

GUEST COLUMN • CANADIAN MUSIC

A powerhouse, thanks to private radio



GLENN O'FARRELL

This weekend's Junos are shaping up to be the most successful ever, and while credit goes in large part to the broadcaster, CTV, and the National Capital Commission, the role of private radio stations across the capital region in celebrating new Canadian talent has been significant. Not just in Juno week, when the Canadian Association of Broadcasters member stations are making a point of playing Juno-nominated artists, but every week.

The performing talent at this year's Junos — one of the biggest music parties in Ottawa history — comes from the upper tier of Canada's popular music powerhouse: Shania Twain, Avril Lavigne, Our Lady Peace, Remy Shand, Sam Roberts, Swollen Members and Blue Rodeo. Ottawa and Gatineau private radio stations and their counterparts across the country had an important role to play in the careers of many of them. This is music Canadians go to hear at concerts, music we buy on CDs, music that most of us heard, for the first time, on the radio.

Stars such as these have been so successful in establishing Canadian leadership in popular entertainment that Canada has become the second largest source of music talent in the world, outstripping the United Kingdom, according to data recently published in *Applaud!*, a Canadian music magazine. Canada's 21 best-selling artists who are still recording have sold, between them, more than 556 million records

around the world. The home-grown star system that radio broadcasters have made possible deserves much of the credit for this success.

Ottawa and Gatineau have a special bond with many of this year's Juno-nominated stars. French-language radio stations in the Outaouais are particularly passionate about promoting francophone artists from Quebec, New Brunswick and Eastern Ontario. Sylvain Cossette, a Juno nominee this year, Orléans-born Luce Dufault, and Mélanie Renaud, the latest bright light on the francophone music charts, all travelled the road to fame on Astral Radio's *Énergie* 104.1 and 94.9 CIMF *Rock Détoné*.

The impact of radio's reach is huge. Ask people what influenced their decision to buy a CD, and they answer that they heard it on the radio.

Meanwhile, there's another very recent success story in Ottawa's Véronic DiCaire, a rising star whose music was promoted on *Radio Énergie* even before her first album was cut. She recently got a big break when she was tapped to sing for Renée Zellweger in the French version of *Chicago*.

Of course, Avril Lavigne has been virtually adopted by Ottawa. Yet long before she was discovered, an Ottawa station — Rogers's X-FM — had quietly added her record to its playlist and brought her into the studio for an interview, giving her exposure that accelerated her journey to stardom.

Private radio stations do this in communities across this country, every day. Every station has a story about performers they coached to success.

Program directors regularly listen to garage bands and solo artists, most of them just not ready. And then, one day, one of those tracks turns out to be from Nickelback, a hot Canadian rock band from British Columbia and one of this year's Juno nominees.

On such a day in January 1999, Nickelback's Chad Kroeger, posing as an agent, phoned Cath Thompson, music director at Standard Radio's *The Bear*. Chad persuaded Cath just to listen to the band's new release. She did, and liked it so much she added it to her playlist.

Because *The Bear* is a mentor station to smaller stations across Canada, Nickelback was suddenly getting play across the country. This was a major accelerating factor in the band's career.

Then there's Ottawa's Kathleen Edwards, one of "alt country's" newest rising stars. Friends of Kathleen's persuaded Kent Newson, program director at CHUM's *Majic 100*, to listen to her indie album playing at a Byward Market coffee shop. Newson knew instantly he was listening to another Canadian northern light. He added her to the playlist, and now she's a name, as well as one of this year's Juno nominees.

The impact of radio's reach is huge. Ask people what influenced their decision to buy a CD, and in survey after survey they answer that they heard it on the radio.

Private radio stations are more than just passionate believers in Canadian talent. They are also unsung heroes of their local communities. They contribute thousands of hours in scores of events and activities that help make our city a great place to live.

The people of the capital region should be proud of their private radio stations for the part they play in the success of Canadian performers.

Glenn O'Farrell is president of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters.