Title
Despite Severe Arthritis, Pianist Gets Second Chance at Stardom

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0b03h39t

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Publication Date
2015-07-10
Next week, over a hundred bands will converge in the desert outside Palm Springs for the Coachella Music Festival. Max Savage Levenson brings us the story of a musician who traveled a long and difficult road to get there.

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Ambi: Anthony’s first recital.

Max: Anthony Ferraro didn’t hear much pop music in his childhood home. The stereo played Beethoven sonatas and his mom, dad and sister all practiced on the Yamaha grand piano in the living room. Anthony gave his first recital at age six.

Ambi: End of recital piece and applause

Max: By the time he was in high school, his dream of becoming a concert pianist had come into sharp focus.

AX 1 Anthony: I fashioned these grandiose visions in my head of me with a full orchestra and band behind me, playing a concert hall to standing ovations.

Max: Ferraro was accepted to Baylor University’s prestigious piano program and was on his way to classical music stardom. But then he began to experience stiffness in his hands.

He had been diagnosed with arthritis in his knees at age 10, and he was afraid it had spread.

AX 2 Anthony: The most sinister part about it is that sometimes I’d be playing a piece, and wondering, is this just my ability, or this the disease? The not knowing is the part that just killed me.

Max: Plagued by self-doubt, he dropped out of Baylor before he even started and moved back in with his parents in Orange County. He got a job at a clothing store. That’s where the next chapter of his career began.

Ambi: Toro Y Moi’s “New Beat”

Max: The music playing at the store was a far cry from the Bach and Ravel of his youth. He discovered an electro-pop group called Toro Y Moi.

Ambi: Toro Y Moi’s “New Beat” (fades up)

AX 3 Anthony: It was on constant rotation in the store. I associated it with putting people in fitting rooms...shoplifting (laughs)

Max: Around the same time, Ferraro got a loan from his dad to buy keyboards, a guitar, and recording equipment.

AX 4 Anthony: *EQ WIND NOISE?* I had to do music somehow. Pop music seemed like a possible solution.

Max: He could no longer play with the precision of a concert pianist, but he could still play, and so Ferraro began crafting his own songs under the name Astronauts etc.

Ambi: Astronauts etc. “No Justice”
Max: After a year at home, Ferraro enrolled in the music department at Berkeley and got a job at a local coffeehouse.

AX 5 Anthony: [I] was working there for a few months when Chaz walked in the door.
Max: That’s Chaz Bundick, of Toro y Moi, the guy they’d been spinning at the clothing store. He had moved to Berkeley the day before.

AX 6 Anthony: So I mentioned that we should hang out. And we should get dinner or something. I guess I asked him on a date. We just kind of hit it off.

Ambi: Philz chatter fades out

Max: Bundick became a mentor to Ferraro. One day, months before Ferraro was set to graduate from Berkeley, he got an unexpected email...

AX 7 Anthony: *TIGHTEN PAUSES* Hey man, I’ve been talking to the guys, we think it would be great to add you to the group. What do you think? (laughs)
The casualness of the email made me think he can’t actually be asking me that. Elation, mixed with a bit of bafflement (laughs).
Max: A second chance had fallen into his lap. No concert hall, but festival stages and rock clubs the world over. Could he keep his arthritis at bay?

Ambi: Ferraro playing keyboards.
Max: Ferraro’s first tour with Toro Y Moi went smoothly. It wasn’t until he returned to Berkeley that the most painful symptoms appeared, in his hands, knees and hips.

AX 8 Anthony: On a good day I could get around with a cane, on a bad day I was bed-ridden.
Max: Ferraro switched to a new medication, taken through an IV. But he missed one of his injections, and paid the price on his next tour, in front of audiences in the thousands.

AX 9 Anthony: If my middle finger and ring finger were hurting on my right hand, I could figure out a way to cover those keys. Kind of improvise playing around the pain in my hands.
Max: He got another IV infusion when he returned home. But his body rejected it, and he lost consciousness.

Ambi: Toro y Moi’s “Empty Nesters” (begins with single snare hit)
Max: That was over a year ago. Now, Toro Y Moi has a new album. This is the lead single, “Empty Nesters.” They’ve just begun a world tour, starting with a string of dates across California including a stop at the famous Coachella festival.

Ambi: “Empty Nesters”
Max: Ferraro, now 24, has found a new medicine that will sustain him during the tour and allow him to focus on the music in his head, not the pain in his body.

Ambi: Crowd murmuring, then cheering as band takes stage.
Max: For the California Report, I’m Max Savage Levenson.

Ambi: First few seconds of opening song

Source List:

Anthony Ferraro
A classically-trained pianist develops juvenile arthritis in his hands in his late teens. He thinks his career is over, until a chance meeting with an electro-pop star called Toro y Moi gives him a second chance to live his dream as a professional musician. His battle with arthritis had only just begun.