

Antonio Sanchez performs live for 'Birdman' screening at Annenberg

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Drummer Antonio Sánchez, who was nominated for Golden Globe and BAFTA awards for his score for "Birdman," will perform live with a screening of the film Saturday. He likens his "Birdman" concerts to touring with a working band.

by **Shaun Brady**, FOR THE INQUIRER

Long before Antonio Sánchez composed the [sound track for Alejandro González Iñárritu's Oscar-winning film *Birdman*](#), Iñárritu provided the sound track for Sánchez's life. The young drummer spent countless hours during his teenage years listening to the future filmmaker spin records on Mexico City radio station WFM-FM.



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“Unknowingly, I was a big fan,” Sánchez recalled last week from his home in Queens. “I loved the music they played, but I wasn’t too aware of who was doing it until Alejandro and [Iñárritu’s sound editor] Martín Hernández started doing a nightly show called *Magic Nights*, where they played a little more sophisticated music.”

It was on that program that Sánchez first heard the Pat Metheny Group, helping to set him on the path that eventually led him to become the guitarist’s drummer of choice for the last 15 years.

The two will next play together in the area Jan. 21, when Sánchez will anchor a new Metheny-led quartet with bassist Linda Oh and pianist Gwilym Simcock at the Keswick Theatre.

The connection came full circle when Iñárritu met Sánchez backstage at a Metheny gig in 2005, sparking a friendship that culminated when Iñárritu had the offbeat idea to score his audacious new film, *Birdman*, about a washed-up actor (played by Michael Keaton) making a desperate comeback bid on Broadway, with a solo drum-kit sound track. Sánchez's boundless imagination made him the ideal candidate, even though he'd never even considered composing for movies before.

"As a drummer, the last thing I was thinking about was film scoring," Sánchez said. "When Alejandro called me, I was elated and terrified at the same time. I really had no idea how to pull this off, but I had complete trust in his judgment. Just knowing that he was going to be the captain of the ship, I knew it was going to be fun. And it was."

It was also highly acclaimed, earning Sánchez best original score nominations at the Golden Globes and BAFTAs, though the Academy Awards (which ultimately handed *Birdman* statues for 2015's best picture, best director, best original screenplay, and best cinematography), disqualified Sanchez's score on a frustrating technicality regarding the balance of his drums and preexisting classical music.

"If they would have just let me go into the field and play and I lost, that's fine," Sánchez said. "What I don't get is these weird, archaic rules that they apply when they want, but don't enforce them when they don't. But it's not something that I lost too much sleep over. It's not like I've been pining my whole life to get an Oscar, and all the publicity that came out because of the elimination probably helped more than a nomination would have."

That might be true, as the innovative score has taken on a life of its own since the film's release. Sánchez will perform live with the film at the Annenberg Center on Saturday, though don't expect to hear the same music that accompanied *Birdman* on screen. "The spirit of what we did in the original movie was a lot about improvisation, about playing in an organic way and a visceral style, and I want to keep that spirit alive. So I improvise probably 90 percent of what I'm playing. I'm very careful that I'm serving the movie and that I try to achieve the dramatic effect that we did originally, but it's completely different from what I've done before and what I'm going to do in future performances."

Though the experience of improvising live to a fixed image is vastly different from playing with other musicians, Sánchez likens his *Birdman* concerts to touring with a working band. "It's kind of like working with the same people every night, but they're on screen and doing their own thing," he said. "But *Birdman* is one of those movies that has a lot of levels, so every time I see it, I focus on something different and discover something different. Like a good record that has a lot of depth, you have to listen to it a bunch in order to really appreciate what's going on."

Antonio Sánchez: "Birdman Live," 8 p.m. Saturday, Zellerbach Theatre, Annenberg Center, 3680 Walnut St. Tickets: \$25. Information: 215-898-3900, annenbergcenter.org.