



TEXT: SHAWN REYNALDO / PHOTOS: POPART

Worth the Wait

Swedish singer/songwriter José González comes to Argentina

Hours before his show at the ultra-posh Hotel Faena, José González is admittedly a little out of place. He states, "I'm not used to playing at places like this." González has certainly come a long way since recording his 2003 debut album *Veneer* in his bedroom back home in Gothenberg, Sweden. Graduating from low-key club gigs to large-scale festivals and international tours, last month he embarked on a tour of Latin America with stops in Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and of course, Argentina. Performing in both Mendoza and Buenos Aires, these dates were a sort of cultural homecoming for González, as both his parents are native Argentinians. He actually performed twice in the Argentinian capital, with one show at the Hotel Faena and another the night before at La Trastienda as part of the Juana Molina-curated Nuevos Aires Folk festival. González's parents fled Argentina in 1976 and ended up in Sweden largely by chance. He explains, "My father was involved in politics...they fled the country through Paraguay and the Río Negro and the Swedish embassy helped them to get to Sweden. It wasn't really a choice." For his parents, their new home was almost entirely foreign, as he explains, "all they knew was ABBA." Born and raised in Sweden, González calls the city of Gothenberg home. Growing up he did not have an especially strong relationship with Argentina, although his family spoke Spanish at home and he admits, "my father would drink mate all the time." His father actually moved back to Mendoza ten years ago but González has only visited his parents' homeland a few times and last month's concerts were his first in Argentina. Nonetheless, coming to Argentina is still something special for him. González explains, "with the language it almost feels like home although I still feel like a tourist." Unfortunately, his Spanish is dead giveaway, as he states that people, "notice

I'm not completely Argentinian." On the plus side, González says, "they also notice the Mendoza accent." Putting aside questions of just how Argentinian he is, the music of José González has been almost universally celebrated around the globe. In 2005, *Veneer* received a widespread release in the United States and the United Kingdom. Its success was spurred in part by the appearance of his song "Heartbeats" in a Sony Bravia television commercial. As the commercial was beamed into living rooms and shuttled around the internet, González's fanbase grew quickly. Oddly enough, "Heartbeats" was originally written by fellow Swedes the Knife. The song is one of many covers José González has done, also putting together his own stripped-down folk versions of songs like "Love Will Tear Us Apart" (Joy Division), "Teardrop" (Massive Attack), "Smalltown Boy" (Bronski Beat) and "The Ghost of Tom Joad" (Bruce Springsteen). Even Kylie Minogue is suitable source material, as González included a cover version of her song "Hand on Your Heart" on one of his EPs. According to González, the covers were initially done out of necessity. "From the start I had a very short set, only enough for 20 minutes, so I added 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' and later on 'Heartbeats' just make a little longer set." When asked what makes a good cover version, González says, "For me playing guitar, I don't want to make a cover that has similar sounding music. So with a song like 'Hand on My Heart,' where the original song isn't that good actually, it's about focusing on and pulling out what I feel is good with that song, but also keeping the original harmonies and melodies and trying to stay true to the song." The novelty of his covers may have initially garnered the attention of the music world, but González's original material is perhaps more impressive. Armed with only an acoustic guitar and his voice, he crafts songs that are both deceptively simple and emotionally rich. Upping the level of difficulty is the fact that González chooses to write all of his songs in English, his third language. He counters this notion by saying "I think by now it's kind of my second language." Although he began learning English as a child in school, González has been making a concerted effort to improve. "It's something that I wanted to focus on, to try and get a bigger vocabulary. I started reading. I'd buy only magazines in English, listen to podcasts in English. Also, I've been touring in the States and the UK quite a lot the past two years." Writing lyrics in a foreign language is already difficult, but González also limits himself musically by writing and playing most of his songs with only a single guitar. While some artists might find that limitation maddening, González feels differently. "It's almost like it's easier to express with just one guitar...when I'd write some stuff two years ago I was sitting with a synthesizer, I was playing with instruments and it's almost like I'd get lost in the focus of what I wanted to make musically." He continues, "It's easier with just the guitar, which I know quite well." Given these sentiments it comes as no surprise that González is keeping it simple on his new album, *In Our Nature*, which is slated for a September release. With a four-year gap since the release of *Veneer*, he is clearly excited about the new material and claims to be much happier with *In Our Nature*. He goes so far as to state, "The other record I can't really listen to it, especially the voices." Although that frustration may have led González to tinker with some new musical ideas, he says that *In Our Nature* is, "pretty much the same. It's just one guitar. There is a bit more backup vocals, a bit more percussion. Two of the tracks have synthesizer but it's still very stripped-down music. I recorded it myself this time too. But I've learned quite a lot about recording. I didn't record it at home, I recorded it in a small room, a studio. It feels similar but a bit better." Once *In Our Nature* is released, González will have plenty of time to spend with the new material, as he plans to tour and promote the album for about a year. He enjoys

performing live, but concedes that things don't always go smoothly when it is just him and a guitar on stage. José González shows are tranquil affairs and he occasionally has problems with chatty audiences. "Back in the day I never yelled or said anything, I just played shorter sets and would go offstage. The whole first year was kind of a struggle. Half the shows had people talking. Sometimes half the crowd wanted to listen and half the crowd didn't care, so I would have people hushing each other all the time and nobody would hear anything." He continues, "It's been a problem and still is, especially at festivals. But as long as the shows are indoors and have good PAs, it's something that we've tackled." There are certainly no sound problems at Hotel Faena, as barely a peep is heard from the late-night audience. González says that the Argentina shows were all "really good" and expresses surprise that so many people in the audience knew the words. With a new album on the way and more international tour dates lined up in the months ahead, González will only encounter more of this as his fanbase extends into the far corners of the world. As an Argentinian Swede who sings acoustic folk in English, José González has a leg up on the competition when it comes to international relations. Luckily for Buenos Aires, Porteños have already staked their claim to his music. Hopefully José González will remember that and schedule his second round of concerts in the Argentinian capital more quickly than the first. *www*

The new José González album In Our Nature will be released worldwide in September. For more pictures of José and the Nuevos Aires Folk festival, go to www.tublip.com. You can also keep track of José González online at www.jose-gonzalez.com or www.myspace.com/josegonzalez.