

MUSICOUNTS

OUR STORY: CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

By Jason Schneider
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For some of us, music is easily taken for granted, whether it's in our headphones, on the radio, or on stage at our favourite venue. What can be forgotten is the positive influence music has on shaping young people's lives, and its power to bring disparate communities together.

Creating the conditions and offering the tools to attain these objectives within Canada has been the driving force behind MusiCounts from the moment the charitable organization was established in 1997 to support music education. As a collaborative effort among media companies, record labels, artists and high-profile sponsors—spearheaded by the Canadian Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (CARAS)—MusiCounts has distributed millions of dollars in grants to schools and music programs over the course of its 20-year history to date, leaving a lasting impact on the lives of students from coast to coast to coast.

The results are evident in the ongoing success of MusiCounts programs such as the MusiCounts Band Aid Program, which annually gives deserving schools the means to purchase instruments and other equipment, as well as the MusiCounts Teacher of the Year Award, which recognizes the hard work and dedication of educators who have kept music a priority in their school's curriculum. More recently, the MusiCounts TD Community Music Program has expanded the organization's reach beyond the classroom, helping independent arts programs work with at-risk youth.

The seeds of all of this were planted long before the creation of MusiCounts, when past CARAS President Peter Steinmetz initiated a scholarship program (still in place) for exceptional students enrolled in post-secondary Music Industry Arts Programs. But as cuts to public school funding became commonplace in the 1990s—with music and arts often bearing the brunt—several CARAS members saw an opportunity to rally the entire industry around a common cause. It began in 1997 with the establishment of Band Aid through proceeds of sales from the hugely successful compilation box set *Oh What A Feeling*, commemorating the 25th anniversary of the JUNO Awards. Things quickly grew from there.

As Allan Reid, current President and CEO of CARAS, MusiCounts and the JUNO Awards, says, "Our message has long been that music education is not only beneficial for kids thinking about a career in music. Studies have shown that learning about music in school enhances cognitive development that translates to other subjects, and often results in kids taking a greater interest in school overall. Being a part of a music program can also boost confidence and self-esteem; it's not just about encouraging the next generation of JUNO winners, but our next generation of citizens."

Upon deciding a course of action in the 1990s, the next step for CARAS was organizing. For board member Deane Cameron—then President and CEO of EMI Music Canada, and who now serves those roles for the Corporation of Massey Hall and Roy Thomson Hall—that meant approaching the people he knew best. “When the idea came up, I immediately thought of the artists I’d worked with who had told me how important music education had been to them,” he says. “One artist I am particularly close to is Tom Cochrane—we’d actually grown up together and taken the same music courses in high school—so I had some first-hand experience with how that can affect someone’s life. And of course, Tom and other artists were happy to help out.”

Another CARAS board member, Ross Reynolds, then President and Chairman of MCA/Universal, recalls Cameron saying that “it was time to turn the blender on high” following the unexpected funds generated by *Oh What A Feeling*. Taking that as a cue, Reynolds helped get many of his fellow industry executives on board, and in short order the original concept of Band Aid was a legitimate charity. “We realized that we had something that could be very attractive,” Reynolds says. “There’s a lot of appeal in helping kids, and a lot of appeal in doing it through music. So, along with getting the industry involved, we were very fortunate to get a lot of well-known artists to participate at the beginning, and that made a huge difference.”

In retrospect, one of the most important calls Reynolds made was in 2003 to his friend Bob Ezrin, the legendary Toronto-born producer whose list of credits includes albums by Pink Floyd, Lou Reed and Alice Cooper. Ostensibly, the call was to inform Ezrin that he’d been selected for induction into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame, an honour Ezrin graciously accepted with a request to use the opportunity to promote his own deep-held belief in music education. Ezrin’s subsequent induction speech at the JUNO Awards immediately brought more attention to the cause, and his increased involvement with CARAS motivated him to re-establish ties with Canada after years of living in Los Angeles.

Ezrin had in fact already been involved with the Mr. Holland’s Opus Foundation in the U.S., which had a similar goal of providing schools with instruments, and also annually recognized five music teachers who exemplified the qualities of the Mr. Holland character portrayed on screen by Richard Dreyfuss. Those teachers were awarded an all-expenses-paid trip to New York City, where they received a \$10,000 prize and statuette, presented during a ceremony at Carnegie Hall. Ezrin was determined to do something similar in Canada, but first he pushed the organization to re-brand itself.

“My position was that ‘Band Aid’ sounds exactly like what it is, just a Band-Aid,” Ezrin says. “We needed something that was more lasting and systemic, so we came up with MusiCan. That seemed to work until we found out that it was also the name of a music education software company. At first they agreed to license the name to us, but ultimately they asked for more money than our board was in a position to pay, and that’s when we agreed to go with the name MusiCounts.”

