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Chilly sauce: Prankster rapper Gonzales may seem more Broadway than baroque with his safari suits and cigars, but there's classical talent behind his goofy cabaret act, discovers Lulu Le Vay



Within the sweaty confines of electro-punk fiesta Trash, at London night spot The End, Canadian expat and current Berlin scene-stirrer Chilly Gonzales takes to the stage in a full-on safari suit. The hefty beige coat is draped around his towering frame, the mesh-style helmet pulled down protectively over his face. Moments later he peels off the jungle gear, revealing

another suit - this time it's tailored and in shocking pink. The crowd is mesmerised, the mix of analogue electro beats, his rough-edged rapping style and pure cabaret persona pounding them into a state of lathered hysteria. Think Barry Manilow meets Mike D with his fingers caught in a plug socket and you're almost there.

Chilly "Gonzo" Gonzales first began wooing hipster muso circles back in 2000 with the release of his critically acclaimed debut album, Gonzales Uber Alles - a record that brought accolades from throughout Europe for its melancholic electro-balladic instrumentals and alluringly unique flavour. His second album, The Entertainer, released the following year, adopted a more comical, Ali G-esque, dirty hip-hop slant that overflowed with a filthy groove.



His latest offering, the fiercely anticipated Presidential Suite, is a more slickly produced fusion of the two, boasting the much lauded and infectious cabaret-electro-funk hit Take Me To Broadway. So who is this Chilly Gonzales? This hairy, hefty man of 6ft 3in who, over the space of three albums, and under as many years, has metamorphosed into an eccentric, colourful

character whose elaborate and confrontational lyric-spouting keeps his legion of fans entranced?

Thirty years ago Gonzales was born Jason Beck into a wealthy Jewish family in Montreal, Canada. His father was a fast-talking government advisor - responsible for commissioning airports in Prague and roads through the Himalayas; his mother was a languages teacher. At four years old, his older brother austerely taught him the piano ("he used to whack me on the back if I hit the wrong notes!"), and a year later they had written their first song, Elizabeth Court - Jean-Christophe (who has since written music for Buffy The Vampire Slayer) plucking away at one string of a guitar, Jason cheerily chanting the name of this random neighbourhood location whilst bashing his pillow with a knitting needle. His desire to entertain was ignited.

"I remember being surrounded by a real positive feeling from the family," Jason recalls, relaxing almost out of character in jeans, overcoat and safari hat in a north London cafe. "I just loved mucking about, on the piano and singing songs. Everybody seemed to like it."

After high school, where Jason's friends enjoyed being taken to jazz sessions purely because it was easier to get served alcohol, he enrolled at Montreal's McGill School of Music. It was here that his childhood fascination with his father's classical record collection (his sister's Barry Manilow and Bee Gees ensemble scoring a close second) propelled him to master classical theory, composition and jazz performance.

"I'm really grateful I went, but I felt like a spy," he enthuses, apologising profusely for having just been caught picking his nose. "I knew I wanted to study 'how?', but then I wanted to 'do'. I didn't want to turn into one of those professors with patches over his elbows asking 'how?' for the rest of my life."

After completing his studies in 1993, Jason moved to Toronto where his alternative rock band Son got signed to Warners, but their starry-eyed moment was short lived.

"I really thought the music part of the job would be enough," he explains. "I wasn't prepared for giving interviews, performing... I can remember having this feeling that I was in a fight that no one told me I was supposed to be fighting. I would see other people driving faster than me up the highway, and they made it look so easy."

This is when the energy and concept of Gonzales was conceived - the performer, the media darling, the industry player. The whole package derived primarily from his long-standing fascination with composers Salieri and Mozart. Salieri, the one who played by the rules but was never satisfied with his own ability Mozart, the one with the exotic, coarse persona who emitted true ingenuity.

"After having failed at the Warners experiment, I wanted to reinvent myself, to start again. I decided I had to bring my own illusion to the job – from being a Salieri figure I had to become more like Mozart."

With this in mind, and a firm grasp of what oiled the industry cogs, Jason left for Paris. After three futile months he ended up in Berlin whilst on tour as a duo with fellow Canadian and infamous queen of slut grunge Peaches. After three days he was hooked.

"Berlin was never on my agenda, but I discovered I could have my own bubble in a big city which physically had more space for an awkward-sized man like me. In Paris I found the tables and chairs too small. In London I felt like a hunchback. In Berlin the outside world wasn't constantly encroaching on me."



And so Gonzales, the professional showman and rapper, was born. A highly marketable illusion, in a similar conceptual vein to 1950s avant garde jazz pioneer Sun Ra and Man On The Moon comedian Andy Kaufman, both of whom Gonzales offers a sincere nod of respect. But for Jason, the illusion of Gonzales means more than offering a sellable package. By sending up the polar elements of his personality – egomania and insecurity (both reflected heavily in his lyrics) – he is forcing them under the spotlight, facing them head-on like a form of therapy.

"It comes down to the twin towers that's at the root of every entertainer," sighs Gonzales, pulling his safari hat down over his eyes. "Growing up I got that positive feeling from the family, from just playing the piano and cracking a few jokes - then you end up chasing after it your

whole life. I've tried to put as much insecurity and egomania into Gonzales as I can, as only then you will get a comprehensive picture."

Gonzales has fearlessly carved out his own agenda. He mocks the culture of hip-hop via his irreverent rapping, his old-school tracksuits and weighty gold chains. He relishes any opportunity to expose his chest hair and the quipping in his lyrics is sharper than Puff Daddy's newly polished crucifix. And if that isn't enough, his suitably off-the-hook merchandise includes hotel-style bath towels, postage stamps and buffoon-like cartoon footprints. Chilly Gonzales appears to be a comic musical genius of our time. But don't be fooled. As Salieri spluttered on the verge of tears about Mozart in *Amadeus*: "This was no composition by a performing monkey. This was music I had never heard."

Presidential Suite is out on April 22. Gonzales plays Sheffield Barfly, Wed 17 Glasgow King Tut's, Thu 18 Manchester University, Fri 19 Bristol Fiddlers, Sat 20 London Scala, Mon 22