

Successful songwriting

In 1977, Eddie Schwartz graduated from York with a BA in English. Today, eleven years later, he has achieved considerable financial and commercial success as one of Canada's most established songwriters. Recently, *Excal's* Howard Kaman sat down to talk to Schwartz about his music, songwriting, and success.

By HOWARD KAMAN

Eddie Schwartz has never achieved popular recognition. One of Canada's premiere songwriters, Schwartz has penned such hits as "Hit Me With Your Best Shot," and "Don't Shed A Tear," for artists Pat Benatar and Paul Carrack, but he has never sought to become a major recording artist.

"I just started writing my own songs as soon as I could play a few chords. Probably, by the time I was fifteen, I had written a hundred songs," said Schwartz, who has been writing for as long as he can remember.

He graduated with a BA in English from York in 1977, though he'd originally enrolled in music.

"The Fine Arts programme wasn't as tailored to the kind of music that I wanted to make. I really wasn't that interested in learning how to play jazz or Indian music, although I did study them — and learned a lot. There was very little about contemporary modern popular music in the university at the time.

"I was brought up with North American contemporary hit radio. Motown, The Beatles, Rolling Stones, a lot of folk music, a lot of blues, Reverend Gary Davis, Little Richard — those are the people that influenced me."

Schwartz's music displays this entertaining vein. He said that experimentation with foreign music — such as Paul Simon did on his *Graceland* album — is "very serious and very studious in a way, and is very commendable. But it's still not, nor has it ever been, the main focus of what popular music is all about.

"A good song is a song that moves me. It's a song that gets to me. It can be about anything. It can be structured any way. It can be done with any kind of instrumentation. None of those things is important. I think if I am moved or stimulated somehow, that's what songs are all about," particularly, he said, "if it does it in an elegant and economical fashion."

A song is "a very small art form," said Schwartz. "It's not a novel. It's not a serial on TV. They don't have to span hours. They're just three or four-minute little packages." He added that to have emotional impact in three or four minutes is an accomplishment: the more intense the impact, the greater the song.

"Theoretically, a great song is a song that a guy can play with an acoustic guitar. You can sing it around a campfire and it'll stand up; the sound of the melody and lyrics are enough." There are, however, cases where music is popular because of the production surrounding it.

"There's a lot of people who make good records, but not necessarily good songs," he explains. "If you put an acoustic guitar in Robert Palmer's hand and said, 'could you play 'Simply Irresistible'?' I don't think it would sound like much. It's got a good hook, but it's the production really that makes that a great record."

The economy he speaks of contrasts with the way some writers — like Bruce Springsteen — expound on minute details in a "self-parodying" way.

"Bruce will make the windshield wiper of a car more important than the whole sweep of modern human history," said Schwartz. "Everybody who's been to New Jersey knows that those songs are far better than what he's singing about. It's almost funny. To take the parking lot of a 7-11 and make it into a great romantic statement says a tremendous amount about his imagination.

"I think that's what's interesting about him. He gets away with what he does because he does it so well, and with so much conviction. But I do think it's a very tenuous structure."

Springsteen is an exception, says Schwartz, in that he is able to



ILLUSTRATION: BRIAN KROEG

create a respectable body of work under the "intense scrutiny and pressure" of being a major celebrity.

Schwartz feels no such pressure, because he is not a star. He is not pressured to produce because he "plants (his) seeds all over the place." Rather than propelling one career, he provides fuel to many singers, and doesn't get caught up in the hype of superstardom.

He is a practical person in the sense that he separates quality and commerciality, not in terms of music, but management.

"I think people make a terrible mistake," said Schwartz, "when they think that quality and commerciality bear any relationship whatsoever. A much better place to look is the management — at the record company — and how much money went into the artist's promotion.

"This is a terribly unromanticized view of the world. But a little more accurate. There are so many great records that have never seen the light of day because the record company was too busy working on Bruce Springsteen's songs."

