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# THEY WRITE THE SONGS...

Format                      Documentary

Product                     1 X 90 minutes

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## THE PROJECT

Canadian songwriters —lyricists and composers— are literally the unsung forces in this country's popular music. Here is a picture: The performer stands on stage, sharing her soul through her music with thousands of people, many of whom are mesmerized, singing these well-loved songs along with her. Yet hardly anyone in the audience knows who put those words in the singer's mouth; who created the music that is flooding the auditorium.

As Margo Timmins of the Cowboy Junkies remarked recently<sup>1</sup>, "People listening to a singer don't realize who wrote the song. They think it's a Willie Nelson song or Céline Dion song. "

The paradoxical life of the songwriter is nowhere expressed better than in the sad history of Canada's most famous practitioner of the art, the late **Gene MacLellan**. His compositions, including "Snowbird," and "Put Your Hand in the Hand" were sung by artists such as Anne Murray, Elvis Presley, and Bing Crosby, but his own albums went quickly out of distribution. He died by his own hand in 1995.

A 2001 article in *Billboard Weekly* notes a rise in the fortunes of Canadian songwriters. It relates this to the renewed popularity of hit-driven pop music, especially as portrayed in 'reality' programs such as "Pop Stars," and, currently "Canadian Idol." Says a music publisher in Canada: "There's the beginning of an attitude shift. People have been loathe to collaborate because of wanting to do everything themselves." He means that artists are increasingly more willing to admit that music is a collaborative art, and that audiences are ready to accept that fact. It's a re-evaluation of the romantic myth of the "singer/songwriter" who is responsible for every note.

So where does that put the songwriters? Is there in fact such a thing as a pure songwriter, or have the boundaries blurred totally, and such a creature to be found only in museums? **They Write the Songs...** intends go in back of the stage curtain and shine a light on the talents responsible for many of the decade's popular songs.

## THE SUBJECTS

What makes a professional songwriter? If given the chance, would many of them rather be performing? And if so, does it, as Margo Timmins suggested, give them a heartache to hear others being applauded for work that they created? Or are they perhaps in a stage of their careers where they are still eager to express themselves,

but tired of the grind of touring and playing? Finally, are there those who prefer songwriting for its own sake, and never yearn for the spotlight?

Some of the creators are tyros such as Calgary's **Anne Loree**, waitressing and writing, until her hit for Jann Arden, "Insensitive," allowed her to buy a house, and record two CDs. Still, she wonders whether the rest of career will ever live up to the notoriety of that one song. Then there are writer/producers such as **Jim Huff**, experienced as "song doctors." Sometimes, rather than doctoring only the songs, they must baby the sometimes erratic artists. In these cases, they take on the role of therapist, coach, and Father Confessor rolled into one.

What follow are a few of the stories of the most successful and prolific voices in Canadian songwriting, a list from which **They Write the Songs...** may assemble its roster of guests:

- **John Capek** was born in the former Czechoslovakia, but after growing up in Australia, he relocated to Canada. His songs have been interpreted by stars such as Joe Cocker, Rod Stewart, Cher, Olivia Newton-John, Amanda Marshall, Diana Ross, Sheena Easton, and bands such as Chicago, Toto, Manhattan Transfer, the Little River Band, and Heart.
- **Lisa Dalbello** warred with her producers when she tried to change her image from Disco Princess to avant-garde artist. She has kept active writing for Heart, Patti Labelle, Cher, and many others.  
*"I didn't make a decision to walk away from music, but rather, to walk towards a sense of more stability."<sup>2</sup>*
- **Shirley Eikhardt** has had a successful career as a performer, but her first love, according to her personal website, is songwriting. Her best known song is "Something To Talk About," recorded by Bonnie Raitt. She has also written for Rita Coolidge, and Ginette Reno. She alternates between periods of performing and writing, and the current interval finds her writing.
- **Eddie Schwartz's** songs have been recorded by more than one hundred artists in sixty countries. Among these performers are The Doobie Brothers ("The Doctor"), Joe Cocker ("Two Wrongs"), Paul Carrack ("Don't Shed a Tear"), and Gowan (All the Girls in the World"). His most famous song is "Hit Me With Your Best Shot," for Pat Benatar.
- **Dean McTaggart's** success as a songwriter outstripped his visibility as a Country-oriented performer. "Heaven Help my Heart" was a Top-10 single for Wynonna Judd, and Australian Tina Arena. "Dark Horse" was a No. #1 for Amanda Marshall, along with "Birmingham," and "Trust Me," the latter also recorded by Anne Murray.

