

BLOCK Boy BLOCK

Jencarlos Canela's name and voice spread like wildfire through Hialeah when he was a child, then throughout the Latin community. Now, his name is on the verge of becoming a household one.

Words by Vanessa Pascale

If you think Jencarlos Canela is easy on the eyes onscreen, you should know that it truly doesn't do him justice. Or maybe it's that within the first few moments of meeting the musician-actor his appeal is further magnified by his disarming suaveness. I don't mean to stereotype, but in my experience, most Latin men possess inherent—and irresistible—swag, and I can attest that Jencarlos certainly has it.

As he walks through the entrance of his hotel, I wave to him from the lobby balcony. He is with his father-manager, Heriberto, who says hello then leaves us to check-in. Jencarlos has a smoldering five o'clock shadow going on, and is in dark jeans and a heather gray sweater topped with a black leather jacket. The chart-topping singer-songwriter is in New York City for a private concert tomorrow night, he explains --then extends an invite to me and a guest. Awake since 3 a.m., he was up recording right before hopping on to a cross-country flight (from Los Angeles, where he resides, to here), and has been going since. "He's probably one of the hardest working people I've ever met in my life. Doesn't sleep... And it's really inspiring," Liza Quin tells me, the next night after the concert. (The beautiful singer was onstage with him and has been working with him on tour and in the studio for a couple of years now.) I won't take up too much time, I assure him. The Miami native looks at me with his kind green eyes, flashes a sincere smile, and tells me that I can take as much time as I need.

Jencarlos has been touring the United States, Canada, Central America, and Europe since January 2015. "It's been a blessing this tour. The single ["Bajito"] before last... We took a risk," says the 28-year-old about his reggae-Latin-pop song. A huge fan of Bob Marley, he invited the icon's son Kymani Marley to join him on the record. "Not one song on the Latin charts was in the genre. It was nonexistent in radio. And everybody said, 'Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't do it.' But there was something in my gut. I'm telling you, this is special." Without Jencarlos' knowledge, the song was picked up by a radio station, then another, and another. He had no idea the song was even out there until a friend told him he loved his new song. "How is this happening?" he remembers thinking. "The label wasn't going to push it. A lot of people believed that the song wasn't going to do anything at all." Then the song began charting, to the label's surprise. "It's my first diamond record. It went quadruple platinum, which is diamond. And this concert is hosted by the station that first played the song. Full circle moment," he says with a smile.

And then he released his song, "Baby," which received platinum status in the first two months. "Now you're seeing, like, we're having a conversation now --which is pretty awesome... But the song that started it all was this "Bajito" record. And when you hear that, as an artist, you're just grateful... I can't explain to you how many times the label or someone would say, 'You gotta do this 'cause this is what's hot or what's working.' But it just didn't feel right. It's much more than a genre, it's a style of life. Rappers, they more or less, dress the same, talk the same. Ballad singers, they more or less, dress the same. It's a culture... It's just felt good to take a risk and stick to your guns and see it pay off in this way. It's crazy."

Presently, nearly all of Jencarlos' music is in Spanish. Even the radio station concert of his I attended the next night was entirely in Spanish. (I think my friend and I were the only two people in the venue who didn't understand a word he sang or said. Nonetheless, it was an impressive performance. A charismatic performer, Jencarlos had the crowd bewitched with his smooth moves, banter and singing.) But I suspect that English might become his default language in the near future, especially when he drops his first English single/album early next year. "Bajito" featured a tiny taste. "Kymani's entire verse is in English. Not one word in Spanish, yet it's on Spanish radio and Latin America. I feel very proud to be Latino. I feel extremely proud to be American. To me, there's no 50/50. I don't want to take Latin culture, which I think is delicious and amazing, to the Anglo side. I want to show the Latin side that on the Anglo side, we have our flavor as well. I want to prove that it doesn't have to be two separate worlds. We live in America, where those two worlds, are more than ever, becoming one. I think that song is a great representation of that unity and what we can achieve when we come together."

The award-winning singer-songwriting-musician recently signed with Republic

Records, who will release his English album, while Universal Music Latin will handle his Spanish version. The upcoming album's ever-evolving sound can be described as: "If Pharrell would have produced a Miami Sound Machine record --with a lil' Lionel Richie in there." [Speaking of the Miami Sound Machine, Jencarlos counts Emilio and Gloria Estefan as close friends. "Emilio and Gloria have been such a huge support unit for me from beginning to now."] His biggest "good problem" is deciding which song to release as the first single since there are a number of great choices. Most of the songs will be written by him, but he is also among gifted company. "Republic has assembled an incredible team of people around us," he says of the group of writers joining him. They have penned hits for Justin Bieber and One Direction. "And they've given me the liberty to express myself how I want to, really push the envelope and put my identity into the sound. People don't even know what's coming," he says excitedly. From the sound of it, Jencarlos has everything lined up to ensure that this album is as successful as his Latin albums.

