



Berklee

Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education

ABLE Voices Episode 3: Nick Guzman

[Introduction theme music by Kai Levin]

[Dr. Bernard] Hello everyone and welcome to ABLE Voices Podcast. I'm Dr. Rhoda Bernard, founding managing director of the Berklee Institute for Arts Education and Special Needs and I'm proud to present this podcast featuring disabled artists and arts educators. We are inviting artists with disabilities to be guest hosts for the ABLE Voices Podcast.

The guest host for today's episode is jazz pianist and composer Matt Savage. Matt is on the Autism Spectrum. He has had a professional career since childhood as a jazz musician, bandleader and composer. He has played with some of the biggest names in jazz including Chick Corea, The Ellington All-Stars, Chaka Khan, Wynton Marsalis and many many more. He has recorded more than a dozen albums. Matt teaches at colleges in Boston and New Hampshire, he gives private piano lessons and he gives master classes in English and Spanish. I hope you enjoy this episode, hosted by Matt Savage.

[Musical transition]

[Matt] Hello and welcome to ABLE Voices Podcast Episode Three. My name is Matt Savage. I am a jazz pianist, composer and educator on the Autism Spectrum and today I am very excited to interview Mr. Nick Guzman. Guzman or Gusman?

[Nick] Gusman!

[Matt] Gusman's perfect! Excellent! Mr. Nick Guzman, a singer-songwriter, guitarist, keyboardist, plays a whole bunch of instruments actually, also on the Autism Spectrum and I'd like to start by welcoming you to the podcast and I hope you're doing well.

[Nick] Yeah! Thank You! Thanks for having me Matt.

[Matt] You're very welcome and thanks for coordinating the time difference as I see you're on the West Coast. I guess you grew up there, right?

[Nick] Yeah! I was born in Sacramento and then, I'm originally from the Bay Area but I moved to Los Angeles in 2014 to pursue my career.

[Matt] That's very nice, it's a ways away from where we are here in Boston where it is currently snowing a great deal right now.

My first question for you Nick is when did you start making music and did you start with guitar, voice, or something else?

[Nick] I began writing music when I was around 12 on piano. I started recording music on my karaoke machine and then I moved to Pro Tools, then to GarageBand and then later to Logic Pro.

[Matt] You've been using these programs for a while, that's very nice.

[Nick] Yeah! And to answer your other question, I started with voice, then piano and then guitar. The first song that I learned on guitar was Helplessly Hoping, which I was able to play with Steven Stills in 2011 at an Autism Event called, "Autism is Awesomism".

[Matt] That's a great event name and that's also a very classic song.

[Nick] Yeah, it's one of my favorite CSN songs.

[Matt] It's Crosby, Stills and Nash, yeah one of the great groups.

[Nick] Definitely!

[Matt] Alright! Now, how does your Autism diagnosis influence the music you make and do you think it matters at this point?

[Nick] I don't think it matters at all. I just play music that speaks to me.

[Matt] Very nice! And, yeah, are there any influences in particular that are particularly powerful these days?

[Nick] Influences like musicians?

[Matt] Yeah! Or just everyday things in your life.

[Nick] Well, I've been going to a lot of concerts before the pandemic hit. I was seeing a lot of artists like Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, Steve Hackett of Genesis, who else did I see? Kat Stevens, Paul Simon, Blondie, a lot of great artists.

[Matt] So many living legends. Yeah, it's amazing, it's always good to see the greats while they're still around.

[Nick] Yeah!

[Matt] Yeah! And speaking of these Rock legends, I wanted to ask, you've done some pretty impressive collaborations with some of the greats of Rock and Pop and Folk music. So what are some of your favorite gigs that you remember or studio collaborations?

[Nick] Well, I do remember when you played piano on my original song, Am I Trembling, at 2015's Light the Blues concert when Neil Young was there.

[Nick] That was a great night!

[Matt] I remember being there, it was a pretty awe-inspiring night.

[Nick] Definitely! Another great concert that I played at was the Light Up the Blues concert in 2013. That was pretty amazing and all the concerts I've played with Wild Honey are pretty outstanding as well.

[Matt] Very Nice! Who was at the previous Light Up the Blues concert? I'm actually not sure.

