



PIANO WARRIOR

In a world filled with gifted pianists, sometimes it takes more than mere talent to make an impact. For high-key piano virtuoso ELEW—also known as Eric Robert Lewis—success comes from a carefully crafted battle plan that combines serious chops, a uniquely flamboyant playing style, and, yes, even armor.

Currently opening for superstar vocalist Josh Groban at a stadium near you, ELEW brings his trademark “rockjazz” solo piano sound to life with energetic, unexpected covers of some of the pop canon’s best-loved hits, including Coldplay’s “Clocks,” Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” and the Rolling Stones’ “Paint It, Black.”

“Opening for an A-lister like Josh Groban is amazing,” says ELEW. “It’s weird and surreal going to these big sports arenas and realizing that’s where the gig is, because normally the gig has been in orchestra halls, clubs, maybe outdoor festivals. All these thousands of people are singing along and laughing and snapping their fingers. It’s a pretty wild experience.”

Eric grew up playing classical piano, taught by his pianist mother and great-grandmother, and added jazz to his repertoire in his teens. At 16, he made his first thousand dollars playing a New Year’s Eve gig in Philadelphia. “My mother had to take me there and bring me back,” he recalls. “But they let me hire my own band, and I got paid for having that much fun. That’s when I realized this could be a nice thing to get into.”

After graduating from the Manhattan School of Music, the Camden, NJ native soon found his feet as a full-fledged professional, playing piano with Wynton Marsalis in the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, and performing with Ornette Coleman, Roy Hargrove, Cassandra Wilson, and Joe Henderson.

A pivotal career moment occurred when Eric won the 1999 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Piano Competition. "It was my first shining moment as an artist on my own," he says. "And I learned some very important things about winning. I was totally competitive. I was spring-loaded. I needed to win that competition to try to get a record deal, because all my previous attempts had come to naught."

But to his shock, no record deal was forthcoming. "I harbored vengeance and anger at the jazz community," he says, "because no one dared make a sound when the record companies passed over me. In my opinion, they were hurting jazz by avoiding me. They violated the basic tradition of jazz, which is to celebrate diversity and eclecticism."

Despite lacking a record deal, Eric continued to grow professionally. He recorded a track with Clark Terry, and toured with legendary Coltrane drummer Elvin Jones. "Meanwhile," he says, "I dried my tears and started buying books on the military. Like Navy Seal books, and The Art of War, by Sun Tzu. Business books about marketing and branding. I decided that I was going to go to war with all these forces that were blocking me."

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Thus the ELEW concept was born. Onstage, he stands poised at the piano, forearms encircled with metal vambraces, ready to strike the keys in a full-on musical assault. "It took a long time to come up with the different parts of it, from the armor to the standing to the name," he says. "I knew that I had to do something radically different from everybody else. With guitar players, their instrument allows them to go into all kinds of poses. They jump around, they do all kinds of things to get the people excited. When I started playing without a bench, suddenly my expressivity opened up."

Another major source of ELEW's expressive power comes from the Yamaha pianos he plays. He's currently touring with a Yamaha DC7 Disklavier grand piano, complete with a technician to tune and tend to it before each performance—a rare luxury for any touring pianist.

"A lot of what I do technically is take guitar music and synthesize it through the acoustic piano utilizing my classical and jazz techniques," ELEW says. "What I love about Yamaha pianos is that they absorb the rock-star energy I put into the instrument. They're built to radiate beauty through all that blunt force."

Since becoming ELEW, Eric has released a solo album, worked on film and dance projects including an upcoming ballet for Complexions Contemporary Ballet Company, wowed celebrities at the Sundance Film Festival, been live on the runways during Fashion Week, and even performed for the Obamas. And as he wins new fans track by track, arena by arena, he continues to rely on Yamaha pianos to transform his musical will into reality.

"These people have come to see something big," he says. "And the Yamaha piano has such a big sound, yet it gives me all the power steering I want. I can explore different tones. The key bed really capacitates the depth of my touch, and there's a warmth and munificence about the instrument. It's a generous instrument. It seems like the piano is saying, "Yes, let's rock. Let's do this."

