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Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: Rediscovering Memphis Through Music



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Joe Restivo is guitarist for the [City Champs](#) — an instrumental soul/jazz trio that nods to Memphis' musical heritage while also forging new ground. The group just released its second studio album, "The Set-Up," which combines influences ranging from film scores to Latin jazz.

"We were born out of a regular gig in Memphis at a club called the Buccaneer," explains Restivo regarding the group's formation. "We just had a regular Tuesday-night kind of for-kicks thing."

A native of Memphis, he's been playing the guitar since he was 12 or 13, and studied at the New School in New York City. He has long played with blues and R&B acts, and draws from many influences from the Memphis region and beyond.

As far as how Memphis' musical heritage influences his own style, Restivo says that many regional artists either do a rehash of the blues or Stax sound (Memphis label Stax Records was deemed by many to have been the creator of Southern soul back in the '60s), or dismiss those outright "because it's old hat." He views the City Champs as taking a middle path where "you're standing on the shoulders of giants, paying homage and respect, and also trying to put your own voice out there." The group uses

aesthetics, stylistic approaches and production techniques from local traditions, but also mashes in new musical elements. "So we're reflecting in a way, but we're also trying to add, trying to build, trying to create our own voice."

The region's musical heritage can also be a little daunting at times. "That stuff is so iconic, you can't escape," says Restivo. "I don't know what the equivalency would be. It's like being from Liverpool."

For local gigs, the City Champs continue to play at the Buccaneer, as well as the [Hi-Tone Cafe](#) and the 1884 Lounge inside [Minglewood Hall](#). "We like the little places," Restivo says. "I think we kind of shine in an intimate setting."

Restivo also plays in an R&B soul band called A440, which performs on Friday nights at Memphis Sounds. It's a little underground place," he says. "Not many people know about it." The band plays retro soul music to a packed, mostly African-American crowd. "It's crazy, it's fun, it's the best place ever," he says.

In the trendy Midtown neighborhood where he lives, Restivo frequents two mom-and-pop vinyl record stores — [Goner Records](#) and [Shangri-La Records](#). "We travel and we see a lot of record stores, and [Goner and Shangri-La are] as good as anything nationally," he notes, adding that they are great if you need to hunt down "some out-of-print thing you've never heard of before."

One of his favorite eateries is a soul food restaurant in downtown Memphis called [Alcenia's Southern Style Cuisine](#). "It's run by a lady named DJ, and when you come in, DJ will give you a hug," he says. "And she's gonna make the best fried green tomatoes you've ever had in your friggin' life."

Restivo views Memphis as a "misunderstood underdog" that's seen a lot of tough times but is moving forward. He calls "The Set-Up" a soundtrack of his community, his city. "I think it's looking back and hopefully looking forward as well," he says. "There's a tune on it called 'Local Jones,' and that's my town."

The City Champs: "Break it Up," "Drippy" and "Rigamarole" appear in Restivo's re:discover video courtesy of [Electraphonic Recording](#).