Arts & Humanities

The Story Behind the Song: How Broadway Stars Tom Kitt and Ben Platt Created a Columbia Anthem for the Ages

“Oh, Columbia” is a gift for the Class of 2020 and a message of hope for the future.

By
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The award-winning composer Tom Kitt ’96CC sat down at his keyboard and searched for the right notes. Kitt is well versed in the art of songcraft: he’s written, arranged, and orchestrated music for Broadway shows like *High Fidelity*, *Next to Normal*, *American Idiot*, and *Jagged Little Pill*. He’s worked on pop songs, folk songs, and R&B songs, on arias and lullabies. But he’d never tried to write a song like this.

With New York under lockdown and Broadway gone dark, Kitt had just gotten a phone call from Donna MacPhee ’89CC, vice president of alumni relations at Columbia and president of the Columbia Alumni Association (CAA). MacPhee had contacted Kitt in the past, asking him to give exclusive talks to alumni around the country, and Kitt had happily obliged. But this time she had a very different request. MacPhee had been thinking about Commencement. Members of the Class of 2020 would miss out on the once-in-a-lifetime experience of gathering on Low Plaza in their blue caps and gowns, with loved ones assembled by the thousands on College Walk and South Lawn. The ceremony had been moved online, and the CAA wanted to welcome the graduates with a special gift. MacPhee asked Kitt if he would

compose a song in their honor.

If anyone can be said to be a dyed-in-blue Columbian, it's Kitt. He received the University Medal of Excellence in 2012 and the John Jay Award in 2019. His father, Howard Kitt, attended Columbia, and his brother, Jeffrey Kitt '88CC, '93GSAPP, and his wife, Rita Pietropinto-Kitt '93CC, '96SOA, are alumni (he met Rita, who would later serve as board chair for the CAA, during his freshman year). A classically trained pianist with a love for songwriters like Billy Joel, Elton John, and Bruce Springsteen, Kitt, who grew up on Long Island, came to Columbia with pop-star dreams of making it in the big city. He majored in economics and was musical director for two Varsity Shows, which kindled a love for musical theater and set him on a professional path that led to a Pulitzer Prize in 2010 and a Tony Award in 2009 for *Next to Normal*.

And so Kitt said yes to MacPhee and dug into what he calls a daunting assignment: to write and record a new Columbia school song that could be shared online with the Columbia community at the 2020 Commencement.

"It certainly took some soul-searching and stops and starts," says Kitt. "I wanted it to be an emotional song and hopefully a comforting song and a galvanizing song. I drew on things I'd been feeling and ruminating about. Being in New York during the pandemic has been very intense, and I'm constantly surrounded by my Columbia experience — being married to Rita, having the memorabilia, the pictures. It's a big part of who I am."

First, though, he needed a voice. Kitt knows a lot of great singers, but there was someone in particular he had in mind: his friend Ben Platt, whose time at Columbia's School of General Studies was curtailed in 2012 when he was cast in *The Book of Mormon*. Platt went on to win a Tony Award in 2017 for his star turn in *Dear Evan Hansen*. Kitt had first seen Platt perform at an audition for the bar-mitzvah-themed musical *13*, for which Kitt was the musical director. "Ben is such a special, otherworldly talent," says Kitt. "But for all his enormous skills, he's so incredibly earthbound and gracious and kind." He is also incredibly busy, starring in the Netflix series *The Politician* and doing publicity for his concert special at Radio City Music Hall, also on Netflix. Kitt fully expected Platt to decline. "But he said yes on the spot," Kitt says. "That meant a lot to me."

To write the song, Kitt drew on his college experience with the Columbia a cappella group the Kingsmen, whose repertoire includes Columbia's two school songs, or alma maters. The first lines to "Sans Souci," the Columbia College alma mater, written by Percy Fridenburg 1886CC, echoed in Kitt's brain before he sat down to write: *What if tomorrow bring / Sorrow or anything / Other than joy?* "Those words are extremely poignant and had a whole new meaning for me in this time," Kitt says. "They suggest an uncertainty in the world and in the future, a taking stock of what this world is and saying that no matter what, we're going to celebrate Columbia, and Columbia will be here."

