

# Jose Feliciano Biography

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FELICIANO: A Name That is Synonymous with MUSIC.

It is synonymous with an international presence that has influenced popular music for more than two generations. It is synonymous with a presence that has bridged musical styles in a way that has never been equaled. Jose Feliciano is recognized as the first Latin Artist to effectively cross over into the English music market, opening the doors for other artists who now play an important role in the American music industry.

As importantly, Feliciano has been acclaimed by critics around the world as *“The greatest living guitarist.”* Referred to as *“The Picasso of his Realm,”* Jose Feliciano’s accomplishments are highly celebrated. He’s been awarded over forty-five Gold and Platinum records; he has won nineteen Grammy nominations, earning nine Grammy Awards, including the *“LARAS Award for Lifetime Achievement.”*

Jose Feliciano's musical career has been immortalized with a Star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame. New York City has honored him by re-naming Public School 155 in East Harlem, "*The Jose Feliciano Performing Arts School.*" The Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, an ancient and prestigious Papal Order of the Catholic Church has knighted Jose at Saint Patrick's Cathedral and he's received a Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, for his musical, as well as humanitarian, contributions to the world.

Guitar Player Magazine has awarded him "*Best Pop Guitarist,*" placing him in their "*Gallery of the Greats,*" and he's been voted both "*Best Jazz*" and "*Best Rock Guitarist*" in the Playboy Magazine reader's poll, as well. In 1996, Jose was selected to receive Billboard Magazine's "*Lifetime Achievement Award.*"

Continuing to be constantly in demand, Jose has performed for and with some of the most important people on Earth. He's enjoyed playing with many of the top symphonic orchestras including the London Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Vienna Symphony Orchestra. He's appeared on major television shows worldwide; he has done a number of his own specials and his music has been featured on television, in films and on the stage.

Jose was born blind, to humble beginnings, on September 10, 1945, in Lares, Puerto Rico. One of eleven boys, his love affair with music began at the age of three when he first accompanied his uncle on a tin cracker can. When he was five, his family immigrated to New York City. Young Jose learned to play the concertina at age six, using a handful of records as his teacher. At eight, he entertained his classmates at PS 57, and at nine, performed at The Puerto Rican Theater in the Bronx.

Venturing beyond the accordion, he taught himself to play the guitar with undaunted determination and again, with nothing but records as his teacher, practicing for as many as 14 hours a day. Exposed to the Rock'n'Roll of the 50's, Jose was then inspired to sing.

At 17, Jose quit school. His father was not working at the time and he needed to help his family. He starting playing in coffee houses in Greenwich Village and for his salary — as was customary during that time in small clubs — they'd "pass the hat." He played in coffee houses, clubs and cafes from Boston to Cleveland to Detroit, Chicago and Denver. A music critic from the New York Times, reviewing his performance at Gerde's Folk City, referred to him as a *"10-fingered wizard who romps, runs, rolls, picks and reverberates his six strings in an incomparable fashion."* He added, *"If you want to witness the birth of a star, catch Mr. Feliciano before he leaves tomorrow night."*

Around this time, Jack Sommer, an A&R executive from RCA, went to the Village to audition a trio who was there, saw Jose perform and signed him to RCA, instead. This was, indeed, the Birth of a Star.

Jose's first major break in the industry, however, happened in the Spanish market when, in 1966, after a spectacular performance at the Mar del Plata Festival in Argentina, the RCA executives in Buenos Aires encouraged Jose to stay and record an album of Spanish music. *"They really didn't know what to do with me in the studio,"* Jose recalls. *"So I suggested that we record a number of old boleros—songs I'd heard from the time I was a kid."* Feliciano's interpretation of the classic bolero of the time was nothing short of amazing. The first single, *"Poquita Fe,"* was a 'smash' hit and *"Usted"* was even bigger.

Jose had taken long-time standards, torch songs from another era, and made them brand new. He re-worked and re-fashioned them with his signature acoustic guitar style and his vocal inflections of jazz and the American influences that he'd acquired during his adolescence. The formula clicked and Jose quickly became a *"teen idol,"* unable to pass through airports or leave his hotel room without a riot.

Two more albums followed in similar fashion and the name “*Jose Feliciano*” was known all throughout South and Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean.

Back in the States, RCA execs in Los Angeles assigned him to staff producer, Rick Jarrard. Rick closely studied Jose’s intriguing style and recommended that he record a Doors’ song that he’d heard him perform in concert — a tune called, “*Light My Fire*”...