Like all brand new non-profit start-ups, it took some time for the organization to find its financial footing. But that changed not long after Ezrin's arrival with the hiring of Srinka Wallia as the program's executive director. Her previous position as national director of UNICEF provided the necessary expertise, even though she had no prior connection to the music business. However, by laying out a viable plan for structure and sustainability, and tirelessly putting it into place, Wallia immediately made a lot of new friends.

She explains, "It was definitely an affirmation to be able to apply my passion for working with youth in this new setting, even though when I started I was just another member of the public whose knowledge of the industry came via the media. But throughout my time with MusiCounts I can say unequivocally that the artists, managers, label representatives, you name it, all went above and beyond to support this charity."

Bob Ezrin underscores that point when describing the Teacher of the Year launch in 2005, when it was decided to approach a well-known artist to sponsor the prize. The inaugural winner was Norman McIntosh of Confederation Secondary School in Val Caron, Ontario (near Sudbury), who, starting with a band class of 24 students, built it into a multi-disciplinary program encompassing performance, staging and recording. By the early 2000s, enrolment in his courses totaled 150 students, with many more names on a waiting list. For Wallia, Ezrin and the rest of the board, McIntosh's work set the standard for what the MusiCounts Teacher of the Year Award stood for, and an artist sponsor needed to reflect that level of excellence.

Ezrin says, "I called Michael Cohl [co-founder of Toronto-based Concert Productions International] and said, 'I need The Rolling Stones to do two things: donate \$25,000 for our Teacher of the Year award, and present the cheque in person.' Without missing a beat he said, 'You got it.' It was just that simple, and Michael delivered. The band made a video that was shown at the JUNO Awards with Norm and his family there, and later in the year when the Stones were touring, he got a backstage meeting with the band where they all congratulated him and had pictures taken. From all indications, that was the greatest night of his life, and from then on we knew we had a formula that worked."

Indeed, over the years many notable names including Rush, The Tragically Hip and Michael Bubl  have sponsored the Teacher of the Year, with funds equally split between the recipient and their school. And while one of the side benefits of the award is to make the teacher the star, sometimes it's been hard not to get caught up in the excitement of having a major celebrity participate. Wallia experienced that firsthand in 2007 when Teacher of the Year honours were bestowed upon Bernard Hebert of Gatineau, Quebec for his thirty-plus years of dedication to his students.

"The sponsor that year was C line Dion and she was unable to attend the presentation in person because of her residency in Las Vegas," Wallia says. "So myself and [then CARAS president] Melanie Berry brought Bernard there without

telling him who he was about to meet. He was convinced that it wouldn't be someone of Céline's stature, and when he found out, he was almost overcome with emotion. Céline was so gracious to him, and she also taped a message for the students, which was shown in a special assembly for the entire school. I still get goose bumps recalling it all these years later."

As Canadian artists such as Dion increasingly became international superstars, celebrating their achievements at home became one of CARAS's priorities throughout the 1990s. Lawyer and television producer Stephen Stohn played a large role in that evolution, with one of his major contributions being expanding the JUNO Awards broadcast to include the full participation of fans. Yet, for Stohn, whose wife Linda Schuyler had created the iconic *Degrassi* young adult television franchise, the nascent MusiCounts program had equal importance.

"I originally came on the CARAS board as its lawyer, with many different responsibilities," Stohn explains, "But I believed wholeheartedly in the goals of what was then known as Band Aid and wanted to see it grow along with everything else. I remember having these small meetings with Deane Cameron and a few other people where we would review potential schools to give grants to. Of course, now there's a much more detailed selection process, and that's the result of the program gathering momentum during those early years."

Stohn adds that his experience working on *Degrassi* brought invaluable lessons to honing the philosophy behind MusiCounts. "The two central themes of *Degrassi* are: one, you are not alone, and two, you are empowered to make choices, and choices have consequences. So really stressing the idea of empowering youth in what MusiCounts represents is what I tried to bring to the program, as it's in line with everything Linda and I have tried to do our whole lives."

When it comes to the annual MusiCounts Band Aid Program instrument grant presentations, it's certainly evident from the reactions of students how much the idea of empowerment through music means. It also often brings the artists who take part in the ceremonies back to the time when they were facing tough choices about the direction their lives would take, and how music got them through it. Ross Reynolds says that Band Aid events are in large measure the payoff for all of the effort MusiCounts staff puts in over the course of each year.

"It doesn't matter how many of these events you attend, it always brings tears to your eyes when you see how excited the kids are to get a chance to play new instruments," he says. "But then on top of that, to have an artist like Jully Black there to talk to the kids about how different her life could have been if she hadn't been able to express herself through music, it really just confirms everything MusiCounts represents. The year that we awarded a grant to a school in Toronto's Jane-Finch neighbourhood, and Jully came to speak to the students, there wasn't a dry eye in the house, believe me."

