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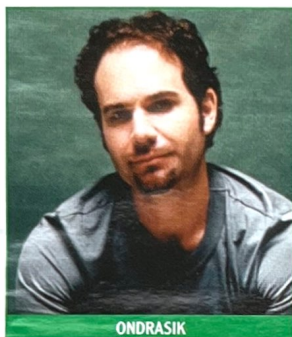
Industry Rediscovered Its Troubadour Traditions

BY WES ORSHOSKI

NEW YORK—Five for Fighting's Jon Ondrasik is living proof that, during the past decade, it hasn't been particularly easy to be a developing male singer/songwriter.

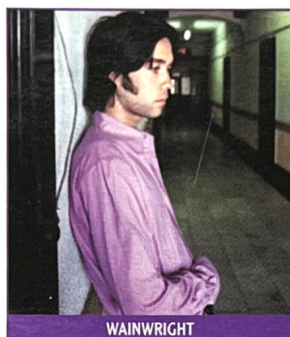
Launching his career in a decade that was first ruled by grunge, then by alt-rock, hip-hop, and teen pop, Ondrasik found himself coping with many frustrations in the '90s, including the closure of his first label, EMI, and industry execs bluntly telling him that, although he wrote good songs, he wouldn't sell many albums.

He was probably one of dozens who heard the same thing during this period, when female singer/



ONDRASIK

songwriters were faring much better than men—the mass popularity of Jewel, Sheryl Crow, Alanis Morissette, Sarah McLachlan, and the like



WAINWRIGHT

exemplified by the three Lilith Fairs helmed by McLachlan.

So, when Five for Fighting (essentially Ondrasik's one-man show)



SEXSMITH

toured the U.S. late last year in support of former EMI labelmate David Gray—who had been dealt his own set of frustrations from the label, both

before and after it closed—Ondrasik found himself filled with pride and hope for his own career as he saw firsthand how, after years of being ignored by U.S. record buyers, Gray was enjoying stardom in the States.

"I remember us laughing, because we both had suffered through [the U.S.] EMI [Records label] closing and every other record company passing on us and our records," Ondrasik says of a shared moment on that tour, which ended roughly a year before Ondrasik himself would begin tasting mainstream success with his "Superman (It's Not Easy)" single.

"It was so neat for me to see [Gray] having success," Ondrasik says.

(Continued on page 74)

Latin Piracy Feels The Heat

BY LEILA COBO

MIAMI—In the past 12 months, labels have been struggling to figure out what releases to slate for the lucrative end-of-the-year season, distributors have been leveraging for the best possible prices, retailers have been playing musical chairs with store placement and exhibits, and acts have been promoting hard in an effort to offset a depressed market.

But for a small-time Mexican pirate who goes by the name of Chon, it's just another day at the office.

At 10 a.m. he goes off to work at a rented house in Puebla, Mexico, where he burns CDs. His equipment is relatively old; it takes him 12 minutes to record each disc. But it's enough for him and his partner to produce and sell 2,000 illegitimate discs per week. Back in the day when pirated CDs were a novelty and CD burners actually cost something, the price of Chon's labor was higher. But business is still good. The only thing stopping him

from selling more albums is the lack of better equipment.

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VAZQUEZ

Reversal Of Fortune: U.K. Artists See U.S. Sales Rise

BY GORDON MASSON and MELINDA NEWMAN

LONDON—After sliding to a historic low in 1999, the fortunes of U.K. artists in the United States have been steadily improving. Much of the upturn is due to the success of albums by Dido, Sade, David Gray, Radiohead, Gorillaz, Coldplay, Sting, Craig David, and—of course—the Beatles.

More unexpected, perhaps, is the clear impact of four British classical crossover performers—



Charlotte Church, Sarah Brightman, Russell Watson, and Bond—who have collectively sold more than 4 million albums in the U.S. during the past two years. Brightman is one of the most popular U.K. acts on the American touring circuit.

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Troubadour Traditions

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"At the time, we had no idea what was gonna happen with Five for Fighting. But it was so great to see him kind of leading the way."

After years of relative exile from the mainstream—and nearly two decades since their heyday in the 1970s—a wider interest in male singer/songwriters seems to be gaining favor with radio and video network programmers and mainstream listeners, as a new buzzed-about group of such artists (some with similar career trials as Gray and Ondrasik) seems to be emerging from under the radar.

