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# Music

## Do-It-Yourself Pop

Skip the tour-bus grind, singer/songwriter Yoni says.

There's gold in the new media.

BY JONATHAN CUNNINGHAM

**M**ost single-name musicians are too egotistical for their own good. Singers like Cher, Madonna, and Prince — yes, that type of single-name musician — can be remarkably talented and full of charisma on stage, but when not performing, they're known stinkers. Sting won't give you the time of day if you meet him in person, and there's a long list of other one-name performers, from Akon to Usher, who are reputedly the same — conceited and self-involved. But there's one exception to the sorry assessment of those with memorably simple noms de theatre: local singer/songwriter **Yoni**, who's as far away from ego and braggadocio as it gets.

With good looks, a slick sound, and a career trajectory that's finally on its way up, Yoni could choose to puff his chest out, but instead, he's humble and looks you in the eye with the earnestness of a man who wholeheartedly believes in the songs he creates and the messages they convey.

His cred among the Gen-Y college crowd is already solid. Says the music blog sonicbids.com, Yoni is "boldly giving voice to the frustration of his peers, ambi-

tious and restless college grads, eager to conquer the world but running into roadblocks and hairpin curves along the way."

The Plantation-based singer and guitar player is only beginning to make a name for himself as a live performer — he played his first solo gig last October. But with a debut album dropping this week and a catchy lead single, "Twentysomething," developing a life of its own, Yoni hopes his chance at stardom is within reach. As an independent artist, he knows he doesn't have the funds or resources to compete with major acts, but he's cutting corners and finding ways to get his music heard in DIY fashion. He's got a bevy of websites handling online distribution for his four-song EP, *Ready for More*, which was released last year, and the same applies to his stellar debut album, *Extra Credit*. Unlike a lot of upstart rock musicians, especially those of the single-name variety, Yoni actually *isn't* looking for a record deal and says he's comfortable keeping things as low-budget and hands-on as possible.

"The label thing is totally not in my sights right now," Yoni says during a recent interview. "I'm very happy doing the indie thing. I want to go out and get film and TV licensing. I want to build things up on my own strategically, just the way that I envision it all coming together."

At the age of 29, Yoni is older and arguably wiser than most rock/pop performers getting their careers off the ground. Born Yoni Laviatan in London to Israeli immigrant parents, he earned a degree from the University of Florida in criminology and law, not music.

His diversity of experience is probably why he knows better than to waste his time pining for a major recording contract, as most record companies like to "discover" talent at a considerably younger age. But what he concedes in a few gray hairs, he's able to make up tenfold from his time spent cleverly plotting his venture into the pop world. Rather than hopping in a van and playing dive bars around the country, hoping for a miracle, Yoni puts his faith in opportunities offered by the new media.

"I have three TV placements [on MTV, PBS, and the Oxygen Network] already and a lot of opportunities online as well," Yoni says. The licensing means that his music can be used as background or accompaniment for shows produced for those networks, while the Internet provides lucrative merchandising opportunities.

"Television is starting to break bands," Yoni says. "It's like the new radio. Bands are breaking because their songs find the right audience on the right show. It's all about placement. To get on commercial radio, you pretty much got to be on a major label. But to be on TV, the doors are a lot more open.

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You can get traffic on MySpace... people see the song here, they hear it there, and it's just about working all the angles."

If MySpace has become the ultimate determiner for how popular a new song is within the online community, then Yoni's "Twentysomething" is off to a good start. Based on the downloads of individual audio files, it's been played more than 6,800 times on his MySpace site. It's the clear standout on *Extra Credit*, a coming-of-age track that steps on the innocent dreams of recent college grads and seeks to alert them about how life really is.

"I think that song turned out so powerful because anyone over 20 can relate to it," Yoni explains. "When you're fresh out of college or whatever school you go to, a part of you still thinks that things are just going to be handed to you — and that's not the case."

The song poignantly conveys the disillusionment of young people finding themselves whisked into the world of sputtering careers and media-driven success: "Somewhere down the line I realized/No one cares about my hungry eyes/Hungry

for the world to identify/Who I am as more than just a passerby."

While the song has yet to run on a television show, both MTV and the Oxygen Network have expressed interest.

Television licensing is so far an obscure route to gaining exposure, but with the poppy production, strong guitar work, and lyrics that speak to the plight of post-college angst, "Twentysomething" is perfect for MTV and television in general.

Despite the potential windfall, Yoni knows the odds are stacked against him.

"Most people start their music careers much earlier," Yoni concedes. "But I didn't start to play off until last year. Still, I knew what direction I was going in, business-wise, and that makes a difference. If I started five years ago, I might be in the same place."

He also wouldn't have lived through the grind of being 20-something in America, an experience that seems to be draped all over the 11 songs on *Extra Credit*. It's an impressive album, striking a responsive chord with its melancholy debunking of the idea that coming of age with a college degree is a one-way ticket to success. Although many of the songs on the album were composed shortly after Yoni graduated from college, the conviction comes from the heart of a man who has already lived through his 20s and has important messages to share before moving on into the next age bracket.

*Extra Credit* is full of positive reminders for young people to stay focused on their dreams regardless of the obstacles. A song like "Consider This" is a bit macabre, with its brooding keyboard accompaniment, but its lyrics remind us that negative situations aren't as bad as they seem. In "The Fight Goes On," Yoni offers this stirring recipe prescription: "No, we should not need anyone/To tell us what must be done/We live in times of burning towers falling to the ground, even now/The fight goes on/Don't back down, the fight goes on."

There are no true love songs here or lyrics about broken hearts or hypersexual relations, like a lot of pop-rock material on the radio today. Instead, the album rolls along like a giant pep talk; the sheer corniness of it works.

"The songs are all my stories," Yoni explains. "The general theme is just, 'Take charge of what you want to do, and just go for it.' While you're in your 20s, you grow up, discover who you want to be, and learn not to be confined in whatever people think you should do."

Despite flirting with a career as an attorney, Yoni followed his heart and kept his guitar handy. Since graduating, he has worked as a project coordinator for Warner Bros. Publishing, both full-time and freelance, for the better part of six years, but he has kept music at the forefront. When he's not gearing up for an album release, Yoni also teaches a garage-band class at the newly minted Conservatory Prep High School in Davie, where students learn the ins and outs of the music business, and he teaches guitar privately on the side. In a sense, *Extra Credit* is a living testament to the fact that dreams come true — a notion that Yoni just may be able to breathe and enjoy while he's still 20-something.

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"Record contract? I don't need no stinkin' record contract."

STEPHEN BRADY/PHOTO