

2009 Muse's Muse Awards A&R Report:

The



of the

D.I.Y. Movement

*by Gian Fiero*

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To say that 2009 was my worst year as a music reviewer since 2004 would be an understatement. It would also be inaccurate. If you are not familiar with my labor of love on behalf of the Muse's Muse, you wouldn't know. So here's the history which will provide you with greater appreciation of my situation, and the plight of today's music industry.

I started the Muse's Muse Awards in 2004 with the purpose of honoring the superior songwriting talents that often go unnoticed and unrewarded. I also wanted to be a bridge to facilitate the search for quality songs and artists by entertainment industry professionals. It was my objective to help them find artists who were the most qualified for career and commercial opportunities.

I had no idea that when I started that I would create such a valuable service, and huge opportunity, for myself and the music artists who were in need of the publicity that my reviews could provide.

Needless to say, record labels – mainly independents – publicists, marketers, and Indie artists who were eager for feedback on their projects and talents come flocking. There were more submissions than I could process in a month. I remember going to my mailbox (one that I rented and still rent for the purpose of reviewing music) and getting a garbage bag full of CDs.



Many of the CDs were lacking. They either consisted of good songs; bad production. Good production; bad songs. Talented singers; average songs. Average songs; talented singers. Great production; mediocre songwriting, etc. You get the point. Finding the perfect matrimony of song, performance, musicianship, production, engineering, and mastering, was a challenging and eye-opening experience. But it was an experience that I relished with each submission that I received.

The great equalizer was the commercial criteria that I put into place to help filter the enormous amount of submissions, and raise the standards while developing my brand as a music critic; a *commercial* music critic. I then developed a "scoring system" to help artists better understand what their songs were being critiqued on. The Muse's Muse Awards were next. The rest is history...sort of.



**R**ecord companies – both independent and major – discovered my reviews. They expressed appreciation in the commercial music filter I put into place, and flooded my mailbox with more submissions. They were all curious to see if releases by their artists could “pass my qualifications” for review and possibly win a Muse’s Muse Award.

The result was 720 submissions and 14,160 minutes (or roughly 240 hours), which equates to about 10 days, spent processing (writing and critiquing) reviews.

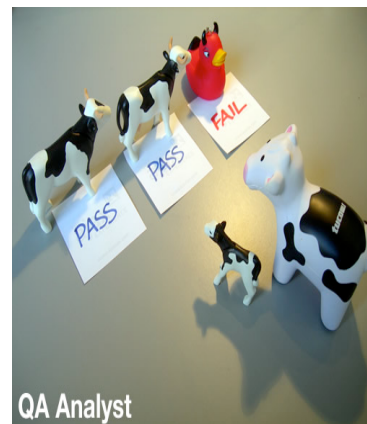


Those were the good old days.

It wasn’t about the quantity of the submissions; it was about the *quality* of submissions that came from multiple sources. As a result of the D.I.Y. movement which I wrote about in my A&R report last year (2008), there is now some significant backlash which can be felt, seen, and heard.

### **Q.A.**

With fewer artists seeking (and getting) record deals, there is no longer a system of checks and balances for projects before they are released. In other words, quality assurance (Q.A.) is becoming a thing of the past like cassettes. With so many artists doing music as a soloist, rather than a collaborative undertaking, there are an unprecedented number of flawed Indie projects being funneled into the marketplace. This is due to artists not receiving feedback on the quality of the content and production that goes into creating their CDs. Ultimately, this devalues Indie projects.



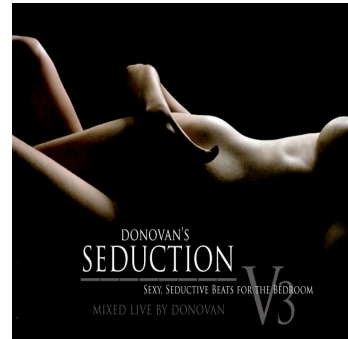
### **SOUNDING GOOD**



Because Mp3 technology compresses sound information, many artists now overlook (or can not recognize) the shoddy sound quality of their recordings; after all, they sound good on MySpace and other websites. Well, in my car stereo system (which is nice) the truth comes through: what you put into (or don’t put into) mixing and mastering can not be hidden.

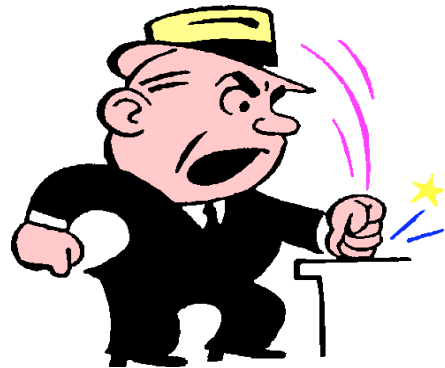
### **LOOKING GOOD**

Ironically, there has been one strong attribute of the D.I.Y. movement: music artists are creating (or rather DiscMakers is creating) really slick, creative, and highly appealing CD covers (which don't account for as much as they used to since 70% of retailers have gone under). I've seen some absolutely amazing and provocative CD covers in the last 5 years. With no record company to censor them for political or sexual content, the sky is the limit. If only the CDs sounded as good the packaging looks...