Among them are Ondrasik's fellow Aware Records graduate John Mayer, alt-country prince Ryan Adams, alt-rock newcomer Pete Dinklage, former indie darling Elliott Smith, piano man Rufus Wainwright, soulful singer/slide guitarist Ben Harper, Canadian songcrafter Ron Sexsmith, lauded Brits Tom McRae and Badly Drawn Boy (the latter another one-man show), charismatic Texan David Garza, ex-Jellyfish/Grays member

one, years of seemingly ultra-present, manufactured teen pop, and, two, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Though noting that it is "quite subtle," Wainwright says there's "definitely something going on, whether it's Ryan Adams, or me, or Elliott Smith—it's almost like a low-grade fever, which we hope will spread and become a horrible disease!"

Wainwright and most of his peers stop short of proclaiming themselves part of a male singer/songwriter movement. "It could be something as big as a movement, or it could be something as small as a trend," rising indie star Johnson observes. "It could just be that boy bands are kind of fading and people are wanting to hear songs that actually come from a person—something that's not such a product."

Of the possibility of a full-fledged movement, Nic Harcourt, music director of Los Angeles noncommercial KCRW and an early supporter of *White Ladder*, says, "If you had asked me six months ago, I would have probably said no. You know, every now and then, somebody talented like David Gray sneaks through. But now, I think there is definitely an interest in these guys, and part of it may be a result of this new acoustic movement, or whatever you want to call it—groups like Travis, Coldplay, and Starsailor."

Modern AC WVRV St. Louis PD Mark Edwards says, "It may be the next big thing." But pop music is cyclical, he notes, and it may simply be no more than male singer/songwriters' turn to shine.

Veteran singer/songwriter John Hiatt concurs. "It just seems like every generation or two, the troubadours start coming around," Hiatt remarks. "I think it's a part of the American music tradition."

Whether they call it a trend, a movement, or happenstance, most agree that what's happening could be traced to the success of Gray's platinum *White Ladder* album (see story, page 76). With "Babylon" and the follow-up singles "Please Forgive Me" and "Sail Away," *White Ladder* seems to have, at the very least, pried open the door for Ondrasik's "Superman" and Adams' "New York, New York" singles. Both are getting solid airplay—especially on VH1, another staunch supporter of Gray's.

"You can't help but compare a lot of this new music to him," says Valerie Knight, PD at adult top 40 KRBZ in Kansas City, Kan. "You say, 'Oh, wow, it sounds a little bit like David Gray, so it's probably gonna work.'"

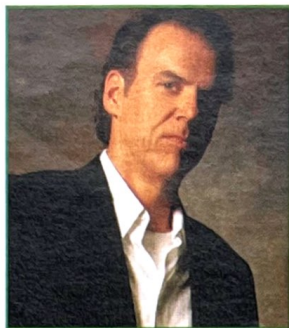
If nothing else, the album's success has inspired some of Gray's peers, who, like the 30-something Englishman, have experienced numerous label ups and downs while garnering piles of glowing reviews and selling relatively few records in the past.

"I find David's breakthrough—and just the whole way that thing went down—really encouraging," says Sexsmith, who is on his second label and fourth album. "He did the record by himself [after

EMI closed], and I don't think he had great expectations for it. It made me feel like my career might not be doomed to cult status my entire life."

WHERE HAVE THESE GUYS BEEN?

So why have younger male singer/songwriters been ignored for so long? "That's a hard question to answer, because they've certainly



'As far as the music biz goes, the singer/songwriter just doesn't exactly fit into the corporate mold as it now stands.'

—JOHN HIATT
VETERAN SINGER/SONGWRITER

been out there," admits Rick Krim, executive VP of talent and music programming at VH1.

Indeed, Gray, for example, went largely ignored in the early to mid-'90s as he criss-crossed the U.S. in support of his first three albums. As of early this year, his first two records—although critically lauded—had only sold a combined 20,000 copies in the U.S., according to SoundScan.

And few of his peers have fared better. Meanwhile, rock's pioneering class of male singer/songwriters—Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen, and such Billboard Century Award honorees as Billy Joel (1994), James Taylor (1998), Randy Newman (2000), and John Mellencamp (2001)—have prospered, despite trends.

