

Cory Johnson puts positive spin on New Year's Eve

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In 2021, Cory Johnson is resolving to build and open his new music recording studio, Alchemy Sound Studios. Johnson's musical potions are as varied as his passions. His career is a mix of producing, playing and instructing on a number of instruments for a multitude of projects.

However, his focus has narrowed to his latest band, Upside Avenue, which will play New Year's Eve at The Craft House.

"I can't wait to play over at Craft House because they're trying to support the music community so much," says Johnson. "We're looking forward to playing our first original song, and hopefully that's the beginning of us moving into this new project. That's the first stepping stone that got squashed in February."

Upside Avenue is a rotating roster from Johnson's pool of musical friends. For New Year's Eve, they will go onstage as a trio. Aaron Buckman will share

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Cory Johnson and his latest band, Upside Avenue, will play New Year's Eve at The Craft House. CORY JOHNSON

Johnson

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vocals, guitar and bass with Johnson while JC Hanon plays the drums.

Johnson says the band has been in the works for over a year. It all started when he began playing solo acoustic music under his own name at gigs around town. When he released his first album of original songs under the name, Upside Avenue, he wanted to fold in more members.

Many band members overlap with a wedding band that Johnson is also a part of and has played in across the southeast. In January, the band set the date for their first practice, but were shut down by the pandemic. They never got to learn a single original song that Johnson had written.

"To learn original music takes hours of practice," says Johnson. "Cover music doesn't take as long. We're going to debut the newest original that I've written at our New Year's gig."

The song, "So Beautiful," was written for his proposal to his girlfriend. He wanted the music to have a danceable vibe and funky beat. The melody and chords came to him first. For more inspiration, he looked back to Maroon 5's first album, "Songs About Jane." Driving in his car, Johnson listened deeply to the music, his producer brain taking over.

Johnson speaks about songs as if they visually take up space in front of him. Guitars jingle on top of the music while the bass is down on the side playing lower octaves. Just like an alchemist, he begins to piece together the overall look of a song, sometimes before he has a single lyric written.

"When I'm writing certain songs, two or three artists will come into my head and then that's like a runaway train," laughs Johnson. "I'll start thinking about all the production elements they had on their albums. That artist's producer inspires a lot of the direction of how I put songs together."

Johnson went to school for commercial music. His mother pushed him towards a career in music. It was a natural path given that his parent's band practice was a regular staple every Thursday night. Johnson's first band, The Ragamuffins, used his parents' designated band room for their own practices.

"My sister and I fell asleep listening to their band," recalls Johnson. "It was in the family which was great, and a blessing to have access to all their equipment."

Since then, Johnson has put together several side bands and projects. One duo with a friend named Ghost Park Productions had aims of licensing music for TV shows, independent films and commercials. Johnson and his friend co-wrote a song with a superhero franchise in mind called "The World Isn't Big Enough."

He says the song centered on the idea of a protagonist and antagonist fighting to destroy one another. The lyrics started to take on a double meaning however, as Johnson reflected on humanity as a whole.

"We realized there is so much violence because people think that they're the protagonist and some-



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BELL 2020

If you go

What: New Years Eve with Upside Avenue

When: Starts at 7 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 31

Where: The Railroad Square Craft House, 644 McDonnell Drive

Cost: \$1 upcharge on items purchased, proceeds to artists

Contact: For more information, visit <https://www.facebook.com/events/381545839831658/>.

one else is the antagonist because they believe something different," says Johnson. "That was a song that took a different turn and I got goosebumps on my arm when we were writing it. We wanted to make it open to all interpretations so it could mean more."

Johnson is always pushing himself to evolve as a musician and a producer, and never get comfortable. It's a mantra he lives by as he continues new ventures. Looking to the new year, he has an incredible amount of gusto for what Upside Avenue might accomplish, including debuting several more original songs.

He will spend the New Year's Eve show celebrating not only the Tallahassee community, but also the entertainment industry's resilience during this pandemic. The Craft House will have tables spaced six feet apart at their outdoor stage, and all proceeds will go towards supporting artists.

"I hope people can walk away from New Year's with a much better hope for 2021, and that we can leave 2020 behind us," says Johnson. "I hope we can see that celebration that night as a milestone and metaphor for moving forward into easier and better times for everybody."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).