### **DEMANDING ARTISTS - WHAT HAPPENED TO BEING GRACIOUS?**

There was once a time when my CD submissions used to be accompanied by a cover letter that was personally addressed to me. They typically came with a note stating why they had chosen me as their reviewer. It was proof positive that they (the person or company submitting it) were familiar with my work. Those days are gone. Now, CDs are blindly distributed to any Tom, Dick, or Harry who writes reviews. I reject at least 80% of the CDs that get sent to me when people don't address me by name.



### **WEBSITE MUSIC REVIEWS AND MUSIC LINKS**



As much as I would love to go to people's website and listen to their music, the problem for me is that it's just not a big enough pay off to do so. In other words, the quality of the music does not justify the time or energy that it takes for me to do it. Furthermore, if it's a MySpace page, the page loads in incredibly slowly (even with high speed lines) because most artists have so much "stuff" on their page, that time just seems to stand still while I'm waiting for 47 of 185 images to download. No thanks. Send it to me and I will decide on my own time, if it justifies the further investment of time and energy.



## CHOOSING THE 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 my previously mentioned 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, comparisons to the top-ranked songs, and high-charting artists that everyone listens to. My 20 years of recording experience and my industry ears are called upon in the final analysis.

## PROFILE OF TYPICAL MUSIC ARTISTS REVIEWED



- 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)
- Majority** are women

## WHAT GOOD IS A MUSIC REVIEW ANYWAY?

There are an increasing number of artists who question the purpose of having their music reviewed. After all, iTunes gives you a snapshot of the songs that other listeners find most appealing; who needs a reviewer to tell you their "opinion" when data which accurately surveys public opinion, is available? I actually agree; however, it can't tell you about the lyrical or emotional content of a song; its production values; stellar musicianship; commercial appeal; or how that song will fit in a TV/Film licensing situation...at least not yet.



## 2009 SUBMISSION STATISTICS:



- Number of CDs submission received in 2009: **134**
- Number of submissions in received in 2008: 227
- Number of submissions reviewed this year: 20
- Number of female artists received: 85**
- Number of male artists CDs received: 49
- Number of CDs from independent artists: 100
- Number of CDs from "signed" major artists: 15
- Number of CDs from "signed" major artists that were reviewed: 0
- Number of artists submitting follow-up CDs: 4
- Number of artists submitting follow-up CDs that got reviewed: 3
- Number of CDs submitted through record labels: 88
- Number of CDs submitted through publicists: 40
- Number of CDs submitted through publishing companies: 3
- Number of artists reviewed through online submissions: 0

## THANK YOU



Of course my annual report would not be complete without thanking Jodi Krangle, proprietress of the Muse's Muse. She not only finds a way to keep the Muse's Muse running every year, but also improves it. She is the quintessential professional, and the personification of dedication. I value my working relationship with her tremendously.

A special thanks to Chip Schultzman of Miles High Productions, who consistently sends me Muse's Muse Award winners every year.



*And now it's my pleasure to  
present  
the 2009 Muse's Muse Award  
Winners...*





# Best CD Project in Any Category...*Margo* *Reymundo!*



## **MARGO REYMUNDO - Best Overall CD Project** **CD: "My Heart's Desire"**

**Review excerpt:** Simply put, this CD is perfection! It's rare when I get a project that takes me out of "music critic" mode, and instantly puts me into music lover mode. Margo Reymundo, an Acapulco born and Dallas raised singer/songwriter accomplishes that and much more with her latest project. Her daring fusion of Tejano/Pop and Latin music is a potent and winning combination that is sure to earn her fans in each genre.



## **Of Fate And Chance - Best Rock Project** **CD: "An Atlas To Solutions"**

**Review Excerpt:** Defined by tight musicianship and distinctive vocals, this band puts on a clinic in how to "jam" within the parameters of well constructed song. In other words, they know how to play with the best of them! It's apparent to me that the only atlas to solutions they need is one that connects them to the right people, to obtain the exposure they so rightfully deserve.



## **Bobby Valentino - Best R&B Project/Male** **CD: "The Rebirth"**

**Review excerpt:** Back with his third project, and first independent endeavor, is Atlanta crooner, Bobby Valentino. This rebirth is appropriately titled because after just one listen, you can detect and appreciate his musical growth...just what the doctor ordered to revive his languishing

career as a former *Disturbing Tha Peace* music artist.

