

Alt-Country Singer Rayland Baxter's Performance In Mexico Highlights The Ways Music Crosses Borders

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12.26.17



Cabo, Mexico might seem like an unusual place to find an alternative country singer and his band playing an exclusive, free rooftop concert, but that's exactly what brought me to the Hotel El Ganzo in San José del Cabo. This trip defied tired expectations about the Cabo you know — which is fitting. Rayland Baxter is not a country singer in the traditional sense and neither is El Ganz. The boutique hotel, which opened just five years ago, is located off the beaten tourist track of Cabo San Lucas and was designed for environmental sustainability with a focus on arts and entertainment. How focused? well, the hotel features a basement recording studio called the Underground, which is its prime lure for the musicians it books for a monthly residency program.

Artists seeking isolation or inspiration are able to come to El Ganzo, stay for a complimentary week while utilizing the studio (among other luxurious amenities), and in return, for the final evening of their stay the musician will perform a free show on a small stage on the hotel's rooftop, situated just next to the swimming pool and its accompanying bar.



Before his show this past October, a small group of fellow journalists and I were able to interview Baxter about his creative process, next to the pool and the stage where he'd later perform. What I found while speaking with him is that Baxter is as unconventional as the hotel where I've come to see him; he's just finished recording his third album in Santa Monica, California, and says he's been using his stay "sitting on my balcony, smoking cigarettes, and listening to the mixes."

There is an air of old-school American romanticism about him, evidenced by his revelation that he's been living out of a van while preparing for the release of his next album, and his admission that he's been wearing the same shirt for three weeks straight. He's got a quirky sense of humor, joking that he sustains himself between recording sessions and performances by working "online nude chat rooms."

He's the perfect match, then, for the Hotel El Ganzo. A stark, white block situated just off the local marina, the hotel has a unique ethos that sets it apart from the stereotypical party destinations nearby. Its rooms are appointed with modern, refined décor with rustic undertones brought in with natural materials throughout. All the wood used in the tables and doors is reclaimed, all the fish is sourced from the local tradespeople in the nearby town, and much of the produce used in the hotel's carefully designed menus is grown on the grounds.

But the thing that makes the hotel stand out is the murals that adorn both the exterior walls (there's a giant stormtrooper painted over the pool) and the interiors of the rooms themselves (the hotel's artist-in-residence program allows visiting painters to doodle to their hearts' content in their designated rooms). The image of the goose (the titular "ganzo") is prominent everywhere, which Rayland finds intriguing symmetry in. "The goose has been a thing in my family," he shares. "My dad drove a Dodge Dart when he was in high school called the Blue Goose, then eight years ago I bought a Plymouth Valiant '69 that has the same engine as a Dart, so that's called the Goose. It's Green, but no need for the adjective."

The hotel's commitment to the arts shines through in every one of its appointments, from the gift shop merchandise (hand-crafted by local artisans) to the employees the hotel hires. El Ganzo's music curator Mark Rudin carefully selects the artists that will perform at the hotel's rooftop venue. Whereas, he says, many of the local bands and venues are dedicated to covers of popular hits, El Ganzo is all about original music and a specific vibe. There are no massively popular international musicians or celebrity appearances. Rudin handpicks the bands and artists who will be recording in the Underground and performing on the roof to emphasize a strong live show and excellent musicality. These are real musicians, skilled, and committed to crafting a specific musical experience.



Rudin was brought on as a temporary hire to design the Underground studio space and wound up staying on to curate the monthly performances ever since. He was the one who selected Baxter as this month's performer, like all the rest, but he says that he chose Rayland due to his unique approach to the modern Nashville sound and how much he stood out from the previous month's more electronic selections. Baxter's soundscape is organic and lived-in, much like his shirt, and his stories of growing up as the son of musician Bucky Baxter are as riveting as the down-home, Americana-laden singles that have defined his two albums, *Feathers & Fishhooks* and *Imaginary Man*.

He says it's his Nashville upbringing and hometown love that have most influenced his style, allowing him to take subjects as mundane as paper clips and turn them into emotional reflections on love and life. However, his experiences living abroad have also transformed his view on songwriting and musical in general as well.

"When I was living in Israel is when I started writing," he reflects, "I started really focusing on writing, and so I was in that amazing place, amazing, not good or bad, just amazing. Or maybe awesome is the word. 'Cause there's all types of conflict happening there, but there's survival, there's beauty, there's the desert, which is an overly lonesome place." He says those experiences informed his worldview, which comes across in songs like "79 Shiny Revolvers," which he says is about "idiots with guns."

He performs this and other songs, including "Yellow Eyes," the aforementioned song that prominently features a paper clip left behind by an ex-lover that takes on a deeper meaning, with two members of his normally six-piece band, Matt "Mr. Jimmy" Roland and Don Bermudez back up Rayland on keys and drums, respectively, as the sun set over the distant hills, illuminating the wide windows behind the band during their surprisingly moving set. A number of locals and tourists had arrived to take in the sights and sounds of the intimate concert, which the hotel advertises by means of paper fliers proclaiming the one-night-only performances.

Asked about how this experience has impressed him, Baxter is forthcoming about his desire to see the residency program expand. "I want to have music that everyone wants to listen to," he says, "Whether it's the hotel guests, or the employees or the local neighborhood, whatever that consists of. That's the trick, finding the sweet spot with everyone. That would be nice. And then to be invited back and then to see this type of thing grow here."

"There's all different types of people here," he continues, "This is an interesting thing that he does because (Mark) brings bands that are not too popular to cost a bunch of money." It certainly has been a different experience for everyone involved. While Baxter and his band have been able to leave behind a lasting contribution to the culture of El Ganzo in the form of a live video of their Underground sessions (Rudin makes sure to create one of every act that visits, which play on guestroom televisions during their stays), it seems that the experience will be leaving an impression on them as well.

"Just being a human is an amazing, strange thing," Baxter muses. "I go into it and over it and around it." El Ganzo's music initiative is the purest example of this. No matter where we come from or where we're going, music brings us together, in often unexpected ways — and sometimes in the most strange, amazing places.