

Klassik (Kellen Abston), 2021 Artist of the Year

Klassik (Kellen Abston) is a multi-instrumentalist producer and performer: “rapper, soul man, producer, collaborator, mentor, keeper of the American songbook.” His most recent album, *QUIET*, 2019, was named the #1 album of 2019 by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, and garnered awards for Best Solo Artist and Critic’s Choice for Album of the Year at the 2019 Radio Milwaukee Music Awards.



Klassik came up through MPS’s arts schools. At age 10, he began studying saxophone with the Milwaukee jazz legend Berkeley Fudge, whose teachings provided the musical foundation that informs his work to this day. Eventually, he evolved from jazz saxophonist to producer, emcee, and singer. His debut EP, *DEATH OF A BEATMAKER*, established him within the local scene, and his subsequent full-length, *IN THE MAKING*, introduced him to a national



audience. Quickly garnering numerous awards over the next few years, Klassik took advantage of his growing acclaim by stepping up to open for artists like Ludacris, Talib Kweli, Kendrick Lamar, Banks, DJ Premier, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony and Rakim. In 2017, he curated *TRIBE UNCOVERED* at Turner Hall, where he led 20+ of the city’s most exciting musicians in a re-imagining of the work of A Tribe Called Quest. He followed this in 2018 by curating, recording, and releasing his first live album,

AMERICAN KLASSIKS, a reinterpretation of classic hymns, anthems and spirituals, re-imagined with 80s, strings, and lyrical and musical improvisation, delivered as both social commentaries and declarations of hope and resilience. He later restaged the live performance for the Library Loud series at the MLK branch of the Milwaukee Public Library. In 2019, he was chosen for Backline, a musician professional development/accelerator program, and he curated a group of more than a dozen musicians for Washington Park Wednesdays at the Washington Park Bandshell.

Klassik has worked with youth across the city through individual schools, and with various arts organizations such as Express Yourself Milwaukee, Arts @ Large, and most recently with the Lynden Sculpture Garden, helping to pilot a virtual artist talk and songwriting workshop with their education department and textile artist Rosemary Ollison. Coming directly off of the heels of a similar project with Bay View High School’s English Department in early 2021, Klassik has further elevated his brand to include artist educator, successfully embracing the responsibility and duality of the title through his ambitious, vulnerable, and passionately creative works.

Photo Credit: Samer Ghani