[Nick] There was Crosby Stills and Nash, Don Felder of the Eagles, Lucinda Williams, Ryan Adams and Ricky Lee Jones.

[Matt] That is very star-studded and I'm impressed! I remember what an honor it was to be at the 2015 event and which was right in the middle of Hollywood at the Pantages Theater. Yeah,

but I think your style of music, you really fit in with all of the other acts that were performing, it was really wonderful. And you know it creates a lot of fond memories and I think you've played in the studio with some rock musicians I might know.

[Nick] Yeah, I think, yeah, we were recording "Chasing Angels", which was originally written by John Wicks and Elliot Easton was there. I think I was at Elliot Easton's house and we were recording the lead for Chasing Angels. I had already recorded the acoustic guitars and the vocals and then we added Chris Price on the background vocals and bass and Syd Straw on background vocals.

[Matt] Mmm-uh, and yeah and I think these guys have been in a lot of bands.

[Nick] Oh Yeah!

[Matt] Yeah! Any names I might know?

[Nick] Well Elliot Easton, he played lead guitar in the Cars.

[Matt] Now that's a big name! They're a Boston band actually.

[Nick] Yep!

[Matt] Very nice! So my next question for you is, since you play a lot of instruments and you produce your own music, you're kind of doing it before it really took off in the last two years with all the lockdowns. So now that everybody's doing it, like how have the last two years with the rise of home recording treated you so far? Like, has it been a net positive for you or are you kind of doing the same thing you've always done?

[Nick] I've been trying to keep myself busy during the pandemic. I have been recording music on Logic Pro. I'm self-taught, but I look at a lot of YouTube videos to help me with my guitar playing, my keyboard playing, my bass playing, my drumming. I've done like about six or seven, maybe eight online shows on Facebook live. I produce all the music, play all the instruments and sing all the vocals and harmonies as a one-man band. And then I sing live to the track and then interact with the audience on Facebook live.

[Matt] That's a lot of fun! So, you've come prepared. Yeah, you know sometimes it's a little hard for me to make sure everything works in time but, you know since I'm also, since I do a lot of

solo piano performances and recitals, you know there's something important about it, like just being able to do a show on your own. It helps a lot with becoming a well-rounded performer.

[Nick] Well, I've looked at your bio lately and I'm very impressed with how you've collaborated with all these jazz greats. I'm inspired!

[Matt] Thank you so much Nick! Yeah, you know a lot of my collaboration has been pretty virtual these days, but I've been teaching a lot as well, so that's been keeping me really busy.

[Nick] That's cool Matt!

[Matt] Thank you Nick! So yeah! You were talking a bit about your first song Chasing, this first song we want to feature today "Chasing Angels". So what is this song about in particular?

[Nick] The song was actually written by John Wicks. It was a tribute song to his bandmate, his bass player, Phil Brown, and he wrote it back, as far back as 2012. And in live shows he did it with Debbie Peterson of the Bengals. And then I started singing with John when we did recent gigs leading up to his passing. And then, I'm trying to think... So I decided to record the song myself. I decided to sing all the vocals and do all the acoustic guitars and then we added some shaker and bass, courtesy of Chris Price, who also did background vocals. We also added Syd Straw's vocals and then we added Elliot Easton on lead guitar.

[Matt] That's impressive! Is there a meaning to the song that inspired you?

[Nick] Well, the song is about, you know, losing someone that you care for a lot, that you love and this is a tribute song to the people that we lose but will always remember.

[Matt] It's a beautiful statement. So, let's play this excerpt from "Chasing Angels" by John Wicks as performed by Nick Gusman. So, here we go!

[Excerpt from "Chasing Angels" plays]

[Fades out, back to Matt talking]

[Matt] Welcome back to the ABLE Voices Podcast episode three. My name is Matt Savage and we're interviewing Nick Gusman, singer, song-writer and multi-instrumentalist. And that was a tune called "Chasing Angels", originally written by John Wicks and...

[Nick] By the way, John Wicks was the lead singer and rhythm guitarist for a powerpop band called The Records.

[Matt] The Wreckers or Records?

[Nick] The Records.

[Matt] Ahh, very nice!

[Nick] The Records were known for their hit “Starry Eyes”.

[Matt] “Starry Eyes”, that’s a nice name.

