

Published - Thursday, April 12, 2007

[POST COMMENT](#) | [READ COMMENTS](#) (No comments posted.)

Rob Gonzalez takes 'love-based approach' to music

By ADAM BISSEN | Staff writer

Rob Gonzalez is piano player turned CEO of a La Crosse-based music Web site, but eight months ago, before he had his "eureka moment," he was just a musician taking a meeting in Los Angeles.

Admittedly, he was a nationally touring artist with a two-decade career and a freshly minted album, one recorded with some of the top talent in the industry. Although he wasn't signed to a record label, his manager thought the disc would sell well to the kind of people who buy their CDs at Borders.

A few days after that meeting with his manager, before he was set to play a concert in Virginia, Gonzalez visited a Borders. He might have walked in with the intention of checking out his competition or envisioning a rosy future, but what Gonzalez saw in the store that September day shocked him.

Row after row of CD racks were empty, their stock being reduced because CDs just weren't selling.

"I walked out of that Borders and I almost had a panic attack. What's going on? I just spent a year and a half making this CD, and now no one's going to buy CDs anymore. What am I going to do?" Gonzalez said in an interview at his downtown La Crosse office.

Across the board, CD sales have dropped in the United States, hurt by music downloads and/or inferior records (depending on whom you ask). Seeing the writing on the wall for CDs while having complete ownership of his own record, Gonzalez went back home to brainstorm a survival strategy.

By selling his digital downloads off of his own Web site Gonzalez could essentially eliminate every middle man in the industry, from retailers to distributors to record label employees. This would dramatically increase profit margins, Gonzalez realized, but instead of taking that extra cash for himself, Gonzalez could also give it away to charities.

"And that was the moment, the eureka moment, that was so obvious to me, that combining digital media, digital distribution, charity and music would be the ultimate win, win, win, win," Gonzalez said.

Thus was born the Music Equals Love philosophy or MEL or, as of Feb.13, melvincares.com.

Gonzalez's Web site idea became a reality thanks to the funding of Don Weber, CEO of Logistics Health, whom the singer met in October when he performed at the grand opening of the Logistics Health building in downtown La Crosse.

The company charges membership fees to use its site: \$1 per month (plus a \$3 processing fee) or \$20 for two years. In return for their fees, users get unlimited downloads from all the independent musicians offered on the site (just six at the time of launch). For each dollar spent on the Web site, 33 cents goes to charities working to fight poverty, 17 cents goes to operating costs and 50 cents goes back to the artists who made the music.

"I know college kids, in particular, they want to pay for their music. They don't want to pay 15 bucks for a CD, and they don't want to pay a dollar for a download either, but they want to contribute something," Gonzalez said. "So if they know that out of their dollar a month, 50 cents is going directly to the artist, why wouldn't

you do that? That's guilt-free enjoyment of that artist's music."

Gonzalez is officially launching melvincares.com on April 21 with a concert at the La Crosse Center. Local band Burnt Brownies will provide walk-in music at 7 p.m., and Venice Maki, a singer-songwriter whose music is featured on the site, will take the stage at 7:30 p.m.

Gonzalez plays at 8 p.m. and will be joined by a full backing band that includes an 11-piece string ensemble featuring members of the La Crosse Symphony Orchestra. A portion of the show's proceeds will benefit the La Crosse Family & Children's Center.

In the middle of Gonzalez's set, the rest of the band will leave the stage and he will perform a medley of cover songs. He called this a tribute to the four months of Friday night shows he played at the Waterfront Tavern, a lounge in the Logistics Health building.

It had been years since Gonzalez was booked at a restaurant gig, but while forging a music career in Boston Gonzalez spent nearly a decade working as a "piano man." Like the troubadour in that famed Billy Joel song, Gonzalez learned to be versatile and play a variety of styles.

Asked to describe his own music, Gonzalez said he sounds like "Elton John meets Dave Matthews." Harkening back to his menagerie of "piano man" styles, Gonzalez latest record "All is Right With the World" blends modern and classic rock songwriting with some jazz tonalities. It's hooky, well-crafted adult pop music, and with the right kind of marketing it could become popular with a mass audience.

Although his business commands the top floor of the North Central Trust Building and his corner office has a to-die-for view of the Mississippi River, Gonzalez considers his job as president and CEO of Music Equals Love, Inc. a "temporary gig."

In one year, Gonzalez hopes somebody else is sitting behind the big desk and he can hit the road promoting the Web site. He is confident he can entertain thousands of people at the La Crosse Center and believes he can also do it nationwide.

Coulee Region music fans have been buzzing about Gonzalez's playing and charisma since he first arrived on our scene five months ago. Gonzalez has Wisconsin roots and has come to love the people that live in this area, but despite packed performances at the Waterfront (where he ended his weekly engagement last month), Gonzalez hopes that this is only the start of something bigger.

"It's kind of miraculous how it all came together," Gonzalez said. "But I think when a person makes a stance and decides they don't want to be part of a greed-based approach, they want to be a part of a love-based approach. I do think that miracles happen then. Maybe that sounds naïve or hopeful or something, but I think incredible things can happen."

Contact Adam Bissen at 786-6813 or adam.bissen@lee.net.

AT A GLANCE

- **WHAT:** Concert/launch party for melvincares.com featuring Rob Gonzalez, named one of The New York Times' emerging artists of 2007. Also performing will be Venice Maki and Burnt Brownies.
- **WHEN:** 7 p.m. Saturday, April 21
- **WHERE:** La Crosse Center
- **TICKETS:** \$15 for adults, \$10 for students; can be purchased at the La Crosse Center box office, all Ticketmaster outlets or charged by phone at 789-4545.
- **NOTE:** A portion of the proceeds will benefit the La Crosse Family and Children's Center.
- **ON THE WEB:** Log onto www.robgonzalez.com or www.melvincares.com