"As far as the music biz goes, the singer/songwriter just doesn't exactly fit into the corporate mold as it now stands," Hiatt says with a laugh. "I think the bigger, the more corporate the music business gets, the more it's about entertainment and being an arm of a big entertainment conglomerate and less about music."

One reason for these younger troubadours' lack of mainstream impact is that a young, lonely guy soul-searching with a guitar or a piano often proves too difficult a sell to consumers, some execs and programmers believe. "One of the hardest things in the world is to set up a solo artist from scratch—whether they're male or female—and break them," says Ray Cooper, co-president of Virgin Records America.

"The cost of doing business to the point where you're doing your first TV can be a million dollars."

Krim says labels seem to have been looking for "something a little more immediate" in recent years, whether it's bombastic rock bands or teen pop acts.

Some note that Ondrasik probably benefited from using a moniker that evokes an image of a band instead of a lone singer/songwriter. "It's easier to get something across with a five-piece band with an attitude and a new sound," says Brandon Kessler, head of New York City indie Messenger, which has released albums by Bern and Chris Whitley. The problem, he adds, is often that the audience is underestimated. "I don't think they're just out there for stupid teenage bullshit," he says. "I think they've always wanted good stuff—they just needed there to be an opportunity for them to get to it."

In any event, because these acts were being skipped over, "a hole for music that's relatable" was created, Knight says. "And that's where the Five for Fighting track comes in and the Ryan Adams song comes in."

SUBSTANCE VOID

Some say these tracks are filling a void of songwriting of substance. Others, like Edwards, add that they mark the return of "music that means something."

They are finding an audience "who wants to hear real songs, listen to words, and be moved," Krim says, pointing to the success of not only these solo artists but that of hard-rock act Creed as proof.

"I think a big part of [Creed's] success is that their songs connect with people," he points out. "There's a message to them, and it's positive. Ya know, you don't sell 10 million records just because you have a nice-sounding song. There has to be a connection."

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, that connection has become even more important. "I happened to see some of the e-mails [Ondrasik's] been getting since Sept. 11," Krim continues. "And people are really listening to the words. They were beforehand, but even more so now, people are just paying so much closer attention to what the songs are saying and looking to music for their diversion, or for inspiration, or for hope."

From the shows he's played post-Sept. 11, Sexsmith says he's got the feeling that "people are looking for something to have a little more substance to it, or maybe they want less of that kind of escapism, or whatever. But maybe they want more of it. Maybe it's too soon to tell."

Certainly "Superman" and "New York, New York"—two personal and reflective tracks written prior to the attacks that carry Sept. 11 overtones—have been embraced in the past few months, boosting Ondrasik and Adams' careers.

Len Cosimano, VP of merchandising and multimedia for Borders Books & Music, says he's even start-

ing to see such older artists as Hiatt benefit from a change in attitude toward male singer/songwriters.

"It's hard to quantify," Cosimano says. "But I think part of it is that you're starting to see excitement over bands kind of wane."

Prior to and since the attacks, Ondrasik says he's had fans thank him for "bringing songs back to music. And the nice thing is that it's not just 25-year-olds—it's 14-year-olds, it's 15-year-olds. These kids know who Stevie Wonder is. They know who the Who is. They know who James Taylor is."

THE POST-SEPT. 11 FUTURE

As is the case with almost any young artist in any genre, these musicians must have both support from their record companies and great songs if they are to continue to prosper and enjoy even a fraction of the early mainstream success of their predecessors.

The success of "Superman"—currently No. 15 on The Billboard Hot 100—would not have materialized, Ondrasik says, if not for a practically undying commitment to Five for Fighting's second album, last year's *America Town*, from Columbia.

"With [Five for Fighting], Pete Yorn, and John Mayer, they are interested in building careers," Ondrasik says. "And to see what they've done with my record—I mean, my record came out over a year ago! And they have stuck with it."

Similarly, it was months after ATO—the new BMG-distributed label co-founded by Dave Matthews—issued *White Ladder* that "Babylon" finally caught on.

Co-founder Chris Tetzeli says, "Because David was our only act—our first act—it was our mission,



'One of the hardest things in the world is to set up a solo artist from scratch—whether they're male or female—and break them.'

—RAY COOPER,
CO-PRESIDENT, VIRGIN AMERICA

and we were able to give it focused attention and stick with it. We just knew we had something, and we went for it."

