

# WHY I THINK GREYSON CHANCE IS A GENIUS

## Reflections based on YouTube videos

A comment on a YouTube video suggested to me the idea to devote some attention to this subject. Many of his (female) fans write 'He is so cute', whereupon somebody of more sense commented that if he were to find his place in the annals of pop, it would not be because of his cuteness, but because he is a musical genius. Now one ought to be very careful when bestowing this epithet, as there is no unit of measure for genius, such as the IQ for intelligence. Thus it is left to everybody's personal taste whether he desires to regard somebody as a genius or not. It would, however, be too cheap simply to claim that he is one without giving detailed reasons; and therefore I have attempted to find criteria that justify such a claim for Greyson Chance (GC).

There is no stringent definition of the word genius, but an **extraordinary capacity for creation** would seem to come closest in an artistic sense. I also like this one: **The genius hits a target that others do not even see.**

When researching GC one quickly realises that he possesses extraordinary creative abilities, and when keeping myself to the second definition I could opt for the easy way out and declare that GC has achieved more in one and a half years than many another musician in his entire life and thus hit a target not previously thought possible and therefore not seen. This would leave in the dark, however, how much of his success is due to himself and how much was contributed by others.

First to be mentioned in this context is his family that fed him the joys of music from an early age. His two elder siblings always encouraged him and assisted him in the composition of his songs, which gives them a share in his career that is not to be underrated. Next to his family the most important factor is certainly that he was a major-league player from the beginning – which is surely to do with his abilities; no eminent manager working for Madonna or Lady Gaga would have put money into promoting a twelve-year-old if he had not been absolutely convinced of his potential.

In diesem Zusammenhang ist zuallererst seine Familie zu nennen, in der er von klein auf Freude an der Musik erfahren hat. Seine beiden älteren Geschwister haben ihn stets gefördert, ihn auch beim Schreiben seiner Songs unterstützt und dadurch einen nicht zu unterschätzenden Anteil an seiner Karriere. Neben seiner Familie spielt gewiss die größte Rolle, dass er von Anfang an in der obersten Liga gespielt hat, was aber mit Sicherheit auf seine Fähigkeiten zurückzuführen ist: Kein hochgradiger Manager, der für Madonna oder für Lady Gaga arbeitet, hätte in die Förderung eines Zwölfjährigen investiert, wenn er von dessen Potenzial nicht absolut überzeugt gewesen wäre.

Which brings us to the question of what distinguishes him from others. The videos I recommended for watching in my article about his career and songs display an entire bundle of attributes that in their totality could explain his speedy success.

## Faith

The expressions of thanks in GC's album leaflet conclude with these words, more than unusual for a thirteen-year-old: 'Lastly but most importantly I have to thank the reason this is all possible, God.' I regard his unconditional confidence in God as the foundation of everything else. It gives him security, and it also makes it probable that he will not shatter on the cliffs of show business.

## Determination

GC was dreaming of a career in music when he posted a video of his Edmond OK students' talent competition appearance to YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxDIC7YV5is>

But he was surprised himself by how speedily his wish came true, as is shown by his reply to the question: 'When you posted your video did you think this could happen?' GC : 'I never thought it would happen. I posted the video just so my friends and family could see the performance. I am so blessed for this opportunity!' At any rate he hung on resolutely, worked on two singles and an album (to which he contributed songs) while attending middle school, did film work, travelled from one TV appearance to another, completed two concert tours and many individual concerts, and yet did not betray all the work that required, always appeared cheerful and amiable, and thus may be called a true professional. Now he does high school online, which may be less stressful when added to his career.

He may best be characterised as a complex mixture of high sensitivity, an iron will and great stamina, and there are probably few people of his age to pursue an aim so resolutely. But he also gives this piece of advice to others: Do not let anybody get in the way of your dreams! Just focus and follow them forever!