[Nick] Yeah, you should check it out. It’s real cool.

[Matt] Definitely, I should. So my next question is, has singing always been a part of who you are?

[Nick] Yes, most definitely. I’ll always play music and sing. No matter if I do it for a living or not.

[Matt] Yeah, it’s true, I mean it’s a little hard finding gigs sometimes, but you know it’s like, sometimes it’s just the most central part of who we are. And when did you start singing again?

[Nick] Well, I started singing when I was like three. I was listening to a lot of artists like Tracy Chapman, Neil Young, Crosby Stills Nash and Young, Paul Simon, Bonnie Raitt, The Beatles, James Taylor, a lot of great artists.

[Matt] Absolutely! So I heard that you just played a live gig recently over on the West Coast, how does it feel to return to live performance again?

[Nick] Well, the pandemic hasn’t done much for my social skills but I did my best. It felt great to see everyone, but it honestly made me feel a little nervous. I was a little concerned about getting too close to the mic, being around people or even having conversations with my mask on, but it all worked out! And I can’t wait to do it again!

[Matt] That is so great, I’m glad you’re excited to perform again. I know, yeah it’s just like being in front of a room with people feels so surreal after a year or two. I mean, I did a few outdoor

gigs and masked club dates over the last two years, but still it's only now just starting to feel like we're returning to form.

[Nick] Yeah.

[Matt] Alright, so I also wanted to ask, do you have any big projects coming up?

[Nick] I'm still working on my EP. It's not really a secret, but I don't have a release date yet, but I'd like to finish it by this summer.

[Matt] Definitely! You know, as like, during the summer you know people have a little more time at home and you know it's possible to achieve something big, right?

[Nick] Mmm-hmm.

[Matt] So are your new songs kind of similar to your old songs or do they represent a new direction? So how do you describe your newer work, like even the stuff that's already released?

[Nick] Well, the first song, "I am Trembling", it was pretty much all electric, but I've been adding some acoustic elements to my later music. There's some songs that I've written lately that are called "Oat Cuisine" and "Pelicans and Seagulls" that had a bit more of an acoustic vibe to it. An acoustic vibe to it.

[Matt] That's great! Yeah and I've noticed "I am Trembling", the one I played with you way back in the day, like that was really like Four on the Floor, powerpop, as we rockers like to call it. But Yeah, I see now you're really diving a little bit more into the Crosby, Stills and Nash kind of vibe that's influenced you for so many years.

So, how would you describe this new tune "Oat Cuisine"?

[Nick] It's kind of like a baroque pop feel with acoustic guitar and bass, also provided by Chris Price and the strings were arranged by Caitlyn Wolfberg. She's a talented violinist.

[Matt] Very cool! And, would you say this song is actually about oak cuisine or?

[Nick] Yeah, something like that

[Matt laughs]

[Matt] Enjoying the finer things in life. Yeah, so why don't we play this one for all of you then. It's a newer tune, a couple of years old right?

[Nick] Yeah

[Matt] It's new, yeah, it's by Nick Gusman and it's called "Oat Cuisine".

["Oat Cuisine" excerpt plays]

[Fades back in to Nick speaking]

[Nick] Yeah, so Matt, what have you been up to lately?

[Matt] Oh I've been up to a lot of things, you know, I have a couple of groups that I currently lead like the Matt Savage Quartet and the Matt Savage Groove Experiment. So, I do want to record with both of those bands sometime because I haven't come out with a full length release since the Matt Savage Groove Experiment's debut long EP, if you will, and that was at the end of 2018, so obviously there's been a bit of a pandemic hiatus since I focus more on teaching but, now I'm ready to start performing and touring again, so I'm really excited for that.

[Nick] Nice!

[Matt] Thanks Nick and yeah, you know I've done a few things like wedding gigs while the jazz club gigs have struggled to return but, it feels good to be playing more in person again. It really does. It feels like something we've been missing.

[Nick] Yeah, back in the Bay Area I played at a wedding myself.

[Matt] Very nice! Any strange requests?

[Nick] I'm not too sure. I can't remember what I played there.

[Matt] No worries! I mean I was just, we don't have to mention any tunes by name but sometimes we get some very interesting requests.

