

# Daukile Play

## Center Fielder Bernie Williams Moves to Center Stage

BY CHERIE YURCO

Standing in center field felt odd. Like many times before, Bernie Williams looked towards home plate and then glanced up at a crowd of 50,000 screaming fans ready for a season opener. He had never played in this stadium, but that didn't explain the surreal feeling. He felt odd to be in this place without the familiar feel of his nylon uniform and baseball cap. Looking down, he was wearing street clothes and holding a guitar, instead of a baseball glove. As he began to sing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," the crowd fell silent.

By the time of this pregame performance at the inauguration of the new Yankee Stadium, Williams had not played with the Yankees for a couple years, and was well on his way to pursuing his other passion—music. But it wasn't something new to him, having played guitar since childhood in Puerto Rico, where he attended Escuela Libre de Música, a performing arts school in San Juan. In fact, Williams credits much of the success he's had in life, including in baseball, to something he learned as a child studying music.

"I made the connection that, if I could put the effort and practice into it, eventually, I could play better and better," he explains. "It was such a joyful thing for me. I started applying it to everything I did—sports, particularly track, baseball, and academics, too."

### Well-Rounded Education

The idea of hard work and focus didn't come to Williams completely on his own. He credits supportive parents, who were strong believers in education, for insisting that he and his brother work hard at everything they were involved in, and that they become well-rounded individuals. Williams' mom, an educator for more than 40 years, kept the kids on a full schedule of school, music, and sports that began at sunrise and ended with the siblings falling asleep over their homework.

"My parents designed our school schedule in such a way that we had absolutely no time to hang out with anybody," he laughs. "There was always this sense of getting the work done and doing your best. You may have talent, but that itself won't take you where you want to go; you really have to work to make it your own. There are no shortcuts."

And, he says, it's because of that idea that he could succeed in such a difficult sport. "In baseball, it's that constant sacrifice and work ethic that can propel you to be on top of the game," he says. "In the big leagues, you really need to have that."

It was Williams' father, a merchant marine, who introduced him to the guitar. "He brought a flamenco guitar home from Spain," recalls Williams. "He sort of taught himself to play, learning a couple chords. He would sing folk songs and boleros, and I would listen to him play before I would go to sleep every night."

His mom believed schoolwork should always come first, and that a good education should include music. "She didn't realize I would love it so much that I would make it part of my life," he says.

The importance of a well-rounded education and the similarities between succeeding in athletics and music is the subject of Williams' recently published book, *The Rhythms of the Game*.

Recruited by the Yankees at the tender age of 16, he left Puerto Rico for the US, guitar in hand. Williams' mother insisted he also pursue a college education. "The first couple years that I was playing baseball, I was doing a semester of biology as a pre-med student, and then the other semester I would play in the minor leagues," he says. "Then, I realized it wasn't translating well to baseball because my mind was split." So, he dropped out of college to throw himself 100% into his baseball career, and it paid off. He worked his way to the big leagues at age 22 and rewarded himself by purchasing his very first electric guitar, a Fender Stratocaster.

Known for keeping a guitar in the locker room, music was Williams' constant companion through 16 years in the big leagues. He recalls a time when teammate (and drummer) Paul O'Neill brought Bruce Springsteen on a clubhouse tour. Williams had Springsteen autograph his guitar. Ironically, The Boss wrote: "To Bernie, If you ever get tired of baseball ..."

### True Calling

Though music was always a big part of Williams' life, it was in the background; it wasn't until his last couple years as a Yankee that he started to think of it in terms of a career. "That's when I realized that my relationship with music was so strong that, even though I didn't know what I wanted to

do, I knew there would be music involved in it," he says.

He was still with the Yankees in 2003 when he recorded his first album, *The Journey Within*, during the off-season. "That recording was a compilation of ideas that I had worked through over the years, even from when I was a kid," explains Williams. "Making it was a great learning experience; it was eye-opening."

Even after recording a second album, *Moving Forward* (2009), and being nominated for a Latin Grammy, Williams still has difficulty calling himself a professional musician. "I feel awkward when someone asks how my music career is doing," says Williams. "It's what I love to do, man!"

