

Yanni: *If I Could Tell You*

By Francine E. Butler

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Francine Butler: After living in the United States for twenty-eight years and becoming an American citizen, would you consider yourself more Greek or more American?

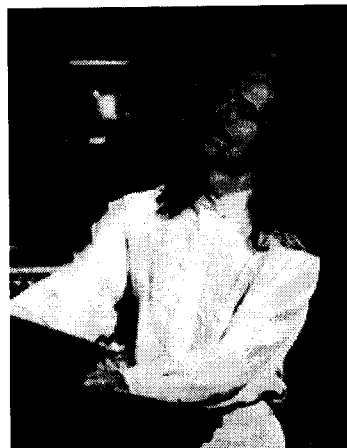
Yanni: That's a great question. People ask me this quite often. Both civilizations are unique. The Greek way of living has been within me up until I was eighteen, and I have definitely been Americanized very well. However, I feel I belong to none. I always say I'm a human being first. This is a very important point for people to get. We grow-up in different countries—and it tends to determine our religion and the way we think. Only if we travel outside the country, spending considerable amounts of time is when we become open-minded, and look at other ways of living and thinking—can we then begin to realize how similar we all are.

I heard that you moved to the East Coast recently. What prompted a move like that?

Yanni: I wanted to find a place in the United States that had the type of climate that was very similar to the one in southern Greece where I grew up. This part of south Florida is as close as I can get!

How do you explain that you are one of the very few artists in the world that has such universal appeal?

It is very difficult to explain. I can only speculate. I try to tell the truth with music. I do not contrive music. Since it is instrumental music for the most part I am asked to describe an emotion with notes, rhythms, melodies and sound. I only talk about emotions that I know of, and the only ones you know are the ones that you have experienced. I think because of that I connect with a fairly large audience around the world because the emotions are similar from culture to culture. Our ways of life may be different but the emotions are similar in human beings. So if your art is based on emotion you should be able to communicate



Yanni In Concert



Yanni In Concert

pretty well. That is the theory and it seems to be working.

What have you discovered as you've traveled the world?

Yanni: It teaches you to be more open-minded and less judgmental. It also may point things out that you don't like about yourself—or about your culture where things could have been done better because you saw something that you enjoy more or that you think is more correct. It aids a lot in personal growth.

What inspires you to create music?

Yanni: Life. I live life and I am moved by life. There is a reason to speak and the way I speak is by using notes instead of words. The reason why I traveled so much for the past couple of years was that I was having an opportunity to live. I have been working so intensely for the past decade or so that I neglected my needs or my well being for what ever was necessary to be done. There is an incredible amount of traveling from country to country and it was a lot of work to put together these concerts. So I needed to just learn and grow. Once your experiences in life increase--the music is there. There is no such thing as a writer's block. I think that is an illusion. I think you stagnate. If you stagnate as a human being your art stagnates with you. If you progress your art will progress with you. I feel that who you are determines what you will create. What your depth of understanding about life is and your experiences will determine your subject matter and how you will address it.

What are your unfulfilled professional goals?

Yanni: Right now it seems like it is a very simple goal but it is extremely difficult. I want to be happy. That's all I want. Ever since I was a kid I had these dreams of creating music that would be heard all over the world which seemed impossible at the time. I have accomplished these goals and I have experienced these kinds of dreams and I have surpassed even my own expectations. So I want to continue living and be happy in my life and grow. I think my art will continue being alive as long as I am.

Are you happy right now?

Yanni: Yes, very! But it took a while. It is very difficult to communicate with the public and my friends. My life has been in such high gear for such a long period of time that ultimately you become brainwashed. When



Yanni

you work sixteen-hour days—when you don't care when your birthday is or if it is Christmas. You're going on high adrenaline with incredible pressure—and you're just trying to maintain your sanity—so you don't burn out—you just try to survive it. Then all of a sudden one day—you do the last concert and the next day you wake up and you say, "Okay, you are free. What would you like to do today?" There's an emptiness that sets in. And it seems like not a lot of things can please you. That is a very scary place to be at. I've been there. I've experienced it and that is why I tend to understand why certain famous people tend to go into drugs and alcohol. It is a hiding place for them. The problem is, no drugs or alcohol could ever fill that. The only way you can do it is by going in it, feeling it and finding your way out. I found my way out by going back home to Greece, clandestinely mind you—nobody knew that I came into the country. I went straight to my mom and dad's house—the place where I grew up and I stayed there—living a very mundane, boring life—at least it seemed boring at the beginning. I did not leave until it was not boring anymore. When I woke up one morning and I loved the sunrise again, thinking how gorgeous the ocean was, wanting to go in—finding beauty and enjoying the simplicity of life, then I thought "you are healed, you are allowed to go out again". So I'm very happy right now. It is a good time in my life.

You have mentioned that you are able to hear the music you create in your mind. Mozart was like that and a few visual artists have had this gift also. Do you think there is a connection between you and these types of artists?

Yanni: I think there is a connection between them and all artists. I think that the creative process is the same for everyone of us. It's a place—a mindset. Athletes sometimes experience this area—they call it the zone. It is a mindset or a place that when I'm in it—all music is available to me. I just don't hear one song, I can hear as many songs as I chose to turn my attention to. So my problem in the studio is when I get into that space, it is choosing which piece I want to bring down to reality. My mind just flies. I have so much fun imagining these pieces that are playing in my mind. It is a miraculous, magical place. It happens to you. It is the same place where you go when you write. When you are looking at a white piece of paper with nothing on it. How horrible is it when you try to logically figure out what you want to write—

how difficult it is and the words don't come. But then there are these miraculous moments in time where you just know what you want to write—it just flows. It is a very similar place.

Do you think more people could be more creative if they tried to tap into that zone?