Columbia seems to be leading a
(Continued on next page)



'These songs are finding an audience who wants to hear real songs, listen to the words, and be moved.'

—RICK KRIM
VP OF TALENT/MUSIC PROGRAMMING, VH1

Jason Falkner, Real World's Joseph Arthur, quirky storyteller Dan Bern, surfer-turned-musician Jack Johnson, and the recently-gone-solo Ben Folds and Grant Lee Phillips (of Grant Lee Buffalo).

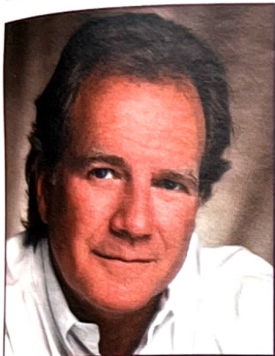
Helped out by the radio and TV exposure devoted to Gray's *White Ladder* singles—most notably, "Babylon"—Ondrasik, Yorn, and Adams are making waves, apparently confirming that more and more opportunities for such artists to be heard have arrived.

And that, say some of these male singer/songwriters and a number of industry execs, appears to come from a desire for more substantive music born out of two things—

Troubadour Traditions

Continued from preceding page

return to the "old days of artist development," Krim says. "In all these cases, whether it's Five for Fighting or David Gray or even Train's 'Drops of Jupiter'—they're obviously a band, but that song has that singer/songwriter vibe—it's a long haul.



"I think it's gonna have to be a half a dozen breakthroughs...At this point, I think everybody's being kind of tentative about it."

—LUKE LEWIS,
LOST HIGHWAY PRESIDENT

"These records were worked for months. And I think there was a mentality—and I think there still is to a degree, but hopefully it's changing—of going for the quick hit, rather than taking the time to develop things. I think people are changing the way they're thinking, and learning now that you can't just shove these things out at random—that you have to let them breathe, get a groundswell going, and then you'll have a much better chance of success."

er Columbia—the career-long of Springsteen and Joel— artist development is very in the tradition of the label, says Will Botwin, executive VP/GM of Columbia Records Group.

he acknowledges that the approach to such artists as Five for Fighting and Mayer is "a bit of a throwback," considering today's marketplace. "And I'm really proud of it, and I think those of us at the management of the label are really proud of what we're doing with these artists, because they're not the easiest to get on the radio and on TV.

"A lot of it," Botwin continues, "is just based on a traditional, old-school approach. It's not so much just going for the *TRL* video and that kind of marketplace. It's much more based on touring and critical press and sort of just day-to-day, week-to-week maintenance of what

we're doing on those acts—and managing our own expectations."

PRIORITY NO. 1

But in a time when artist development almost always takes a back seat to the bottom line, what is most important—Mercury Nashville chairman/Lost Highway president Luke Lewis notes—is that these guys, at the end of the day, "have hits."

"You can have singer/songwriters out the wazoo, and if they don't at some point write a compelling song that somehow or another gets exposed—or is compelling enough to get exposed by the gatekeepers in this industry—it's always going to be niched out," Lewis says.

He adds that although PDs—like most people in the music industry—are music junkies who may be hungry for songs with more substance, they may be a little slower warming to a song like "Babylon."

"Some of the programmers I've talked to have described that record—in terms of the way it broke through, or in the way they programmed it—as sort of a flavor track," Lewis says. "I don't have a sense that programmers, at this point, believe that there's a movement afoot. And I don't think that they believe that one artist is gonna change the pie. Ya know, I think it's gonna have to be a half a dozen breakthroughs, and then I guess it opens the door, and everybody will at least spend some more money marketing these people and trying to get them on the radio and do what we all do to get things exposed. At this point, I think everybody's being kind of tentative about it."

Despite the fact that more opportunities seem to be arising for these artists, it's unclear whether they've become a hotter commodity. "It's always been on the agenda that these kinds of acts do get signed," Cooper says. And Virgin is no exception, signing Harper, Arthur, and Brendan Benson, among others, during the past decade.

"I think the more intelligent A&R guys, whether they are working for major labels or working for smaller labels, gravitate to that quality of voice and the brilliance of songs," Cooper adds. "And you're always going to get a lot of these types of artists signed on that basis."

In the past few months, Ondrasik says he's heard that "Superman" has caused some changes in the A&R community: "I've heard a few rumors of people at record companies going, 'Ya know, we need to find something like Five for Fighting,' which is so great.

