



## Canadian professors are winning awards for penning some of the best CD liner notes in the music business

**Y**ou don't have to be Nostradamus to predict certain things about the Grammy Awards each year with a reasonable shot at seeing your prophecy come true. J. Lo will surely turn up wearing an outfit that showcases plenty of celebrity skin. Canada's reigning polka king, Walter Ostanek, will be nominated for his latest offering. And, chances are, a Canadian academic will be in the audience, rub-

bing shoulders with the likes of Elton John and Céline Dion.

What would a scholar from north of the border be doing at such a star-filled awards ceremony? Well, if recent history is any indication, the Canadian professor would be a nominee in the Grammy's best album notes category.

York University music historian Rob Bowman has been nominated five times for the prize, winning it once in

1996 for *The Complete Stax/Volt Soul Singles Volume 3:1972-1975*.

Memorial University's Neil Rosenberg, an authority on bluegrass and folk music, was part of a team of writers that earned a Grammy in 1998 for their album notes for the Smithsonian Folkways recording, *Anthology of American Folk Music*. And Concordia University jazz expert Andrew Homzy earned a Grammy nomination in 1999 as one of

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the liner notes contributors to *Charlie Mingus: Passions of a Man – The Complete Atlantic Recordings, 1956-1961*. All told, Canadian pros have been in the running for a Grammy for the last five years in a row.

Dr. Bowman’s Grammy nominations have made him one of the most sought-after writers in the music industry for the specialized task of penning liner notes. “I’m in a strong position,” says Dr. Bowman, an ethnomusicology professor. “I don’t need to take on jobs that don’t interest me, just for the money. I say ‘no’ to a lot of offers.” His next project is a chance to write liner notes for a boxed set of six CDs of mostly never-before-released tracks by The Band. The prospect has Dr. Bowman grinning from ear to ear. “This is an unbelievable opportunity.”

### Packed with data

Liner notes provide CD buyers with information about the musicians and the music on the albums they purchase. The text can range from the smallest details about how each song was put together to backstage gossip about band members’ feuds to the political musings of the featured artist. “You look at liner notes sometimes and they read like a Wall Street promotion,” says Andrew Homzy of Concordia University. “I want to do something that’s more than just a string of superlatives. I believe [liner notes] become part of the literature about music. I feel I have a responsibility to try to bring forward something that’s new about the recording.”

With the recent advent of boxed sets of CDs that feature digitally enhanced re-issues of recordings from certain eras or by significant artists, liner notes have taken on a new importance. They are prestige items for record companies, says Dr. Bowman, “and they’re willing to spend on them”.

Fred Litwin, president of Northern Blues Music, a Canadian label that specializes in blues recordings, recently compiled a CD from the lifetime work of the influential American blues guitarist Archie Edwards. He hired a respected

blues scholar – the University of Maryland’s Barry Lee Pearson – to write the liner notes. “I really wanted to do it justice,” says Mr. Litwin, adding that “it’s important to give context” to the career of someone like Edwards. Still, in his view, liner notes aren’t the key non-musical ingredient for an album in terms of helping to sell the CD. “The artwork is what’s really critical,” says Mr. Litwin.

Liner notes often represent something of a hybrid between popular writing and musical scholarship. Writers should know the subject they’re covering

Neil Rosenberg, a folklore professor at Memorial, says liner notes aim for music enthusiasts so it’s essential to provide information about all facets of a recording, such as who played every instrument.

“Liner notes are a way of helping people understand a recording. My role is to tell them what to look for,” says Dr. Rosenberg. “It’s a little like writing text for a museum exhibition.”

Professor Homzy sees the task in much the same way. “As a musician myself, I’m able to talk about the musical events in a recording,” he explains. “I



A Canadian CD label turned to a respected U.S. scholar to write the liner notes for blues guitarist Archie Edwards.

inside out. They also have to be able to write for a broad readership, something that many academics can’t do well. Jargon that might suit a scholarly journal has no place in the CD stacks of a Future Shop or HMV store.

