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Pianist Jade Simmons works to expand her music, audience

Jade Simmons is a classical pianist who is forging a career between traditional and experimental music

By Tara Dooley

Jade Simmons has strapped herself into an evening gown and played Chopin in a packed Atlantic City convention hall large enough for a football game.

A gig last month at the Meridian, a nightclub and sports bar on the edge of downtown, was more of a jeans-and-heels event featuring electric beats and hip-hop-infused piano *é tudes*.

This week she performs Russian composer Alexander Scriabin at a Houston art gallery.

It's a schedule of seeming contrasts that makes sense for a performer with a love of classical music and influences that range from civil-rights activism to the Miss America competition, from ballet to African drumming, from Frédéric Chopin to Missy Elliott.

In a competitive field with limited job opportunities and legions of flawless performers, Simmons, 31, is part of a generation of classical musicians who are crafting their own careers and making a living as performers. She is drawing not only on her musical skills but also her talent as a public speaker and a personality with an understanding of how to present herself on the Internet and television.

With a career "that doesn't necessarily exist otherwise, you kind of have to carve out your own niche," Simmons said.

Once upon a time, it wasn't supposed to look so hard and was considered unseemly for a performer to promote him- or herself, said Jon Kimura Parker, a successful concert pianist and Simmons' master's degree professor at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music.

"We are only just now beginning, I think, to understand a little bit more about everything else that you need to do besides playing the piano well," Parker said. "The thing in Jade's case is, and this is critical to me, she has the artistry to back that up," Parker said.

At the Meridian gig, Simmons was offering up an unusual electronic repertoire for a classically trained pianist, including parts of *24 Bits: Hip-Hop Studies & Etudes* for piano by Daniel Bernard Roumain, a New York-based composer who draws inspiration from genres once separated like oil and water.

She took the stage at the end of an evening featuring local talent that drew an audience that could have fit into the restroom. The act before her was a group fronted by the 21-year-old assistant manager of a church cafe who rocked the

nearly-empty house singing, "I get so sexual."

When the band stopped and the decibel level fell to a dull roar, Simmons removed her earplugs and helped lug the piano toward the front of the stage.

"Let me hear your vocals," the sound technician in the back of the room called out as he fiddled with dials and Simmons settled onto her piano bench.

"I'm not going to be singing, just talking," Simmons said into the microphone. She repeated herself at least twice before the message got through that she planned to play the piano — and not like Alicia Keys would.

Her warm-up runs at the keyboard rang in the club with the clarity of a diamond in a coal mine. With a warning to her audience to expect music "a good bit different than what you've been hearing tonight," Simmons started her set, accompanied by the electronic beats of Roburt Reynolds.

"My day job is as a classical pianist," Simmons told the audience. "At night, I like to mix it up."

The mix comes from Simmons' childhood in Charleston, S.C. Her parents were musical, but not in the classical sense.

Her mother, Loretta Smalls, played the piano in church. Her father, Jerome Smalls, studied drumming in West Africa and raised his daughter on the rhythms.

“It’s a musical connection to Africa, and the wonderful thing now is that part of this niche I’m carving out has come from the influence that rhythm and drumming has had on my life,” she said.

Jerome Smalls, a retired oil-company warehouse manager, was also a local civil-rights activist. Simmons remembers joining him at rallies where she stood on opposite ground of the Ku Klux Klan.

As a child, she took ballet and African dance lessons. In high school, Simmons played volleyball and basketball and ran track. She performed with the school drum line, and served as class and student-body president. She played clarinet in the band and viola in the orchestra.

When she moved in the late 1990s to college at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., she studied music and founded *Boomshaka*, a percussion and dance ensemble.

She digs into projects well prepared and intensely, said Jonathan Sanford, a saxophone player and sound designer who collaborated with Simmons at Northwestern and on later projects.

“Jade likes to have fun,” said Sanford, who is based in Los Angeles. “But when it’s time to work, you better not show up late.”

Then there’s the beauty thing.

In 1999, Simmons won the Miss Illinois pageant and went on to take the title of first runner-up in the Miss America contest. She then toured the country for a year speaking to teens and adults

about mental health and suicide prevention. Though she spent little time at the keyboard, the experience helped to polish her speaking skills. Empathizing with young people in despair helped her grow as an artist, she said.

The niche Simmons is creating, in part, relies on her interest in drumming and rhythm, and draws on the background that distinguishes her from colleagues who rarely wander from a practice room. The influences come across on her first recording, *The Rhythm Project: Revolutionary Rhythm*, released earlier this year.

The goal of the project was to highlight the percussive side of piano music, Simmons said.

“It’s not just loud banging,” she said. “But it could be Beethoven and exploring the rhythm that holds the piece together.”

The album features standards such as a sonata by Samuel Barber. But it also includes the hip-hop *é tudes*, which were inspired by Roumain’s experience teaching children in Harlem with little connection to classical music, the composer said recently. The pieces are experimental, but they also fit in the tradition of composers such as Ludwig van Beethoven, Bé la Bartók and George Gershwin, who drew musical inspiration from the sights and sounds of their surroundings.

“It’s not hip-hop music; it’s not classical music; it is a composer’s response to hip-hop music,” he said.

Unlike some classical musicians who cross over into genres such as bluegrass or popular music, Simmons is part of a young generation of classical musicians who grew up with so many influences that the term “crossing over” no longer applies to her music, Parker said.

“She started out with so many things,” he said. “It is simply part of her.”

These days, Simmons lives in Humble with her 21-month-old son and high school sweetheart-turned-husband, Jahrell Simmons. She is a “New Music, New Places Fellow” with Concert Artists Guild, a nonprofit that promotes young musicians, spot she earned in a competition.

In addition to about 45 concerts a year, Simmons also participates in programs for children and has worked with the Van Cliburn Foundation’s *Musical Awakenings* in the Fort Worth School District. She was the webcast host for the 2009 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.

The combination of performing and speaking adds up to Simmons’ professional goal: to take classical music to places it doesn’t usually venture.

To date, her largest platform was as unlikely as any: the 1999 Miss America pageant. She performed a Chopin *é tude* for the Atlantic City crowd gathered for the nation’s annual appreciation of beautiful women.

As her fingers sped to the emotional high point of the *é tude*, the hall erupted in applause, she said.

“They were responding very naturally to really great music,” Simmons said. “That is my mission. If it is good music, people are going to listen.”