



CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO
SCHOOL OF MUSIC
GRADUATE RECITAL

Julian Cunningham, jazz voice

Rhapsody en Tru'

Walk With Me Lord	Traditional Spiritual arr. by Julian Cunningham
Nobody Knows	T.L. Barrett arr. by Julian Cunningham
Skylark	Hoagy Carmichael arr. by Julian Cunningham
Follow Me	Frederick Loewe arr. by Billy May
Bring Me to Life	Amy Lee, Ben Moody, Davis Hodges arr. by Jacob Swedlow
The Good Life	Sacha Distel arr. by Julian Cunningham
Everybody Wants to Rule the World	Roland Orzabel, Ian Stanley, Chris Hughes arr. by Julian Cunningham
Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise	Sigmund Romberg, Oscar Hammerstein arr. by Julian Cunningham
Illusion	Gregory Porter
Head To The Sky	Julian Cunningham

Dr. Joe Gilman, piano | Christopher McEwen, bass | Jacob Swedlow, drums
Miguel Recendez, trombone/auxiliary synth | Joey Archie, trumpet/ auxiliary key

*This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Music in Performance.
Julian Cunningham is a student of Gaw Vang Williams.*



WEDNESDAY, 7:00 P.M.
OCTOBER 1, 2025
CAPISTRANO CONCERT HALL

PROGRAM NOTES

Julian Cunningham – October 1, 2025

1. Walk With Me, Lord

Rooted in the rich oral tradition of African American spirituals, “Walk With Me, Lord” is a prayer, a plea, and a powerful declaration of faith. Its call, “while I’m on this tedious journey...” is both personal and collective. This song emerged in a time when the Black church was more than a sanctuary; it was a site of resistance, community, and cultural rebirth. It provided language for the suffering and the hope of a people navigating the brutal realities of slavery, Jim Crow, and systemic oppression.

I chose to open this recital with a humming choir, wordless and steady, evoking the sound of ancestral breath, the kind that held us when there were no words left to say. That hum becomes the bedrock for my voice to rise in solo prayer. As the band slowly enters, so does the world I’m about to reveal. This song is my benediction and my beginning. It represents where I come from spiritually and musically, and it invites something sacred to walk with me through the rest of this journey through memory, struggle, joy, and truth.

2. Nobody Knows

T.L. Barrett’s classic has long echoed through sanctuaries and street corners alike, carrying the cry of a people who have known sorrow but refuse to stay broken. This song is my declaration that I am here. That I’ve made it this far not by luck, but by grace, grit, and something divine moving through me.

This arrangement leans into groove, gospel drive, and call-and-response, building a sound that feels like Sunday morning and survival all at once. We’re not just performing, we’re lifting each other.

In the broader arc of Black music, *Nobody Knows* continues the lineage of spirituals that carried coded resistance, emotional honesty, and healing. It lives in the tradition of Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child and Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen—songs that held space for pain while pointing toward hope. Following *Walk With Me, Lord*, this piece raises the temperature, moving from quiet prayer to public praise. It’s the hallelujah after the valley. It tells the audience: I don’t look like what I’ve been through, but I carry it in every note. This isn’t just backstory it’s my foundation.

3. Skylark

After the grounded soulfulness of *Nobody Knows*, *Skylark* takes flight. This song is my heart’s whisper to the sky, a spiritual yearning disguised as a jazz standard. Written by Hoagy Carmichael with lyrics by Johnny Mercer, *Skylark* is often interpreted as a wistful love song. But in this recital, it becomes something more, a meditation on calling, vision, and divine timing. I grew up in the church, learning how to pray with both words and song. *Skylark* feels like the moment when I stop shouting and start listening. I ask the questions we all carry: Will I find my path? Am I being led, or left behind? In this arrangement, I lean into a light 3/4 swing feel, dreamy, lifted, and free, like the bird in the title. Musically, it breathes. It soars. And it opens space for improvisation and for vulnerability.