“Record companies don’t hire me because I’m a professor,” says Mr. Bowman. “They hire me because I’m a proven writer.” He has been a music journalist since covering Pink Floyd in his teens and today he contributes commentaries to CBC Radio’s “Definitely Not the Opera”.

can analyse the use of counterpoint or melody or rhythm. Because a recording is a document that’s frozen in time, the listener can take that information, go back to the music and listen to it over again.” The more the listeners learn from the liner notes, the deeper their appreciation will be for what the music itself has to offer, he says.

University of British Columbia music professor Robert Silverman is a Juno Award-winning classical pianist who has penned the liner notes for his most recent albums, including a 10-CD

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recording of all 32 Beethoven sonatas. He used to rely on the efforts of professional writers, but often came away unimpressed. “I do it myself now. That way, the things that I think are important will get written about. I try to bring listeners into the music-making process,” Professor Silverman explains.

“I write about some of the narrative things that are going on in Beethoven’s work and how you expect him to go in a certain direction, but no, he goes off

an academic, he worked in the music industry as a journalist, producer and engineer. He still keeps a toe in the music business, interviewing Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell for *Grammy Magazine* and writing liner notes for CDs by Stevie Wonder, Julia Fordham and the Carpenters.

He sees liner notes as a form of journalism, but different from the hard-edged reporting that might be appropriate for covering politics. In putting together liner notes, Dr. Levitin

booklet the size of a vinyl record album. “That’s half a book,” notes Dr. Bowman.

In fact, Dr. Bowman is often encouraged to delve less deeply into his subject matter by the record companies that hire him. “They’ll offer me more money if I come in under a certain word limit.”

He understands why: “It costs them money to print longer texts and they have less space for graphics.” Still, it’s an offer he never accepts. “If the music matters enough for someone to pay big bucks for a boxed set, they’ll want to know everything about the recordings the way I want to know everything.”

Professor Homzy of Concordia says he is sometimes asked whether some of his liner notes are too detailed – does the average Charles Mingus or Duke Ellington fan need to know so much?

“A casual listener might not understand everything in the notes the first few times he reads them,” he concedes. “But as they become more familiar with the music, as they realize that they want to understand more about it, they might re-read those notes three years later in a different way.”

On occasion, Professor Homzy mentions in his liner notes that a track on the CD he is writing about doesn’t represent the artist’s best rendition of a composition, and he’ll even steer the listener to an album issued by another label. “I must say, I’ve never had a problem with a record company over something like that.”

As often happens with faculty who get involved in work-related endeavors outside their university work, professors who write liner notes say the experience frequently improves their classroom teaching. “My understanding of the economics of the recording industry and the nuts and bolts of record releases has really been enhanced”, says Dr. Bowman. Meanwhile, Dr. Rosenberg says a graduate seminar he gave recently on sound recordings and the folk music canon benefited from his insider’s knowledge of how the music business operates.

Liner notes offer other rewards too. “More people have read my liner notes,” notes Dr. Rosenberg, “than have read any of my [scholarly] articles.” **AU•UA**



The extensive album notes for an American folk music anthology, penned by a team of writers that included Memorial University’s Neil Rosenburg, earned a Grammy Award in 1998.

and does something entirely different instead.” This ability to defy convention, argues Professor Silverman, is why Beethoven still sounds fresh today.

“What I didn’t say in the liner notes was that Beethoven wrote such-and-such a piece in such-and-such a place. You can get that kind of information about Beethoven anywhere. I’m bringing the [CD buyer] the perspective of the performer.”

Daniel Levitin, a psychology professor at McGill University, examines musical memory, perfect pitch and what sets elite musicians apart. Before becoming

talks extensively to the musicians themselves. He considers himself a bridge of sorts between musicians and their fans. He works hard at getting artists to open up about how they view their work. “I see my role as helping the artists express themselves about their music. What was going on in their head when they wrote something?”

Dr. Bowman also interviews musicians in putting together liner notes, and he doesn’t take on projects lightly. He produced 47,000 words for his Grammy Award-winning effort about the Stax recordings which fills a 60-plus-page