Schwartz's music is good commercial product. He recently wrote three songs for Joe Cocker's breakthrough album, *Unchain My Heart*, and finished four month's work in California, producing the new Doobie Brothers LP. And one can't forget the successful "Hit Me With Your Best Shot," which became Pat Benatar's signature song, and won Schwartz his first Juno for 1980 Songwriter of Year. He realized it was his first major success when his mother, who had always given him a briefcase on his birthday — hoping he would become a lawyer — bought him a book titled *This Business of Music*.

"I was writing in the car, on the 401," he explained, "heading to a studio in and the entire song 'Hit Me With Your Best Shot' came to me in a flash." Not a note [was] changed since that night."

"The lyrics are harder to write than music," said Schwartz. "In a great song, the lyrics are the most crucial element. Songs are a literary form. That's why so many songwriters are lousy musicians. A song is fundamentally a type of literature. It's a folk art. It's the lyrics that convey the ultimate and most important conduit of the emotion."

Although Schwartz's argument contradicts what most musicians say, he has a few points to back it up.

"There's a couple of idioms that argue in my favour. One is the blues, the other is country music. Music, from song to song in the blues, is virtually identical — the most distinguishing element is the lyrics. Same thing with country and western — it's lyrically based.

"I'm not saying the music is unimportant — it's very important. If you go back to Robert Palmer, the music and the production of the music is extremely important. But what counts is the lyrics."

"Hit Me With Your Best Shot" exemplifies the complex process of an artist choosing a song to record.

"A singer takes on a song as being part of his or her personality. Pat Benatar is a perfect example. 'Hit Me With Your Best Shot' became the song that she may be most remembered for. She'd better feel really comfortable with that because of what the song says, because it's become synonymous with her name.

"When I wrote it I thought, 'That's a nice little song.' Ten or twelve million records later, I go 'Wow! I guess a lot of people thought it was more than just a nice little song.' I didn't think it was one of my best songs. I thought it was a funny song. A lot of humour got lost when Pat Benatar did it the way she did. She took all the aggression and turned it '10', but that was part of what she was trying to project at the time."

Only after it's been determined that a song will be both profitable and generate the desired image, is it recorded. "When you get a song on a record, 'it's usually sort of a small miracle,'" said Schwartz.

The payment method of record companies also makes life difficult for artists.

"The record companies have a thing called Controlled Composition, whereby they only pay their own artists three-quarters of the going royalty rate."

In other words, a record company's own artist receives less per song than an outside writer, which makes it more economical for a company to avoid outside writers altogether.



"I'm put at a disadvantage. They have to think one of my songs is really something special before they'll put it on a record. This is something that we, as songwriters, are fighting. We want all writers to be paid the same royalty because that's what's right."

He mentioned the Songwriter's Association of Canada, a new organization set up to protect the rights of writers.

"It's important that songwriters get together and have some kind of an association that can talk to record companies and publishers and say 'Hey, we deserve to make a living too.'"

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On September 28, Schwartz was awarded the Performing Rights Organization of Canada's William Harold Moon Award, given to Canadian songwriters for international achievements. He has written for over 100 contemporary artists and his songs have been recorded in 22 different countries.

"It's a sort of a lifetime achievement award," he said. "I'm not quite ready for it . . . but I'll take it anyways."

At 38, Eddie Schwartz has reached a peak in his career. What's next — a recording career perhaps? He has already recorded a few albums.

"I was very fortunate that some record deals, through my songwriting, were offered to me, but I didn't really go after them, so much as they came after me. I have never really actively pursued record deals. I'd much rather work on songs, keep a low profile, and avoid pressure. Whether, at some point in the future, I'll want to pursue it I don't know.

"I've looked into production work. I just finished producing the Doobie Brothers and that's an area I'm exploring as well. I'm not so ego-motivated that I have to see my name up in lights all the time."

"It's one thing to send a message," he said, "but the most important thing about sending a message is making sure it's received. Those are the people who make successful writers. They make sure that, no matter how complicated what they're trying to say is, it's done in a way that really does communicate . . . that gets across their point."