



A Bridge Over Troubled Water



by Gian Fiero

Senior Music Reviewer, The Muse's Muse

Heading into the new millennium everyone in the music industry was wishing for a “level” playing field; a field upon which independent music artists with less financial backing could compete with major artists and their major budgets. With the advent of the Internet, consequent evolution of digital music, a faulty music business model, and fleeting commercial opportunities, we can now say, voila! The playing field is officially leveled.

Now what? And what does it *really* mean?

I’m not an astronomer (obviously) but I do know that as you look up into the galaxy two things determine your ability to see stars: 1, how brightly the star shines and 2, your vantage point. Well, the music industry is the galaxy in which stars are created and found by their adoring fans. Some shine brightly on their own (independently), others shine more brightly because they have the resources (of a label) to polish them up and direct attention towards them.

There was an invisible wall between “signed” and “un-signed” music artists. The un-signed viewed their status as rejection as they secretly sought validation by the record labels that shunned them, and then talk of the playing field getting leveled became the impetus for a change in attitude about getting signed. Unsigned suddenly became being synonymous with being unchained and unencumbered by record label control, bureaucracy, and creative constraints. The stigma of being unsigned was transformed into a badge of honor and a more favorable business position to be in.

As the floodgates opened, musical luminaries such as Prince, Nine Inch Nails, Madonna, Jay-Z, and Tori Amos joined the ranks of the independents and it created a rippling gridlock effect in terms of opportunity, viability, and sustainability that has had some adverse impact on the truly independent artists (i.e. those never affiliated with a major or have been the recipient of financial backing).

Artists formerly signed to major labels and who have hit songs *always* have a calling card to perform in venues. Which venues will they be performing in as independents? You guessed it: venues that used to rely upon the talent pool of truly independent artists to survive. These venues, once viewed as stepping stones to bigger and better performance opportunities, have become dual elevators that transport artists going both up and down in the life cycles of their careers.

Joe Blow artist down the street will be spurned in favor of the artist who has a song, name, or face that club patrons recognize and will pay (probably extra) to see. While the formerly signed artist can take satisfaction in knowing there's just enough interest (if not demand) for their services to piece together a tour in these venues, Joe Blow will not readily get the chance to develop his artistry, or fan base because both access and opportunities will be limited. It's not a gloom and doom fate, but a stark reality. Joe Blow will have to get better as a performer and entrepreneur. As I stated in a recent article, he will have to *Get Real About Going Independent*.

Here at the Muse's Muse I've also seen the trickle down effects of this leveled playing field as a reviewer. What once was an afterthought or distant alternative (getting online reviews) is now a chief consideration and viable alternative to print publications. Publicists, Labels, and Managers like the "linkability" factor which online communities such as the Muse's Muse can offer. This increases competition in yet another area which little competition existed for the true independents.

Going back to Joe Blow; Joe Blow sends me his CD which he had pressed at Discmakers. At first glance it looks comparable in quality to the packages sent to me by formerly signed and currently signed major label acts, but there is one major difference: Joe Blow doesn't have the confluence of financial and talent resources that prove to be the difference between true independents, formerly signed and currently signed major label acts. The two areas in which Joe Blow's CD are lacking the most - comparatively speaking - are also the most expensive: production and engineering. But shouldn't you invest in the quality of *any* product you are attempting to sell?

Joe Blow may be a better songwriter than (insert name of Grammy nominee here), but without production expertise, his song ideas are not conveyed in the most effective manner and he fails to utilize and illuminate his talents properly, and that results in the overall quality of his songs getting compromised. With no outside feedback he records 10 or 12 more songs that have the same weaknesses, deficiencies, and production flaws and he sends it to me. While he may be as talented as (insert name of Grammy nominee here) I don't review it. Why? Because in comparison, Joe Blow's songs are lacking and do not measure up.

That's a scenario that happened oh, let's say, 200 times this past year when receiving CDs: many of the independents just were not commercially viable...but the CD packaging was...

Because of this common occurrence, it's a truly remarkable feat when an artist creates a CD that's elevated in quality by higher standards in songwriting, vocal delivery, musicianship, production, and engineering. Every year that a Muse's Muse Award is granted, you can best believe that it is *earned*. My winners from the previous 6 years are still active and rising; diligently fighting to make their rightful place alongside music industry luminaries.

One such winner, former Muse's Muse Award recipient Sara Bareilles, is now a 2008 Grammy nominee for her tune *Love Song* which was heavily featured in a VH1 commercial. This track blazed local radio stations this past summer the way that I knew her songwriting could and would. Yes, Sara is signed to a major (Epic), but her talent was proficiently captured and presented on the first project (*Love Confessions*) that she sent to me in 2005. She casually referred to it as her "demo."

