

THE ART OF

Toronto audio-design firm Grayson Matthews wants musicians and the advertising world to play nice. Can it be done?

BY LARA ZARUM

Photograph by Daniel Ehrenworth



COMPROMISE

“I’VE BEEN ASKED THIS QUESTION NO LESS THAN 500,000 TIMES: ‘DO YOU DO ANY REAL MUSIC?’”

As a co-founder of the Toronto audio-design firm Grayson Matthews, Dave Sorbara is a major player in the city’s burgeoning music-for-ads scene. And he’s used to defending his work. When he started the company with fellow McGill graduate Tom Westin in 1998, “the idea was to make music and make a living at it,” he says, perched on a chair in Westin’s office, a sun-and-instrument-filled space with tall ceilings and exposed brick walls. “Yeah, eating was nice,” Westin adds.

If you were to time-travel from 1988 to the present day, you’d probably be shocked at the extent to which today’s artists have rejected the notion that licensing a pre-existing song (or writing a new one) for a commercial is akin to selling one’s soul. Although there are still plenty of people who oppose the intersection of pop music and the commercial world, the lines between the two have become increasingly and irrevocably blurred. We live in a time where Beyoncé, one of the biggest stars on the planet, can premiere a song in an H&M ad and almost no one blinks an eye. From our vantage point, the position held by most musicians and music fans 20 or 30 years ago—that using popular tunes to hawk stuff is immoral—appears to have been a luxury, a relic of a time when way more artists could rely on album sales to make a living.

When Sorbara and Westin first opened up shop 15 years ago in a small office space at Dufferin and Eglinton, the majority of their clients were advertisers looking for original music, which the pair wrote themselves. Instead of starting a band and selling tickets to shows, they spent their creative energy in the studio—and in the service of corporate clients, rather than concertgoers. Now, the company has a bright, airy office on Queen East and a staff of 25 people, eight of whom are in-house composers writing songs based on the briefs that come in from clients. But their staffers have other creative itches to scratch, something Sorbara and Westin fully support. “We’ve always felt like we could add more to a project rather than just be a hired gun,” Westin says. Advertising gigs represent about 60 per cent of their work. The rest fluctuates between writing music for TV and film and the music-supervision end of the business—finding songs already attached to artists for shows and commercials.

They’ve written music for a diverse roster of clients, including McDonald’s, the Toronto Zoo, War Child, Plenty of Fish, Crime Stoppers, and Canadian Tire. Grayson created the background music for “Joy of Books,” the *Nutcracker*-esque stop-motion video shot at Queen West’s Type Books, free of charge. They’ve composed theme songs for the CBC shows *Wild Docs!* and *Steven and Chris*, and MuchMusic’s *Countdown* and *Screwed Over*, and are working with Brazilian artists on the theme song for the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

Grayson Matthews’s collective goal (other than being successful, which they clearly are) is to close the gap between music-as-commodity and music-as-art; in other words, they operate under the assumption that all music is created equal, regardless of its intended use. “It’s not like I’m going to save all my good ideas for myself and Coca-Cola can have this generic piece of commercial music,” Sorbara says. “There are people who have that mindset, but if I’m sitting down to write a piece of music, I just want to write a great piece of music.”

The ad industry’s demands on Grayson Matthews

are getting more nuanced all the time. Brands often approach their marketing campaigns with the goal of creating a spot so savvy that it doesn’t immediately appear to be advertising; the traditional short, tinny jingle that is so obviously out to sell you something isn’t subtle enough for our media-savvy age. It used to be that you would hire someone to write a ditty about your product, something befitting a 30-second TV or radio spot (which usually involves repeating the name of the product ad infinitum). Now, many companies want the tunes written for their ads to feel like “real music” (Sorbara’s words) or to have their brands associated with a popular artist.

That’s where music supervisors come in. They match up pre-existing songs with ads, and have become a powerful player in an artist’s quest to have his or her music heard without simply giving it away for free online. When MacLaren McCann Toronto, a Canadian branch of the global advertising agency McCann Erickson, approached Grayson Matthews in the summer of 2010 to find a song for the Chevy Cruze campaign, music supervisor Chris Corless chose Janelle Monáe’s single “Tightrope,” grafting it onto a campaign that played on television and radio, online, and in movie theatres for the next two years. It was a bullseye.

Corless has been Grayson Matthews’s music supervisor for three years. Before that, he held a position in the Artists and Repertoire (A&R) division of Universal Music Canada, which he had always considered his dream job. But then—all together now!—CDs stopped selling, digital downloads failed to make up for the resulting loss in revenue, and that sweet gig at Universal started to sour. “Imagine this rusty ship with portholes where the water drips out and then you see a nice little Scarab just skimming by,” he explains. “You’ve got a cigar and a grizzly beard and it smells like seafood, and you see these guys in white blazers with gold chains and slicked-back hair, *Miami Vice*-style, and everybody’s popping Champagne. That’s what this place looked like to me. I was like, I gotta get off this stinky boat and onto that boat.”