By the time he was twenty-three, Jose Feliciano had earned five Grammy nominations and won two Grammy Awards for his album “*Feliciano!*” He had performed over much of the world, and had recorded songs in four languages.

But Jose was not satisfied. He had a desire to expand his career to include some acting and during the next few years, had made a number of dramatic TV appearances, including an episode of “*Kung Fu*,” “*Macmillan and Wife*” and “*Chico and the Man*.” “*It was a lot of fun*,” recalls Jose, “*But I’m a musician...*”

A musician, indeed.

Three songs that have been milestones for Feliciano are: 1) "*Light My Fire*," which topped the charts globally in 1968 and according to the song's publisher, is now a "*standard*" because of Jose's interpretation. 2) "*Che Sarà*" the 1971 San Remo Music Festival entry that became a mega-success for Jose throughout Europe, Asia and South America and of course, 3) "*Feliz Navidad*," the Christmas song that has now become a tradition worldwide during the holiday season top iTunes download while ASCAP has placed it among the 25 Greatest Holiday Songs of the Century!

Additionally, the world enjoys many other Feliciano songs, including "*Rain*," "*Chico and the Man*," "*California Dreamin'*," "*Destiny*," "*Affirmation*," "*The Sound of Vienna*," "*Ay Cariño*," "*Ponte A Cantar*," "*Cuando El Amor Se Acaba*," "*Porque Te Tengo Que Olvidar?*" and countless others, many of which are of his own writing.

When Jose made a cameo appearance in the Academy Award Winning motion picture "*Fargo*" in 1995, he performed one such important self-penned composition, "*Let's Find Each Other Tonight*," demonstrating his strength as a songwriter, as well as a performer. As Steve Buscemi's character in the film, Carl Showalter, declared, "*You know, Jose Feliciano. You got no complaints.*"

One of Jose's most memorable moments was on December 1, 1987 when he joined other entertainment legends in having his star permanently implanted on the world-renowned "*Hollywood Walk of Fame*."

Similarly, he's also been given a star on the Walk of Fame in his native Puerto Rico alongside Jose Ferrer and Raul Julia and had his hands cast for the world famous Wall of Fame in Madame Tussaud's in London, England.

From a historical point of view, it should be noted that Jose was the first artist to ever stylize the National Anthem and perform it publicly. He did so during the 5th game of the World Series between the Detroit Tigers and St. Louis Cardinals on October 7, 1968 in historic Tiger Stadium. It was the first time the anthem became a charted Top-40 recording and once again, Jose opened the door for new generations of stylization.

Today, the National Anthem is rarely sung in its strictly traditional form, ever since Jose's extraordinary performance in Detroit. In The Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, you can actually listen to this historic moment when Jose first sang the National Anthem and caught the world's attention by surprise!

Feliciano oftentimes will venture into other artistic genres and has, in fact, become famous for doing so. In 1989, for instance, legendary author, Ray Bradbury, invited him to write the music for his play, *“The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit.”* Jose and his wife, Susan, took on the challenge of writing over a dozen songs for the project. It was a delightful experience and the thrill of a lifetime to work alongside one of the literary world’s greatest writers, Mr. Ray Bradbury. The production enjoyed a successful run at the Pasadena Playhouse and was well received by the media and patrons of California’s State Theater.

Jose and Susan have been together since 1971. In 1988, they were blessed with a daughter, Melissa Anne; in 1991, with their first son, Jonathan Jose and in 1995, with their third child, Michael Julian. Together they live in a 300 year-old former tavern-turned-homestead on a river in Fairfield County, Connecticut. It’s lively, even noisy at times; the perfect place for an active household which is, in fact, typical of the Feliciano’s.

When Jose is at home, his time is spent writing and recording in his studio, enjoying all-things baseball — playing it with the boys, listening to it on the radio and watching it on TV. He enjoys going to the gym and just being a dad.

In the early 90's, Jose indulged himself a little by staying closer to home, enjoying his young family and trying his hand at a life-long dream: "...to be on the air!!" The local Westport, Connecticut radio station, WMMM, became the perfect instrument for his desire. Its general manager, Mark Graham, and Jose had a Saturday morning talk show entitled, "*Speaking of Music,*" where they would chat, take phone calls, share musical tidbits and trivia, interview musical artists and play an array of music from jazz and blues to the rock 'n' roll of the 50's and early 60's to pop and more.

The community embraced their collaboration and the show continued for well over a year until Jose's touring schedule simply couldn't afford the time it took to broadcast a weekly show.