## Ability

GC's ability is hardly circumscribed. He abounds with music and it may be assumed that sooner or later he will be counted among the upper crust of pop music. It is impressive, for instance, how easily he transforms a song from the early days of rock (1958) into a glittering musical gem: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4EBJXetKrE>

Pianism: He almost never makes mistakes, even when not looking at the keyboard. During the first one-and-a-half years of his career he has also expanded his pianistic abilities: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2PZEbLNqqE>

GC has converted many of his LP songs (recorded with band accompaniment) into piano versions, and it is against these that he ought to be measured – beautiful though his songs on the album may be – as he plays here unencumbered. Among his high points I also count his cover songs (which frequently surpass the originals) and above all the songs written by himself; which, allowing the fullest possible expression of his abilities, bespeak an approach to music that could not be more direct.

Voice: His gamut of expression ranges from breathed, stimulating notes to vocal eruptions. With an unusually large register and a special timbre his voice is one of the best and most interesting in pop. As a specialty he sometimes performs long and powerful vocals, with which he delights his fans. As an example, here is his performance at the opening ceremony of the US Open in New York (after 1:50): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbDOixFafek>

Composing and interpreting songs: His songs are musically demanding and not easy to sing; they require special interpretative abilities. The lyrics of his first three songs, which he composed at the age of twelve, deal with broken hearts (*Broken Hearts*), the soul's ascent to the stars after death (*Stars*), and the lament of a child his mother abandoned into an adoption agency (*Within the Lights*). In most of his other songs as well, relationship troubles, disappointment and pain hold the stage. GC interprets them with much sentiment, but listening to them does not cause depression – on the contrary: he presents them so authentically that he convinces his listeners he is taking them on a tour of his emotive world (the geography of which frequently corresponds to that of their own) and that there is a great deal they are able to handle; with his positive aura, his specific style of interpretation and his

voice he is capable of acting as an antidepressant. This may in fact be the reason why his admirers flock to his concerts to sing along:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RN7Et5qT2rE>

I count several of his songs among the finest and most impressive of the genre. All his songs are listed in my first article from page 5 onwards. Of special note is his song *Running Away*, which constitutes a quantum leap in instrumentation for him and is also fabulously rendered:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPDWDeR21QQ>

With his method of interpretation GC also succeeds in pulling the listener into his songs, as is especially recognisable in this video (a cover of Lady Gaga's *Yoü and I*):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2PZEbLNqqE>

Greyson Chance and Schubert: Although I enthuse over many things, my favourite music has for some time been, above all, Franz Schubert's late work, because in it grave and cheerful, dark and light elements are intertwined in such a way as to appear like a portrait of life. Schubert did not pursue a programme in his compositions, but allowed musical structures to grow like natural ones; therefore, his music sounds not intended, but like the passage of water that can adapt itself to all conditions and yet remains always the same whether it is a calm lake or a torrential river. When I had been occupying myself with Greyson Chance's music for a year, I suddenly noticed the analogy with Schubert's. It, too, balances gravity and cheerfulness, darkness and light; it does not appear forced, but emerges naturally in his interpretations. For this reason, I never seem to have heard his songs frequently enough, as happens sooner or later with almost every other kind of music.

### **Casualness and concentration, entertainer skills and self-confidence**

This heading promises much, but the ingredients are difficult to separate and I will, therefore, treat them in one section.

In front of TV cameras he appears totally unconstrained and briskly chats away:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aN3dsJDnvw0>

No sooner does he dedicate himself to his music than the unconstrained boy becomes a fully concentrated, serious artist who knows how to captivate his audience. This transition from ease to concentration is on display in many videos, for instance the one in which he sings his cover version of Alicia Keys' *Empire State of Mind* in a New York pub:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaGIQUlj5k>

Or the one in which he explains and performs his first self-composed song *Broken Hearts*:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIaW85Ue1c8>

This video shows one of the most rousing band performances with considerable vivacity and a great voice: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3u5kJZAJyY>

