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THREE GREAT MCCALLIE MEN

DUCK DAY QUACKS UP
THE SPRING SEASON

MCCALLIE

MAGAZINE

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Chris Lee Takes Chicago

A look at one alum's meteoric rise, plus other McCallie men living musical lives

Chris Lee is

Recent alum hits it big on stage thanks to work on Ridge

Chris Lee '13 will never forget the moment in 2010 when he walked out on stage for the McCallie-GPS talent show, and the roar of applause hit him.

It was then the 14-year-old freshman knew not just what he wanted to do, but what he needed to do. The life of a performer beckoned, and he was not looking back.

"I remember going on stage and just starting to sing, and it was crazy. I had never really had that before. All I have to do is sing? It really clicked that this is something," said Lee, who is currently playing the paired roles of the Marquis de Lafayette and President Thomas Jefferson in the Chicago production of the groundbreaking "Hamilton: An American Musical."

But before Chicago, before the star turn in McCallie-GPS musicals, there was Atlanta, and a wholly unexpected path to the Ridge.

LOOK AT WHERE YOU ARE, LOOK AT WHERE YOU STARTED

Lee grew up in Atlanta as part of what he describes as a musical family — singing in church and at home was part of life, but it was never something he pursued as a passion.

"My mom sang, my uncle sang, but that was something you did in church or at home," said Lee. "I never thought of it as a career."

As a public school student in Atlanta, Chris Lee was part of two programs, Breakthrough Atlanta and A Better Chance, that were focused on providing intense academic preparation over the summer for middle schoolers and exposure to educational options, such as independent schools, they may not have previously considered.



Non Stop



McCallie alumnus Chris Lee '13 was cast in the dual roles of Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson in the Chicago production of the Tony Award-winning musical "Hamilton".

Chris Lee '13, second from left

Each year, A Better Chance holds a conference and it was there with his friend Matthew Jones '13 that Chris went to a panel on independent schools that included Troy Kemp, McCallie's former dean of admission and now executive director of the National Center for the Development of Boys. The impact was immediate.

Private school had never been on Lee's radar, much less boarding school, but Kemp's presentation caught his attention. His mother was hesitant at first, but it was a visit to McCallie's campus that helped open her eyes to the possibilities that McCallie offered.

"I really went up to Chattanooga thinking this was not the place for me, but at least it was a day off school," said Lee. "But when I got onto campus, it totally changed. There were all these kids doing all these activities. You had to be exceptional inside the classroom as well as outside."

From Kemp's perspective, it was clear that Lee had immense potential even before he became a student.

"I remember distinctly that people who met Chris consistently asked, 'Who was that guy? That guy needs to be here.'" said Kemp. "Admission decisions often come down to things you can't really measure, and it was

clear that Chris was the kind of guy who would have an impact on everyone he came in contact with."

When he first arrived at McCallie, Chris dove into athletics, playing both football and basketball his freshman year while taking on leadership roles in dorm life and around campus.

After his first taste of the stage in the talent show, though, it was a dare from a classmate that brought him into the limelight for good.

UNAFRAID TO STEP IN

It was standard McCallie fare in a lot of ways: a dare from one boarder to another to do something that veers a little outside the lines. In this case, it was Alec Josiah '13 putting the challenge to Lee: try out for "Annie," the spring musical.

"We went over to GPS to audition, and to be honest, I wasn't trying to do very well. I was kind of making fun of it," said Lee. "I was auditioning for the radio host, Bert Healy, and was just there trying to be silly."

What Lee didn't realize in



his attempt to throw the audition was that Bert Healy is among the silliest of characters.

“From the moment he started his audition, we could see that he was someone special,” recalled Catherine Bolden, a former director of the drama program at GPS. “His talent was so clear. We gave him a basic dance step to show us, and he picked it up immediately.”

Lee was cast as Healy and was instantly drawn into the process, passing on tryouts for the track team in favor of diving deeper into rehearsals.

Once again, it was the moment he stepped on stage that told Lee what he needed to know about his calling to perform.

“I just remember being like, ‘What is happening?’” said Lee. “I didn’t know that I could have this effect, and I didn’t know that the audience could have this effect on me. It was life to me; It was amazing.”

From there, Lee performed like he was running out of time. He joined McCallie’s pep band — the Tornado Winds — as a percussionist, and sang in every possible vocal ensemble available to him. Candlelight Chorus, Men’s Chorus, Chamber Singers and more filled nearly every waking moment. He’d found his passion and McCallie offered the chance to own it in ways he never thought, possible and faculty who opened doors to him.



Lee fell in love with music and musical theater as a student at McCallie, taking part in several student productions



“There was something Rev. Snow said to me at McCallie, ‘If we both think exactly the same way, then one of us is unnecessary,’” and that has stuck with me. You learn from other people, but when you try to copy them, one of you is unnecessary.”