Ironically, Sara, who was once a true independent artist, is the female singer/songwriter who raised the bar for everyone. She is the reason why so many others in her genre have not gotten reviewed. Now when I get CDs from female singer/songwriters, *this* is who they are measured against. Admittedly, at one point this year, I did feel that I had raised the bar too high; by June my total number of reviews was at an all-time low.

Right when I considered loosening the standards, I got caught up in a haze, Sara Haze that is. How fitting - another Sara! Her CD (*The Ladder*), like the Sara Bareilles CD, arrived in January. The similarities did not stop there. Both are singer/songwriter/musicians who perform regularly. Both have performed frequently in the belly of the beast (LA), and both have the ability to deliver emotionally whether in a full or sparse production. Also, like Sara Bareilles, Sara Haze worked with exceptionally talented musicians to cultivate and present her talents. One notable difference: Sara is 18.

As the year progressed, Sara was the clear front runner for the top Muse's Muse Award for Best Overall CD Project in any category, and then...there was a *Departure*, both literally and figuratively, from Jesse McCartney. His latest CD (*Departure*) was submitted to me and it created a major conflict in terms of the applicability of the criteria that I have used for the Muse's Muse Awards over the last 5 years.

My dilemma was this: How could I have Sara Haze and Jesse McCartney compete against each other for top honors, when one is a true independent, and the other is with a major (Hollywood Records)? How fair would it be to pit them against each other knowing that they have disproportionate resources? Furthermore, could Sara's organic and mature sound really be considered commercial in comparison to Jesse McCartney's slick and highly produced homage to Justin Timberlake, Ne-Yo, Usher, and Michael Jackson?

The answers are yes I did; it's definitely fair; and yes it's most certainly commercial *in a different way*.

In the end, the finalists for Best Overall CD Project in any category represents a metaphoric bridge that is symbolic of independence or an independent spirit that artists must now use to cross over to success; effectively changing the definition of cross over success. They will have to go above or outside of the traditional conventions of the music industry to prosper. When artists look over the balcony of this bridge to see the troubled and unpredictable waters of the music industry sweeping their peers downstream, or worse, dragging them under, they are quickly reminded that these waters continue to flow with the same turmoil that has plagued the industry for years now. The real competition is not between the artists, or for Muse's Muse Awards or even Grammy Awards. The real competition is making quality songs that inspire the public to make the music of any artist a part of their everyday lives...music that can be used as a form of escape or discovery, expression or therapy. When that occurs, the real award – or reward – of fan loyalty takes place and a sustainable career emerges.

CHOOSING THE MUSES MUSE'S MUSE AWARDS



I do not use a complicated process like the American Music Awards, or some political voting strategy like The Grammy's to determine who would receive a Muse's Muse Award. I use my "commercial" criteria and a scoring system that I've had since day one. Other evaluation factors include originality, identity, vocal/songwriting talent, musicianship, competency/proficiency in production, and sonic quality (mixing/mastering).

I also use good old fashioned side-by-side comparisons of the songs in the same categories *and* to the top-ranked songs and high-charting artists that everyone listens to, or has heard of. My 20 years of recording experience and my industry ears are called upon in the final analysis *especially* when things get close.

PROFILE OF ARTISTS REVIEWED



So who are these artists that I've chosen to review? They tend to be:

- Talented with some development or refinement** (naturally gifted, or well-versed through practice, school, training, etc.)
- Experienced** (they've spent time actually *doing* what they've practiced)
- Quality Songs** (written by or with someone who thoroughly understands *The 6 Rules Of Commercial Music Success*)
- Good supporting cast** (experienced producers, musicians, managers, etc.)
- Financially backed** (to pay for their musical supporting cast and professional support)
- Strong Identity** (their voice, sound, or style is distinctive)

SUBMISSION STATISTICS: WOMEN STILL RULE IN 2008



- Number of CDs submission received in 2008: 227
- Number of submissions in received in 2007: 303
- Number of submissions reviewed this year: 28
- Number of submissions reviewed in 2007: 40
- Number of female artists submissions received: 145**
- Number of male artists CDs received: 82
- Number of CDs from independent artists: 170
- Number of CDs from "signed" major artists: 57
- Number of CDs from "signed" major artists that were reviewed: 6
- Number of artists submitting follow-up CDs: 4
- Number of artists submitting follow-up CDs that got reviewed: 1
- Number of CDs submitted through record labels: 95
- Number of CDs submitted through publicists: 55
- Number of CDs submitted through publishing companies: 10
- Number of artists reviewed through online submissions: 1

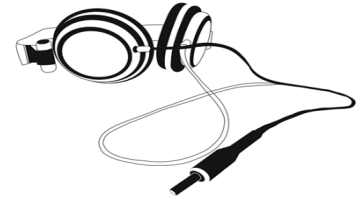
Some interesting facts follow regarding The Muse's Muse Awards as well as the 2008 Muse's Muse Award Winners...