Historically, *Skylark* belongs to the Great American Songbook, but its place in this program underscores the emotional bridge between jazz and Black spiritual longing. Though its authors weren’t Black, the song’s ache and search resonate within the lineage of African American artistry, always reaching, always believing there’s more. Following *Nobody Knows*, this piece becomes a moment of stillness and wonder. If the recital begins with prayer and testimony, *Skylark* is the plea for confirmation, a melody sent skyward, asking: Is my dream real? Will it come back to me with an answer?

4. Follow Me

After the longing and wonder of *Skylark*, *Follow Me* answers with certainty. This is the turning point in the recital, a moment of divine clarity, where spirit responds to yearning with invitation. Musically, it's bold and brassy, channeling the swagger of a Sinatra-style big band number, but underneath the swing is something more spiritual: it's a call to alignment. To purpose. To movement.

Growing up, I was taught to listen deeply to intuition, to music, to moments that seem to guide you forward. *Follow Me* feels like that moment when clarity arrives not as a command, but as an invitation. The voice here, whether you call it purpose, your higher self, or a sense of destiny says: "Come with me. I'll show you the desires of your heart." This is the soundtrack of the moment you choose to follow your path, even if you don't fully know where it's leading. In this show, *Follow Me* is not just a love song, it's a spiritual nudge. It's the Muse, the higher self, or the Divine saying: "You've asked, you've waited. Now let's go."

5. Bring Me to Life

This reimagined arrangement of Evanescence's *Bring Me to Life* marks one of the most daring pivots in the recital. Known originally as a gothic rock anthem of inner awakening and emotional urgency, this version reinvents the song through a jazz-fusion lens—harmonically rich, rhythmically expansive, and spiritually charged. Jacob Swedlow's arrangement clears space for something fresh and vulnerable, making this not just a cover, but a resurrection.

For me, *Bring Me to Life* is not just about romantic revival, it's about spiritual awakening, creative breakthrough, and the desperate desire to feel fully alive again. It's the plea that comes when you've done the praying, you've followed the signs, but you still feel like something's missing, something sacred.

There's a long tradition in Black music of turning lament into transformation, from spirituals to soul to jazz. In this piece, that lineage continues. The groove builds slowly, but with intention. The harmony is dense, complex, and dissonant at times, mirroring the spiritual tension within the lyrics. But then it opens, the music breathes, and so do I. Placed after *Follow Me* in the program, *Bring Me to Life* is the reckoning. It's the moment you realize that even after saying "yes" to the call, there are still valleys to walk through. It's the sound of needing more from yourself, from your faith, from your music and daring to ask for it.

6. The Good Life

After the emotional reckoning of *Bring Me to Life*, *The Good Life* enters with a smile, but it's a complicated one. This isn't just a celebration of luxury or ease. It's a reflection on what it really means to arrive, especially after struggle. The lyrics hint at comfort, but they carry an undercurrent of caution. "Wake up and kiss that good life goodbye" isn't just a catchy phrase, it's a warning not to lose yourself chasing something that might not be real.

In this performance, *The Good Life* becomes a layered conversation. On one hand, it grooves with confidence, blending classic jazz harmony and soulful vocals. On the other, it reveals the disillusionment that can follow success or the pressure to appear successful. Then comes that unexpected line "I still want you." Not from a lover, but from something deeper, a reminder that your worth was never conditional. The piece begins ends with a reimagined tag from Kanye West and T-Pain's *Welcome to the Good Life*, tying past and present into a single moment. I've seen what the world calls "good," and I've come out the other side clearer, more grounded, and still reaching for what's real.

7. Everybody Wants to Rule the World

In *Everybody Wants to Rule the World*, the recital takes a sharp, introspective turn. Originally recorded by Tears for Fears in 1985, the song has long stood as a cryptic commentary on ambition, power, and control. In this reimagined version, I strip it down and rebuild it with a hip-hop-inflected groove, jazz harmony,

and a storytelling vocal approach that makes the message feel immediate, personal, and culturally specific.

This piece lands at a crucial point in the arc. After the searching of *Skylark*, the calling of *Follow Me*, the yearning of *Bring Me to Life*, and the false arrival of *The Good Life*, this song offers a reckoning with the world itself, the systems, the illusions, the broken promises. It's the disillusionment that comes with waking up. The recognition that power can be seductive, but also destructive. That everyone wants control, but few know what to do with it once they have it.