He also thought of "Stand, Columbia," the University alma mater, written by Gilbert Oakley Ward 1902CC. "I kept thinking of a procession and how the graduates can't be with each other physically, so how can they occupy the space of a procession virtually? This idea of standing tall, standing proud, feeling your classmates there with you in some way, connecting to them, closing your eyes and feeling that you're on Low Plaza and getting ready."

Dressing the alma mater in modern garb, Kitt blended elements of the past, present, and future. The title "Oh, Columbia" is in the traditional mode, but the song's first line is utterly contemporary: *I'd do anything to be by your side.* It could be the beginning of a love song, and in many ways it is.



Tom Kitt

“It means, I’d do anything to be with my fellow classmates right now, and with the institution itself,” Kitt says. “I’d do anything to be sitting on the Low steps or walking on campus.” As with “Stand, Columbia,” with its reprise of *Through the storms of Time abide*, Kitt wanted to speak to Columbia’s resilience and timelessness — *Through gathering storms and the rising tide* — and how, despite wars, unrest, and pandemics, the school continues to persevere. By the final verse, the listener is called to *raise a glass to our old Broadway / Where we shall raise one together someday*, promising the return of human contact.

When the song was done, Kitt sent the demo to Platt with the piano track. To Kitt’s amazement, Platt recorded the vocals and sent it back the next day. “It was golden,” says Kitt. “There’s so much you can do in the studio with editing and different tracks, but Ben did this in one take, which is truly astonishing. What a beautiful performance. To me, Ben is the epitome of humanity and authenticity and true emotion. He gives of himself so freely; you just kind of swim in this beautiful palette

that he brings to the song. I was so moved and comforted and just swept away.”

School songs are meant to be enduring, to be sung by generations not yet born, and Kitt, who in the song never names the crisis from which it emerges, appreciates the potency of old songs written at historic moments and the mysterious weight that attaches to them when sung in the present. He imagines students fifty years from now saying, “Yeah, I think this was written during the pandemic.”

“I want the song to speak to all students who are graduating right now and aren’t able to have their graduation ceremony, and to generations to come. I want us all to appreciate what it is to be together and to know that when we’re back in each other’s worlds it’s something we’re going to relish. You just don’t realize how lucky we are simply to live in the world together, and I want the song to convey the hope that, knowing how precarious things can be, we’ll really take care of one another and the world that we live in. These students who are graduating into this uncertain world are the ones who are going to lead the charge of bringing us back and making the world much stronger and better.

“So I just wanted to send a message of hope to them, that with these moments in history comes great resurgence — that you’re going to be part of that resurgence, and Columbia will be here for you when that happens.”

OH, COLUMBIA

Words and music by Tom Kitt

I’D DO ANYTHING TO BE BY YOUR SIDE

I’D TRAVEL THE WORLD BOTH FAR AND WIDE

THROUGH GATHERING STORMS AND THE RISING TIDE

COLUMBIA, OH COLUMBIA

BUT NOW THE SKIES ARE THE BRIGHTEST BLUE

AND VOICES ECHO DOWN THE AVENUE

IT SEEMS THAT EVERYTHING REMINDS ME OF YOU

COLUMBIA, OH COLUMBIA

STAND UP, STAND TALL

DON’T LET YOURSELF GIVE WAY

TOMORROW’S STILL THE FUTURE

TODAY IS STILL TODAY

FROM LOW STEPS TO THE CAMPUS STORE

WE FEEL YOUR SPIRIT IN OUR VERY CORE

SO ROAR YOU LION, ROAR YOU LION, ROAR…

COLUMBIA, OH COLUMBIA

STAND UP, STAND PROUD

THE DAY HAS JUST BEGUN

THOUGH WE CAN’T ALWAYS SING TOGETHER

WE CAN STILL SING AS ONE

SO RAISE A GLASS TO OUR OLD BROADWAY

WHERE WE SHALL RAISE ONE TOGETHER SOME DAY,

AND TOAST OUR ALMA MATER, NOW AND FOR AYE…

COLUMBIA, OH COLUMBIA, OH COLUMBIA

NOW AND FOR AYE.

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