



# JOSÉ GONZÁLEZ

by Bryan Borzykowski

## SONGWRITING SWEDE PULLS BACK THE COVERS

THESE DAYS, José González is known for a lot of things – his soft-spoken acoustic sounds for one – but two years ago he was associated with something very unmusic-like: LCD televisions.

Back then, González was playing well-attended gigs around Sweden, his home country, but outside of the Scandinavian nation he was virtually unknown. So when Sony called with an opportunity to score a commercial, he jumped at the chance to make some extra cash and bring his songs to the rest of the world. “That commercial took things to another level,” says the quiet musician on a crackling cell phone from Ireland. “I had some success before that, but after, the UK and other parts of Europe began hearing about me.”

While YouTube-savvy Canucks may have stumbled upon González’s commercial here – it was the one with all the bright, colourful balls bouncing through a city street while his version of The Knife’s “Heartbeats” played in the background – it was his myriad covers that really endeared him to his growing North American fanbase.

In his short career, he’s covered everyone from Kylie Minogue and Joy Division to Bruce Springsteen, Massive Attack and British synth-pop trio Bronski Beat. Playing other people’s tunes might be an odd way to get noticed, but most artists don’t cover songs the way González does.

Take Minogue’s 1989 dance hit “Hand on Your Heart.” The original is pure pop, complete with bouncy keyboards and proud, infectious melodies. González’s rendition is just him and his guitar. It’s quiet, haunting and passionate. His other covers – and his own songs, for that matter – follow in the same intimate vein.

González says his penchant for playing covers was brought about because he didn’t have enough tunes of his own. Now though, he plays other people’s songs because, well, he’s a procrastinator. “I guess it has to do with me being really slow with songs sometimes,” he explains. “I take the easy way out and take

a really good song and make it my own. So being lazy is the main reason.”

While playing cover songs may have helped launch his career, it’s his own music he’s focusing on today. And it’s no wonder: his new disc, *In Our Nature*, which hit the masses to critical acclaim this September, is a stunning collection of warm acoustic numbers that’ll easily push his popularity to new heights.

The songs seem so simple – they’re basically just layered vocals and guitars – but the Swede had so much trouble writing the disc that he wasn’t sure the album would materialize. “I felt that it wasn’t that fun trying to write songs,” he says. “I was trying to write on tour and I felt many times like, ‘Why am I doing this? I’m not a good songwriter.’”

But when his tour ended and he was able to concentrate only on writing, the songs came. “It really helped staying home and to not talk about making music. I just spent time playing with my guitar every day.”

Pressure to follow up his gold-selling debut, *Veneer*, also weighed heavily on the songwriter’s mind. It was the first time that he recorded an album knowing that people would hear it. “I was more aware how I was writing and recording these songs,” he says. “And I was aware that maybe a lot of people would listen to the music.”

The finished product even surprised González. “I feel more confident,” he reveals, “so it’s fun to talk about what different songs are about. I didn’t expect that much from myself. I feel like the songs reached a level that I didn’t aim for.”

But with all the success and attention, what of González’s much-loved covers? “Well, I don’t want to focus too much on them right now,” he says, “but maybe in the future I’ll do a covers album.” ●

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