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## *Love Ya, Yanni. No, Really.*

By David Segal

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Let's make peace with Yanni.

Seriously. Let's hug this adorable little man and give him Euro-style kisses on both cheeks, then head to Starbucks and split a Danish and just hash things over. Let's reminisce and have a few laughs and buy him a latte. And at some point, let's offer him an apology.

We've had fun at Yanni's expense--the "Yawn-ee" jokes, the dentist in that New Yorker cartoon, asking his patient, "Novocain or Yanni?" We snickered a bit at his white suit and the melodrama of his synthesized, swirling, New Agey music.

Yanni didn't mind. Well, he minded a little, but he sold more than 14 million albums while we giggled, and that helped. Then, in 1998, he all but vanished, quitting music and plunging into a deep depression brought on by the end of an extensive worldwide tour and the demise of his relationship with former "Dynasty" star and shoulder-padded vixen Linda Evans. He moved to his native Greece and lived with his parents.

Now, he's back. "If I Could Tell You," his first studio album in three years, arrived in stores last week and Yanni arrived with it, passing through town to see if anyone remembered him.

So here he is, 45 years old, sitting in a suite at the Four Seasons Hotel, dressed in a pectoral-hugging aqua-blue sweater, with a day's worth of stubble and that halogen smile and cascade of black hair, radiating inner peace and Mediterranean suavity. He's smaller and more weathered than you expect, as cute and compact as carry-on luggage. Thankfully, he doesn't hold grudges, and though we've pummeled him without mercy, he wants to share the tale of his recent travails.

"I didn't do an interview for over two years, I stayed away, I just dropped off the face of the Earth. I just left the career," Yanni says, his voice deep and lightly accented. "I traveled. I wanted to see other people's ideas of life, get out of the American dream."

Yanni, it turns out, could use a hug, and apparently many of us are eager to give him one. His new album sold 55,000 copies last week, according to Soundscan, enough to land it at No. 20 on the Billboard charts, his highest debut ever. Virgin Records is plotting an 18-month sales campaign, backed by a wave of two-minute commercials on cable networks. The guy is here to stay.

But that's not the only reason to make peace with him. No, we should do it because only now can we fully glimpse the staggering improbability of his singular career. Even if you find Yanni's music ridiculous--and you know who you are--his achievements are unprecedented. We didn't realize this

before because we were too busy smirking, or too dumbfounded by his popularity, but there has never been a pop phenomenon like him in history.

Yanni's career is basically a miracle, a lesson in pluck that could be taught in business school, preached from pulpits and woven into bedtime stories.

Seriously.

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To appreciate why, imagine you're a record impresario and you hear this: "He plays this swoony, highly fraught instrumental music. Radio won't touch him, nor will MTV. When he tours he takes a spectacularly expensive orchestra. Kids hate him. Critics despise him. Oh, and another thing: He doesn't sing."

Trying to sell records without airplay, or MTV, or critical support, or a voice, is like trying to drive a car without a car. Yet this was Yanni through the '90s and, not surprisingly, he attracted more skeptics than investors. So Yanni bypassed the music industry, connecting to his audience through unconventional means, a one-man guerrilla war that he personally financed.

"I realized that my problem back then, my biggest problem, was that I could not present my music to the public because the two avenues that expose music to the general public--namely, music television and radio--were closed," says Yanni. "That was just the way it was. Instead of spending time being upset about it, I said, 'Let's try to get my music heard.' "

First, and most memorably, he wangled an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show in 1990, winning over an audience of millions, much of which rushed to stores the following week, snatching up 300,000 copies of his albums, then another 300,000 right after that. In 1993 he sank the proceeds and his every last dollar--about \$2 million, to be precise--into a video of his concert at the Acropolis. It was a gamble, since at the time, no network had committed to air the footage.

"Live at the Acropolis" became a heavy-rotation fundraising fixture on PBS stations, now seen by more than 1.5 billion people. It played so often that even Yanni worried he was overexposed. But he proved what he'd long argued: that if he could play for people, they would love him. Yanni turned that love into cash through more albums, such as 1997's "Tribute," and then he used the money to underwrite more touring, which sold more albums.

Just as remarkably, Yanni's albums are a one-man show. He writes all the songs, plays all the instruments and handles all production duties. He goes into his home-built studio alone, then emerges several months later with finished songs in hand.

"I wake up and I'm in the studio and I have almost no contact with people," says Yanni, relishing his mad-scientist intensity a little too much. "Somebody walks in the studio and leaves a sandwich in the back. For this latest album, I instructed everyone: 'Don't talk to me. If you see me in the morning, say good morning and let me go.' "

In sum, Yanni is the ultimate do-it-yourself pop star. Rockers and punks of every persuasion take note: In the age of the Internet, with dreams of end-running the music establishment dancing in your head, look no further than Yanni for inspiration. Other musicians work solo (Prince, for instance) and other bands have blazed original trails to their fans (Phish comes to mind). But only Yanni, grinning through

gritted teeth, has waltzed around the music industry's vast machinery on his own.

That's why the corniness of Yanni's music is entirely beside the point. The guy is a living metaphor for Success on Your Own Terms, the dream of every American with an idea that is either ridiculed or ignored. He proves that if you sell a product, it doesn't have to be great as long as it's marketed correctly--and you are adorable.

Yanni is hope.

You may hug him now.