"It's been really hard for me to look at music as a profession," he adds. "With baseball, obviously, the three or four hours I spent on the field playing were fun, but there was a lot of preparation that had to happen before that moment. I never felt that way with music."

Williams says that this could mean that music is, and has always been, his true calling. "Music has always been more like a steady, very enjoyable process. Every skill I acquire has opened the door to discovering more things, whether it's harmony, rhythm, tone—it's such a joyful experience," he says. "I think your true calling in life is something that, even if you didn't get paid, you could still do it."

Williams' compositions, which have a strong Latin influence, are not easy to categorize. "I think my music is pretty eclectic," he says. "It takes from my background in Puerto Rico. I've always found rhythm very intriguing. There are so many influences—at the performing arts school I listened to classical, and since coming to the states I've become more familiar with blues and rock. Lately, I've been gravitating more towards jazz because I like the freeing sensation of improvisation."

He says that inspiration for his compositions can come from anywhere, anytime—water dripping or the sound of windshield wipers. "Sometimes, I wake up at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning with a melody in my head," he explains, adding that other times



it comes from a deeper place. “Sometimes it comes from the emotions and experiences I’ve had, like the passing of my father. I come up with a melody to explain it to myself. To me, that’s the real art of it. I use melodies, rhythms, instrumentation, timbre, and dynamics to express a mood or emotion. It’s kind of cool when people listen and they can tell what I was feeling.”

### Lessons from the Game

Williams credits baseball for helping him cope with certain aspects of a music career. “Playing music is great and fun, as long as you’re not playing in front of 500 people,” says Williams. “There’s a completely different aspect to music that has less to do with music and more with performing under pressure, and that was one thing I was able to draw from baseball.”

Williams explains that performance anxiety, in sports or music, is something that never goes away. “It never disappears, but you find the tools to handle it. My work was basically dealing with that on a daily basis for 16 years,” he says. “Playing in front of 50,000 people, when the game is

on the line, and you are the last hope, and you have to produce ... Well, everything is a walk in the park after that, if you find yourself mentally prepared.”

“Another thing I was able to draw out of my baseball experiences was muscle memory,” he adds. “Like when you are facing a pitcher and he throws you a pitch that is down and low. Your body takes over—wait, hit it where it’s pitched, and drive it the other way. That mental process comes automatically because you’ve done it so many times before.”

“To translate that to the stage, I work my skill level up to the point where I don’t have to think about what I’m playing,” he says. “I don’t think about the scale, just the concept because I’ve done it so many times.”

### Early Highlights

Though Williams points out his music career is still young, he’s had some amazing experiences so far. Among his favorite moments have been those performing with top-notch musicians. Some of these encounters have happened at baseball great

Joe Torre’s annual Safe at Home Foundation fundraising dinners. At those events, Williams has performed with James Taylor, Paul Simon, Garth Brooks, and even Bruce Springsteen, about 10 years after The Boss signed Williams’ guitar.

“Playing ‘Take Me Out to the Ball Game’ at the new Yankee Stadium inauguration was a pretty cool highlight as well,” adds Williams. “When I started playing, you could hear a pin drop, everything stopped. After I finished playing, it was just craziness again.”

When asked about where he hopes the music will take him, Williams says, “There’s a personal goal and there’s more of a humanitarian goal. I understand how powerful music is as a language and how you can change peoples’ attitudes and do a lot of good, especially influencing kids.”

“Because of the profound impact music has had on my life, I feel it should be a part of every kid’s experience growing up, if they choose it,” he says. Earlier this year he lobbied Congress about the importance of school music programs. He also volunteers for Little Kids Rock, a national program to boost music instruction in public schools by providing donated instruments and money to fund music departments.

On a personal level, Williams says his goal is to “become a better musician every day and be able to take my skill and music everywhere in the world,” with the ultimate goal of becoming a versatile musician.