In the following interesting video, showing a carefreeness not otherwise on display, he throws down his jacket (2:40), knocks down the microphone support (4:17) and rolls it away with his foot (4:24). This is also the video in which he performs his finest dance movement visible on YouTube (5:34): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJDIGbE49TQ>

How does GC react to unexpected situations? In Singapore, during the song *Paparazzi*, the microphone topples over (at 2:14). He turns it back up and goes on playing. But now somebody approaches to fix the microphone ...:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7\\_q7IHS9IWs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_q7IHS9IWs)

The following characteristic is to be particularly emphasised: on the one hand he forms an almost incredible whole with his piano, on the other he always leaves the impression of playing and singing, not for himself, but for his audience – whom he frequently addresses in an off-handed manner while playing, showing entertainment skills that require high self-assurance. The best example of this is his performance in Toronto before an audience of 18,000. This is the biggest live audience he has ever had, but he gives no room to nervousness; alone with his piano in the huge crowd he fully accepts the challenge and maintains total control over his audience:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7Swsx4NdhQ>

He evinces the same self-assurance also in appearances of a quite different nature, for instance when pointedly reading the fairy-tale *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOkOCd\\_XBm4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOkOCd_XBm4)

### **Tendency to introduce variations**

His accuracy of aim is on display quite especially when he varies his songs. He seems to feel an inner urge to do this, for on YouTube there are not two identical interpretations of a song to be found. I presume that in the exuberance of his musicality he cannot avoid showing how various his music can be, and his audience are usually waiting to hear what he is going to change.

He may count it a feather in his cap that a variation, no matter how surprising it may be, is never unsuitable, but always contributes to making the song a well-rounded whole, thus showing the matter-of-factness of his approach to music.

For purposes of comparison I recommend two interpretations of his album song *Home Is in Your Eyes*, once with the band (August 2011, Lancaster PA; a video already listed on page 3): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJDIgBE49TQ>

and the other time solo at the piano (November 2011, Singapore): GC shows a new level of his interpretative art. Whilst other musicians of his age tend to bank on fast rhythms, he gets slower and more intense and begins to swing it with a degree of maturity totally incredible for his age. This performance makes the song (co-written by him, and one of his finest) a work of art: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=QJK\\_U-UFYLO](http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=QJK_U-UFYLO)

A close-up of GC: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOx6QEOAF4&NR=1>

I recommend, furthermore, two piano interpretations of his album song *Cheyenne* that are markedly different from each other (except in being both marvellous). In the first of these he reaches the limits of his expressive potential – I regard this as unsurpassable.

August 2011, Billboard-Studio: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5E45xm6gCDk>

November 2011, Singapore: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=GI4BrEEUuq4>

A close-up of GC: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41f0uus8Ezw>

At the end of the penultimate video, GC takes his leave with the same kind of bow as in his *Paparazzi* video from April 2010 (the first on page 2) and in the one recorded when he was five years of age: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WphJqJMh7k>

### **Acting talent**

In a collage of video scenes entitled *Funny Moments 2* GC shows that he can also be funny, and at 1:17 he even displays his seductive talent:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlvS8KlpWXo>

His acting talent was already recognisable in the video of his song *Unfriend You*:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Rd-tfJRMLI>

This talent, combined with his pianistic and singing abilities, predestined him for a guest role on the TV series *Raising Hope* (from 2:36):

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GonYmFm\\_dlk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GonYmFm_dlk)

He impersonates thirteen-year-old Jimmy Chance, and already one can hardly imagine a more suitable actor. But even more sensational is how he plays the music scripted into his role at home for himself (and of course those that are going to see the video). It is only here that he shows the emotions it involves in their purest form, and it is always fascinating to watch: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwXML9l0GSg>

### **Human greatness (social commitment)**

To the extent that a thirteen- to fourteen-year-old is capable of changing the world, GC does so: Passively, by setting an example for young people, but also actively, by touring schools to sing with the pupils and to give them the assurance that efforts pay off. The pupils receive this with enthusiasm: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ovml7lm4hQ8>

Of unique importance is his song *Purple Sky*, which draws attention to school mobbing (bullying) and the suicides it leads to. He was given the opportunity to present this song at the Human Rights Campaign's National Dinner 2011 in Washington DC, which was addressed by President Obama, and delivered a performance with a goose skin effect.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qC-NFuAn-U>

At the end of the song he quotes from Depeche Mode's *People Are People*:

'People are people so why should it be you and I should get along so awfully?' The suspense-enhancing pause before the last accord is remarkable. Then he takes his leave with the words: 'Thank you and thank you for everybody watching above', referring to the suicide victims in heaven.