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"He's gorgeous to look at," says Donna Blumenauer, who is giddily chatting with her friends at Borders in Rockville. They have come for Yanni's in-store signing and they have not been disappointed. They waited in a line, roughly 500 people strong, nibbling on vegetable skewers offered by staffers. When they got to the front, Yanni smiled at them and signed their albums and now they are glowing.

"He's an Adonis," says one.

"He has an incredible talent," says another.

"I think it's sad," Blumenauer muses, "that he hasn't had children to pass on the gift that he has."

Is Blumenauer volunteering?

"Who wouldn't?" she wonders, laughing.

Yanni's fans talk like this. They say chemotherapy patients have played his songs instead of taking painkillers. They recount stories of suicidal teenagers who were convinced that life is worth living after getting an earful of Yanni. For ladies, his music romances and soothes, buys them flowers and gets them a little tipsy. For men, it's an opportunity to drift, daydream or, on dates, bust a move. Industry surveys suggest that some of these people won't buy another record all year.

"It's the kind of music that I want to hear when I go to Heaven," says Elizabeth Kitts. It's a large crowd--proof, maybe, that Yanni's audience hasn't forgotten him. This is a bit of a recon mission, a chance for Yanni to take the measure of his fans and see if there is interest in a full-scale tour, which he might launch in a few months. He is a little wary of touring because the last one nearly killed him.

It was 1998 and he was playing five dates a week for weeks on end, with a full orchestra in tow. He played the last date, went home and just crashed. After the chaos and acclaim of the tour, the stillness of real life seemed shatteringly dull. To make matters worse, Yanni's relationship with Evans was coming apart.

"I woke up the next morning and I realized that I was depressed," Yanni says, sipping a bottle of ginger ale. "There was nothing I could think of that I would like to do, and that's a very dangerous place to be. It scared me. So I said, 'I'm not doing well,' and I packed up and moved to Greece."

For Yanni, born Yanni Chryssomallis, it was a rare, extended bummer. Raised in the seaside town of Kalamata, he spent much of his youth in a pool, swimming five hours a day and getting fast enough, at

the age of 14, to break the Greek national freestyle record. Leaving his homeland for an education, he graduated from the University of Minnesota with a degree in psychology, but he gravitated to the piano, which he'd started playing at age 6.

He joined an obscure rock band, Chameleon, then started to make his own music, a cross-cultural ragout that lifts rock influences like Genesis, then adds hints of classical, a world-beat drum or two and a dash of tzatziki sauce. It's medal ceremony music, billowy and shamelessly emotional.

"I do it with total disregard for my well-being," Yanni says of his compositions. "I live and breathe the music."

So did Linda Evans, it turns out, who, in 1990, called Yanni out of the blue after hearing his music. The two began a phone flirtation, which blossomed into romance when the pair finally met, months later. Evans, 12 years his senior, lent him cachet and helped plot his assault on the country, first by landing him that gig on Oprah's show, where he was declared "the sexiest man alive."

That's when Yanni began topping charts and breaking box office records, selling out 10 consecutive nights at Radio City Music Hall, equaling Bette Midler's record. After the fame-or-bust triumph at the Acropolis, wind-blown shows at national monuments became his specialty, with performances in China's Forbidden City and a show near India's Taj Mahal. The latter had local farmers vowing mass suicide, but it turned out they were worried about fans trampling their soil, not Yanni's music. (He eventually met with them and smoothed things over.)

The platinum albums and nonstop touring continued until two years ago, when Yanni lost all will to perform. He stayed with his parents for three months, then started traveling around the world. Last year he snapped out of his funk through a quintessentially Yanni epiphany, staring one morning at a sunrise. "I thought, this is beautiful," says Yanni. "My heart opened up and it felt good. And I thought, okay, you're healed."

He recently built a house in Florida and started to write songs for what turned into "If I Could Tell You." He describes the album as more even-keeled and less dramatic than previous works, though only hardcore fans will spot the difference between it and cuts from a forthcoming greatest-hits collection. "Tell You" is filled with tinkling keyboards that suggest vast and inviting vistas, as well as drums and digitally reconfigured voices, all of it seemingly collected from parts as far-flung as China and Africa. It won't win over detractors. Yanni has skipped a Madonna-style makeover--the hair and mustache are unchanged--and so has his music.

Will it sell? "He'll do fine," predicts PJ Birosik, author of "The New Age Music Guide." "Anything by these household names, like Yanni and Enya, will sell. It doesn't matter what the music sounds like as long as it's packaged attractively."

Virgin Records will do its share to promote the album, pushing it through commercials on cable's A&E, Weather Channel and Lifetime. The label knows better than to underestimate Yanni's appeal, in part because he draws more Internet traffic than any other Virgin artist, including the Rolling Stones and Smashing Pumpkins.

"We'd like to go through two Christmases with this album," says Ken Pedersen, a Virgin executive. "We have the TV campaign through this Christmas in the first phase, then we'll work with him on another spot after that."

Yanni claims he doesn't fret much about sales. His mellowness these days is nearly Zenlike, and he's even friends again with Linda. He just wants to get along, to point out the sunrise and yak about simplicity and wear snug sweaters and play a national monument or two. And maybe, just maybe, along the way, he'd like to make a few bucks, peddling tranquillity through song.

"I will always do my music," Yanni vows, "if it sells or doesn't sell."

Is that so wrong?

