

“T here’s this terrific untapped potential particularly in Western Queens,” Gustavo Rodriguez says, perched on a piano bench in a private room of the Gibson Guitar Showroom in NYC, which just so happens to be the former famous Hit Factory recording studio where Michael Jackson recorded *Bad* and Bruce Springsteen recorded *Born in the USA*, just to name a few. He runs down the list of neighborhoods – Astoria, Long Island City, Sunnyside, Woodside, Jackson Heights. “Artistically speaking,” he continues, “I think it’s a community that’s underserved, and I’m excited to see little signs of life popping up in the last few years.”

We have Gus Rodriguez himself to thank for many of these signs of life. Expressive and endlessly driven to create, Long Island native Rodriguez has always been connected to Queens, but fell hard for it upon moving to the borough seven years ago. As a musician, booker, promoter, event curator, crowd-funding proponent and all-around creative, he has become one of our local artistic community’s greatest revolutionaries – and all by doing what he loves most. “At the end of the day, I’m a creative person. I just like making stuff.”

Rodriguez is equipped with the kind of industry savvy, musical and curatorial talent, seemingly tireless work ethic, and genuine receptivity to the needs of his fellow artists that have granted him countless connections and compatriots, as well as special experiences like those he’s had at the Gibson Showroom. Through it all, he remains humble and humorous, a stalwart supporter of Queens who is unafraid to break down boundaries between boroughs, and most importantly, to push our own local artists to do, be, and create more than they ever have before.

“Our vibe is different,” Rodriguez reflects on the car ride from Manhattan to the Jackson Heights coffee shop where he’ll be playing a gig later that night. “It’s a little more inclusive, because where we live is statistically, honestly, the most diverse place on the planet – it’s not just hyperbole.

ing that. When you go into the places

# GUSTAVO

## A TRUE QUEENS CREATIVE

# RODRIGUEZ

by Audrey Dimola  
Photos: Kenneth R. Goldberg

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Where I work, I feel like you see a nice mix of people of different age groups, ethnicities, and walks of life that come in and mutually enjoy the same thing, which I don’t see in other places – and I don’t take that for granted.”

Rodriguez stays busy curating live music nights at LIC Bar, and has recently branched out into literary events by staging the Fireside Ghost Stories series in the cozy, fire-lit carriage house at the back of the venue. He is also the booking agent for the Queens Kickshaw in Astoria, and does freelance booking for other venues like The Living Room in NYC and The Astor Room, also in Astoria. In addition, he runs Spike Hill’s Tuesday night music showcase in Brooklyn, which is sponsored by RocketHub, the locally-founded online crowd-funding platform of which he is the Director of Creative Development and Special Events. “This is the most accomplished

I’ve been creatively at this time in my life,” he says. “I feel really lucky – I was kind of adrift at sea for a lot of years... Had some growing up to do, I guess.”

“I kind of fell into this,” Rodriguez goes on to admit. “I had a day job in advertising and research, and music interested me, but I never thought of myself as someone who would be doing booking and promoting and all of that. I went to an open mic at [Long Island City bar] Dominie’s Hoek in 2006 or 2007, and I met a person

named Jimmy Artache and friends like Justin Finley, Brian Meece [who went on to found RocketHub], and all these great guys – they changed my life. It led to LIC Bar, it led to working with [songwriter and Pogues frontman]

nights, and various themed shows featuring the borough all-stars of the Planet QNS band, which was created and co-produced by Woodside musician Neil Nunziato. He has also watched with pride as his friends and fellow Queens musicians have become increasingly accomplished, noting Aram Bajakian playing lead guitar for Lou Reed, Jeneen Terrana appearing on a Food Network program, and Little Embers’ music playing in films and TV shows.

“I enjoy very much what I do, and I love working with artists,” Rodriguez says warmly. “I enjoy their company, and I feel comfortable with them.” Of his experience as a booker and music event curator, he reflects: “I’m a musician myself, so I guess I have a vantage point of knowing what it’s like on both sides of the fence. I know how it feels to play a venue and have everyone be very cold or kind of indifferent to you, or

even rude sometimes, so that always stuck with me. Whenever I do shows I go out of my way to make sure that the experience is nothing like that – that there’s always a personal touch.” In planning countless gigs in the NYC area, he has also come to take great pleasure in bringing Queens artists over with him to successful events in Manhattan and Brooklyn, as well as introducing artists from outside Queens to this extremely unique, but all-too-often overlooked, local territory.



Shane MacGowan – everything that I’m doing now musically, especially in Queens, flows from that place. It changed everything.”

In recent years, Rodriguez produced the first ever Long Island City Jazz Festival, founded a website called LICNotes aiming to spark interest in local music, worked hard to bring artists like Gordon Gano of The Violent Femmes to play in Queens, and spearheaded popular LIC Bar events like the Queens of Queens local female musicians showcase, special tribute



"I think the best hidden gems in New York City are scattered around Queens," Rodriguez asserts. "People take for granted things we have like Flushing Meadows Park, Louie Armstrong's house, Kaufman Astoria Studios, the Museum of the Moving Image. Queens has a great artistic legacy. It's the heart of a lot of things that have happened creatively throughout the twentieth century, and probably before that as well." He laughs, "It's amazing we have to work as hard as we do to emphasize that!"

For whatever reason – its sprawling size, diverse neighborhoods that seem like worlds unto themselves, lack of creative interaction between communities, or complete absence of traditional music venues – Queens unfortunately finds itself in the shadow of Manhattan and Brooklyn and their respective art and music scenes. "That's the thing we keep asking each other over the last few years: why is it so hard to get that kind of thing going here [in Queens]?" Rodriguez says. "It's a tough business – venues come and go, it's part of the cycle of artistic life. But given how many artists live in our community – because they can't afford to live in Manhattan or Brooklyn – it'd be nice to have more places where they can ply their trade in the neighborhood, and I've been saying that for a long time."

These quintessential questions and concerns are those that drive much

of Rodriguez's work in Queens and for Queens – aside from his general love of "seeing things happen." "I can't emphasize this enough," he implores. "If you have a good idea, any kind of good idea that's art-related, I'd love to hear about it. I love seeing things happen, especially in our neighborhood – any excuse to get something happening. I don't care if I make money off of it most of the time! I just want to see it happen. If your passion is there and you really want to grow something and build an artistic community in any of the disciplines, whether it's writing, dance, poetry, painting – there is a way to do it. It's just a matter of having the will and the willingness to ask, that's the first thing – and that's kind of how I ended up doing what I'm doing."

Gus Rodriguez remains open to the possibilities while steadfastly pushing forward with his ever-growing list of projects and pursuits. At this juncture, the night comes to a close with his gig at Espresso 77 in Jackson Heights, performing rootsy rock and roll under his musical pseudonym, Silbin Sandoval, in live collaboration with longtime pal Jonny Meyers for the first time. Patrons fill the cozy and clearly well-loved space, offering gracious applause. But then something interesting happens – while Gus and Jonny, who have never played together before, are making their own music, a few African musicians – who happen to be in-house after playing a gig down the street – spontaneously join them in a multicultural musical improv, adding their traditional hand drums and kora (a 21-string bridge-harp) to the rockers' pair of bluesy voices and acoustic guitars.

This quite magical, local musical occurrence couldn't be anymore apt. Literally right before taking the stage, Rodriguez shared one of his greatest wishes for Queens, which involves the borough truly embracing what makes it special. "What I think can happen



in this neighborhood, as opposed to other neighborhoods in the city, is – if we could create more of a situation where different cultures are mingling in an artistic form – we could see some really unique things happening. What kind of cool hybrids could we come up with that would be so distinctly our own, if we embrace and open up and actually create spaces and stages where people can do their own thing?"

Our borough needs positive, enterprising locals like Gus Rodriguez to keep reaching out and asking questions. The importance of nurturing – and believing in – what exists here in Queens cannot be underestimated. "I am very optimistic," Rodriguez says, "that's why I do what I do. I still think there is tremendous opportunity here." And in his usually humble but hopeful fashion, he adds: "I'm only one person, but I'd love to see more people run with [these ideas], and take the ball." Yes, this true Queens creative may be only one person, but as history – local and otherwise – has proven, that's all it takes to start a little revolution.

We'll meet you on the frontlines, Gus.

*It's Queens*

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