

Berklee

When Johann Met Engelbert

By [Danielle Dreilinger](#)

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Johann Frank '07 is backing singer Engelbert Humperdinck on a world tour.

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It's gospel among sidemen that you never know when the big break might come. Johann Frank '07 was working hard in Los Angeles but mostly on small-scale engagements, with a few bigger jobs backing R&B crooner Al B. Sure and Mitchel Musso from *Hannah Montana*.

So he didn't expect anything in particular when he got the call in January 2011 to audition for the tour of some musician he knew nothing about.

"Nothing. My agent had to spell out his name two hours before I auditioned," says Frank, now 24. It's a challenge: E before L, and CK instead of K. But millions of fans around the world could probably spell "Engelbert Humperdinck" as easily as their own names.

Frank sure knows who "Engel" is now. "The voice of the century," he says of the smooth pop megastar perhaps best known for his hits "Release Me"—famous in the the UK for keeping the Beatles out of the #1 slot on the charts in 1967—and "Quando, Quando, Quando."

The gig has been "life-changing," Frank says. "I'm getting endorsements . . . I'm getting newspaper reviews."

And he's getting a workout. Though Humperdinck is 75 years old, the show is "90 to 120 minutes nonstop, no break," Frank says. "He's dancing, he's singing."

However, Frank is no stranger to drive. He was discovered by Phil Collins at the age of 14. Once he arrived at Berklee, with support from the college and Collins, he earned his degree in music business in only five semesters, playing in multiple Singers Showcase and Singer's Night concerts and even squeezing in a stint on the West Coast through Berklee's Los Angeles Internship Program.

That speed in learning, and Berklee-honed sight-reading skills, got him the gig. At the audition, "I had to sight-read, with the rehearsal tape running, 25 songs. . . . All my Berklee teaching just made sense at that point," he says. The audition was Monday. He was on stage with the band Thursday.

Also key was the stylistic versatility he cultivated with faculty members such as [Jeff Ramsay](#), [Joey Blake](#), and [Thaddeus Hogarth](#). Humperdinck's repertoire spans everything from rock to flamenco to jazzy ballads.

Learning the material doesn't stop on tour. "We are on our toes. Every soundcheck is a rehearsal," with changes in the arrangements, Frank says. The leader debriefs the band after every show. "He never stops working. Never. He always thinks of ways to improve."

The gig stretches Frank's arranging skills, as well: Humperdinck has had him arrange Marvin Gaye's hit "Ain't That Peculiar" and a medley that kicks off the show and "delights the crowd every night by its energy and new sound. It's been amazing writing for horns, percussion, vocals, etc.," Frank says. In fact, he's now officially the assistant music director.

Admittedly Frank is a decade or three younger than the core audience for the tour, and the youngest member of a band that also includes alumni Chris Golden on bass, Dawn Woullard-Bishop on backing vocals, and David Page as stage manager. But far from being out of touch, Humperdinck is, to Frank, an inspiring and relevant example of long-term success in the music industry.

Humperdinck is in charge of his career now, beholden to no one. "He's established. He has an audience all over the world and he will until he leaves this earth. He doesn't even need a label," Frank says.

If you want to sing and dance for two hours a night in your 70s, you need to get your sleep, eat right, and work out every day. "I swim a lot," he says. "I choose fish over chicken."

Going forward, "I want to work further with Engelbert. I feel I have a lot to learn from him," says Frank. After a quick side gig with Musso at a 150,000-person festival ("stylistic shock! loving it!" he says), he'll return to Enge for shows in Florida, Mississippi, Texas, and Singapore. The band plays [Royal Albert Hall November 3](#)—possibly the highlight of his year.

In the long-term, he sees himself starting a blues trio while continuing to back artists of Humperdinck's caliber. He also hopes to give back to Berklee. Back in L.A., Frank's known as the guy for new alumni to meet. He's talking with professors about opportunities to teach for the college in some way.

He already has some advice for students: don't stick to your compatriots. When not running around the world with Humperdinck, he brings the world to him, musically—arranging with a guy from Chile, producing with Ecuadorians, writing music with Dutch people. "That's what music is about, that's what sharing is about, that's what Berklee is about," he said.

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