His already seismic fan base (7 million Facebook followers, 1.43 million Twitter followers, 1.5 million Instagram followers) is about to grow even larger with his English album debut. "We started flirting with the Anglo side here in the states. I had the pleasure of being alongside Eva Longoria for the NBC comedy *Telenovela* and we had songs in that show. Then I did *The Passion* for FOX, where I had the honor of playing Jesus Christ. I feel that more than anything that catered to that crossover American market. Those things take time and you can't force it... It's always a process and always a challenge. But I think that it's just about embracing both cultures. Both of them are a part of who I am," he says.

FAMILY BUSINESS

"My dad is the motor of this 100%. I had the blessing of having a family that believed in me, supported me. It's got its complications as well; father as your manager but it's got a bunch of positives that are undeniable. A lot of people think I'm with my father 24/7, but I'm with the manager. On these trips, he's working. At home, it's dad and son."

The passion to sing and perform began when Jencarlos was a child. Mesmerized by the live band that would perform each year at his parent's annual anniversary party in their Hialeah, Florida backyard, he saw these musicians as gods. "I only dreamt of being a musician like that one day." At 7, he told his parents he wanted to sing at their upcoming anniversary party. They told him he could if he learned a couple of songs. "They didn't think I was going to, but I did. My mom bought me a little suit. I looked like mini Scarface," he says with a wide smile. "It was crazy. Cuban family, imagine. The performance was horrible. There was feedback. It was horrendous, but my family loved it. They were applauding... But I was so high on that energy that I actually started getting into it. I was giving the mic for people to sing along. I was like a superstar," he says about his



Jencarlos in *Telenovela*
Photo Credit: Nino Munoz/NBC



EXCLUSIVE

performance in front of 200 guests. “My dad says that I told him that I wanted to feel that forever. My response at 7.”

At that moment, his father knew he had to help his son any way he could, he tells me. The hustle began in the neighborhood. Any time his father heard that a neighbor was having a party, he asked if Jencarlos could sing at it. “I would go neighbor to neighbor. My goal was to conquer the neighborhood. If I can be known in the neighborhood, I made it. We made it! We made it! These blocks, right here, know who I am! I just kept doing it and doing it and doing it,” he fondly reminisces. As a child, he played organ, conga, piano, and guitar, and would accompany the singers in school. “I wanted to sing so badly, but I didn’t have the guts to say I know how.” When he was 9-years-old, he was playing “Amazing Grace” on a piano in school and began to sing along --thinking he

MRS. RIGHT

If you think Jencarlos is passionate about music and acting, you should hear him talk about his family and the future Mrs. Right. His last relationship (with his 4-year-old son’s mother, Gaby Espino) ended two years ago. He is currently happy and enjoying single life. “Look, when you find a person that you want to share time and space with, when you’re like, I wanna see this person again tomorrow, day after, and day after, you don’t let that go. You take advantage of it. But right now, that person hasn’t shown up, so I’m chilling,” he says with a smile. While he’s extremely focused on his career, when the right lady comes along, he plans to make her just as big a priority. “There’s not as many options as people would think. You meet a lot of people on tour and in the industry... Living at such a busy pace, it’s hard to get to know someone. You meet people superficially and I’ve never been into the superficial type of connection... I like relationships. When I find someone, I commit and I’m there,” says the self-proclaimed romantic. “I love details. I don’t want to wait till a certain holiday to surprise her with flowers... write an uplifting message just letting her know how great she is. People, I feel, need to hear that. I especially understand how intimidating my business is and how much attention it requires, so I would never want a person that’s with me to feel like this is bigger than what we have. But I’m not in a rush.”

was alone. His teacher overheard him and decided on the spot that he will sing this at the next mass. This would be his largest crowd yet with over 1,000 people. “There was like 2-3 songs before mine, and I remember telling her, ‘I’m going to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.’ I went to the bathroom and I stayed in the bathroom for literally two hours. She was so upset. So upset. I just had to confess: ‘I’m terrified.’ Little by little, the little backyard parties really helped break the ice.”

His face lights up as he launches into another story from his childhood. “This is a long story, let me know when you want to move one,” he warns. “Ohmygod, my dad is a character!” he prefaces his next tale. After making a name for himself in the neighborhood, Jencarlos moved on to soliciting the festival circuit. Festivals like the 8th Street Festival. “No one gave me a chance, every time. I was a little jit. They’re not gonna put a 10, 11-year-old kid out to sing. They would treat me horrible. Horrible,” he recalls. His dad had a plan. Jencarlos and his dad pull up in a limousine near one of the festival stages, where off to the side his little girl cousins and friends are waiting with photos of Jencarlos that his dad printed. “Completely experimental. We show up... the girls that were my cousins and friends we’re like, ‘Oooh Jencarlos.’ I was inside cracking up.” He recollects with a big smile. “And they were having so much fun with it. The cameras actually start shifting to where we are. ‘Who is he?’ My dad is like, ‘He’s huge in New York and huge overseas and just came to Miami and wanted to say hi to the organizer of the festival.’ On that stage, I gained a spot during the day... We grinded. I kid you not, that’s not even half of the hustle.”