So, my next question for you is, what would you say to any kids who are interested in pursuing music as a career but, overwhelmed by the sensory and social aspects of being a musician?

[Nick] I know a lot of kids on the spectrum have sound sensitivities, and I was one of them. I think that maybe having perfect pitch has its pros and cons. When I was young, the sounds of fire engine sirens, crying or screaming little kids, and flying insects really made me anxious. But for some reason, when it comes to loud concerts I had no problem. I think it's probably different for everyone. I just encourage people to follow their, what their passions are, because it's who they are. Be who you are.

[Matt] Very well said. You know, like there's something about just being able to follow the pitches as they go that's really soothing and healing even if it, like no matter whether it's the quietest adagio or a full-blow rock concert.

[Nick] Yeah, I've been to many rock concerts. Some of them were loud but, you know, it's worth seeing the act.

[Matt] Oh yeah it is! I am really curious about how you got connected with some of these greats. Just kind of by happenstance?

[Nick] How I got connected ? Yeah, I guess it just happens like straight out of the blue. I'm asked to play a gig and then all of sudden when there's another person on the bill that I know of, I'm like "WOW, Oh my gosh!"

[Matt] Definitely! And it's all important that we all make connections in this world.

[Nick] Yeah! It's definitely fun.

[Matt] Absolutely! So, I wanted to ask, like, how you approach writing music, you know, especially since you play so many instruments?

[Nick] How do I approach writing music? Well, I come up with some ideas, you know, about events that I have been involved in like, like maybe a concert or a place that I've been to that I really love. Like, last year I went to Muir Woods and it was amazing there, so I was thinking about writing about that. But, I'm also thinking about writing about stuff that I've been through with my family.

All the anxiety and all the adventures and all the fun times we've had. I'm not really too sure. The music comes first and then the words come but, sometimes it comes vice versa, the words come first and then the music. I put it all to paper or onto my notes onto my iPhone and then I just write a bunch of ideas about how the song should go and how it, what the song should be

about. And as far as language is concerned, you know, I have to be honest, I have a hard time trying to get the words out because I'd hate to say the wrong thing and I just want people to know, I just want the song to give a message. To give a true message.

[Matt] Yeah, there's always inspirations, good, bad, and ugly and sometimes the music obviously represents that and sometimes it doesn't.

Also Nick, what joys do you find working and writing music with others?

[Nick] I have to say, writing the music is actually easier than writing the words because, to be honest I have a hard time coming up with words as far as song-writing is concerned. I usually get help from my family and to get some ideas about what the song should be about and what, where the story takes place and how the story goes and the dynamics it builds up into a chorus, just basic ideas of how the song structure should be or how it should go.

[Matt] Yeah, you know we've got to write songs about something substantial, not just filler.

And, I guess my last question for you today, is there anything else you'd recommend we listen to, like, whether your own work or someone else's?

[Nick] Well, you can find my music on Apple Music, CD Baby, Pandora, Amazon Music and Reverb Nation.

Also, some of my favorite artists are Billie Eilish, The Beatles, Crosby Stills Nash and Young, The Beach Boys, Miles Davis, and Ex-ambassadors, just to name a few. I have a very eclectic taste.

[Matt] I can tell you do!

So thank you again for coming and recording and once again, this is the ABLE Voices Podcast episode three and my name is Matt Savage, and we'd like to thank our today's interview, Nick Guzman and hope to catch up with you soon!

[Outro music by Sebastian Batista starts]

[Nick] Thank you very much Matt!

[Matt] You're very welcome Nick!

[Outro continues]

[Dr. Bernard] ABLE Voices is a production of the Berklee Institute for Arts Education and Special Needs, led by me, Dr. Rhoda Bernard, the founding managing director. It is produced by Daniel Martinez del Campo, the introduction music is by Kai Levin, and our closing song is by Sebastian Batista. Kai and Sebastian are students in the arts education programs at the Berklee Institute for Arts Education and Special Needs.

If you would like to learn more about our work you can find us online at [berkee.edu slash b-i-a-e-s-n](http://berkee.edu/slash-b-i-a-e-s-n) or e-mail us at [biaesn@berklee](mailto:biaesn@berklee.edu) that's l-e-e-dot e-d-u

[Outro music ends]