

WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES

How some songwriters and composers earn a living without the need to release albums, play live or tour

BY JIM KELLY

It's been a long day at the office for **Ian LeFeuvre**. Deadline demands. Computer problems. Clients. But now he's arrived home and his 22-month-old son, Evan, is at the door to greet him, welcoming Daddy as if he were a modern-day Fred Flintstone returning home from a day's work at the quarry. Soon they're off to the park for a little stroll before supper.

Not very rock 'n' roll.

But that's okay with LeFeuvre, because he's done the rock 'n' roll thing. Been there, done that, got the tour shirt. Best known on the Canadian music scene for his acclaimed power-pop band Starling, which the guitarist and singer started in 1997 in Ottawa, LeFeuvre's done his time on the road, soaked up the spotlight on-stage and toiled away in recording studios. These are different days.

Being a recording artist and performer can be a tough row to hoe at the best of times. With today's decreasing record sales, tight radio playlists, and jam-packed internet bandwidth, making a go of it can sometimes seem as futile as planting seed in stone. Musicians who don't throw in the towel to look for a "real" job have to try to dig up other revenue streams that suit their talents.

For LeFeuvre, who had always kept his fingers in several different pies—scoring short films, producing other artists, co-writing—the answer came when he landed a gig writing music for TV ads, television series, radio programs, and films. Now his working day is spent in a studio at a Toronto media production company, a quick jaunt from his downtown home.

"You just start thinking in terms of, 'How am I gonna make a long-term go of applying the skills I have?' It just seemed like a logical thing to have as part of the equation," he says.

You've likely heard his voice and ultra-catchy songs in any number of TV commercials, including ads for Ritz Crackers ("Make Believe"), Toyota, Hyundai, Bud Light, Microsoft, Telus, Bell and others. If you have little ones running around your home, it's quite possible you've heard the music he co-writes for the

Teletoon series *Johnny Test* (with fellow SOCAN member **Chris Tait**), which also airs on the Cartoon Network in the United States as well as in various European countries.

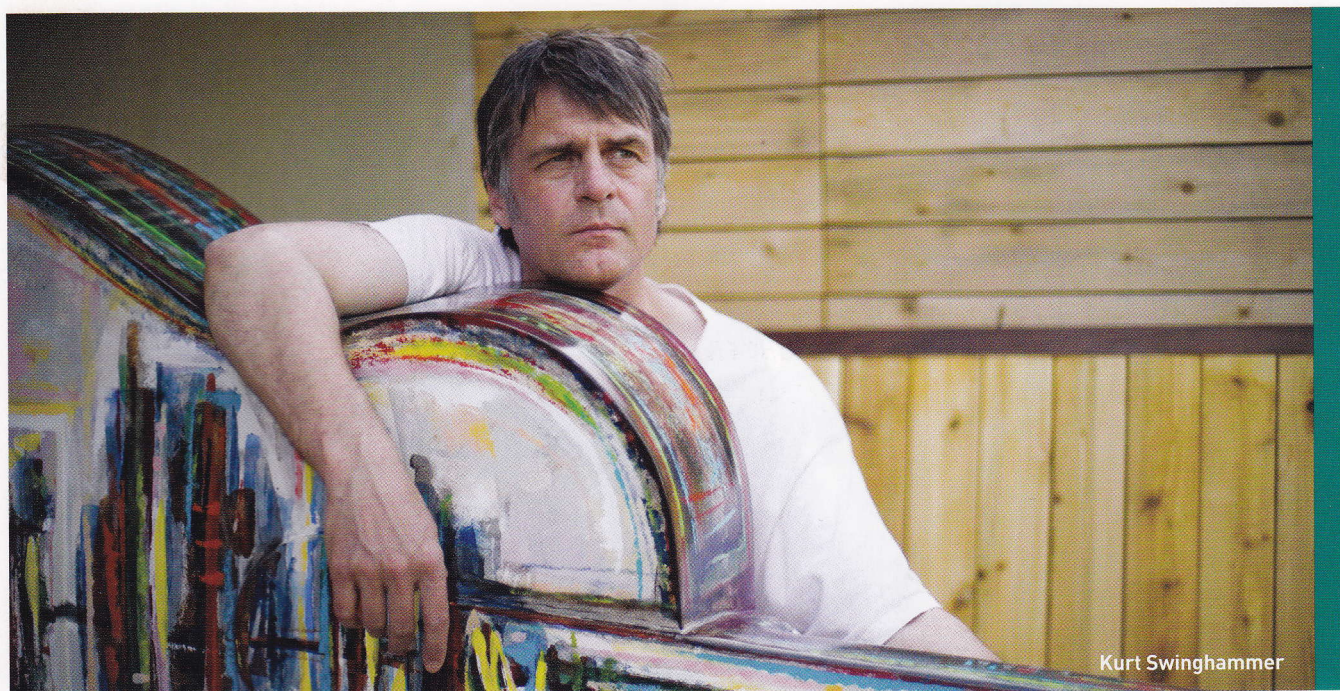
Though his workday in the commercial music quarry is fast-paced and sometimes stressful, for the most part LeFeuvre finds it a joy to trot off to his job with a lunch pail full of tasty melodies, meaty choruses and a variety pack of musical flavours. It allows him to keep his musical chops sharp and hone his songwriting and producing skills.