“You see all these great musicians who are able to transcend their genres and play all kinds of music, with all kinds of people,” says Williams. “I want to be able to play the Concierto de Aranjuez with the Spanish National Orchestra, and then go to Newport Jazz Festival and play with Chick Corea, or go to Puerto Rico and play with a salsa band. To be able to relate to music in all those aspects would be really cool.”

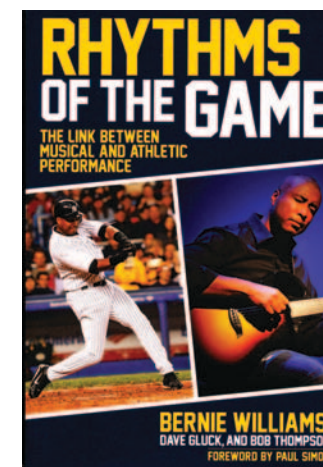
Williams plans to release another album in the first part of next year. However, as far as touring goes, after 16 years traveling with the big leagues, he’s likely to take it slowly. “I want to keep the freshness in this,” he says. “I don’t want it to be a drag. I do love it, but I don’t want it to become work.”

# Playing the Fields

## Finding Similarities Between Music and Baseball

BY CHERIE YURCO

■ When people talk about Bernie Williams’ smooth transition from pro baseball player to pro musician, the remarks often go something like: “Wow, to be so talented, in such diverse fields.” But, according to Williams, if you dig a little deeper, you will discover plenty of correlations between sports, in particular baseball, and music, including the dedication required to thrive at them.



So, his achievements in both fields aren’t really that unusual given his strong will and drive to succeed at both. “There is no shortcut,” says Williams in his book *Rhythms of the Game: The Link Between Musical and Athletic Performance*. “You have to prepare thoroughly—no matter how talented you may be—and you have to translate the preparedness into a solid mental approach.”

“I’ve learned much from music and applied those concepts to baseball,” explains Williams. “Baseball made me a better musician, while music made me a better baseball player.” For example, batting has

a lot to do with perceiving the rhythm of the pitcher. An ability to improvise on the field, and with music, can be critical to success in both playing baseball and playing jazz.

Aside from the years of training and thousands of hours of practice needed to perfect both professions, it’s probably more than a coincidence that common words—players, rhythm, flow, pitch, tempo, timing—are used to describe baseball and music. And, numerous studies have proven that both music and sports are natural stress relievers.

In fact, there are so many baseball player/musicians that, back in 2001, sportscaster Bob Costas even produced an album, *Big League Rocks*, of hits from baseball players, including Williams, Sandy Alomar Jr., Ernie Banks, Luis Gonzalez, Tyler Green, Mark Langston, José Lima, Jack McDowell, Paul O’Neill, Ozzie Smith, Scott Spiezio, and David Wells.



Here are some other famous baseball player/musicians and musician/baseball players:

**BABE RUTH** is well known for playing the piano.

**EDDIE “FIDDLER” BASINSKI**, who played for the Brooklyn Dodgers (1944-1945), was a trained violinist.

**DENNY MCCLAIN**, the last major league pitcher to win more than 30 games during a season (31 in 1968), played the organ, and even played professionally in Las Vegas in that same year.

**CARMEN FANZONE** followed his years in the major leagues (1970-1974) with a career playing the flugelhorn. He is married to jazz vocalist Sue Raney.

Current Cincinnati Reds pitcher **BRONSON ARROYO** is also a guitarist and vocalist, and released an album of cover tunes, *Covering the Bases*, in 2005.

**JAKE PEAVY** of the Chicago White Sox says that he can’t stand to go even a few days without playing his guitar.

Composer and conductor **JOHN PHILIP SOUSA** played baseball as a youth and his love of the game continued throughout his life. He even formed a baseball team from members of his band to play teams in tour cities that they visited.

Country music star **GARTH BROOKS** was more focused on athletics—baseball, football, and track—growing up. The exuberant baseball fan even tried out for the San Diego Padres in 1998.

“There’s a completely different aspect to music that has less to do with music and more with performing under pressure, and that was one thing I was able to draw from baseball.”



Scan the QR Code to see a clip of Bernie playing and enter to win a copy of his book.