- **Ben Mink**, a veteran of the Canadian folk circuit, hooked up with k.d. lang while touring in Japan with the band Cano. He wrote songs for her; later became her producer for *Absolute Torch* and *Twang* (1989), and her commercial breakthrough "Constant Craving" from *Ingenua* (1992). He still collaborates with lang, while producing for others such as The Barenaked Ladies, and the Klezmatics.<sup>3</sup>
- **R. Dean Taylor** left Toronto in the 1960s to find employment in Detroit as a ghostwriter for Motown Records. He wrote many songs with little or no credit, but was eventually recognized for "I'll Turn To Stone" (The Four Tops), "Love Child" and "I'm Livin' In Shame" (The Supremes), and "All I Need" (The Temptations). He had his own hit in 1970 with "Indiana Wants Me," and continued to write for others through the 70s. Still, his comeback in 1980 attracted little attention.
- **Jim Vallance** hated the grind of touring with his band Prism. Instead, he found happiness writing hits sitting tight in Vancouver, particularly for Bryan Adams, ("Run To You," "Heaven," Summer Of '69 and "Cuts Like A Knife") and a kaleidoscope of artists including Aerosmith, Glass Tiger, and Ozzy Osbourne.
- **Christopher Ward** quit his high-profile job as VeeJay with MuchMusic, when his girlfriend, Alannah Myles, scored big with the debut album he co-wrote with her, and partner David Tyson. He now writes in Los Angeles for acts such as Amanda Marshall and Australia's Tina Arena, among others.

Whether it is to express themselves creatively, or more prosaically, make a living, music is the common element among these subjects of our documentary camera.

## TALKING POINTS

Here are some springboards into the stories for guests of the program:

- Performers: the ones who sing the songs. Love them, hate them, there's no music without them. A primary issue in this program will be songwriters' relationships with performing artists.
- Why choose songwriting in the first place? Would the writers really rather be on stage, receiving that applause?
- Influences: Mentors and Idols. Was there a sound, a style of music, or a personality that laid the pattern for a songwriter's career?
- The others around a songwriter: Friends, family, colleagues. Were they supportive or challenging? What is it like to work in the music industry. Does the writer have any say?

- The question most hated by artists: Where do you get your ideas? How does a song start, with a particular person or incident? What are the writer's working methods?
- Finally, the future. Not specific plans, because nothing dates a documentary more than a subject saying "I plan to put out an album in the fall." Rather, where do they see themselves going? Ahead into the spotlight in front of that crowd, or back onto the farm, raising horses?

Summing up, the intention of **They Write the Songs...** is to highlight the underappreciated heroes of Canadian music. It seeks to uncover the souls of the people who put the words and music in the mouths of our stars.

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# TREATMENT

## FORMAT

1 special, approx. 90 minutes.

## INTERVIEWS

The inexpensively-produced program will focus on intimate in-depth interviews with guests. It will meet the subjects close-up in their natural surroundings, and allow them to speak for themselves, rather than relying on a narrator or an on-camera host in a studio. A short title at the beginning will introduce the subject, and give a sentence or two of background.

Settings for the encounters might include the actual workplaces where music is created: studios, clubs, and theatres, not to mention the offices, homes, and even basements where songs are brought to life.

Viewers will also hear comments from relevant others: appreciative fans, the performing artists the songs have been written for, and family members, friends, colleagues of the writers: the ones who have known and helped them at various points in their careers.

Supporting material can include news clippings, archival photographs, and of course, performance footage of the song in question.

## FILMING

The camera rarely moves, and is focused on the person speaking. When a new speaker appears, his or her name is slugged into the corner of the screen. The viewer has the effect of as unmediated an experience as possible, of getting the story directly from the source. Clips, photos, and images are inserted where appropriate, in the natural flow of the program.

## GRAPHICS

There will be energetic and graphically inventive title sequences, lead-ins and lead-outs from commercials, which will identify the program, reinforce the subject matter of songwriting, and grab the viewer's attention.

## **VISUAL CONTENT**

The program is keyed to the pace of the guest, with him or her determining the topics addressed, and stories told. The simple method of presentation gives **They Write the Songs...** an unvarnished quality that provides viewers the sense of a real meeting with the guest. It's as if we were sitting down together over a drink or cup of tea. This is the kind of honesty that can lead to genuine revelation.

## NOTES AND SOURCES

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<sup>1</sup> Margo Timmins, interviewed on The Vinyl Cafe, September 21, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Dalbello, dalbello.com

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from the All Music Guide, quoted on misskathydawn.co.uk

### SOURCES:

The biographies were adapted from material found in the Canadian Pop Music Encyclopedia on canoe.ca, and from the writers' personal web sites.

"Canadian Songsmiths Offer and Accept Outside Assistance," by Larry LeBlanc, Billboard Weekly, 1 Dec, 2001.

Melhuish, Martin, Heart of Gold (Toronto: Insight Productions Company Limited, 1983).

Jackson, Rick, Encyclopedia of Canadian Rock, Pop, and Folk. (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1994).