To say that the digitization of music (and the attendant death of the physical album) has made it difficult for artists to earn money is an understatement. Perhaps this was best illustrated at June’s NXNE music festival. At a panel discussion called “Step By Step Licensing,” one music supervisor offered some practical advice to those hoping to profit from licensing their music to ads: make sure you have an online presence; don’t include big attachments in emails to supervisors; and the ad world loves songs about “home.” It was hard to ignore the fact that the people taking notes on their smartphones were mostly wearing “Artist” badges, and playing gigs at NXNE in exchange for either \$100 or a festival pass. Musicians, welcome to your nightmare.

As the U.K.-based academic Bethany Klein points out in her book, *As Heard on TV: Popular Music in Advertising*, selling out has lost some of its stigma over the past 15 years. Brands started to overtly attach themselves to artists in the 1980s. In 1981, the perfume company Jovan became one of the first corporations to sponsor a rock tour, the Rolling Stones’ “Tattoo You” spectacle, which at the time was the highest-grossing series of concerts in rock history. An article in *Rolling Stone* argued the affair was “as much about money as about art.” Jay Coleman, who arranged the sponsorship—and has continued to pair up rock tours with brands eager to be associated with pop music ever since—told the magazine that artists and brands were finally aligning in the common goal of making money. Artists, he said, “are no longer fearful of recognizing the fact that music is a business.”

But just a few years later, Neil Young released an album that made it clear that music is more than a business for many artists. Released in 1988, *This Note’s For You* featured a title track that attacked sell-out musicians. The song includes the lyrics “Ain’t singing for Pepsi/ Ain’t singing for Coke,” and the accompanying video pokes fun at the idea of corporate-sponsored music. It features a Michael Jackson lookalike with his hair ablaze—a reference to the infamous episode in 1984 when Jackson’s hair caught fire while filming a pyrotechnic-filled Pepsi ad.

The idea of selling out began to lose some of its taint over the next decade. Blur’s “Song 2,” from their self-titled 1997 album, had a frenzied pace and catchy “woo-hoo” chorus that made it instantly recognizable and impossible to get out of your head, and the song found a second—and third, and fourth, and fifth—life as the background music for countless commercials. Moby set a record when he licensed every one of the songs off his 1999 album, *Play*, for use in films, TV shows, and commercials, a move that pushed the electronica artist deep into the mainstream.

Depending on your point of view, pop music is either a pure form of self-expression or a commodity like any other. Its ongoing use in advertising continues to nudge it in the direction of the latter, which has had the effect of making many ads look more like short films or music videos, like the recent BlackBerry ad set to Tame Impa-

TORONTO MUSICIANS WHO MOONLIGHT IN THE AD WORLD



KATHRYN ROSE

Musical resumé Ex-singer for Wind May Do Damage; backing vocals for Sarah McLachlan’s 2004 world tour; sang with King Cobb Steelie; currently pursuing a solo career.

Ad campaigns Dairy Farmers of Canada (“I’ve Got You Under My Skin”), Tim Hortons (“You’ve Always Got Time for Tim Hortons”), Ford, Triscuit, Dove, Microsoft, Kraft, LCBO.



KRITTY URANOWSKI

Musical resumé Lead singer for Patti Cake; appeared in the Stage West production of *The Wedding Singer*.

Ad campaign Home Hardware (“Homeowners helping homeowners”).



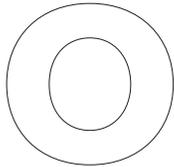
EMILIE-CLAIRE BARLOW

Musical resumé Juno Award-winning jazz singer; voice of Sailor Mars and Sailor Venus on *Sailor Moon* (ok, it’s not musical, but it’s *Sailor Moon!*)

Ad campaigns Tim Hortons (“Always fresh, at Tim Hortons”), Kellogg’s, The Bay.



la's "Elephant." Pop music's steady march towards total corporate sponsorship may not be embraced by all artists, but it has had a profound impact on the way brands think about music in advertising. A song doesn't have to be *about* a certain product—it just has to make you feel like buying it.



One by-product of the free-for-all that is the 2013 music industry is that hit songs can come from unexpected places. It's something Andrew Austin has learned in the past two years, working as a full-time composer for Grayson Matthews. In March, Alexander Keith's rolled out a spot featuring a song Austin co-wrote and performed specially for the beer company: "Toast This Life," a jangly, acoustic tune with a singalong-friendly chorus. The song took on a life of its own, charting on iTunes and collecting over 100,000 views on YouTube and more than 30,000 on SoundCloud at press time.

According to Paul Lawton, that's a travesty. Lawton, the singer and bassist in the Toronto-via-Lethbridge band Ketamines, caused a minor kerfuffle among music bloggers and industry types when, around the same time the Keith's ad premiered, he started a blog called Slagging Off. In it, he took aim at music festivals that offer little or no compensation for artists, as well as government grant schemes that fund the same-old indie-rock bands that have dominated the Canadian music scene for years.

