

The Piano Guys are do

YouTube sensation opens Mendel Center's 25th anniversary season

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — Jon Schmidt is quick to dispute any notion that he's become a rock star.

The lone pianist in the four-man ensemble, The Piano Guys, does concede that the group seems to end up on some legendary rock star stages, including a recent show at The Greek Theatre, the 5,870-seat music venue in Los Angeles' Griffith Park that has hosted everyone from The Who to The White Stripes, Paul McCartney to Paul Simon.

"What was really amazing is that we had some of the tech people there tell us that our show was one of the best they had ever seen, which, I mean, just totally blew us away," Schmidt says by phone during a tour stop in Columbus, Ohio. "Real rock stars play The Greek. We are literally middle-aged, not good-looking, not cool dads. It really makes us scratch our heads when we hear that, but I think maybe that's part of the appeal — to see people of that description kind of hanging with the big boys. It's kind of comical."

The Piano Guys have done much more than just hang with the big boys, and girls, for that matter. It was last month at The Greek Theatre that the ensemble of Schmidt, cellist/songwriter Steven Sharp Nelson, music producer/songwriter Al van der Beek, and producer/videographer Paul Anderson, were presented with a plaque in honor of reaching 1 billion views on YouTube — joining the likes of Katy Perry, Justin Bieber and fewer than 100 others.

The internet sensation, which performs Friday to open the 25th anniversary season of Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center Mainstage

IF YOU GO

Who: The Piano Guys

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$60-\$100

Contact: 927-1221 or themendelcenter.com

Artist info: thepianoguids.com

Theatre, recently hit 5 million subscribers on their channel, which launched in March 2008 with videos that include covers of Christina Perri's "A Thousand Years" and Coldplay's "Paradise."

"I think it is just a classic case of being in the right place at the right time in history," Schmidt says. "I like to compare it to acts who were on the performance circuit right when radio hit. They just exploded because they were already visible and radio looked at them for content. We kind of feel that is what happened again with the advent of YouTube and Facebook. We had a fan base. I had been performing as a solo artist for about 25 years, so when we put out our first video we were able to ask maybe 30,000 people on our mailing list to watch it and share it. But it was incredible how all of a sudden it exploded into the world."

The Piano Guy's story begins in St. George, Utah, where Anderson, who owned a piano store, was looking for a new, unconventional way to market his pianos at ThePianoGuys.com. Schmidt had often practiced on one of the store's pianos when he came through town. Only this time, Anderson asked if he would be willing to be in a video promoting both the store and his music that Anderson could put on his new YouTube channel.

"He saw a concert video that Steve



ABOVE: Music producer Al van der Beek, from left, pianist Jon Schmidt, cellist Steven Sharp Nelson and cinematographer Paul Anderson perform Friday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre to open the venue's 25th anniversary season. **ON THE COVER:** Pianist Jon Schmidt and cellist Steven Sharp Nelson perform on top of a 1,000-foot cliff in Utah.

and I had put out for fun and his wheels got turning," Schmidt says. "He really studied YouTube and he asked me to play a couple compositions for his channel as a favor. He had this idea to put his pianos in cool places and crazy locations. Eventually we thought, 'OK, let's join forces.'"

Schmidt enlisted frequent collaborator Nelson, a multi-instrumentalist that had been experimenting with the electric cello, and Nelson brought in

van der Beek, a neighbor who also happened to be a songwriter and engineer with a decked-out home studio.

"Steven was a guy who I had played with for years and was doing cool things with a loop pedal and effects stuff, which was really intriguing in our live show," Schmidt says. "He had been writing with a guy who just happened to live on Steve's street, Al van der Beek, who not only owned his

own recording studio and was an amazing musician. We had four guys who were all really talented and it was serendipitously amazing to have some fun."

The first video that they made was "Michael Meets Jon Schmidt" and it was a cover of two songs when they first started. "We couldn't get Michael Jackson's

ing better than 'Okay'



Photos provided

ographer Paul Anderson, who are collectively known as The Piano anniversary season h for one of their many YouTube videos.

lio but was an and arranger. So who came together l we just started to e foursome created ts Mozart," which riginally supposed o Michael Jackson t a copyright snag. permission from people, so we

tweaked it so that the Michael Jackson riffs were not so recognizable in the Mozart," he says. "I think what happened is people saw something they had never seen before and it just exploded." Within two weeks of the first video, the group was getting hits from way beyond its fan base in Utah and neighboring states. It was that blend of classical music with pop that seemed to fuel the phenomenon.



The Piano Guys – comprised of music producer Al van der Beek, from left, cellist Steven Sharp Nelson, cinematographer Paul Anderson and pianist Jon Schmidt – have reached more than 1 billion views on YouTube, a plateau reached by fewer than 100 other users on the social media site.

"Every arranger and composer is a product of the music they have been exposed to and they love," Schmidt says. "Steve and I both have classical training and legit classical backgrounds from our parents. My parents were German immigrants and my dad was an operatic tenor, so I just grew up listening to classical music all the time. Steve's mom was an operatic soprano. So classical music is one of our favorite elements to use. That's one of the things I love about Billy Joel for example is that you hear these classical influences in his writing because his dad was a concert pianist."

The Piano Guys have now made more than 50 videos, including an innovative multi-handed version of One Direction's "What Makes You Beautiful" and a classical reinvention of the hit song "Let It Go" from Disney's "Frozen."

Complementing the unlikely marriage of pop rock and classical is Anderson's video visions, placing his pianos in some unusual and often

precarious places, like hoisting one on top of a 1,000-foot cliff in Utah. They've also managed a mini-concert at Iguazu Falls in Brazil, and moved a piano by hand along the Great Wall of China – part of an effort to shoot a video at each of the Seven Wonders of the World. They recently passed the halfway mark filming in Chichen Itza, Yucatán, Mexico and Petra in Jordan.

"That's Paul's dream," Schmidt says, "He wants to film videos at all Seven Wonders of the World."

The Piano Guys, who are signed with Sony Masterworks, have released five albums so far. Their debut album, which reached No. 44 on Billboard's Hot 100, recently earned an RIAA Gold Album Certification, and their sixth recording, "Uncharted," is due Oct. 28.

"We have a couple of new tunes we have worked into the show from our new album," Schmidt says. "It has two of the Wonders of the World video tunes on there – the one from Chichen Itza, and the one was from

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Petra. What people may not realize is that Al is also an incredible vocalist who used to have his own performing group. So we are going to feature him on vocals on this really cool original tune, called 'Okay.' It's a great vocal pop song and when we do it in the show people love it. ... That's what we do. We cover pop songs, we cover classical songs, we cover movie tunes, and we write original tunes. Now, we are going to throw in more and more vocal pieces, too."

It's all just part of the ensemble's evolution, he adds, shying away from labels such as "pop group" and "band" and, yes, even, "rock star," despite the foursome's jet-setting, arena playing lifestyle.

In fact, Schmidt points to one of his very "non-rock star" habits as evidence to the contrary.

"I think it's fun to go to Ticketmaster.com to read the reviews that we get after a show," he says. "One of the favorite things I see is when people think the show is as good or better than our videos. That makes us really, really happy because our videos have had some pretty great response. ... Honestly, we are so grateful when people come out to support us, it still just blows me away."

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