Generally speaking, just about all issues GC addresses in his songs are about trying to make interpersonal coexistence more bearable. They are about love, faithfulness and honesty, and with his positive character traits and his style of singing he is probably one of the best ambassadors for such values in the world.

### **Naturalness**

His naturalness is certainly closely connected to his abilities, as he needs no frills, but only his pianism and his voice to impress. And his motto, born from fundamental sincerity, is: I want to show myself to my fans the way I am. This could also explain his invitations to official functions. He was allowed to sing *Purple Sky* at the HRC National Dinner for an obvious reason, because the song is exactly suited for human rights issues; but bearing in mind how many singers wait for a chance to sing at the opening of the US Open, I regard it as one of the most surprising chapters in the GC story that the job went to a boy who looked back on a career lasting just one year: this becomes understandable only by considering that one is staying on the safe side by inviting him – no gaffes, no scandal, but a stimulating example for young people. The upright impression he leaves is accordingly appreciated by his (female) fans, who, in bestowing epithets on him, go as far as 'delightful' and 'adorable'.

### **Holistic approach**

He usually presents himself in everyday clothes, sits down at the piano, begins to play and sing, and thus meets not only his own requirements but also those of his enthusiastic

audience. He requires no grandiose stage decoration, no light show and no dancers. This holistic approach impresses me to the extent that I prefer his piano solo performances to the band-accompanied ones, because he gets more intense when concentrating on himself.

There is, however, a fine example showing how he employs the band to create new possibilities: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMdswv8ceVU>

He begins this cover of the Jackson Five's *I Wanna Be Where You Are* solo at the piano; at 1:14 the band gradually comes in, at 1:25 GC stops playing and uses the freedom of his hands to accompany and enhance the song with quasi-volitional gesticulations.

### **So what does his genius consist in?**

What has been said so far in my opinion reveals an aggregate genius that results from the combination of a musical genius and a unique personality which also comprises, among some other talents, an interpretative genius.

His musical genius comprises the areas

- songwriter
- pianist
- singer

I regard him as hardly surpassable especially in his combination of a pianist and singer, which off-handedly produces musical highlights an adequate appreciation of which may have to wait until future times.

- His interpretative genius consists in the ability to present his songs (which usually deal with problems) in such a way that they can have the effect of medicine on the soul, strengthening his fans for the task of coping with their personal problems and thus possibly saving them prescription medicines, drugs, or a visit to the psychiatrist. Hitting this target, which he probably did not even see himself, is what I regard as his most remarkable capability.

And now for a more poetical wind-up, provided by the video that shows the only available performance of his song *Within the Lights*, which I regard as one of his finest:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljDbbl69rFU>

First he chats about it ('a story about a kid in New York whose mother abandons him into an adoption agency'), then he begins to play and to sing, and soon he seems to have forgotten his environment; in fact, however, he is effusing himself in his music, a fascinating mixture of strains of a Renaissance-like beauty and loud lamentation. It is especially when watching this video that I feel that he is permitted to 'sit at the table of the gods' – and that this is his genius.

*Note:* To be precise, GC sang *Within the Lights* a second time at an Oklahoma charity event, a performance only partially preserved on a YouTube video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0pJqXKfzwU>

This is so moving, however, that it is worth watching.

As Greyson Chance's creativity seems to know no bounds, his fans may look ahead to an exciting future.

Erwin Kohaut, Vienna, Austria, Europe, February 2012