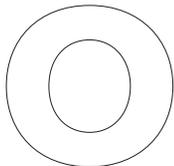
Lawton believes that Grayson Matthews "steals authenticity" from popular music and uses that goodwill to sell products. When "Toast This Life" came out, Lawton took to his blog to rail against the kind of "commercialized sincerity" that he felt was on display in the song. "I was like, man, I'm really tired of listening to this Mumford & Sons song," he says. "And then I did some digging and found out it's not Mumford & Sons, it's an advertising agency who did an amazing job duplicating that sound."

Austin disagrees with Lawton's charge that "Toast This Life" was meant to imitate Mumford & Sons. It wasn't—Keith's never gave such specific directions—but Austin doesn't blame anyone for detecting certain similarities. Still, he insists that the music he writes for ads and the music he writes for his own projects (he has a solo album coming out in the fall) come from a similar place. "I want to write a song that people are going to hear in the commercial and then want to buy, or want to hear the rest of," he says. "It's like you're kind of a machine being asked to create all this music and churn it out. At the same time, that's probably the best thing that ever happened to me. I think I've become way better at making music than I ever was before."

Ironically, even Lawton himself has fallen for the lure of big bucks on offer from the ad industry. He

admits that Ketamines licensed a song last year to Target in the U.S. "It was an advertising campaign to sell mom jeans," he says. "They paid us \$30,000, which is the most money any of us in that band has ever seen." He still feels uncomfortable about the transaction, but adds, "If you're a career musician right now, where else are you getting money?"

If a band—particularly a Canadian band—decides to license music for a corporation, it's not always because the lead singer needs a new pool house. When Sloan's "Money City Maniacs" appeared in a Labatt ad in 1998, it may have seemed like a sell-out move. But guitarist Jay Ferguson says that licensing the song to the beer company allowed Sloan to buy back the publishing rights to their catalogue from EMI, which had owned the rights to the band's songs up until that point. "It wasn't like, 'Hey, great, I can buy a new sports car!'" he says. "It helped us become more independent." He adds, "You can be lucky enough to be Radiohead and never have to license anything, but I think there are a lot of bands who are in the middle ground."



On a sticky afternoon in June, I went to the members-only Soho House on Adelaide Street West to meet with the Grayson Matthews crew: Andrew Austin, co-founder Tom Westin, music supervisor Chris Corless, and executive producer Bridget Flynn. A fire in their building had caused some damage to their offices, so the team suggested the swank private club (have you seen the bathrooms?!) instead.

The conversation turned to the moral consequences of working in a modern-day Tin Pan Alley. "You have to believe in what you're doing, or else it's just a crappy job," Corless said over lunch. He's surprised at the similarities between his old job in A&R at a major music

label and this gig as a matchmaker for musicians and advertising—both roles put him in a kind of gatekeeper position. "He struggles with that," Flynn discloses.

Corless and his colleagues work hard to make sure the artists whose music they're licensing to advertisers are getting as fair a deal as possible. As well, they want the in-house staff at Grayson Matthews to have some degree of freedom over the projects they're assigned. The company encourages these writer/performers to use its resources to write and record their own music on their off time, and only a month and half after Austin joined the team, he was granted a two-month leave of absence to record his album.

Austin admits that when he first got the offer to work for Grayson Matthews full-time, he was skeptical. "I was a little wary of throwing that much of my life and work into a company, and not just doing it for myself," he says. Now, he's developed a "dual musical life" at Grayson, one that offers both stability and creative freedom. But he has established some boundaries: He would feel different about licensing a song from his album than he would about writing an original tune for an ad.

"I think it's important that we recognize that the ad industry is a distributor of music with a very particular constraint that other distributors"—like labels—"don't have," says academic Bethany Klein. "They're never going to use music that would potentially turn off a client's audience." And, she adds, for those creative souls who license their songs for ads, "It's never going to be just business."

The artist-sympathetic team at Grayson seems to understand that. But it's not as if they're in a position to reject the constraints of the advertising industry. Working with advertisers is their bread and butter, and it's allowed them to expand the scope of their business. In October, construction begins on a new 15,000-square-foot, two-floor office space downtown on Adelaide Street East, complete with five studios. And they have plans to release a series of vinyl singles featuring their in-house writers' music. "Big studios are coming down, but we're building a new facility," Westin remarks. "So we're either really smart or really stupid."

If you take a step back, Grayson Matthews starts to look a lot like a Motown-style hit factory, with a team of composers and performers churning out all kinds of music in a single space. But by necessity, they operate under the caveat that every song written must be palatable for their corporate clients. Isn't the market already oversaturated with ballads about "home"?

The digital revolution may have offered artists a direct route to get their music heard by millions, but no one has quite figured out how that massive shift in distribution and consumption will translate into paycheques. If you want to make music simply because it makes you happy, then you've got a hobby for life. If you want to make music in order to earn a living, be prepared for that beloved song you wrote while holed up in your room post-breakup to become the soundtrack for a toilet-paper commercial. ■

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—Chris Corless, music supervisor at Grayson Matthews

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