

## Piano Days @CLE: Dueling Pianist Benito Gonzalez

by Mike Telin



Two-time GRAMMY Award-nominated pianist and contemporary jazz master Benito Gonzalez combines a long lineage of American jazz traditions with rhythms from around the world. His sound is recognizable for the powerful rhythm section and Afro-Latin patterns he prioritizes across his projects, working with luminaries from across the spectrum of jazz.

On Sunday August 14 at 5:00 pm at The Madison, Piano Days @CLE will feature Gonzalez in a Dueling Piano Gala as he faces off with Cleveland's own Jackie Warren in a thrilling musical showdown. Purchase tickets

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I caught up with the Steinway Artist by telephone and began our conversation by asking him what he thought when Piano Cleveland approached him about the gig with Jackie?

Benito Gonzalez: I thought it was a great idea. In my career, I play a lot with drummers, percussionists, horn players, and bass players, but I don't get to play solo as often as I would like. So when Piano Cleveland approached me to play a duo concert with Jackie I was thrilled, because playing with her is a joy.

*Mike Telin: How did you meet Jackie?*

BG: I met Jackie at Night Town — it must have been in 2017 or 18. We talked and would jam together, and it felt good. I really liked the way she played, and I liked her attitude toward music.

We're going to play some popular tunes and of course we'll be improvising. We'll also play some ballades. It's going to be fun.

*MT: When did you start playing piano?*

BG: I started music when I was three. I played drums t and then guitar, and then organ at my church — piano came after all of that.

The church where I was the organist got a piano for me and I was able to translate what I was doing on the organ to the piano.

*MT: When did you discover Jazz?*

Jazz came way later. One of the first recordings I heard was Chick Corea *Return to Forever*, then I discovered some Latin guys like Chuccho Valdez. Then I discovered John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, Herbie Hancock.

When I discovered Jazz, I realized that I could make a living by playing the piano — I didn't know I could do that.

*MT: What prompted you to come to the United States?*

The Cultural Ambassador from the U.S. to Venezuela was basically the person who brought me to this country. I met him at a jazz club I was playing at in Caracas back in the 90s.

My band did some concerts at the Indigenous schools, and we made a recording. And when he came back to the U.S. he asked if I wanted to come and give some concerts here. And that's how I moved from Venezuela to the U.S.

Back then I wasn't really attracted to being outside of Venezuela. I knew that I could play the piano, and I had done some touring in Europe. But I was 19 or 20 at that time and I had no real intentions of moving.

But when I came to the US and heard some of the piano players I realized that I needed to stay and study, and learn music properly.

*MT: How do you approach performing with musicians you have never met?*

If I'm going to play with musicians I have never played with, I will have heard them play and I know that they have the same direction in jazz that I have.

You can't say that jazz is just jazz — there are many different ramifications of it. So when you find somebody who understands your direction in jazz, you give them a call because you know that from the first note the song is going to take flight.

*MT: Can you explain what it is to be “in the groove?”*

That is tough. But it's like making a salad — if you put in an ingredient that doesn't get along with the other ones it's not going to taste good. For example, if you put blue cheese on a Caesar salad it's not going to work. And in music you need to have the right musicians to make the groove come to life.

Click [here](#) to read a *Downbeat.com* profile of Benito Gonzalez.

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