As MusiCounts entered its second decade, the board—in partnership with CTVglobemedia—introduced the Fred Sherratt Award, named after the pioneering

Canadian broadcaster. It now annually recognizes 12 outstanding Canadian post-secondary music program graduates, who receive a \$2,500 cash prize, along with exclusive opportunities to observe behind-the-scenes operations of major media outlets. MusiCounts also evolved alongside the Canadian music industry, an example being its partnership with the Canadian Country Music Association, which donates one dollar per ticket sold for its broadcast awards show.

This, of course, came in addition to the longstanding MusiCounts fundraising events held in conjunction with the JUNO Awards: the celebrity hockey game affectionately known as the JUNO Cup, and the Songwriter's Circle currently presented by SOCAN and Yamaha Canada Music. The first JUNO Cup game, presented by MasterCard, was played in 2004 in Edmonton, largely through the efforts of Blue Rodeo's Jim Cuddy, an avid hockey player who saw the potential of fellow musicians wanting to test their mettle against former NHL players. With Hall of Famer Lanny McDonald leading the opposition that first year, the game was a huge success, and has been a staple of the JUNO weekend ever since, raising close to \$1-million in total to date for MusiCounts.

Cuddy remarked in a 2013 interview, "We are very lucky in Canada for many reasons, but one of them is that our sports heroes are very nice people. We're not dealing with huge, inflated egos, and as much as you admire their skill, you really don't understand it until you're on the ice with them. We the musicians always try our best to be competitive, but it comes down to making it a good time for the fans, and thanking them for supporting the cause."

Meanwhile, the Songwriter's Circle has come to be regarded as the "jewel of JUNO Week," as it allows its audience to get up close and personal with many of Canada's premiere artists. Each year it brings together a diverse array of nominees to perform in an acoustic setting and share the stories behind some of their best-known compositions, with portions of ticket sales going to MusiCounts. As 2016 Songwriters Circle host Paul Brandt said, "It all began with a song for me, and that song would have never been written if I hadn't had access to my school music program. I'm proud to host this event on behalf of MusiCounts and CARAS."

As new voices in Canadian music have emerged, so too has MusiCounts broadened its scope. One idea that instantly had a huge impact grew out of a call from TD Bank Group in 2011, asking how it could be involved. The MusiCounts TD Community Music Program was officially launched in 2013, initially providing \$200,000 annually toward the purchase of musical instruments and equipment for community centres, after-school programs and other non-profit organizations serving local communities. That amount increased to a total of \$1-million for 2016 and 2017.

The program was initiated by Kevin Drew, co-founder of the beloved Toronto modern rock collective Broken Social Scene, who had been encouraging MusiCounts to seek out new avenues to meet the needs of kids unable to participate in music in a traditional school setting. "Being young and struggling to find your own voice can feel like a full time job," Drew said at the time. "To be able

to offer kids a chance to play instruments so they can find an expression of their own is not only important for them but for their community as a whole.”

The first recipient of a MusiCounts TD Community Music Program instrument grant was Toronto-based SKETCH, a community-arts-development organization aimed at engaging street-involved and homeless youth. At the presentation ceremony held at one of SKETCH's workshop spaces, Drew took part in a jam session, while music program coordinator Michael O'Connell stated, “This infusion of equipment and capital and care is really going to help us strengthen our program, but it is also going to allow us to go out and find people who are facing so many barriers that they can't even make it to SKETCH to come to our programs.” Since then, MusiCounts TD Community Music Grants have been awarded to dozens of other organizations from St. John's to Dawson City.

Expanding its outreach continues to be the mission of MusiCounts as it enters its third decade. In recent years, Arcade Fire's Plus One Foundation added MusiCounts to its community of charities, providing artists with the opportunity to donate one dollar of every concert ticket sold to MusiCounts, and in turn allowing their fans to take part in the process of making a difference. Elsewhere, the Aeroplan's Miles Match Week initiative, in tandem with TD Bank Group, has helped MusiCounts offset travel expenditures in an effort to visit more schools and communities across the country. The organization has also teamed up with the growing number of music festivals in Canada, including Boots And Hearts, Field Trip, Digital Dreams and Rifflandia to raise funds and awareness.

The drive to forge these new partnerships is ongoing, because the passion to get new generations of kids involved in music remains undiminished for everyone involved with, and connected to MusiCounts. In the end, the results benefit all of us, as Allan Reid explains. “I'll echo what Bob Ezrin has said that kids who have music as part of their overall education are the people we want to lead our country. They are smart people with well-rounded skills, and they seem to develop a greater sense of empathy, no matter where they come from or what their backgrounds are. Band class is one of those few opportunities in school that brings all kids together to create something unified. Our world needs more of that, and all of us at MusiCounts will continue striving to achieve that goal.”