

IN CONCERT: From the Sidewalk to the World Stage - Nuevo flamenco artist Benise brings his new production 'En Fuego' to the Chumash Casino on Thursday

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IN CONCERT

BENISE, 'EN FUEGO'

When: 8 p.m. Thursday

Where: Chumash Casino, 3400 E. Highway 246, in Santa Ynez

Cost: \$15 to \$35

Tickets: 800-585-3737, chumashcasino.com

Anyone who has been in Santa Barbara for the past decade or so probably has caught wind of the dynamic and friendly "nuevo flamenco" guitarist known as Benise, who performed with his band outside of Borders and other local venues for years in the early 2000s.



courtesy photo

But local went global when Benise — born Roni Benise, in Nebraska — went all out with an ambitious music-dance-theater production called "Nights of Fire!" at the Arlington Theatre. That production, logically compared with "Riverdance," but with a Spanish musical and cultural accent, caught fire when PBS aired the video, which also won an Emmy.

Since then, Benise has toured the world and developed other projects, including the new "En Fuego!," which takes over the Chumash Casino stage on Thursday. This show, directed by Amy Tinkham, includes versions of classic rock classics, nuevo flamenco-style, and grander aspects of the ambition which began in the Arlington Theater in 2006.

Benise was on his cell phone on a recent rainy morning, on the commute from his current home in Westlake Village to a studio in Montecito, where he is working on a filmed version of "Benise Live in China."

You played around Santa Barbara for several years early in the 2000s and then zoomed upward with the "Nights of Fire" production at the Arlington, after which you went global. How did that shift happen?

We started on the streets, right there in Santa Barbara, and we played at SOhO many times, building up a fan base. We started to do concerts, where I would add circus performers and flamenco dancers and aerial acts and exotic African drummers. I filmed one of these in Thousand Oaks and submitted that to PBS. I put all the money I had into it.

(PBS) loved it. They gave me a couple of suggestions about better costumes and things like that. Of course, one of my favorite places is Santa Barbara and the Arlington is just a beautiful theater. I knew that was the perfect setting for my show.

How was it for you, making a transition from just dealing with life as a musician to these elaborate productions with so many different elements. Is it a whole different animal than when you're just focusing on music-making?

(Laughs) Completely. Of course, there is music, but this has dance and theater and, of course, we have the big production. We travel with a Spanish village set and multi-media elements. It's a challenge. I think we have found a great balance for this new show, "En Fuego," where we still do a lot of unplugged things, with just the band, but then we also have these huge dance productions.

And it seems like such an obvious connection, considering that dance is so critical in the flamenco tradition, and other Latin cultures.

Yes. What's different about our show is that nothing is traditional. So there is flamenco dancing, but ours is a fusion of different styles. We'll take flamenco and fuse that with rock 'n' roll.

But I have a rock 'n' roll background, and it's just in my blood. I fell in love with the Spanish guitar, so I fused those two styles together. That's the nature of our show, really. It's a fusion and a melting pot of different cultural styles.

In your own musical background, you made a radical shift from from rock 'n' roll when you caught the flamenco bug, so to speak. When and how did that happen?

That was in 1999. I was at a crossroads in my life. I was playing rock 'n' roll and I just wasn't into that lifestyle. I heard the Spanish guitar on the radio one day, while driving. I had never really thought about playing Spanish guitar before, but it just captured my soul.

That very day, I made up my mind: "I'm changing. I want to learn this style."

We just started playing on the streets for free, because nobody in Los Angeles would hire us. We went outside and started performing on the street, and that's how we built our following.

That seems like such an organic way to go about it, starting from the street up, so to speak. There are groups like Del Fuego, a rock band with a strong flamenco and classical guitar approach. So it's not as if the worlds of rock and flamenco are polar opposites. There is a common ground, wouldn't you say?

These days, everyone is fusing styles together. When we started, it was twelve years ago. It was hard back then to find dancers who would cross that line and dance non-traditional flamenco. We got our flamenco dancers right there in Santa Barbara. Jodi DeMarcos was the first dancer to dance for us.

Santa Barbara is really where it all got started. Our bass player is from up there, who plays in different bands. We have performers from up there, and some of my dancers, as well.

Can you describe who your audience is? It seems to be a combination of different demographics.

That's a great thing about this show. There is something for everybody. It's a great couples' night out, because it's romantic and passionate. It's Spanish guitar. The older crowd likes it. We do a lot of classics, like "Aranjuez" and the tango. The older crowd loves Spanish guitar music.

And we keep it hip for the younger crowd with rock 'n' roll. We do "Kashmire" by Led Zeppelin and "Hotel California," but we do them in our style. That's what this show is.

Of course, the Gipsy Kings do "Hotel California," and have sort of made that song safe for the gypsy-flamenco style.

Right. This show also incorporates multi-media from around the world. We've spent the last three years going to some of the world's most exotic and romantic cities, like Venice, Italy and Paris, France. We filmed in the older bull ring in Spain, in Dubai, in the middle of the desert, in India, in the Taj Mahal. All of this video is incorporated into our show.

How has the Internet affected what you do? It must have really expanded your horizons, hasn't it?

It has. We just performed in India last year and China, and that's all because of the internet. With YouTube and other things, it's such a small world now. We can go anywhere and people can find out about us on the other side of the world. That's really how we captured our world audience.

Do you play many simple, music-related gigs for fun these days?

Yeah. We just played (the) I Madonnari (festival) last year. It's my favorite. You set up at the Mission, with a view of the ocean. It's just a fun day. We still do benefits and other things, when we're all in town. It keeps us all grounded. That's what it's all about, just having fun.

It seems as if you have arrived at a great place in your musical life. Do you take a minute to pull back and recognize that?

Yes, every day. We're very blessed and fortunate. It's been a long road with a lot of hard work, but we're thankful that we can keep making music, performing and traveling.

It's a great show for the whole family. It's a positive show, too. I stress that people can bring their kids to this show. It's an inspiration for a lot of kids who are in dance class or ballet class. We have some of the best dancers in the world in this show, a lot of them from

Cuba, from India, from Canada, from Brazil. The show isn't just about the dancers. We actually have performers from all over the world.

Especially in this economy, it's not easy. People don't have that extra money to go out to the theater, like they used to. They're being pickier. That's why we want to give everybody 100 percent.