Jencarlos was accepted into Miami’s New World School of the Arts. He sung opera for four years, in five languages, and studied various components of music and musical theater. Acting came later. “I always say all singers; we all want to act... We’re naturally more vulnerable and sensitive; you have to be because music is a portal and a dimension... And to be a successful actor, you have to be vulnerable, you have to be sensitive to the circumstances that your character finds himself in and you have to believe the reality in which you’re living in order for you to be truly effected by it. We’re storytellers as musicians, it’s what we do,” says the singer also internationally known for his acting roles in three popular telenovelas: *Más Sabe el Diablo*, *Mi Corazón Insiste*, and *Pasión Prohibida*.

Recently, Jencarlos starred in the NBC sitcom *Telenovela* as Xavier Castillo alongside Eva Longoria and played Jesus Christ in FOX’s 2-hour live music TV special, *The Passion*. “Unforgettable experience singing with Seal, Trisha Yearwood, Yolanda Adams,” he says about the latter. FOX initially approached him to play Danny Zuko in *Grease: Live*, but he was unable to commit due to filming *Telenovela*. Not long after, they circled back with a new offer. “Hey, how about Jesus Christ? Dayuummm!” he says dramatically, “Are you sure? Like, I’ve sinned.” He flashes a guilty smile and laughs. “I’m not religious at all, no disrespect to those who are. The most effective, truthful religion is the human mind. And what the human believes, it deserves respect and is a truth to that person... But I thought it was important, the message of what that story is truly about... It was the perfect time to use a story that’s more than 2,000-years-old... and kinda give it a different twist and make it more accessible to my generation. Not on the religion aspect, but let some love into your hearts, some of that perseverance, unity, values. I needed them... We adapted these amazing songs to sound the way they did... The album, we were #1 on iTunes for I don’t know how many weeks. Incredible to be a part of.” *The Passion: Live* soundtrack featured seven of his songs and was a Billboard Top 10 album.

This opened a deluge of opportunities for him; including an offer to play the lead in a hit Broadway show (he asked that I not mention the name, out of consideration for others). “I had to commit for a year and I just couldn’t. I would love to do Broadway. I love this city [NYC] with a passion, but the whole team collectively decided: ‘You cannot take a year off from what’s happening right now to go to Broadway...’ But I’ve always been the type of artist, when a great project comes along, you don’t say no to it. If a great project comes along, television, film... You can expect film and there are already offers, thankfully. So the ball is on our side of the court. Right now, it’s inclining more toward the Anglo side, English side. But you can never say you’re never going to do something, especially when you love it. So, let’s see what happens.”

WE WANT MORE

Who are you listening to?

"Sting, The Police, The Beatles, Michael Jackson, Prince, Lionel Richie, Miami Sound Machine, Marc Anthony, Bob Marley, KC and The Sunshine Band, a lot of R&B, Boyz II Men. You put on some Boyz II Men, light some candles --still gets it done. I listen to all types of music. I love what the Weeknd is doing. I think Ariana is extremely talented. Sam Smith is amazing."

What are you watching on TV?

"*The Blacklist*, *House of Cards*, I love sci-fi. *Grimm*."

What has surprised you the most in your career?

"This diamond record was very surprising for me. The platinum with the new single. I had this little game with my mom when I was growing up, where when the radio programmer would say, 'And now with you guys, #1 this week on 106.7 Hit FM,' my mom would put the radio on pause and put in a song of mine and she would pretend it was my song on #1. I remember driving home one night a few years back, when I had my first #1 on Billboard. I hadn't heard it on the radio. And the radio guy, Javier Romero, says, 'And now with you guys, #1 this week: Jencarlos Canela "Amor Quedate."' When he said that, I pulled over and cried my eyes out. I called my mom and was like, 'Look, 'Mom, you don't have to pretend anymore, it's really happening.' That was a moment for me I'll never forget. It was pretty special. That was 4-5 years ago, so after all that hustle."

You have the Key to the City of Miami --what does that mean?

"It don't open shit. I've tried it on every door." He smiles. "I'm kidding. We have great relationships with a lot of political forces over there, even though I'm allergic to politics, somewhat," he says before poignantly launching into his political stance, which I'll save for another time. "What it does open is the door to many powerful friendships in a city that really can help you make a difference when it comes to giving you licenses when you want to do an event, charity -- give back to your city. These are the people that can really help you make a difference, if you know how to use it correctly and wisely. We definitely have the right people in our city to do that." ML