"I really love having to put on different hats in terms of styles," he says. "For the series that I score, *Johnny Test*, I get to do all kinds of stuff. You're literally all over the map. I really like that. It's pretty fast-moving, but if you can keep up with it, it's pretty fun."

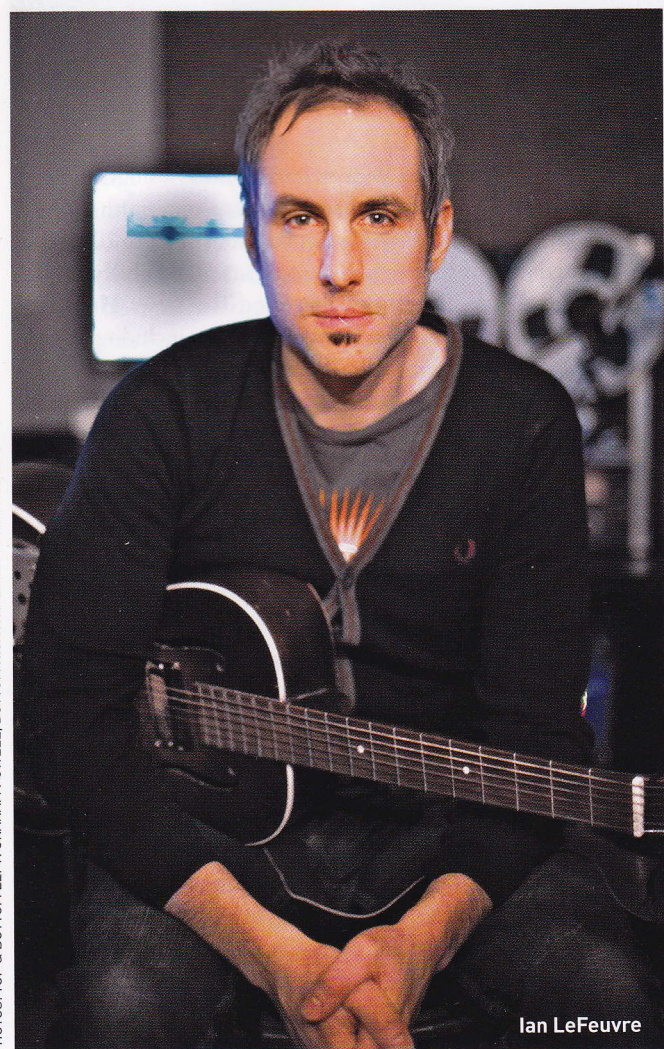
Toronto-based artist **Kurt Swinghammer** has also found a way to score some stability through his musical talents. Having played for years in the city's clubs and done session work as a guitarist, other opportunities started presenting themselves when he was asked to work on the music for a film. Swinghammer's scoring and theme composing credits are now numerous and varied, including movies such as *The Falls* and *Ginger Snaps II: Unleashed*, documentaries like *Acquainted with the Night* and *Waterlife*, and TV series like *Paradise Lost* and *Marketplace*.