WHY DIDN'T I GET MY CD REVIEWED?



People often ask me questions related to reviews such as why their CD didn't get reviewed; how to get better reviews; and what submissions I listen to on a regular basis during my personal time *after* I've reviewed submissions. But mainly, people want to know why I don't review their CDs. Below are the answers to those questions...

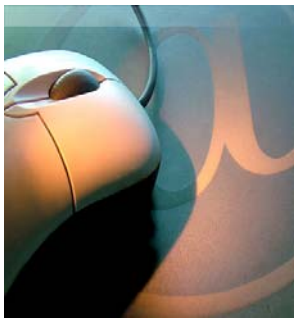
Clearly, I don't review every submission sent to me; however, I do listen to everything that I receive. After all, how would I know what to review and what not review if that wasn't the case? When I don't review an artist or a selection from their project, it simply means that in my professional opinion, that the artist either a) needs to put forth more effort in improving the quality of their project or b) is not commercial. Unfortunately, people still send me their projects without knowing who I am, or what commercial music is. A common, but costly oversight.



MY PLAYLIST

Which artists did I listen to the most? Ryan Leslie, Jesse McCartney, Sara Haze, Ryan Neilson, Tracy Cruz, Durojaiye, Gooding, Taylor Thompson, Rozzi Crane, Eoin Harrington, Samantha Molin, Tre Houston, Saint, and Curtis Peoples.

DEATH OF THE ONLINE REVIEWS



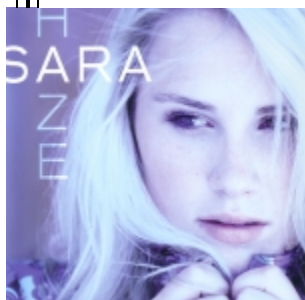
Last year I made a valiant attempt to convert to digital music submissions. The switch entailed venturing into the html hell that is MySpace. While I tried to access music from links that were broken, or sites that took forever to load in, my frustration mounted. I then came to a sudden realization: why should I go through all of this (an average of 2 listening hours per CD *not including the time, creativity, and energy it takes to write the actual review*) if someone is not willing to make the effort to mail a CD in order to obtain the valuable marketing and publicity benefits that my reviews provide? This marked the death of the online reviews experiment. The bottom line now is that if artists don't (or can't) justify the effort to mail a CD, I can't justify putting forth the effort to write one.

THANK YOU

Every year I get approached by some website about doing reviews. I never entertain the idea. It's rare in life when you are part of something special, but it's a greater rarity when you meet people (even if it's only been online) who embody the highest level of professionalism and are dedicated to providing resources for others to nurture and promote their special talents. Jodi Krangle, proprietress of the Muse's Muse, is such a person. The Muse's Muse is the number one songwriting resource and community on the Internet because of Jodi's vision, dedication, and efforts.



And now, it's my pleasure to present, the 2008 Muse's Muse Awards....



Sara Haze - *The Ladder*

This project parallels the eminence of past teen prodigies such as LeAnn Rimes and Christina Aguilera while showcasing the full spectrum of her talents and the immensity of her star potential. With the aid of top-notch production by Spinbox Club, Elicit Music, Eric B. Fraley, and Grammy Award-winning Glen Ballard, she triumphs with songs that resonate with quality and showcase beautifully framed stories which speak to your heart and linger in your memory.

Read the full review: <http://www.musesmuse.com/mrev-Saraaze-ladder.html>

Best Overall CD Project In Any Category

The first tie in the history of the Muse's Muse Awards!



2008

Winners



Jesse McCartney - *Departure*

Jesse strategically covered all (mainstream) bases on this CD. His core fan base will appreciate the Disney friendly, "**How Do You Sleep?**" The Ne-Yo phites will gravitate towards and embrace "**Told You So,**" and the Justin Timberlake fans will relish "**It's Over,**" a ballad that manages to capture the essence of *Cry Me A River* and Usher's *Let It Burn* - both number one songs. Both tracks, as do all the songs on this project, are accentuated by sublime music production that never overshadows or detracts.

