christian was thrilled to book his first paying gig. He and a few jazz-band buddies formed a quartet and were hired to perform outdoors at a pizzeria in Sanford.

"We played for our parents and other people who strolled by – we didn't know what we were doing," Christian recalls with a chuckle. "We were just stoked to be playing music."

After graduating in 2010, Christian attended Valencia College, where he played in the jazz and concert bands. He graduated from Valencia in 2013 with an Associate of Arts degree in music performance and studied jazz composition for a semester at Berklee College of Music in Boston.



Christian soon returned to Florida, where his life became a whirlwind of gigs. He regularly plays with two bands, Leisure Chief and Holey Miss Moley; performs in trios and quartets; does solo gigs; and teaches private music lessons. He has performed throughout the United States and in the Caribbean and China.

Younger musicians often ask Christian for career advice, and he tells them that being diverse is key. His repertoire extends beyond jazz and classical music; Christian also plays rock, pop, country, soul, reggae, R&B, hip-hop, and world music.

"You've got to be able to play everything," he says. "That's what I set out to do. I wanted to play all kinds of music, and I think that's what's helped me in my career."

Earning His Spots

Anthony Pyatt, Jr. won the leading role in the very first show for which he ever auditioned – playing Aladdin in his middle-school production of Disney's *Aladdin* Jr. He lost the part a couple of rehearsals in, though, because his grades were bad.

"It was a very hard but valuable learning lesson," Anthony says. "I had to earn it. I'm thankful for it in hindsight."

Anthony, 25, has come a long way since that bittersweet introduction to theater at South Seminole Middle School. For the past two years, he has performed multiple roles at Universal Studios Orlando and Universal's Islands of Adventure. And, he's had starring roles in buzzed-about theater productions in Orlando and Winter Garden.

"I've always had an artistic flair," says Anthony, who has also appeared in a couple of independent films. "Ideally, I want to be a working TV and film actor, but I don't think I'll ever fully step away from theater. That's home."

During his high-school years, Anthony dabbled in chorus but then switched to theater. The Lake Howell Theatre Company gave him an outlet to express himself, and it taught Anthony "how to turn your ideas into reality," he says.

The Silver Songbird

Melissa Vasquez recently enjoyed a full-circle moment at her alma mater. This spring, the actress and powerhouse singer helped judge Lake Howell High's talent contest – a competition that she won twice during her years as a Lake Howell Silver Hawk.

Melissa, 35, was happy to give back to the school where she was active in both the choral and drama departments.

"In choir, we were given the opportunity to get out of our comfort zone and to step up," says Melissa, who graduated in 2001. "Theater gave us the opportunity to have fun, think outside the box, and play pretend."

Singing comes naturally to Melissa, who has been a songbird since she was a toddler. After high school, Melissa headed to New York City, where she graduated from the American Musical and Dramatic Academy.

Upon returning to Central Florida, she found steady work at the theme parks. For the past 13 years, Melissa has been a performer and a production supervisor at the Holy Land Experience. Before that, she performed at Walt Disney World parks and was an original cast member at Hong Kong Disneyland.

Last fall, Melissa proved to be an audience favorite in the musical *The Color Purple*, produced by Theater West End in



Sanford. She has also performed in musicals at venues throughout Central Florida, including the Garden Theatre in Winter Garden.

Melissa is also a cabaret artist who performs comedic shows filled with songs and anecdotes about her own life. She recently performed her newest cabaret, *Screaming Koalas the Musical*, at Theater West End.

Melissa advises teens who are intent on having a career in the performing arts to get as much stage experience outside of school as they can.

"Directors, stage managers, coaches, and costumers will all help to shape and mold you and will also be great connections later on in life," Melissa says. "If you want to learn how to do something, learn from the people who know. Glean from their experience."



After graduating in 2011, Anthony studied for a year at Circle in the Square Theatre School in New York City. Since returning to Florida, he has played leading roles in *Newsies* at Orlando Repertory Theatre and *Hand to God* at Mad Cow Theatre in Orlando.

He also has a knack for working with kids and teens. Anthony directed a youth production at Theatre South Playhouse in Orlando and works as a camp facilitator at Full Sail Labs in Winter Park, where he teaches everything from improv to photography to filmmaking classes.

Anthony advises aspiring young performers to remember that being a successful actor involves much more than looking good in the spotlight.

"Being kind, genuine, and hardworking is going to get you so much further than being talented or pretty," he says. "Simple as that."

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