"I've always been interested in the craft of writing songs," he says. "With film work, so much of it is about craftsmanship and solving problems; you're basically a servant to the director and your role is to create something that's often invisible or transparent, which is kind of the opposite of the singer-songwriter tradition. But there's that element of solving the problem, which has always drawn me to creating art."

In between working on scores, session work, and other projects, Swinghammer—like the other SOCAN members in this story—tries to find time for making his own music ("My motto is, if the phone don't ring, I do my own thing"), but scoring is his bread and butter.



Kurt Swinghammer



Ian LeFeuvre



Gordie Sampson



"I love working with people to realize their vision. It feels like a beautiful kind of service."

Simon Wilcox

"I feel pretty fortunate that I get to do something that I love to do and I find it completely rewarding and challenging work," he says. "If I didn't have that, and if I didn't have my SOCAN royalties, I probably wouldn't be able to afford to just play music. It's been the solution to figuring out how to make a mortgage and stuff."

For others, the road to a fruitful career has meant giving up the road and the performing life, and doing the write thing.

Though he started out penning songs for the bands he was in, acclaimed songwriter **Gordie Sampson** eventually decided to devote more of his energies to writing songs for other people to record. Since then, he's co-written tunes for some of the biggest names in country music, including Carrie Underwood, Faith Hill, LeAnn Rimes, Martina McBride and **George Canyon**, as well as leading Canadian artists such as Great Big Sea, **Ashley MacIsaac** and **Carolyn Dawn Johnson**.

"Somewhere in my mid-to-late 20s when I started to see [song-writing royalty] cheques coming in, that light bulb went off," he says from his home in Nashville, "and I realized that this is why I'm here; that co-writing for other projects is the thing that feels the most comfortable to me."

He's written and released his own music on three solo albums (a fourth is on deck for June), but these days he dedicates the bulk of his energies to writing and recording demos. He spends nine months of the year in Nashville and the remainder of his time at home in Cape Breton, where his trophy shelf bends under the weight of a dozen East Coast Music Awards (including several SOCAN Songwriter of the Year honours); a 2002 SOCAN Country Music Award; two Juno Awards; a Grammy (for co-writing the 2007 Country Song of the Year "Jesus Take The Wheel,"

sung by Underwood); and dozens of other prizes from various musical associations.

In a similar way, **Simon Wilcox** started out as a singer-songwriter before hanging out her shingle as a tunesmith for hire. Signed to EMI Music Publishing Canada from 2004 to 2010, she's collaborated with or written songs for artists such as **Jully Black**, **Jorane**, **Matt Dusk**, Three Days Grace and The Trews. Her co-writes have frequently hit No. 1 on the charts—including "Stay," recorded by Jorane, "Home" by Three Days Grace, "Man of Two Minds" by The Trews, and "Tell All Your Friends" by Projet Orange. Her song "Empty Sky" was commissioned for the 2009 film *Brothers*, starring Jake Gyllenhaal, Tobey Maguire and Natalie Portman.

"It was like I had found my calling, in a way," she says from her current home in Santa Monica, California. "I love working with people to realize their vision. It feels like a beautiful kind of service."

While it was once considered anathema for "serious" artists and songwriters to write for commercial outlets, the times they are a-changin'. "It really depends on whether you want to hear your song in a television show or a movie," says Wilcox, "or if you're comfortable with your songs being used in commercials."

Increasingly for songwriters and composers—whether it's film and television work, ads or even video games—these outlets represent viable, even desirable, career options.

For Ian LeFeuvre, although he receives some revenue from songs he's co-written over the years (including a few on the latest Barenaked Ladies album, *All in Good Time*) and songs of his own that have been used in films, it's the television work that's been a real eye-opener.

"It starts to add up," he says. "*Johnny Test* has been undoubtedly the biggest plus for me. If you can find a show that's got some legs and it's something you enjoy doing, it's great." ■■■