Oakville Beaver
Artscene
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Oakville musician donating time, talent to promote local performers

■ By Tina Depko
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

There are some people who are championing Canadian music, pushing for further exposure of our nation's own talented singers, bands and songwriters.

John Serré is one of them.

As a singer-songwriter, Serré, 50, knows the ins and outs of the business.

He also served as the volunteer coordinator for the Halton Regional Writers Group for the Songwriters Association of Canada from 2003 to 2006, so he understands the frustration of his colleagues trying to make a career in the industry.

Unhappy with the status quo, he recently started approaching local media about plugging the talent right here in our own backyard.

"You never hear most of the hit songs," he said. "They aren't on the radio because the musicians don't have the money behind them. It isn't because they are not there."

Local TVCogeco Channel 23 liked the idea. Serré worked with the station this summer to develop a series called *In A Song*. Serving as the host, the Oakville man volunteered his time and talents to record 10 30-minute episodes. The show debuts this week and runs on Thursday and Sunday nights at 9 p.m.

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>
> ■ *John Serré*
> *Local singer-songwriter*

Serré said the process was gruelling, but worth the effort. The station initially promised four episodes, but saw the value of promoting local talent, increasing the number of episodes to 10. Filming took place throughout the summer, wrapping up in late August.

"The show was my idea, so it is very cool this worked out," Serré said. "What I pitched to them was what I had basically been running through the Songwriters Association of Canada. We would have monthly meetings and I would meet all these people and it is the classic example, especially here in Canada."

In A Song starts off with Serré performing one of his own songs. The program then features interviews and performances by two singer-songwriters. Many of the guests are members of the songwriting group Serré oversaw in Halton. This means a large portion of the 20 featured musicians are from the surrounding area.

"I've been in this area for 15 years now and some of the people I know are still writing their songs, finally coming out with their CDs and are only enjoying small successes and finally getting airplay," Serré said. "We have a lot of talent here that deserves exposure. I'm a giver and if I can inspire someone musically, that brings me amazing joy. I see it happen around me all of the time. That is all I really want out of this."

Although the term singer-songwriter often carries the connotation that the artist is a folk musician, Serré said the program breaks this stereotype, featuring artists in different musical genres, such as country, folk and pop.

Serré estimates he put approximately 100 volunteer hours into the show.

"No one, including myself, got paid for this," he said. "But I think it is going to raise the profile in the region of local musicians. I think it is important to give people some sort of return who are investing their souls into their songs, and for them, it is nice to get behind the camera and share it with everyone. We want people to hear what we are doing."

A major problem Serré sees with the Canadian music industry is the lack of funding from federal, provincial and municipal governments. He would like to see artists receive grants, for example, so they can afford to record and release an album.

He said he would also like to see more business owners promoting live music.

"We need to get live music happening again everywhere, like the cafés and coffee shops," he said. "They should open up to musicians playing there because they have a message and it is a universal communication. It brings joy to everybody."

Serré said he is working to raise the profile and get Canadian music out there through a website called Songwriters Source, at www.theSongwritersSource.com, which he hopes to launch in 2009.

"Music is a real problem in this country, especially getting paid for it or getting to the point where you can get some return in investment," he said. "This industry is hurting and it is a sad thing in Canada. You would think that people from Finger Eleven shouldn't have to work anymore."

This web community for Canadian songwriters will connect them directly with consumers.

"One of the things I'm proposing is having them send me their wav file," he said. "If you put every song on a website, you could choose 20 songs, the artwork for the jewel case and CD, order it, pay for it and have it mailed out for around $15. That is what has to happen. For Canadian songwriters, they can send me their original stuff and we've just eliminated record labels, distribution, publishing and all that other stuff. They're going to get 80 per cent, then."

Serré said he has found the software to make this purchasing process possible. He also has many other plans for the site, such as featuring participating Canadian artists with Internet radio.

"There will be an administrative fee and things like mailing costs, but I don't plan on making a lot of money off of this," he said. "It isn't about that for me."

Serré is currently working on his first solo CD, *Welcome to the Swampland*. His stage name is Dirty John Wedgewood and he's known around this part of the province for his musical elixir of blues, country, Southern rock, folk and, what he said is, 'a quart of snake oil.'

When Serré isn't strumming his guitar, he's teaching others how to play the instrument. But like many performers working in the Canadian music industry, it is impossible to make a living from music alone.

"I was a shoebox songwriter for a long time, meaning you'd write a song, record it and take that recording and put it in a shoebox under your bed or you'd send out songs and try to sell them," he said.

"Now I'm more of a solo performer. I've been playing for 36 years, I've made brochures and business cards, but it is like pulling teeth getting a gig. And people also think you'll play for nothing. Musicians shouldn't have to go through this. They deserve much better."

LIESA KORTMANN / OAKVILLE BEAVER

INSPIRED MUSICIAN: John Serré, an Oakville-based singer-songwriter, took his campaign to promote local talent to the media. His efforts were rewarded with a 10-episode show called *In A Song*, which debuts this week on TVCogeco Channel 23.

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