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Grammy Winner Chilly Gonzales On Rapper Billionaires, Daft Punk, New Album

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How do you follow a Grammy-winning album? Chilly Gonzales, who won the award with his friends Daft Punk for Random Access Memories, has it all worked out.



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Chilly Gonzales at the Montreux Jazz Festival. (FABRICE COFFRINI/AFP/Getty Images)

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He took the lead of rapper billionaires and started his own full-service music company. He set up his own international academy and got a little help from his friends such as Pulp star Jarvis Cocker and singer Peaches. He collaborated with everyone from [Drake](#) to Feist and Jane Birkin. He made an intimate album, *Solo Piano*, which went from cult hit to big seller. This July, Chris Evans, the *Captain America* actor, was raving to his 10 million [Twitter](#) TWTR +0% followers about its follow-up, *Solo Piano II*. The latest, *Solo Piano III*, will be out on September 7 with Gonzales going on tour to support it.

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Gonzales arrives for an interview at the Town Hotel in London's Tower Hamlets after lunch with Cocker. Dressed in a dark shirt, he runs fingers through his black hair, orders water and launches into his views on the music industry.

While some artists are fearful because of low royalty rates and copyright theft, Gonzales is positive, pointing to how this has perversely helped the strength of live music. Asked for sales figures, he points to more than 40,000 for his book, an extraordinarily large number for a work of sheet music and theory.

He still introduces himself to strangers under his real name, Jason Beck, but he has grown into the flamboyant persona of his rapper-style stage name, which originated from his appearance, thick sideburns and open chested shirt. "Even though the name is ridiculous, it is fun to say," he says.

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Gonzales aims for the full autonomy and control achieved by many hip-hop entrepreneurs. He speaks with admiration about everything from Master P's oil-rig interests to the fashion lines and alcohol brands of other rappers. Gonzales, sipping on his glass of water, dryly notes that he doesn't drink alcohol. (So much for the idea of a Chilly Vodka brand then.)

His company, Gentle Threat, is run with manager Melinda Cody. It "takes the rappers' playbook essentially," he says. Gentle Threat is one of the few 100% artist-owned companies to act as booking agency, publisher, record label servicer and TV/video producer. "We are trying to keep control," he says, "Not because we know better, but because we learn better." Rather than being enslaved by record companies or having to rely on patronage, he has five employees of his own.



Niedermueller/Getty Images)

Gonzales contrasts the present joys of being his own boss with his early career in his native Canada, when he was initially delighted that his rock band, Son, won a deal with Warner Brothers Music: “When I was a major label musician, I naïvely thought that I could ignore the non-musical aspects of my career. There is a whole other part to being a musician, especially if you want to make a living out of it.” Despite major airplay for the song “Pick Up The Phone” and support slots for Barenaked Ladies, the group did not succeed. Gonzales moved to Berlin to make a clean break. Even though he could not speak German, he became the self-declared ‘President of the Berlin Underground.’

“I thought I would try to make those non-musical parts, such as presentation, not only enjoyable and creative but I would hopefully get good at them. In the end it was good. I am absolutely optimistic: I owe my career to the fact that the traditional apparatus of recordings and royalties has changed.”

It was not easy at first, Gonzales recalls. “I played in lingerie shops, bars and restaurants. People were not listening but they heard. If I make background music for hipster dinner parties, that’s fine, because hipster dinner parties deserve background music that is good too.”

He has made more than a dozen albums, touching on everything from classical to pop, jazz, hip-hop, electronic, ambient, easy listening and the avant-garde. In 2009 he broke the Guinness world record for the longest solo concert, playing 200 pieces for more than 27 hours. In 2010, he composed a global hit for the inaugural [Apple](#) AAPL +0% iPad 2 campaign, “Never Stop.” Along the way, he has also worked with Boys Noize, Charles Aznavour, Ibeyi and Toddla T.

Gonzales, who is often known just as Gonzo, has also ventured into a new form of entrepreneurship. After much teaching and broadcasting, he has his own annual music school, known as the Gonzervatory.



For the first event in Paris, he had 800 video applications from all over the world for seven residential places for students. Many applicants were in their mid to late 20s, bursting with talent but barely making a living from music. Gonzales said that the first event cost about 200,000 euros (about \$230,000) including all filming, travel, accommodation and expenses for the musicians. They had an intensive week of workshops, rehearsals, coaching by Gonzales, plus masterclasses by Cocker, Peaches and more. Much of the outlay was covered by events such as a concert for 1,500 fans. Gonzales wanted the students to learn more about subjects not on the curriculum elsewhere, partly because these topics are almost unteachable, such as musical humanism and audience psychology. Everyone has their own way of performing, he says. Just one approach is to be extrovert and larger than life. (He introduces himself onstage as “Chilly Gonzales, musical genius.”)

The 2019 version of the Gonzervatory is already being planned, with Gonzales talking to builders and city authorities about a year-round version of the school.



Jarvis Cocker and Chilly Gonzales perform. (Gaelle Beri/Redferns)

He is modest about his Daft Punk collaboration, which came about after years knowing and working with Thomas Bangalter, one half of the pop duo. Gonzales found himself in Los Angeles when a flight was cancelled, discovered his friend was in town and was invited to a recording session: “They had these two songs, one in B-flat minor and the other in A minor, and were missing one connective key change to a semitone higher. ‘You are pretty good with key changes,’ they said, ‘can you figure out a way to end this song?’ The description they told me is that they wanted a minute of a Keith Jarrett album to just pop up. I got a Grammy for that! Amazingly,

they knew the order of the album 2½ years before it came out.” After that, he became something of a fixer for dance acts and producers.

While Gonzales, 46, is his own man, his latest solo piano release will appeal to fans of Erik Satie, Keith Jarrett, Chopin and more. Each track is dedicated to someone, with female composers Fanny Mendelssohn, Hildegard Von Bingen and Wendy Carlos among those namechecked.

“It has more dissonance” than its predecessors, says Gonzales, “though a mostly happy ending in C major.” It could be the story of his life and career.

Gonzales is on [tour](#) starting on August 31 in Geneva, with dates in Britain, Germany France, Canada, Austria and more.