Yanni: Absolutely! I think that is the key, but no one in school or college has attempted to describe that place or tried to teach people how to get there. **Everyone** can. This is not a specific talent to me. Everyone is creative. Little kids are creative. But we are never trained. We are not taught, and we do not spend enough time looking for it. The way I discovered it was by writing music, doing it the painful way of writing music one note at a time starting as a youngster. That process trained me to focus. At the beginning maybe I had those moments of inspiration that lasted for five seconds and then they were gone. Then I could be sitting in front of my keyboards for a week with nothing. Now I can do it for hours at a time because I have been doing it for years and years. So I know exactly what I need to do, and one of the **things I do is block the input**. For example, I don't watch television, I don't listen to the radio, I don't answer the phone. The day to day living is so stressful and quick now. I can't imagine myself getting up at seven in the morning, going to work in a factory until five, then coming home and being creative. **By that time you have been bombarded by the outside world that all you want to do is hide**. If you are in the Arts—painting, writing, music—it is exactly the same process. All you need to do is **just block the input**. You will hear yourself talking in a little but you just have to be patient. Westerners are not really trained on how to do nothing. We are not trained on how to be alone, how to be in a room with no music, no TV and no one to talk to. It tends to drive us crazy. But in silence is where you find music.

Since you create such beautiful music my personal guess is that you appreciate all types of beauty in the Arts. Who is your favorite visual artist?

Yanni: There are a lot of them. I saw an extraordinary exhibit of Pablo Picasso in Cologne, Germany. When I was a kid I liked Dali believe it or not. People find it strange. I like beauty. My favorite painter of all time is Michelangelo. He is my favorite sculptor also, other than the ancient Greeks—the people who built the Parthenon.

Let's talk a little about your new album If I Could Tell You. It is your first studio album in seven years after your two-year sabbatical. How is this one different from the ones you have done before?

Yanni: The past couple of albums were concert albums. I felt that they made really good concerts but the albums may have been a little too dramatic. The difference between a concert and someone listening to an album at home is that in a concert you sit down and the lights go out, and you can't talk to anybody for two and a half hours. When I'm doing a concert I have to take this into account. So I have to make it dramatic and exciting to maintain your interest for two and a half-hours, which is an incredibly long amount of time. With this one I didn't have this problem so I feel it is a little more even tempered. I think it is more cohesive as an album and I'm hoping it will be more pleasurable to listen to. I personally like it a lot. I think it is one of the best albums I have ever done, and I feel it has a place in people's hearts and in people's life's. I think there is going to come a time during the day or the night where this album will be appropriate to hear. When I went into the studio to begin doing this new album, I went in not really knowing if I was going to have any new music. I had promised myself if I felt that the music that I wrote was similar or too close to whatever I had done in the past, then I wouldn't release it. I was taken out a couple of years until I had something new to say. Much to my surprise it was one of the most effortless albums to create. It just came out. I guess I was ready.

You once said "That you know when an album will be useful in people's life's since you know what the emotional content is." What is the emotional content of your latest album?

Yanni: There are a lot of different emotions that I deal with there. My problem is I traditionally do not try to explain my songs. It is one of the reasons that I choose instrumental music. To back track right now, trying to describe and explain what each song means emotionally with words, is next to impossible for me. I feel the accuracy of the emotion is in the piece when you hear it. If I have done my job correctly you will feel it.

In listening to it there seems to be a variety of cultures that have influenced you. Is that true? Yanni: Absolutely. I think in this album you will hear influences from Asia, the Middle East, South America and

from Africa.

Wishing Well—that's from Africa, right?

Yanni: Absolutely. You were in New York City when your album debuted.

Why did you choose New York City?

Yanni: I think that that is the most important city in the U.S. I love the people up there. I have always come to New York when I do a tour and I love the audiences. I have a lot of fans in New York City. I have to come there.

Is the highlight of your career performing at the Acropolis?

Yanni: I have to say yes—not because other audiences or other places were not just as exquisite as the Acropolis. The Acropolis is significant for me because it was a Greek boy coming home to show his friends and family what he has been doing in his life. That makes it the most special place for me.

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What are your unfulfilled personal goals?

Yanni: As soon as I find them I will let you know! Right now, I look for simplicity. I just want to be happy. I don't have any grandiose goals anymore. I think with all the things I have gone through in my life and whatever small influence that I have from all the work I have done is that I would like to use it to do good in society in some way. I want to be a contributing member of society. I feel that I have a responsibility to my fans and the people who enjoy my work. The reason why I am here is because I have millions of people who support me as an artist. That is why I am able to keep doing what I do. I have a responsibility to all these people to act appropriately and to use this recognition that they have given me correctly. I am open to goals in other words. They will appear. There are plenty of places to apply your energy and to do good.

What kinds of things do you enjoy doing in your leisure time when you are not composing?

Yanni: Anything that has to do with the ocean is okay with me. I windsurf, scuba dive, fish and swim as often as I can.

You seem to speak to the world through your music. Is there any particular type of message that you are trying to give them?

Yanni: There are many messages. The message comes from my traveling and experiencing different cultures. If we can't

love each other, or if we find it impossible or very difficult to do so, we should at least learn how to tolerate one another. We should not be so judgmental, not so eager to jump on people just because they are a little different from us, or they act slightly different, or they speak slightly different, or they eat different foods, or they behave different from us. Those differences are not that pronounced. They seem large because we tend to look at each other through a microscope, which amplifies our differences.

How do you want to be remembered in the world?

Yanni: I don't have this kind of ego. It is not that important now-at least not in this stage of my life. If I am remembered as a good man who was able to alter people's moods for the better-if my music made them happier-that is as far as I think about those things. And if after I am gone, there are a couple of people who still enjoy it, that would be nice.