Within the Black American experience, this song resonates deeply. It echoes the history of individuals and communities who've watched oppressive systems place power in the hands of the few, while still daring to dream, build, and resist. In this context, "everybody" doesn't just mean politicians or moguls. It's the universal temptation to rule, even over ourselves, and the spiritual cost of that hunger. This arrangement doesn't just modernize the track, it reframes it as a warning and a confession. It asks; What kind of power are you chasing? And what are you losing along the way?

8. Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise

Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise marks the emotional and rhythmic shift that re-grounds the recital in motion. Originally composed for the 1928 operetta *The New Moon*, the song has lived many lives, most notably through its transformation into a jazz standard interpreted by artists like John Coltrane, Abbey Lincoln, and Sonny Rollins. In this performance, I reimagine the piece within an Afro-Cuban 6/8 groove, drawing on diasporic rhythmic traditions that pulse with both urgency and release.

Placed after *Everybody Wants to Rule the World*, this moment becomes one of both confrontation and reflection. The lyrics "Softly, as in a morning sunrise, the light of love comes stealing into a newborn day" are deceptively gentle. Beneath that softness is a meditation on fleeting passion and the quiet ache that often follows. Love enters quietly and it often leaves just the same.

For me, this piece is about learning to let go, not just of love, but of illusions, expectations, and the need to control what's next. It's a song that recognizes how beauty and heartbreak often live side by side. In this arrangement, the push and pull between rhythm and melody reflects that emotional tug-of-war. The Afro-Cuban groove, rooted in the African diasporic tradition, becomes a grounding force beneath those shifting feelings. It's a reminder that even when something ends, there's still a rhythm to return to—a steady pulse that carries you forward.

9. Illusion

After wrestling with love's impermanence in *Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise*, *Illusion* brings a tender kind of clarity. Gregory Porter's composition has always felt like a sermon wrapped in velvet; smooth, warm, but piercing. In this moment of the recital, it becomes a meditation on truth, trust, and the mirages we build around both. This song hits close. It's about the stories we tell ourselves, the visions of love, success, or identity we cling to, only to realize they were never quite real, or at least not sustainable. In a world full of performances, expectations, and masks, *Illusion* asks a simple question: What's real? And more importantly, am I being real with myself? Porter's vocal writing, lush and lyrical, gives room to breathe between the lines. In my version, I lean into that vulnerability, letting the melody stretch, letting the silence speak. Harmonically, it lives in the space between jazz ballad and soul confession. It's quiet but never passive.

Placed late in the program, *Illusion* functions like an internal reckoning. It's a spiritual moment, not because it quotes scripture, but because it demands honesty. In the broader context of the Black musical tradition, it resonates with that long-standing theme of double consciousness, the tension between how we are seen and who we truly are. Here, I strip that tension bare. No mask, no show, just truth

10. Head to the Sky

Head to the Sky is the only original piece on this program, and in many ways, it's the most personal. I first released it in 2021 under my artist name, Jamal Tru, during a time of creative rebuilding and self-discovery. Now, reimagined with choir, layered harmonies, and a mashup of Earth, Wind & Fire's *Keep Your Head to the Sky*, the song becomes not just a finale but a benediction. A call to rise.

This piece is a spiritual affirmation born of lived experience. Written at a time when I was trying to remember who I was as an artist, a man, and a believer, it became a musical mantra reminding me that no matter the confusion, the loss, the detours, there is always something higher guiding the way. It's not naïve optimism, it's defiant hope.

In the context of the Black experience, *Head to the Sky* belongs to the tradition of freedom songs, gospel grooves, and soulful testimonies that refuse to stay in the valley. Musically, it blends contemporary jazz harmony, R&B rhythm, and a choir-rooted feel that nods to both the church and the streets. It's about resilience. About remembering that no matter how low you feel, you were made to lift your head and your voice.

Placed at the end of this recital, *Head to the Sky* is a homecoming. After all the questions, all the longing, all the battles and awakenings, this is the moment I remember my purpose. I return to my sound. I return to the source. And I invite the audience to do the same.

Special Thanks to

Dr. Joe Gilman

Professor Gaw Vang Williams

Professor Claudia Kitka