Read the full review: <http://www.musesmuse.com/mrev-jessemccartney-departure.html>

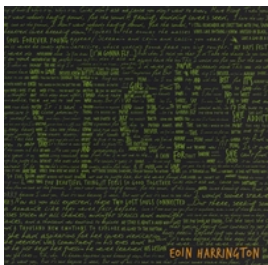
The complete list of the 2008 Muse's Muse Award Winners follows



Best Alternative Pop/Rock CD Project: Ryan Neilson - "Four Walls"

From the eastern corner of the world known as Nova Scotia, comes Ryan Neilson, a singer/songwriter/musician. I first listened to his project while driving and I was immediately compelled to write a review for it - literally - by pulling over and jotting down my thoughts. His debut project revives the art of lyric writing and storytelling through songs, while evoking the essence of 70s musicianship with a contemporary flair.

Read the full review: <http://www.ryanneilsonmusic.com/>



Best Adult Alternative CD Project Male: Eoin Harrington - "Story"

Ever since I reviewed singer/songwriter/musician Eoin Harrington's first single, (the ultimate babe stealing ballad *Never Be Lonely*), I have been eagerly anticipating an LP which would answer two lingering industry questions: Was the first song a fluke? And could he deliver a complete project with the same caliber of songs? The answers are: No, it wasn't, and yes, he can - and he did. He also managed to make a very strong musical *and* commercial statement in the process.

Read the full review: <http://www.musesmuse.com/mrev-eoinharrington-story.html>



Best Adult Alternative CD Project Female: Natalie Walker - "Urban Angel"

Natalie Walker, a singer/songwriter from India via New York, has the kind of lyrical talent for which lyric sheets were invented. She artfully documents and articulates the many nuances of the love experience upon a beautiful musical canvas that comes courtesy of the mellow and superlative production of producers, Dan Chen and Nate Greenberg, who help her create a CD that can be enjoyed from start to finish.

Read the full review: <http://www.musesmuse.com/mrev-nataliewalker-urbanangel.html>



Best Alternative R&B CD Project: Lina - "Morning Star"

Lina, an LA based songstress, issues a wake-up call with her new project which starts...*Wake up, my love, your day is calling you...don't miss the sun...* That's prophetic and poetic. That's Lina. Her latest project is a mosaic of neo-soul, alternative R&B, and retro jazz flavored tunes that urban music lovers with a predilection for lyrical content, strong hooks, and pleasing vocal arrangements will celebrate.

Read the full review: <http://www.musesmuse.com/mrev-lina-morningstar.html>



Best R&B CD Project Female: Tracy Cruz - Feel'osophy

From San Jose, California comes singer/songwriter, Tracy Cruz. Blessed with a sultry, soulful and emotive alto, she delivers a debut project which not only captures and reflects years of vocal and artistic development, but puts her on the map of the Bay Area music scene and on industry radar. Her most commercial track, "**Nothing In This World**," is easily the best *and* most complete R&B song that I've heard this year; complete as in *solid* music production, vocals/arrangements, and lyrics. Comparisons to Toni Braxton will be both inevitable and inaccurate; Tracy is the better singer, with greater range and vocal agility as evidenced in this masterpiece.

Read the full review: <http://www.musesmuse.com/mrev-tracycruz-feelosophy.html>



Best Country CD Project: Tracy Millar – "I'm Not That Girl Anymore"

From Hines Creek, Alberta comes a singer/songwriter who has masterfully blended Country with Bluegrass to create a project that's replete with robust songwriting, vivacious melodies, and heartfelt performances.

Read the full review: <http://www.musesmuse.com/mrev-tracymillar-notthatgirl.html>



Best Instrumental CD Project: Durojaiye - "The Fermented Sessions"

Durojaiye, a producer based in the San Francisco Bay Area, turns in his debut instrumental project that is sure to be thought of as a music licensing treasure chest. With a repertoire of songs that are tightly composed, artfully arranged, and well-produced, this CD achieves the rare feat of being both serviceable to professionals in television, film, and media, and being a coherent and highly enjoyable project that music lovers of alternative electronica/ambient/jazz music will thoroughly enjoy.

Read the full review: <http://www.musesmuse.com/mrev-durojaiye-fermented.htm>



Best Pop CD Project: Justin Stein - Justin Stein

Somehow while traveling around the country as the official opening act for Disney's Corbin Bleu, Justin Stein, a singer/songwriter/actor found time to make a CD that is sure to delight his legion of female fans.

Read the full review: <http://www.musesmuse.com/mrev-justinstein-js.html>



Best Blues/Rock CD Project: Sean Costello - "We Can Get Together"

Sean Costello died on April 15th, 2008. I received his CD the previous month in March. He never read this review. Because of the involved manner in which I review music, and the amount of time I spend listening to an artist to really "get" what they are about, I inevitably develop a connection to them. It's this connection that I established with Sean - through his music - that I commiserate with his loved ones and his fans.

