

marco

When you hear about an ultra-disciplined musician, anecdotes crop up of Charlie Parker locking himself in a woodshed to practice his saxophone for weeks on end, or a mentally unstable Beethoven sawing the legs off his piano to hear the instrument's vibrations. But maybe it's time we liven up that image of the stern artist with tunnel vision. Piano and keyboard mastermind, **Marco Benevento**, is a reminder that a serious, incredibly disciplined jazz keyboardist can still be as jolly as a lute-playing minstrel.

benevento

INVESTING IN HIS OWN WORLD

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ver versatile, Benevento is as much in his element when he's seated at a baby grand as he is re-wiring a second-hand Optigan (a plastic synthesizer made by Mattel in the 1970s). According to Benevento, the so-called "model" is "totally broken in music right now. There's no standard way of making albums. It's not like how it was [30 years ago]."

Benevento seems to thrive on the fact that there's no set mold for musicians to follow nowadays. He's a straight-up musical mad scientist, and the range of instruments that fill his Brooklyn living room—everything from a Hammond Organ to a noise-making Simon Says baby—are evidence of his creative experiments. While using circuit-bent toys to add character to his keyboard sounds is a relatively new development for Benevento, he admits that his interest in playing around with machines started much earlier. "I've always had this set-up where I was recording, I had mics, or I had tape, and I was editing stuff." He remembers, "I still have my four-track from when I was a kid." After he explains this history of fooling around with sounds, it's no shock when he mentions that before shifting his focus to performing, his original intent was to study audio engineering at Berklee.

Upon graduating from Berklee, Benevento became a regular on NYC's experimental jazz scene, hooking up with grade school buddy and drummer, Joe Russo, to form the Benevento/Russo Duo in 2001. The two made a name for themselves by touring hard, and collaborating with Trey Anastasio and Mike Gordon in 2006, before toning down their schedule to devote more time to side projects and their families (in 2006, Benevento and wife, Katie, had their now-two-year-old daughter, Ruby, on the way). Those initial years of hard work on the road were huge for Benevento in terms of his own personal growth as a musician. When the Duo first started, Benevento didn't use organ foot pedals, opting to travel only with his Hammond organ and a Leslie amp. He admits that while, at first, he was intimidated by the idea of playing bass lines on the Hammond, he grew to really love the instrument, mentioning John Medeski as a big influence on his early Duo work.

Benevento likens the move of devoting more time to his solo career to "shaking a seltzer water bottle...I had all these songs that were saying, 'You better finish me!' I had been playing Hammond and Wurlitzer for the last six years, not even playing the piano. It got to the point where I realized, 'Oh, I've missed you!'" Marco exclaims, hugging the baby grand in his living room.

Recently, through the Marco Benevento Trio, he's been getting plenty of bonding time with his piano. With his close friends and collaborators, bassist Reed Mathis and drummer Andrew Barr, encouraging him to take the reins, the Trio challenges Benevento's creativity, while fueling his songwriting. He explains, "It's fun to be that person in the band because your friends are trusting your opinion. And then you get to go off and be inspired to write a lot with this confidence that Reed and Andrew are your supporters. That's a total musical turn-on." It seems that Benevento is being humble, but when world-class musicians insist on playing your songs, it's definitely a testament to

