



A real world real music awards show

By Mabrian Fitz

Photos by David Sobel & Richard Carr

It's been called the "Grassroots Grammys," but it's really about the revolution that is going on in the awards program that recognizes the "other 98%" of the music made around the world.

Each year there are over 35,000 albums commercially released in the United States. Only a tiny sliver of that music ever gets radio play, is featured on a music video channel or is considered by the televised music awards shows. But thanks to the Just Plain Folks Music Awards, it's no longer ignored and forgotten. In just four awards cycles, the Just Plain Folks Music Organization's (JPF) awards process has become the largest in the world.

What started as a casual way to recognize the best albums and songs sent in by members of the JPF organization is now a grassroots phenomena that includes over 10,000 albums and 140,000 songs from 85 countries in over 60 different genres of music. Reflecting on its humble beginnings, Brian Austin Whitney, (JPF founder) said, "I was getting a couple CDs a day from members who just wanted me to check out what they were doing. As we neared the end of 1999, I realized that there was some great stuff that no one had probably ever heard of before. There were a myriad of music contests and awards shows out there so I figured our community of artists and songwriters deserved recognition as well." The first awards were held during one of the organizations "Roadtrips" where they travel to cities around North America and host networking events and showcases to feature area members.

Welcome All

The interest level the second year shocked the staff as 2,400 albums and 35,000 songs were sent in. Thinking the members had exhausted their libraries, JPF agreed on a third awards. As the 7,880 Albums and 102,000 songs rolled in, it was clear there was a real need for someone to screen and recognize the work that the other 98% of the world was creating. According to Linda Berger, the organization's Projects Director, "No one had ever done anything like the JPF awards before. It was larger in scale and diversity than any of the awards contests and unlike most awards shows, all the music involved was actually listened to and judged one song at a time on merit rather than by the popularity or public and industry awareness of the artists and writers involved."

Diversity is one of the signatures of the JPF Awards for which the staff is most proud. "There's a lot of great music in smaller niche genres that get completely bypassed by the major awards programs. This year we added categories like: Celtic Instrumental; Cajun; Jewish; Bluegrass; Techno and a host of ethnic and foreign language categories which truly made our awards an international and all-inclusive affair," said Brian. "That diversity was especially illustrated at our awards show this year which featured a world wide collection of artists and genres."

With 85 countries represented amongst the entries, the JPF staff wanted to make sure the world was represented at the live awards show. Led by Lithuanian band SKAMP and Japanese band Mother of Soul, the performance lineup boasted performers from all continents. "We even sent judging discs to a weather and scientific research station crew on Antarctica this year," said Linda Berger, "With representatives from every racial, ethnic, religious and cultural background, performing songs from over half of the 60 nominated genres, the show was living proof that the JPF awards are not only the largest in the world, but the most diverse and inclusive as well. It also provided a living demonstration of our organization's motto: We're All In This Together! It was a night filled with world class talent from above, below and beyond the mainstream music industry radar."

"Looking around that room, I really felt I was in the midst of a revolution."
- Bob Malone, Award winning Singer-Songwriter.

International Stars

Music legend Taj Mahal, who was blown away by the caliber of talent and professionalism presented, commented, "The artists who performed at the award show renewed my faith in the continual regeneration of music. All is not lost—big business has not taken over the music... and these folks are still making great music! It's nice to see attention given to artists that are usually 'off the radar' to the entertainment industry. Normally, you wouldn't have access to the wealth of creativity that we saw at the 2004 Just Plain Folks Music Awards." Taj was at the awards show supporting his late sister Carole



photos

FACING PAGE
2002 Horizon Artist Amber Brooke backs it up with 5 Nominations

THIS PAGE
2004 Female Artist of the Year Erika Lockett
Insets (from top left) - Dreamsicles Cary Cooper and Tom Prasada-Rao, Brian speaks backstage with Japanese Translator for Asian Album winners Mother of Soul, Billboard Chart Topping Dance Diva Pepper Mashay has them dancing in the aisles, The hands down crowd favorites of the night were the Poxy Boggards whose Renaissance meets Monty Python performance brought down the house, 2004 Country and Americana Song Winner Eve Selis, CD Baby Founder Derek Sivers and JPF Founder Brian Austin Whitney have become the Kings of the Grassroots and Indie Music Scene, Hit Artist and Writer Andrew Gold Wins Best Male Singer-Songwriter Album, Jazz Vocalist Winner Brooke Fox moves the crowd with a stirring performance, Bob Malone wins for Best Live Album



photos

Left - Erica Jennings from the band SKAMP is already a star back home in Lithuania
 Insets (from top) - Metal Nominee Truth Cell's front man James Savage, Rap meets Classical Opera as Rawbeatz & the Duelin' Sopranos demonstrate musical unity at the show

Fredericks, who won two Gospel awards for Best Song and Album.