Over the years, Jose has been part of many historic events, sharing the stage with other internationally renowned artists. For instance, Jose participated in the American Bicentennial celebration at Ft. McHenry and the Lady Liberty Concert in New York along with Frank Sinatra, Elizabeth Taylor, Helen Hayes, Barry Manilow and Mikhail Baryshnikov before Presidents Reagan and Francois Mitterand.

Jose co-headlined with Paul Simon and James Taylor at the internationally acclaimed '*Back To The Ranch Benefit*' on Long Island and performed on the Motown 25 Special where he preceded Michael Jackson's premier '*moonwalk.*' He took part in the PBS Television Concert Special entitled, "*The Kennedy Center Presents – The Americanos Concert,*" the Christmas Tree lighting ceremony in Washington, D.C. and party at the White House.

Jose truly recognizes his great fortune in having met some of the world's most notable artists, writers, scientists, sports figures, heads-of-state, royal figures and, among his greatest honors, to have performed for three Popes: Pope John Paul II for the televised presentation, "*Christmas at the Vatican,*" Pope Benedict XVI before his Papal Mass at Yankee Stadium and for Pope Francis, again for the prestigious "*Christmas at the Vatican*" event.

In the fall of 1997, Jose released his most important recording in a number of years, "*Señor Bolero,*" for it marked a return to his musical roots. Having revolutionized the sound of the bolero earlier in his career, Jose elevated it to another new standard while again indulging himself in this classic, romantic music for which he'd been long associated.

PolyGram, his Label at the time, had designed an elaborate promotional campaign to support this exciting collection of boleros and the public's response was phenomenal. In the first two weeks of its release, it had out-sold the previous Spanish album, which at that time had been out for two years.

The first single from "*Señor Bolero*," "*Me Has Echado Al Olvido*," shot straight to number one in New York and in countries throughout Central and South America. In less than six weeks after the release of "*Señor Bolero*," it had earned platinum status in the U.S. and Puerto Rico.

Shortly thereafter, it was nominated by NARAS for Best Latin Pop Album of the year, marking Jose's sixteenth nomination. "*Señor Bolero*" attained DOUBLE PLATINUM status in The United States, Puerto Rico and Venezuela and GOLD in Mexico, Costa Rica and Argentina.

On the heels of a successful Spanish-language recording career, Jose Feliciano entered the new Millennium with great impact: Los Premios Globos honored him with the tremendous accolade, the "*Artist of the Millennium Award*" and he received the "*Alma Award for Lifetime Achievement*."

These new honors joined an ever-increasing collection of mementos that line the walls of his recording studio and bring to his visitors a sense of awe. They see first-hand, not only the history but the great love shown to him by his admirers from around the world and an industry that has embraced him for over fifty years!

In 2005, another genre was explored, this time, a collection of Mexican Mariachis. In *“A Mexico...con Amor”* Jose was able to express his affection for the people and music of Mexico in much the same way he’d illuminated the beauty of the Bolero.

With the orchestral arrangements of veteran, Jose Hernandez, it proved to be a stunning collection of cherished Mexican standards, presented in a contemporary manner and delighting listeners from Mexico to Melbourne to Miami.

Accolades continued to follow and In September 2006, The Hispanic Heritage Foundation, an organization that identifies, inspires, promotes and prepares Latino role models through national leadership, cultural, educational and workforce programs, honored Jose with their prestigious *“Lifetime Achievement Award”* at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Having joined past recipients including Oscar de la Renta, Celia Cruz and Raul Julia, Jose was both honored and humbled by the display of affection shown him at the Gala which was aired on both the NBC and Telemundo television networks. Truly, Jose had become a bi-lingual icon and as the original Crossover artist of our time, the world was beginning to recognize it.

In 2008 Jose was given yet another opportunity to stretch the limits, musically, this time when he explored the typical countryside music of the Dominicanos – The Bachata. The album, part of his now-popular “*Señor Series*,” was aptly titled, “*Señor Bachata!*” Leila Cobo from Billboard.com put it so well when she wrote:

*“It’s always a challenge to take an artist out of his or her established format and plunge him or her into another. So it’s a tribute to José Feliciano’s artistry that he’s able to navigate pop and tropical idioms with ease, and that his foray into Bachata—perhaps the genre most alien to his long recording history—is convincing to the musician and the style...”*

Making this an even more exciting and important release for Jose and the music industry, “*Señor Bachata!*” was awarded TWO Grammy Awards in 2008: for “*Best Contemporary Tropical Album*” by LARAS, the Latin Association of Recording Arts and Sciences and “*Best Tropical Album*” by NARAS, the National Association of Recording Arts and Sciences.

