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New Age He's Not, but Yanni's Music Speaks Volumes

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His is a name that usually induces two reactions: Women swoon and men roll their eyes. But neither can help but be mesmerized by his music.

Yanni.

Say it out loud.

Yanni.

Heck, his name even sounds soothing. And don't forget that lustrous mane that most anyone would envy.

But more than being known for his exotic good looks and now defunct love nest arrangement with former "Dynasty" star Linda Evans, Yanni, 43, is a tremendous musician. Not to mention a tremendously successful one, a term that once applied to his nine-year relationship with Evans — a storybook tale that ended this week.

Calling from New York on Friday, Yanni said of his relationship with Evans, 55, "The only time marriage comes up is when we're asked by the press! But we're very close."

On Monday, the pair issued a joint statement that said, "After a wonderful nine years together, regrettably we have decided to end our relationship. We have collaborated professionally and have shared many extraordinary personal experiences. Though we feel our lives moving in different directions, we expect our friendship will always endure."

So, girls, guess that means he's single. But having to explain his life is nothing new to Yanni. Because his music is instrumental, awash in grandiose synthesizers and orchestrations, those unfamiliar with his deeper intentions are quick to target him a "new age" artist. It is a title that is not only inaccurate, but also one that Yanni disfavors.

"My main objection to a 'new age' label is that it isn't a musical term," Yanni said before one of 10 performances at Radio City Music Hall last week. "To apply it to music, you bring the baggage of what is implied, visions of people sitting on mountaintops and chanting. If I had to call my music something, it would be contemporary instrumental, but I simply write music. I don't try to fit in some category."

Indeed, the man who was the first Western artist to perform at the Taj Mahal in India and China's Forbidden City is not the average pop star.

His latest album, "Tribute," draws from those two concerts last year. While he says they were awe-inspiring experiences, he also acknowledges the headaches involved with the coordination of such grand events. The Taj concert took more than 18 months of preparation, and, days before his scheduled performance, Yanni was forced to grapple with a series of political and religious protests in India — hurdles cleared in time for the concert.

"Oh, those shows have tremendous problems," Yanni said with a laugh. "They're a relief when you get them done because the responsibility lies with me. Anything can go wrong. If someone goes crazy and decides to shoot at the Taj, it's my responsibility."

So, then, why bother?

"These places are very inspiring and worth taking the risk for, to me and the public," he said. "They tend to remind us of the potential for greatness. It's impossible to play at the Acropolis and not feel something. The crowd also realizes it's a once-in-a-lifetime event, so there's that synergy."

Speaking of synergy, not many artists can communicate so readily with an audience and say so little. But that is the power of Yanni's music.

"I don't like blabbing or talking about nonsense. I take special care in the words I use and the message I want to send. If the audience is energetic, I'll talk with them. Here at Radio City, we even did a question-and-answer segment at the end of some of the shows. But this is New York — fans here will always have questions, and they will be heard!" he said, chuckling.

In both talking to and watching Yanni, there is a feeling of complete serenity, as if his soul bleeds with every note he touches. Not so unbelievable, considering how long he has honed his craft.

Born in the seaside town of Kalamata, Greece, Yanni Chryssomallis started playing piano, guitar and accordion when he was 6, but after being "gently discouraged by my parents to use music as a way to make a living," Yanni took up swimming. By 14, he broke the national freestyle record as a member of the Greek National Swimming team, left his homeland in 1972 and attended the University of Minnesota, where he received a degree in psychology. It wasn't until after college that Yanni says he considered music as a serious profession, and in 1986, he released his first album, "Keys to Imagination."

Still a hometown boy at heart, however, his 1994 concert in Greece was recorded for the "Yanni: Live at the Acropolis" album, which has gone on to sell more than 7 million copies. The accompanying television special has become a standard during PBS pledge drives, raising more than \$12 million for the network.

Throughout the years, Yanni has assembled one of the finest multicultural touring bands ever, with members hailing from Russia, China, Australia and Cuba. Aside from his core seven players, including flute/saxophone player Pedro Eustache (from Venezuela) and violinist Karen Briggs, Yanni also tours with a 45-piece orchestra — a necessity to project the same concert setup as the shows at the Taj Mahal and Forbidden City.

Yanni's current tour will keep him away from the Seattle and Greece homes he used to share with Evans until the end of next month. While last week he said Evans would likely join him for a few weeks at a time during his travels, plans might have changed. Regardless, the couple's breakup could perhaps be a source of inspiration for Yanni's music, as he says his main enlightenment is "life."

"I talk about life, what it feels like to me," he said. "It's important that you have experiences and you have personal growth and understand life."

While Yanni agrees that his music could project him as a deeply spiritual person, he prefers to explain his passion another way.

"I'm definitely interested in studying about [spirituality], but I don't follow a particular school of thought on any religion or philosophy," he said. "I listen and I study, and I'm searching for the same things everyone else is — understanding who I am and what I'm doing here. There's nothing mystical about what I do."

Doubtless, his fans will disagree.

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