Lee, center, went to Belmont University in Nashville to further his musical education after graduation, but his rise to stardom has smashed the expectations of a performer his age.

McCallie Musician Spotlight

On a recent visit to campus, Eric Dozier '87, gave the Upper School a glimpse of his unique approach to blending music, education and social justice. Dozier has built a career in music around the idea of music as a uniting and inspiring force for change and reconciliation in America and the world.

Dozier's lecture, delivered from behind the keys of a piano on the Chapel stage, was a "musical history of American race relations," ranging from African-American spirituals to the music of the civil rights movement.

Among his numerous musical projects are an album of original music recorded with a children's choir, work in expanding the understanding of gospel choir music to diverse audiences and more.

"One of the ways that I've been able to understand, process, and endure my turbulent love affair with my country," said Dozier, "has been through music in general, and my music, the music of Black America."

In addition to dramatic roles at McCallie, Lee participated in other musical groups such as the McCallie Men's Chorus.



"Candlelight Chorus was my favorite time of year, and my first introduction to classical music came from Lew Cisto [the longtime chair of McCallie's Music Department], and Brent Alverson [McCallie's director of instrumental music], who helped me develop a respect for the arts."

Even then, though, the idea of a career in performance still had not taken root in Lee's imagination. He was cast his sophomore year as Seaweed in the musical "Hairspray," and it was a conversation with his mother after the show that opened his eyes.

"I remember fighting back tears as I was talking to her," said Lee. "She told me I needed to go to Broadway, and I didn't even realize that this was something people got paid to do. From then on, my high school journey was about anything to do with the arts."

LIKE HE'S RUNNING OUT OF TIME

In addition to star turns in the McCallie-GPS productions of "Les Miserables" and "Footloose" his junior and senior years, Lee's life was made of music however he could find it. He learned to play piano and took music theory class and he started a business as a DJ for everything from middle school dances to bar mitzvahs. He recorded his own songs, and posted them online — in short, there was nothing that would get in between him and music.

As a senior, Lee sought and won the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Millennium Scholarship, a program designed to reduce the barriers to college for diverse student populations with a significant financial need. That opened the door to a huge array of college options, and Lee landed at Belmont University in Nashville, which has been a hub for success in the music industry for decades.

It was there that he first heard "Hamilton." He was already a fan of creator Lin-Manuel Miranda's work, including his first hit musical, "In the Heights," which Lee performed in as a student at Belmont. But when a friend played him the cast album in the fall of 2015, Lee knew he'd heard something special.

Within a few weeks, he'd learned every line of every song in the show, but when the announcement was made that auditions would

Eric Dozier



be held around the country to replace the original Broadway cast and fill a planned Chicago production, Lee wasn't optimistic about his chances.

"Everybody in the world went to the cities where they were doing these auditions, but being the broke college student I was, I didn't think I would actually get cast," he said. "And you don't audition for Broadway as a junior. You're not there yet."

Even knowing that the odds were beyond scary, Lee sent in a video audition — as he put it, "the thing that never works" — and hoped for the best.

At first, he didn't hear anything, which was not surprising, but during a trip to New York to audition for other shows, he got an e-mail: could he come in Tuesday? As fate would have it, he had meetings Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, but Tuesday was wide open.

Lee initially auditioned for the role of Hercules Mulligan, but over the course of multiple callbacks, the show's team had him shift his focus to the dual roles of Lafayette and Jefferson.

"Up until rehearsal started, I still didn't believe it," he said. "People I know, people who are extremely talented, also went out for this... I have done nothing. I am 21, in college, my resume is empty. They saw different, thank God for that. They have changed my life."

HISTORY HAS ITS EYES ON YOU

He spent weeks rehearsing for "Hamilton," and then came another momentous first time on stage: this time in the 2,000-seat PrivateBank Theatre in Chicago, where he fell to his knees giving thanks to God for the opportunity he'd been given. Since then, it's been eight sold-out shows a week.

As Lafayette, Lee plays "America's favorite fighting Frenchman" and one of Alexander Hamilton's closest allies during his time in the Revolutionary War. The role features a particular verse in the song "Guns and Ships," which includes

more syllables in less time than in any Broadway musical before it. But for Lee, it was no sweat.

"It wasn't that hard for me," said Lee. "This is the stuff I do. Rapping, improvisation, these are things I do for fun. It just fits so well."

As Jefferson, Lee plays Hamilton's ultimate foe: an unrepentant yet genteel slave owner opposed to Hamilton's fiscal policies, his objection to slavery and his brash approach to, well, everything. It's no coincidence that Lee's costume features a bright red coat in this role; he's the bad guy and relishes the part.

The Chicago Sun-Times called his turn as Jefferson "wonderfully obnoxious", while Variety said he was "both mellifluous and hilarious in his twin roles."