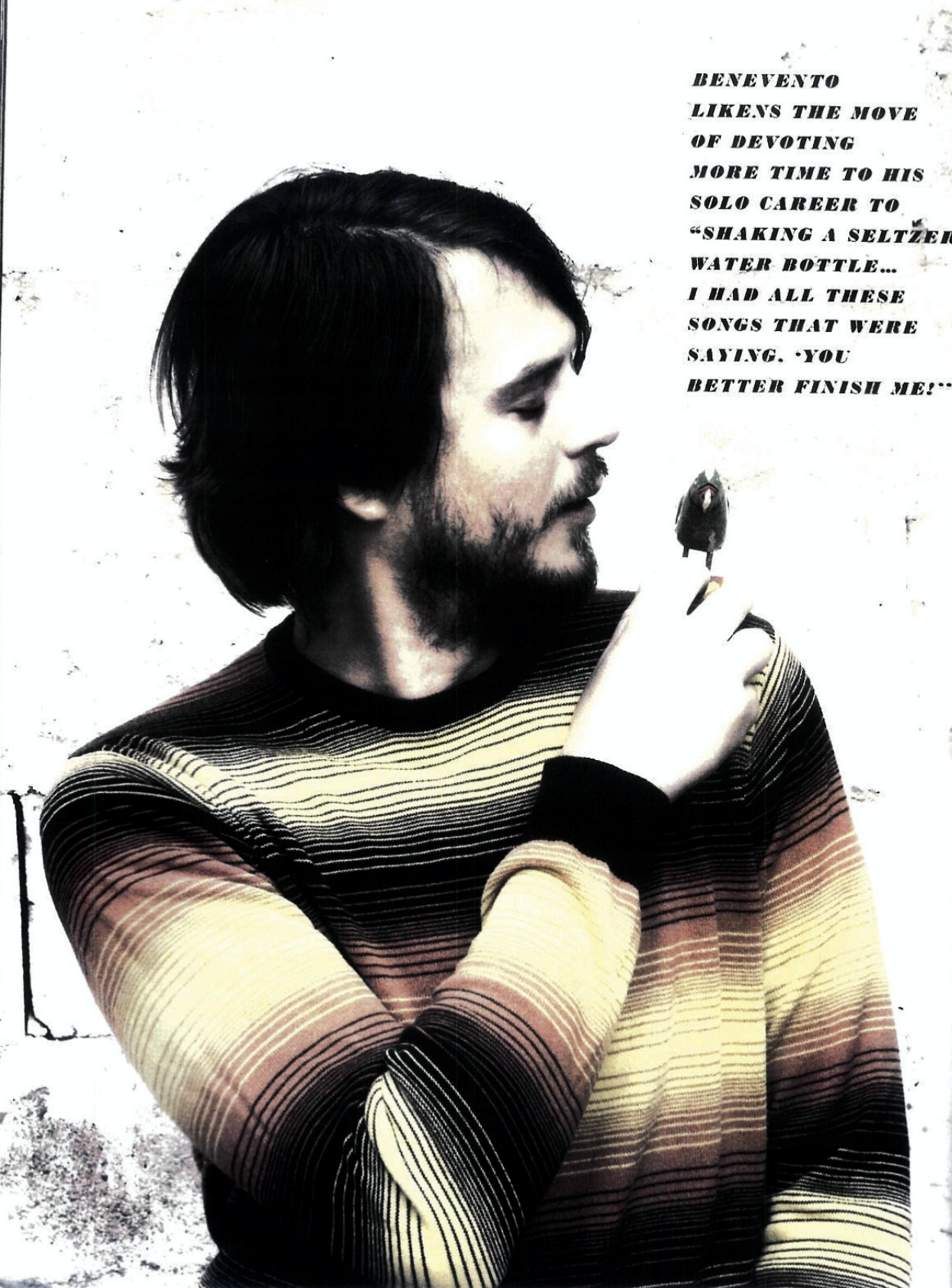
the respect he commands from his musical peers. Longtime collaborator, Joe Russo, best articulates the special feeling that comes from sharing the stage with Benevento: "I'll play a few shows with one of my other bands, and then I'll come back and play with Marco and go, 'Holy shit, nothing is like this.'"

One of Benevento's newest experiments in his laboratory-like living room is an instrument called the Optigan—a sampling keyboard that reads waveforms with an optical laser off of clear, disc-like transparencies—that he discovered on Craigslist. As Benevento flips through his stack of pre-recorded Optigan discs ("Bossa Nova Style," "Banjo Sing Along," "Romantic Strings," "Guitar in ¾ Time"), he jokes, "the fun never stops!" imitating an infomercial voice-over. After Benevento bought the keyboard, made of fake-wood, he took it apart with photographer friend Mike Didonna, and the two stayed up until the wee hours of the morning re-wiring, fixing, and customizing the machine. Not surprisingly, Benevento was immediately interested in the possibility of learning how to make his own discs, which would allow him to play over his own pre-recorded Optigan music on the instrument.

Although he couldn't get a hold of the maker of the instrument, he got into contact with a man named Pete Hicks, who runs a website called optigan.com and makes Optigan discs. Hicks is currently helping Benevento put his own tracks on the transparencies—a very intricate and glitchy process. His newest solo album (*Me Not Me*) is Benevento's first to feature his Optigan, using the "Romantic Strings" transparency on "Golden," and one that loops a kind of gritty-sounding drum-breakdown on "Heartbeats." He utilized the Optigan, or as he puts it, his "new love that's nearly 40-years-old," on about half of each tune from *Me Not Me*, and shows no sign of stopping this affair with the retro synthesizer.

Distinguishing his latest effort from past releases, *Me Not Me* is noteworthy in that it is the first album to be released under Benevento's own record label, Royal Potato Family. He gives special credit to his friend and Hyena Records boss, Kevin Calabro, for encouraging him to release his music on his own label. Benevento rationalizes the decision: "If I do the extra legwork and go for it, it'll be worth it down the line. If you can invest in your own world, it's worth it."

James Baldwin once wrote, "A piano is just a piano... while there's only so much you can do with it, the only way to find this out is to try; to try and make it do everything." For Benevento though, it seems as though there's only so much he can't do on a keyboard, and he's going to try to make it do everything and anything. In this vein, Trio comrade Barr sums his friend up as having "wonderful skills rhythmically, harmonically and technically on the piano, but also operating like a whole multi-tracked studio session in the live situation, triggering little pre-recorded loops of old drum machines or his baby talking. [Benevento can] pull emotion and crescendos from a broken apart kid's toy into a perfectly arranged song on the grand piano. Mostly though, he just likes to eat good pizza and laugh before, during and after anything."



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