

WHARTON ARTS WILL HONOR GRAMMY WINNER, MULTI-FACETED ARTIST MATTHEW WHITAKER AT 2026 GALA

BY MABEL PAIS

MATTHEW WHITAKER, GRAMMY winner acclaimed jazz pianist, composer, and music advocate, will be honored with the Trailblazer Award at the upcoming "Arise to the Occasion Gala" on Friday, April 17, 2026, at the Hyatt Regency Morristown, 3 Speedwell Avenue, Morristown, New Jersey.

EVENT DETAILS

What: "Arise to the Occasion:" Wharton Arts' (whartonarts.org) largest annual fundraising event supporting its four core programs serving 2,000 students; New Jersey Youth Chorus, New Jersey Youth Symphony, Paterson Music Project, and Performing Arts School

Where: Hyatt Regency Morristown, 3 Speedwell Avenue, Morristown, NJ 07960

When: Friday, April 17, 2026; Cocktail Reception at 6 pm, Dinner & Program at 7:30 pm

Who: 300+ guests

HONOREE: MATTHEW WHITAKER

Matthew Whitaker has captivated audiences worldwide with his virtuosic

keyboard and organ performances, appearing on major platforms including "Showtime at the Apollo," "The Today Show," "Ellen," and "60 Minutes." A versatile artist, he has scored the Emmy-nominated documentary "About Tomorrow," composed music for films such as "Starkeisha," and created works for the Alvin Ailey Dance Company's 2024-2025 season. Beyond his artistry, Matthew is a passionate advocate for music education and accessibility, embodying the mission of Wharton Performing Arts to make the arts accessible to every child.

A true musical trailblazer, Matthew has collaborated with renowned artists including Jon Batiste, Christian McBride, Derrick Hodge, Regina Carter, and Anderson .Paak. He has performed with symphonies worldwide, including the Aspen Chamber Symphony and the National Arts Centre Orchestra in Canada, and has composed for the 82-piece Bulgarian Symphony Orchestra. His fourth album, "On Their Shoulders: An Organ Tribute" (2024), received an NAACP Image Award nomination for Outstanding Jazz Album in 2025, honoring the Hammond B-3 pioneers

who shaped his sound.

"As Wharton Arts embraces our season theme, Arise — Artistry, Representation, Inspiration, Self-Expression, and Empathy — as a call to action for our entire community of learners, I can't think of anyone who embodies these values more fully than Matthew Whitaker," said Artistic Director Helen H. Cha-Pyo.

"Matthew Whitaker's journey as an artist reminds us that talent, hard work, and passion can overcome any challenge," said Executive Director Gina Caruso. "At just 24-years-old, he has already accomplished so much — not only as a brilliant jazz musician, but as a trailblazer who opens doors for others."

The "Arise to the Occasion Gala" is a signature fundraising event for Wharton Arts, supporting programs that empower students through music and performing arts. Attendees can enjoy an elegant evening of fine dining, performances, and the opportunity to support Wharton Arts' mission.

TICKETS

For tickets and sponsorships, visit <https://e.givesmart.com/events/KOa>.



Matthew Whitaker, honoree.

Credit: whartonarts.org.

Mabel Pais writes on The Arts and Entertainment, Social Issues, Education, Business, Spirituality, Health and Wellness, and Cuisine.

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REELABILITIES FILM FEST EMPHASIZES TODAY'S URGENCY OF DISABILITY RIGHTS

international and arts desks.

Content notes: war, violence.

ESPINA — Closing Night Film

Dir: Daniel Poler; 2024; Panama; Spanish; 90m

The festival closes with a Panamanian road trip unlike anything else in the lineup. Venezuelan expatriate Jonathan, facing spinal surgery, recruits two unlikely companions — a between-gigs actor and a jaded playboy — to finance the journey through public donations. He finds himself plunged into Panama's wild side before going under the knife. Inspired by the director's own experiences, Espina is irreverent, high-energy, and genuinely funny: Latin American cinema that treats disability neither as tragedy nor as inspiration, but as the backdrop for a stranger's wager with fate. A strong angle for Latin American arts, travel, and indie film coverage.

Content notes: medical discussions, nudity.

FULL FEATURE FILM LINEUP

96 Lbs. of Dynamite (NY Premiere) — Chad McDaniel, a witty pool player born with brittle bone disease, refuses low expectations on his way from rural Mississippi to high-stakes amateur tournaments.

Concerto for Other Hands (NY Premiere) — A father composes a piano concerto specifically for his son with Miller syndrome, turning music into a shared language of adaptation and trust.

Dream Touch Believe (NY Premiere) — Indigenous sculptor Michael Naranjo — blinded and losing a hand in Vietnam — rebuilds his creative life through adaptive technique and refusal to quit.

Heavy Healing (NY Premiere) — Metal, hardcore punk, and underground hip-hop as mental health lifelines: community care inside the loud music scenes that mainstream culture wrote off as aggressive.

Horsegirls — Autistic 22-year-old Margarita finds

confidence, autonomy, and community through the unlikely world of competitive hobby horse dancing.

My Everything (U.S. Premiere) — Mona has arranged her entire existence around her adult son Joël, who has an intellectual disability. When his partner becomes pregnant, the film asks what devotion, control, and letting go actually mean.

My Brain: After the Rupture (North American Premiere) — After a catastrophic brain hemorrhage, broadcaster and musician Clemency Burton-Hill fights to reclaim her voice, her music, and her life.

We Might Regret This (U.S. Premiere. BBC2 Series (3 x 30 min)) — Wheelchair user Freya hires her impulsive best friend to be her personal assistant after moving to London for love — exploring what happens when caregiving, friendship, and romance combust into hilarious chaos.

Westhampton — A filmmaker returns home a decade after causing a fatal accident, confronting the revised version of events he adopted to survive. Co-starring Breaking Bad's RJ Mitte, who has cerebral palsy.

SHORT FILM PROGRAMS

Close & Personal (Stories forging personal paths with honesty and humor) — Bad Survivor; Don't Take This the Wrong Way; Misfit; Rearranged (World Premiere); Talk (NY Premiere); Them That's Not

Expressions (Artists redefining identity on their own terms) — Beyond Each Frame (U.S. Premiere); The Blind Reggaetone; Once More, Like Rain Man; The How We Look Project (World Premiere)

Growing Pains (Youth navigating identity and talent in unexpected ways) — Boys (International Premiere); Gum; Key of Genius (NY Premiere); Late-Diagnosed; Little Monsters; Sunna (North American Premiere)

Against the Current (Lives shaped by adversity and circumstance) — Circle Hook (International

Premiere); Rag Dolls (East Coast Premiere); White Nine (East Coast Premiere); Creating The Space To Succeed (World Premiere)

FILMMAKER Q & As & COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Every screening is followed by an extended conversation with filmmakers, cast and/or crew, and disability community members. All Q&As are ASL-interpreted and live-captioned.

ACCESSIBILITY

Every RFFNY event — every screening, panel, and industry session — includes:

- Open captions on all films
- Audio description on all films
- ASL interpretation and CART (real-time captioning) at all Q&As and panels
- Braille and large-print materials
- Sensory-friendly spaces and designated quiet rooms
- Wheelchair-accessible venues and service animal accommodations

Select titles available for home streaming, April 23-May 3: reelabilities.org/stream

TICKETS

For tickets to the festival, visit reelabilities.org/newyork

Learn more about the Reelabilities Film Festival @ reelabilities.org/newyork

Social media: @ReelAbilities for Facebook and twitter, @ReelAbilitiesny for Instagram and TikTok. Festival hashtag: #RFFNY2026

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