Read the full review: <http://www.musesmuse.com/mrev-seancostello-gettogether.html>



Best Jazz CD Project: Times 4 - "Relations"

The beauty of instrumental jazz is that it provides you with a blank canvas upon which you can paint your own thoughts. On the latest project from the San Francisco based quartet, Times 4, you may be influenced – or inspired – to think about relations...adult relations...sexual relations

Read the full review: <http://www.musesmuse.com/mrev-times4-relations.html>



To all of the 2008 Muse's Muse Award CD Project Winners

The miscellaneous awards follow

2008 Miscellaneous Muse's Muse Awards



This category has been condensed and is now an all encompassing. The awards for best song and performance are also included.

Keeping in step with what the Muse's Muse is all about (songwriting) it's only appropriate to start this section off with the **Best Song In Any Category** Award which goes to...

Ryan Neilson



Hello Houston
Best Song of the year



Tracy Cruz
Best R&B Single Female

Best Rock Single: "Angry Place" – **Six O'Clock News**

Best Pop Single: "Sweetest Girl" – **Justin Stein**

Best Alternative R&B Single Female: "Stepping Stone" - **Duffy**

Best R&B Single Male: "My Baby" – **Jesse McCartney**

Best R&B Single Female: "Nothing In This World" - **Tracy Cruz**

Best Inspirational Single Male: "You Are Not Alone" - **Taylor Thompson**

Best Inspirational Single Female: "The Greatest" - **Coko**

Best Reggae Single: "Vices" - **Tomorrow's Bad Seeds**

Best Alternative Pop Single Female: "The Big Lie" - **Sara Haze**

Best Instrumental Single: "Fixed Stars" - **Gooding**

Best Adult Contemporary Single Male: "If Only" - **Byron Zanos**

Best Adult Contemporary Single Female: "Long Way Down" - **Courtney Jones**

Best Adult Alternative Single Male: "Back Where I Started" - **Curtis Peoples**



Sara Haze
Best Alternative Pop Single Female



Saint

Best Rap Single

Best Adult Alternative Single Female: "Photographs" - **Cyndi Harvell**

Best Alternative R&B Single Female: "Stepping Stone" - **Duffy**

Best Rap Single: "Roll With Me" - **Saint**

Best Club Single: "Movin'" - **Tre Houston**

Best Country Single: "Spread A Little Love Around" - **Tracy Milllar**

Best Jazz Single: "Relations" - **Times 4**



2008 Muse's Muse Awards Miscellaneous Performance

Best Overall Performance On A CD Project By A Male: Jesse McCartney

Best Overall Performance On A CD By A Female: Sara Haze

Best Overall Performance On A CD By A Duo, Group Or Band: Six O'Clock News

Best Overall Musicianship On A CD Project: Six O'Clock News

Best Performance In a Rock Song: Six O'Clock News



Six O'Clock News



Craig David

Best Performance Male Vocals In Any Category: Craig David
Best Performance Female Vocals In Any Category: Rozzi Crane
Best Overall Performance Male: Ryan Neilson
Best Overall Performance Female: Sara Haze
Best Lyrics Male: Ryan Neilson
Best Production: Tim Feswick for Ryan Neilson's *Four Walls*
Best Engineering: Ryan Neilson's *Four Walls*
Best Lyrics Female: Tracy Cruz

2008 Muse's Muse Awards Miscellaneous Commercial & The "Most Likely" Categories

Most Commercial Track In Any Category: "Diamond Girl" – Ryan Leslie

Most Commercial Viability Male: Ryan Leslie

Most Commercial Viability Female: Sara Haze

Most Likely To "Blow Up" With Sufficient Airplay: Ryan Leslie

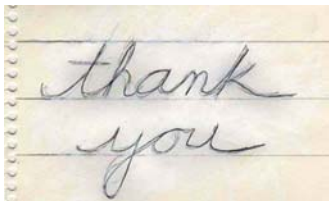
Most Likely To Be An MTV Favorite: Jesse McCartney

Most Likely To Win A Grammy: Sara Haze & Ryan Neilson

Most Commercial Viability As A Band: Six O'Clock News



RYAN LESLIE
DIAMOND GIRL



In wrapping up this year's Muse's Muse Awards I'd like to send a special thanks to those who support me both directly and indirectly in my endeavors to provide a unique and quality publicity service to the music community. Teresa Conboy P.R., Chip Schultzman of Miles High Productions, and Strive Management who sent the top Muse's Muse Award winners.

Happy New Year
Gian Fiero, Senior Music Reviewer, The Muse's Muse