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## 2009 Muse's Muse Awards - **Best Projects**

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### **Passion - Best EP in Any Category**

**CD: "The Paper Airplane EP"**

**Review excerpt:** Passion, a San Francisco Bay Area based R&B singer/songwriter/musician, turns in his first official musical offering. Best described as a cross between a demo and a completed project, it fully displays his talent...and his passion. Armed with a smooth tenor that conjures up thoughts of what Ne-Yo would sound like if he had a fuller voice, Passion delivers songs that showcase his superior songwriting talents which are highlighted by his emotive vocals.

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### **Jen Woodhouse - Best Adult Alternative**

**CD: "Press Kit"**

**Review excerpt:** Jens' narrative skills are on long display during this short project, along with her ability to convey relentless emotion with her raw, organic vocal style - which is second only to her superlative songwriting talent.

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### **IBU - Best R&B Project by a group**

**CD: "Inspired By U"**

**Review excerpt:** The rising R&B vocal trio from Chi-Town is back with a more progressive and aggressive sound. IBU successfully showcases their artistic, vocal, and musical growth with a collection of well-written and performed songs that capture the imagination and stimulate the heart.



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## 2009 Muse's Muse Awards - **Best Projects**

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### **King Of The County - Best Rap Project** **CD: "King Of The County"**

**Review excerpt:** A project that features rap luminaries such as Nate Dogg and Too Short has got to be worth listening too. And it is. But the truth of the matter is that this project holds its own sufficiently, and admirably with an interesting repertoire which aptly demonstrates lyrical skill and personality.



### **The Guy - Best Instrumental** **CD: "Only Human"**

**Review excerpt:** How do you I know when a CD is good? When I put it on just to "sample" it, and I end up listening to whole thing. Even though I'm a music reviewer, it should be no different for music lovers. That's the case with *Only Human*. His new project reflects a well-contrived, but highly organic body of work which is truly meant to be consumed (and best appreciated) in its entirety.



### **Eric Schwartz - Best Comedy** **CD/DVD: "Parodies Nuts"**

**Review excerpt:** While most comedians tend to thrive in one particular genre, Eric displays chameleon like powers when adapting to different characters during his vignettes and music videos. His video for the track, "**Milli Vanilli**," and the aforementioned "**Crank That Kosha Boy**," get my nod for two of the most

entertaining and well-produced independent videos that I've seen.

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**The above CD reviews can be read in their entirety at:**

<http://www.musesmuse.com/mrev-gian.html>

Best Singles & Miscellaneous Awards Follow.

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## **2009 Muse's Muse Awards - Best Singles**

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**Best Single In Any Category: "911"**  
**Artist: IBU**

**Most Commercial Single: "911"**  
**Artist: IBU**

**Best Rock Single: "An Atlas To Solutions"**  
**Artist: Of Fate And Chance**

**Best Pop/Rock Single Female: "Untitled #2 - (Kiss Me)"**  
**Artist: Molly Thomason**

**Best Inspirational Single: "Rainbow"**  
**Artist: Sugar Ray**

**Best Rap Single: "Hip Hop"**  
**Artist: Lusciato**

**Best Instrumental: "Interlude In Bleu"**  
**Artist: The Guy**

**Best Ballad: "Desperately"**  
**Artist: Passion**

**Best Adult Alternative Single: "Rearview"**  
**Artist: Jen Woodhouse**

**Best Comedy Performance: "Milli Vanilli"**  
**Artist: Eric Schartz (a.k.a "Smooth-E")**

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**The above CD single reviews can be read in their entirety at:**

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Best Miscellaneous Awards Follow.

## **2009 Muse's Muse Awards – Miscellaneous**

**Best Overall Performance On A CD Project: Chris Hines Presents Mastermind**  
**Artist: Various**



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**Best Overall Performance On A CD Project By A Male: Bobby Valentino**

**Best Overall Performance On A CD By A Female: Jen Woodhouse**

**Best Overall Performance On A CD By A Duo, Group Or Band: Of Fate And Chance**

**Best Overall Musicianship On A CD Project: Of Fate And Chance**



**Best Performance In a Rock Song: Of Fate And Chance**

**Best Performance Male Vocals In Any Category: Brandon Hines ("Take My Time")**

**Best Performance Female Vocals In Any Category: Rachel Robinson, Anhayla, and Ashaya**

**Best Overall Performance Male: Passion**

**Best Lyrics Male: Passion**

**Best Lyrics Female: Jen Woodhouse**

**Best Production: Chris Hines for "Chris Hines Presents Mastermind"**

**Best Engineering:** Bobby Valentino - "The Rebirth"

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