That diversity helped bring in artists who are famous superstars in their corner of the world, but who have had little exposure to the North American music industry. SKAMP, who set a record with 12 nominations, outsells Britney Spears and Madonna in their home country of Lithuania. Posters of SKAMP vocalist Erica Jennings are far more popular than those of her US superstar peers. "SKAMP is one of the biggest discoveries we've made in the years we've done the awards. Not only are they great writers and recording artists but they have a multi-national lineup that incorporates Pop, Alternative, Rap, Dance and Electronica into some of the most commercially exciting music we've heard since we started—and they're really nice and humble people, which is always a bonus," said Brian. A well-known producer at the awards show immediately took interest in SKAMP and met with them the next day to discuss recording some tracks to shop to US labels. Brian adds, "I think it's great that we embrace the smaller niches and still represent mainstream commercial music made by our members as well. We really do have it all."

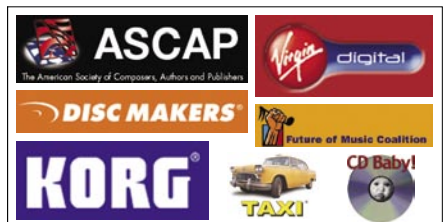
An indication of the breadth of music recognized is illustrated by the genres of the Album of the Year winners. "The last four winners were Melody Guy's Country Album Ready For Sunshine, Noelle Hampton's Pop/Rock Singer-Songwriter Album Under These Skies, Tammy Edwards's

Contemporary Christian Album Widows Mite and this year's winner, Celldweller, who's self titled album was a mix of hardcore Industrial, Metal, Rock and Electronica. "These albums couldn't be more different, yet all of them are brilliant efforts in their genres. The mainstream media didn't pick up on it but our voters did," said Brian. "In the case of Celldweller, a lot of people have heard the music (every song on the album has been licensed by a major motion picture), but for some reason this album isn't in every record store in the US and people don't know who is behind that amazing music they hear on the movie screens."

"That was like an interior lineman winning the Heisman Trophy Award" – Multi Platinum Songwriter Harold Payne on Children's Artist Zak Morgan winning 2004 Male Artist of the Year.

Moved by the Music

With the inclusion of not only grassroots stars, but also successful mainstream writers and artists, anonymity for the winners will be harder to come by. With 7 #1 Country songs, singer-songwriter Steve Seskin won the overall "Song of the Year" along with Chuck Jones for their song "Pictures." "Just Plain Folks is a tribute to why we all make music, celebrating creativity and the joy of writing a song and sharing it with the whole world. I'm flattered to have been chosen for Song of the Year by Just Plain Folks, the coolest group of songwriters on the planet, where everyone is welcome and



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All of us at Just Plain Folks including this year's 2004 Award Nominees, Winners, Staff and Membership at Large would like to thank these Community Partners for their support to help make the 2004 Just Plain Folks Music Awards possible. Each of these companies have gone above and beyond to give back to our Grassroots Music Community and we thank you for proving our motto "We're All In This Together"



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Left - Grammy and JPF Nominated in the same year! Children's Artist Zak Morgan wins 2004 Male Artist of the Year.

Insets (from top) - African artist Ze Manel takes the first award of the evening, Totem Maples' Larry Handy Mixes Spoken Word and Singing, With a record 12 Nominations, Lithuania's SKAMP takes home 4 awards including Group of the Year, Backstage with the St. Paul All-Stars David Gamson, Joe Finger, St. Paul, Oliver Leiber & Kat Dyson before they perform



creativity is celebrated and honored" said Steve Seskin, who also gives back to the organization as a mentor, sharing his knowledge and experience with the rest of the community.

Even industry veterans like Andrew Gold, who have had enormous successes over their career, appreciate the recognition. "I was honored to receive my award for best Singer-Songwriter album at an event with such a diverse and talented representation of music from around the globe. JPF's support of independent artists is inspiring. Seeing groups from around the world that were so amazing was terrific and I am hopeful that these groups will garner more success and fame due to the work of Brian and JPF," said Gold, who did a special performance of "Lonely Boy," one of his hits which had special meaning to the organization's founder. "That song was a big part of what got me interested in music as a kid and the fact that Andrew is still making music at such a high level and his peers chose to recognize it via the JPF awards was quite rewarding to us as well."

Rewarding great music based on its merit is what the JPF awards are all about. Using a mix of industry professionals, songwriter and artist peers, JPF staff members and music fans, judges are given only one criterion to judge the music: Does it move you? It sounds like a simple thing, but the freedom behind choosing music that moves you, without commercial or PR pressures and limitations can be

a shock to those industry judges especially. "Each year we get these long letters of apology from A&R reps or publisher judges who say "I am sorry that I chose song "x" because I know it won't get radio airplay or cut by a major artist, but I just really loved the song," said Linda Berger. "We let them know they did their job correctly. We want folks to chose based on what they actually like, not what they've been told they're supposed to look for to meet current commercial industry demands."

So what does the future hold for the explosive success of the JPF Music Awards? "Well, we've learned to stop underestimating the demand for fair and honest recognition based on merit. In a way, we're victims of our success. Each year we have to reinvent our processes for screening and voting because of the growth and diversity of the entry pool. It's not always easy to find judges who speak a language from the other side of the world or who understand experimental performance art music that defies comparison to anything anyone has ever heard before. But the challenge is also part of the fun. And we never forget that making, performing and listening to music is first and foremost supposed to be fun" said Brian. "We'll let the mainstream awards focus on rewarding the business successes in music. We'll focus on the music that moves us." ■

For more information on Just Plain Folks and their Music Awards program, please visit www.justplainfolks.org.