With these two Grammy Awards, Jose Feliciano became one of but a handful of artists who, for over a forty-year period, is still viable in the recording industry and still earning Grammy Awards.

In Jose's case, he has remained relevant in both the English and Spanish cultures so consequently, in November 2011, LARAS honored him with their prestigious "*Lifetime Achievement Award*" in recognition of his life's work. Jose is now among an elite group of individuals who have, during their lifetimes, greatly contributed to the entertainment industry.

Even with the attention given to his roots in the Spanish culture and his life spent on American soil, Jose's music has touched people in all corners of the world. He has a particularly warmhearted affection for Europe: Austria, in particular.

Jose recorded what was to become an iconic song, "*The Sound of Vienna*," and for many years, passengers on every Austrian Airlines flight arriving in Vienna would be greeted with Jose's singing of it. Now it has become the Official Anthem of the City of Vienna.

Additionally, Jose was humbled to have been chosen to represent Austria when he was named Honorary President of the Ronald McDonald Children's Aid of Austria, 'Kinderhilfe.'

About it, Jose said, *“The privilege of sharing in the magic of what the Ronald McDonald Children’s Aid of Austria accomplishes for children and their parents is unparalleled and I am thrilled to be associated with it.”*

All of these projects and so many more throughout his life have driven Jose to continue pursuing his life-long ambition to share his music well into what others may refer to as their ‘golden years.’ For Feliciano, this time in his life has become an opportunity to relish his fruits while continuing to pick those which he still aspires towards, as well.

In 2018, “Jose Feliciano’s Golden Anniversary Year” was designed to celebrate the Fifty years since Feliciano first came on the International Music Scene with his historic acoustic/soul take on *“Light My Fire”* as well as his controversial rendition of the U.S. National Anthem, both in 1968.

The year was punctuated with visits around the world to places that were most influential to his long-spanning career, including concerts in both North and South America, Europe, Australia, the Middle East and particularly, in his birthplace, Puerto Rico. Not having visited there in several years Jose was overwhelmed by the outpouring of affection, admiration and gratitude by his countrymen, culminating with his sold-out concert at Bellas Artes.

Less than a month later, his world would do another back flip when his little girl, his Niña, would be married and became Melissa Anne Feliciano Erickson.

Just four days later, the newly-extended Feliciano Family traveled together to Washington D.C. where the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History had chosen to celebrate Feliciano's life and artistic contributions by preserving some of the most significant and definable objects associated with his career.

Among the objects donated to the museum, most notably, was the very guitar with which he not only recorded many of his successful boleros in South America, kickstarting his Latin music career in 1966, but also "*Light My Fire*" which ignited his Anglo music career around the world in 1968.

Most importantly though perhaps, for many, it was the instrument with which an artist would first publicly reinterpret the "*Star-Spangled Banner*." With Jose having done just that before the 5th game the World Series in Detroit, it resulted in the controversy of his lifetime.

On June 14th, 2018, Flag Day, in the Smithsonian's celebrated Flag Hall, the permanent home of the actual banner that was spotted still flying over Fort McHenry "*at the dawn's early light*" on September 14th, 1814, inspiring Francis Scott Key to pen the words that would later become America's National Anthem.

In this remarkable Hall, the Naturalization Ceremony commenced with Feliciano offering the key note remarks and then rendering the National Anthem in the same manner he had done fifty years before with the same instrument, for the last time.

Later in September Jose was invited to return to Michigan to the Golden Anniversary of the Detroit Tigers as they, too, were celebrating fifty years since their historic win over the St. Louis Cardinals. In a game between the two rivals, they wanted to reenact that day with Feliciano again, taking to the field to render the anthem in the manner in which he had done so long ago. Instead of jeers and boos he was met with cheers with the fanfare of affection and appreciation. Quite a different showing of emotion, providing him healing after years of disgrace.

Today, in the works for the foreseeable future are a trio of projects, in part, acknowledging the brilliant legacy of Jose Feliciano, as it continues to evolve. The first, is a documentary, the second an album recorded and produced with the great Rick Jarrard whose productions in 1968 catapulted Jose onto the American music scene and his book; his story as told by him to his wife, Susan. All three projects are in the final stages of production.

Jose's gifts of time, treasure and talent have earned him the reputation of great humanitarian and "*Ambassador of Good Will*" throughout the world. "*I'll never forget where I came from or the people who helped my family or me along the way.*" For this reason, Jose will often lend a hand or his name in support of causes that he believes are important.

Even though Jose has recorded nearly seventy albums in his impressive career he is still humble with all the successes he has had and, remarkably, feels that he has just started to share his talents with the world.

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