

” ‘Making Memories’ is about the importance of creating good memories in life. They don’t just happen, but we have to actively do something to ‘make’ them, since they will stay with us for the rest of our lives, continuing to shape, change, and enrich us,” Vana had said about the title track of his CD ‘Making Memories.’

In 2021, given the new realities of the pandemic, he repeated that message to an outdoor audience on the deck of his own home in downtown Manhattan’s East Village. During a seemingly impossible situation of no concerts worldwide, Vana had moved to create his own outdoor concert series - ‘Chez Vana’ - on the large yet intimate terrace of his home, an instant success with the New York audience, that surprised even Vana himself. Lauded by fans as a ‘magical’ setting, the series is now – 2024 – in its 4th year, and always sold out.

German-born, Boston-schooled, New York-based pianist Vana Gierig uses his music as a language – one of eight languages he masters – to communicate these kind of messages. Called a “piano phenom” by Keyboard Magazine, Vana creates his unique sound as much thru his writing, as thru his style of playing and improvisation. At the core of his projects is always his piano trio, originating from one of those early ‘memories’ he ‘made’ when, at age 12, his parents took him to hear the Oscar Peterson Trio, which started a recurring childhood dream in which he himself was the one playing the piano on that stage.

Expanding from that core, his trio has often grown to include a variety of instrument combinations, such as Brazilian percussion, violin, cello, saxophone, vocals, and, for many tours, the clarinet of multi Grammy Award winner Paquito D’Rivera, who is picky about the projects he chooses. “Vana and I have played together in the most diverse places all over the world, and his music always offers something unexpected and truly beautiful. That’s why I am here,” says Paquito at the recording studio, as Vana and his group were documenting some of that collaboration on “Making Memories” (Enja Records), his 4th CD as a leader.

Vana Gierig, known to most simply as Vana, got his early music education in Germany. As a teenager he arrived in the United States, and went to Boston to focus on his jazz performance and composition studies. After Quincy Jones handed Vana his Magna Cum Laude Bachelor’s Degree from Berklee College of Music, the New England Conservatory awarded him a scholarship to pursue a Masters Degree in Jazz Composition. Soon after that he moved to New York honing his craft as sideman and/or musical director to various, musically very diverse national artists, such as Rachelle Ferrell, Najee, Lena Horne, Angela Bofill, Special EFX, Regina Carter, and many others. In 1996, he was invited to the palace of Marrakesh to musical direct King Hassan II’s annual New Year’s gala, the one time when all of the world’s royalty comes together.

In 1998, Marcus Miller called Vana for a tour at the same time as Regina Carter was asking him to stay on as her pianist to start a new project on Verve/Universal. Vana chose Carter’s project, as it was offering exactly the kind of project that would allow him to return to the acoustic piano he had been looking for at the time. It was at that time that Vana started making a mark for himself, focusing his sound as a composer and performer. In 1999, he released his first CD entitled “Small Regrets” (Avenue C Records), of which 4 songs ended up in the independent film “Sins of Fate”, and one on the Emmy Award winning PBS show “City Arts.”

Vana's follow-up CD "A New Day" (Twinz Records, 2003, re-released by Challenge Records in 2008) got even more attention, and charted for 9 weeks in the top of the Jazz Radio Charts. His collaboration with Carter also peaked at that time. In 2002 he appeared on the PBS program "An Evening with the Boston Pops," with her and the phenomenal orchestra.

And one year later, Vana was executive producer, artistic musical director, composer and pianist for Carter's new album "Paganini: After a Dream" (Verve/Universal), being the co-creator, negotiator and realizer of the historic vision for Carter to become the first non-classical violinist allowed to perform on Paganini's violin, the national treasure of Italy, kept in a vault in Genoa. The resulting recording which Vana co-produced and musical directed, went on to become the only non-vocal jazz album in years to reach Number 1 on the Billboard charts. The recording, as well as the historic, sold-out concerts with the priceless violin at New York's Lincoln Center and Genoa's Carlo Felice Theatre in Italy, were enthusiastically covered by CBS' 60 Minutes II, NPR's All Things Considered, the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Oprah Winfrey's O Magazine, Downbeat, JazzTimes, and countless other media.