Lee says that playing two roles so far apart in motivation actually makes the task more manageable.

"It has been easier than I thought it would be," said Lee. "It's almost like doing two plays, two different arcs. They are just so contrasting in their mission."

"Hamilton" is nothing short of a phenomenon, with the Broadway production continuing to sell out nearly a year in advance, and the standing Chicago performance doing the same. Planned national tours are selling out two years before their scheduled appearances. The musical has touched off deep discussions about the role of non-white actors and producers in the theatre, and has thrown open the doors of Broadway to a new generation of young people who may never have been interested in musical theatre.

"I talk to people that tell me how they changed and are inspired by this show," said Lee. "When I hear from little black boys and black girls who say 'I saw myself up there when I saw you,' that wrecks me."

New Madrid

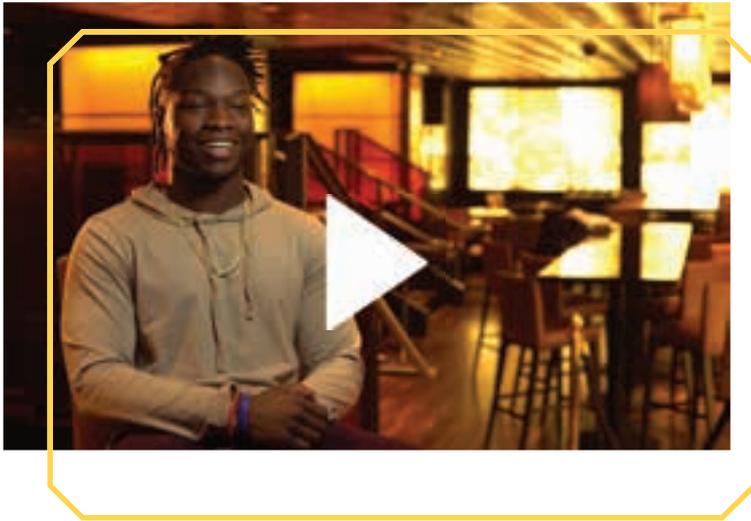
McCallie Musician Spotlight



Though based in Athens, Ga. — the cradle of Southern independent music — the fast-rising group New Madrid is tied closely to the Ridge. Ben Hackett '09 on bass, Graham Powers '11 on guitar, and Phil McGill '09 on guitar and vocals make up three-quarters of the group.

The band started as a long-distance recording project where the band members sent each other pieces of music to add to and build on — "a theoretical band," as McGill referred to it in an interview with Atlanta's Creative Loafing magazine.

New Madrid now tours nationwide, sharing their Southern-infused psychedelic sound with the masses. The band released their fourth album, "magnetkingmagnetqueen", last year.



NOT THROWING AWAY HIS SHOT

Lee has no intention of letting this moment pass. He's already earned a two-episode arc in the hit Fox show *Empire*, and is developing a massive social media presence.

"I'm hungry," said Lee. "When you're hungry you have to eat or you'll die. I'm always thinking, writing, playing, singing. I wake up, I work out, I do music. It's just about — whatever you're doing — to stay sharp. Make sure you're bettering something every day."

In the moments when he has a chance to reflect on how his story is playing out each day, he thinks back to the decision to attend McCallie.

"I didn't grow up wanting to do this; it wasn't tangible to me, it wasn't a thing that people did. And I didn't know until I was at McCallie," he said. "There are so many people who are stuck, and I was so blessed as a young person thanks to McCallie to see everything and be cultured."

Lee's advice to others who are thinking about taking a leap similar to his?

"I would just say, if you're given any opportunity to be exposed to things you didn't grow up doing. Go out, try it, look it up, try something else. Do it." ■



Watch our feature on the life and career of Chris and his time at McCallie on our YouTube page!

youtube.com/mccallieschool

McCallie Musician Spotlight

Thomas West

Thomas West '13 grew up singing; as a child, he sang in a choir for young boys, and from the day he stepped into the Middle School, he found a home at McCallie for his vocal and musical talents.

He joined nearly every single singing group offered at McCallie, took every music class he could and combined with intense individual study he was accepted to the Juilliard School — one of the nation's most elite conservatory programs. He was one of few students accepted from a school where the arts were not a singular focus.

"I'm so glad I went to McCallie and didn't go to an art school. It's 100 percent for the best. I feel like I had a well-rounded high school experience, and I value community and relationship. The things that McCallie instilled in me — how to research, how to study, how to write — influence my musical work."



MCCALLIE MUSIC

Since its founding in 1905, music has played a key role in the McCallie experience. From the military band and glee club to handbells, the men's chorus and the Tornado Winds pep band.

Do you have a story of how music impacted your McCallie experience or know of a McCallie alumnus who is working in the music industry?

Send us your stories and memories
by emailing us at info@mccallie.org