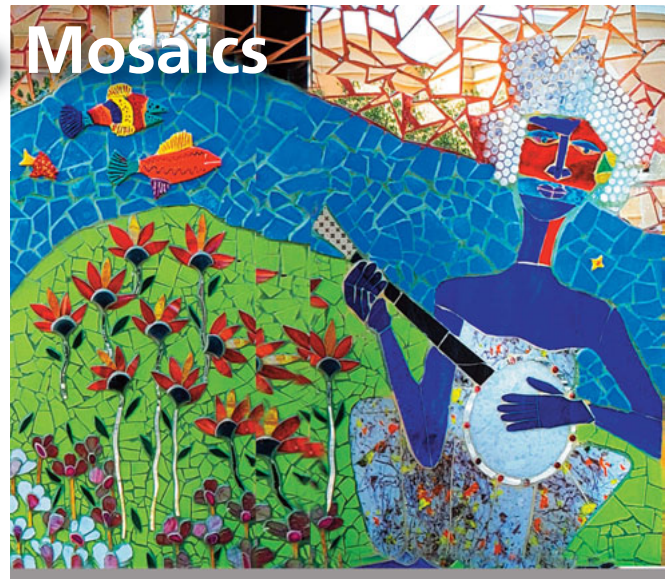


# Street Freedom:



## Sculpture to Mosaics



### James Simon's big sculptures lead to big mosaics

by James Simon

**My mosaic career started on a porch at a friend's birthday party.** There, I met John Fetterman, who is now the Lieutenant Governor of Pennsylvania, but then was the newly elected mayor of Braddock, a small, depressed, industrial town about 20 minutes outside of Pittsburgh.

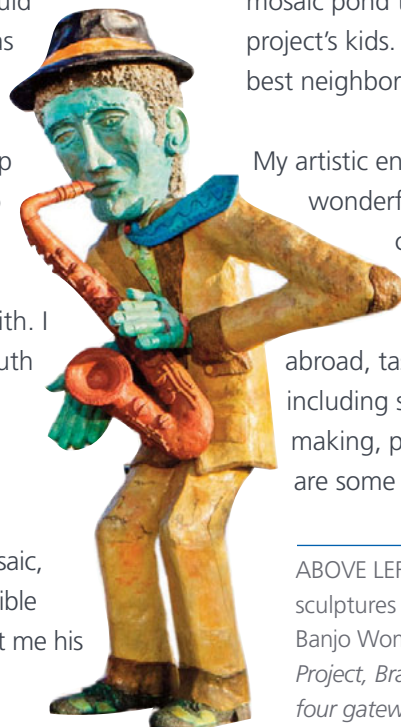
John was familiar with my large musician sculptures in downtown Pittsburgh and asked me if I would consider doing something in Braddock. I was excited by this idea and created a sculptural proposal that included a mosaic floor for the youth of the community to help me create. We wanted the young people to be directly involved in making their environment more beautiful, and a mosaic was something they could easily help me with. I collaborated with AmeriCorps Braddock Youth Project who supplied me with a bunch of local high school kids.

One small issue was that at that time I knew absolutely nothing about how to create a mosaic, but I did a little research and found the incredible Philadelphia mosaic artist Isaiah Zagar. He sent me his

"book" on how to make mosaics. The book was a bunch of stapled together papers, but included years of knowledge and everything I needed to know to get started.

We eventually created the mosaic *Welcome To Braddock Sign* and a large mosaic pocket park that turned an empty lot into a beautiful green space, that's center attraction was a large mosaic pond that I also created with the Braddock Youth project's kids. The sign eventually won *Pittsburgh Magazine's* best neighborhood public art award.

My artistic endeavors started in high school where I had a wonderful ceramics teacher Mr. K, who introduced me to clay and the magic of creativity. After high school, with traveling fire in my blood, I spent several years "on the road," in the United States and abroad, tasting life and learning various arts along the way, including stained glass window making, carpentry, jewelry making, photography, and ultimately violin making. There are some great photographs of me from this time,



ABOVE LEFT: The Liberty Ave Musicians are three, 15-foot-high sculptures created in clay and cast in concrete. ABOVE RIGHT: Banjo Women is the final panel of the 120-foot Magic River Project, Brandenton, FL. LEFT: Trumpet Man, 16-foot high, one of four gateway sculptures at Perry Harvey Sr. Park, Tampa, FL.





barefoot, with a banjo slung across my shoulders, a giant afro of curly black hair atop my head.

**After apprenticing with violinmakers in England and Italy, I became a professional luthier.** Over the years, I had studios for violin making in Oxford England, Tepostlan Mexico, San Francisco, California, Sao Paulo Brazil, and Eugene, Oregon.

After a while, my creative juices needed more than the classical constraints of violin making, and, at the University of Oregon’s ceramics department, I taught myself how to create large sculptures out of clay during open studio hours. I noticed everyday folks connected with my work, especially when it was out on the street in the public sphere. So, I became an artist that creates artwork for the streets—a public artist.