By 2004, Vana's composition "Healing In Foreign Lands," which Downbeat Magazine called "divine" and "a luminous testimony to Vana's sizable talent," had become one of his most popular compositions, and he was awarded the SESAC Performance Activity Award. It also triggered HBO's "Sex and the City" to solicit Vana to compose and perform a special piece for the season finale with Sarah Jessica Parker & Mikhail Baryshnikov.

In 2005, legendary bassist Eddie Gomez presented Vana as an 'outstanding next generation pianist' in a 3-day special presentation at the Iridium Jazz Club in Manhattan. "Vana is a highly polished technical whiz, whose vocabulary is brimming with complex lines, flourishes, runs that traverse the range of the piano, and contemporary harmonic approaches," Eric Nemeyer wrote in Jazz Improv Magazine after the performance.

Vana's unique musical language as a composer-performer had started to mature and he was being continuously sought out as such, whether being commissioned by Michigan State University's Wharton Center for the Performing Arts, or by HBO's "Sex and the City", or by Marian McPartland. In 2006, she asked him to be the pianist on the Marian McPartland & Friends NPR Jazz Christmas CD, on the song "The Moon on Christmas Eve," which he had co-composed with Kathryn Williams. And an audio/photo book "A Day in New York" (Ear Books/Edel Music), which solicited 8 of Vana's compositions and recordings, had become a bestseller in Europe.

In 2011, Wynton Marsalis invited Vana to be a guest pianist with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, together with internationally acclaimed vocalist Ute Lemper. They performed for 3 nights at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Rose Hall. Besides touring worldwide with his own projects, as well as producing various artists, Vana has worked for years as pianist and musical director with Ute. He co-produced and co-arranged on her CD "Between Yesterday and Tomorrow," and wrote some of the arrangements for bandoneon used in "Last Tango in Berlin", as well as co-arranged for her most recent project, the highly acclaimed "My Rendezvous with Marlene". The CD was released in 2019, and during the pandemic - in 2020, Vana was musical director and pianist for her online film release of the same name.

Preceding the pandemic, Vana toured Japan extensively with his group and won critical acclaim in 2019 as pianist on Jiro Yoshida's album "Red Line" (Sony Music) and while touring its release, Vana was offered a trio recording deal by Sony to be recorded in 2020 at their famed Sony Studios in Tokyo, This project got derailed by the pandemic soon after, when Japan closed its borders for 2 years. In November 2023 however, Vana resumed touring in Japan as well, and is working on a new deal.

In May 2022, Oscar winning director Barry Levinson chose Vana's arrangement and his group for the 2023 Universal streaming series "The Missing", which Levinson directed and for which he chose to have Vana and his group record and film live on the set.

The pandemic's resulting in the worldwide collapse of live music is what prompted Vana to start his 'Chez Vana' live outdoor concert series and is continuing at great success. It continues featuring his various projects mixing in many artists and special guests, such as guitarist Mark Whitfield, Ole Mathisen (sax), Matthew Parrish (bass), Alvester Garnett (drums), Oran Etkin (clarinet), Philip Hamilton (voc), Pauline Kim Harris (violin), Maucha Adnet (vocal), Laura Metcalf (violoncello), Rocky Bryant and Marcello Pellitteri (drums), Michael Rosen (sax), Sean Conly (bass), multi-instrumentalist Mo Pleasure, as well as Brazilian percussionists Vinicius Barros and Rogerio Boccato. The first season finale culminated with Vana's group bringing back Paquito D'Rivera (sax & clarinet).

In 2024, Vana sold out the world-renowned BIRDLAND Jazz Club in Manhattan in May, and his subsequent performance at the gigantic BLUE NOTE in Sao Paulo, Brasil in August. Back in New York in September, he played the Chez Vana Season Finale with world-renowned cellist Jaques Morelenbaum, which received so much acclaim - they are planning a future project together.