Being able to create both large-scale sculpture as well as mosaics has been a complementary way to balance my artistic expression at this stage in my career. The sculptures demand an enormous amount of physical attention—welding

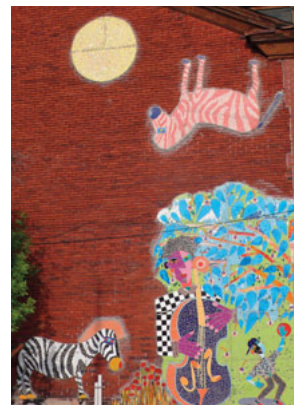
large armatures; moving around thousands of pounds of clay, plaster, and concrete; mold making; scaffolding; cranes; and forklifts. Mosaics are a nice switch, where I can enter into an easier physical art form—putting the extra energy into the compositions, materials, and colors.

*Liberty Avenue Musicians* in Downtown and *Uptown Rhythm* in Uptown were my first large-scale sculptural works created for the streets where I’m based in Pittsburgh. Both pay homage to their respective neighborhoods’ daily life and history. They also interact with the world and people around them to create their own unique, independent spirit.

The *Liberty Ave Musicians* are three, 15-foot musicians created in clay and cast in concrete. *Uptown Rhythm*—located on Duquesne University’s urban campus—is installed on the side of a parking garage. The 26-foot colorful relief sculpture depicts a day in the life of the neighborhood with intricate details of architecture, sports, music, dogs, biking, and street life in general. It was created in clay and cast in a fiber reinforced concrete.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Fisherman Kid, Skateboarder with Café People, and Musicians—all are sections of Magic River Mosaic, Bradenton, FL.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Bicyclist with Dog, Lovers with Umbrella; Magic River Mosaic, Bradenton, FL. Woman on Bike Reading Poetry: Millville, PA. Bass with Upside-Down Zebras, Pittsburgh, PA. Baseball Players, Bradenton, FL.



After completing my first mosaics in Braddock I fell in love with the process—the colors, the endless composition possibilities, the stories I can tell, the youth involvement. I have gone on to create large-scale mosaic installations locally, as well as nationally and internationally. In Pittsburgh,

I helped ignite positive development in my blighted neighborhood by creating several public art works, including three large-scale mosaics. In addition to *Uptown Rhythm*, I also created *Bass Moon with Upside-Down Zebras* on Forbes Avenue, *The Skateboarders*, on Fifth Ave, and finally *Welcome to Uptown*, a 14- by 14-foot, glass and tile mosaic tree that stands 25 feet tall. Located at a strategic gateway to Downtown Pittsburgh, this public art signage is a keystone for my Uptown community's revitalization vision to bring new vibrancy and life to an abandoned urban corridor.



ABOVE: *The Skateboarders*, apartment building for youth transitioning out of foster care homes, Pittsburgh, PA.

Most recently I created a more ambitious mosaic for Bradenton, Florida. *The Magic River* is a 120-foot glass and ceramic mosaic commissioned by Realize Bradenton for a new building in the heart of their downtown. The mosaic celebrates the diverse cultures and daily life of Bradenton with the symbolic Manatee River running through the entire composition, tying it together. The ceramic fish that “swim” in the river were made by members of the community through two artist-led workshops. This project was a lot of square feet, and I lived, breathed, and dreamed mosaics for almost a year.



**My mosaic work is not traditional and probably breaks all the laws of how you should make a mosaic.** My classical violinmaking training has given me an extremely disciplined approach to my creation process, which I kind of shake loose into something I think of as “street freedom,” a unique expression that represents my signature style.

My influences stretch far and wide—from the Australian Aborigines, to the Mexican muralists, to Matisse, to Romare Bearden to Gaudi, and Miles Davis. I approach mosaics as both sculpting and painting. I like to feel that anything is possible. I layer glass upon glass, create relief sculptures, use exotic old tile, and create my own tiles. My old Hungarian violinist friend, Kato Havas, often said, “It’s music that creates the technique, not technique that creates the music.” I think this is true for all the arts—work hard, be yourself, and the magic comes.

*Educated in the early 80s in the art of violinmaking, James Simon is known for his dramatic large scale works such as the Liberty Avenue Musicians in Downtown Pittsburgh, and has inspired a grass-roots revitalization and change in a blighted neighborhood. He received the Artists and Cities Award in 2015 by Pittsburgh’s ACTION Housing, and the Neighborhood Leader Award from the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group (PCRG). [www.simonsculpture.com](http://www.simonsculpture.com)*



TOP: Uptown Rhythm, 26-foot relief mural created in clay and cast in fiber-reinforced concrete, installed on the side of a parking garage at Duquesne University. Concrete sealer is tinted with pigments to give a ceramic, glaze-like finish. ABOVE: Welcome To Braddock, 12' x 10' ceramic tile and glass mosaic with concrete dog sitting on top. LEFT: Welcome to Uptown, 14' x 14' glass and tile mosaic “tree” 25 feet tall overall. Mounted on hardy board that is attached to a welded metal infrastructure. Pittsburgh, PA.