"But we've only seen a couple of songs," Ondrasik continues. "We'll have to see where we are two or three years from now. I think we still have a lot to prove. I've had one song that seems to touch people. You go to an Elton John concert, and you'll hear 50 of 'em. So I still think we have a long way to go, but it's nice. As a songwriter, you ask for one thing, and that's a chance to be heard. And guys like me [and] Ryan Adams, we're getting that chance.

"And will we grow into some of

these guys? Maybe a couple of us will. I just think it's exciting we're getting the chance. You look at guys like Ron Sexsmith and Elliott Smith, who are so under the radar, ya know, they deserve that chance, and they deserve the voice that people like James Taylor, Dylan, all those guys did. And if it does happen, it's about time."

Trend or movement, Ondrasik says the rise of such artists helps return a healthy balance to mainstream music in the U.S.—between sugary pop and songs and artists with integrity—that has been missing in recent years.

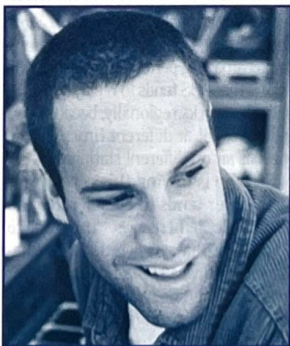
"I think that's why I—as a music fan—and my friends are so frustrated with pop music. You really don't have the balance," he says. "When we grew up, there was New Kids on the Block, right? But there was also U2 and the Police."

Hiatt concurs, "Good pop music is great. I love good pop music. I'm totally all for it, but there's been a lot of turds floating down the river lately. Let's not kid ourselves, and I'm sure the labels aren't kiddin' themselves, either."

SOMETHING TO KEEP IN MIND

One thing to keep in mind is that male singer/songwriters are sort of intended to clash with the mainstream. Or so says Wainwright, the son of quirky folk singer Loudon Wainwright III.

"The funny thing about male singer/songwriters is—and I can say this because I'm pretty much an expert



"It could be that boy bands are kind of fading and people are wanting to hear songs that actually come from a person."

—JACK JOHNSON,
RISING INDIE SINGER/SONGWRITER

on them, because my father was one—it's a very tenuous kind of situation, because it is kind of based on this macho, I'm-alone-in-the-world/I-don't-need-anybody-but-myself sort of vibe," Wainwright candidly explains. "So it thrives a little bit off of not having massive success, in a weird way—not being a success-monger is sort of part of being a great male singer/songwriter."

NEWSLINE...

Dave Grohl and Krist Novoselic filed a countersuit Dec. 12 against Courtney Love (*Billboard Bulletin*, Dec. 13). The case involves the release of material by Nirvana, the band that had comprised Grohl, Novoselic, and Love's late husband, Kurt Cobain. The counterclaim, filed in Superior Court of Washington for King County, comes in response to an action Love filed earlier this year against Grohl, Novoselic, and Universal Music Group (UMG), seeking a declaration that Nirvana's contract with the company is void and that all rights pertaining to the band revert to her (*Billboard Bulletin*, Oct. 2). According to the countersuit, Grohl, Novoselic, Love, and Geffen Records agreed in 1996 to compile a boxed set of Nirvana recordings timed for release around Christmas 2001, the 10-year anniversary of Nirvana's landmark album *Nevermind*. Earlier this year, Love



obtained an injunction preventing the set's release. Grohl and Novoselic say that Love—who has a separate suit pending against UMG regarding her recording contract—has "thwarted negotiations" with Geffen over the release of a Nirvana hits set because she is "attempting to force Geffen and UMG into modifying her personal recording agreement." The countersuit's allegations include tortious interference with contract, related to the failure to deliver the boxed set; abuse of process; and trademark infringement, regarding rights to the nirvana.com domain name. Grohl and Novoselic seek the dismissal of Love's original complaint, court costs, and damages to be determined at trial. Love's attorney, Yale Lewis, denies Grohl and Novoselic's "conception that they were full partners in Nirvana" and denies allegations that Love is thwarting talks with UMG. The case is slated to go to trial next fall.

CAROLYN HORWITZ

Cuban composer/flutist José Antonio Fajardo, leader of the Fajardo y sus Estrellas orchestra, died Dec. 11 in New Jersey. He was 82. Fajardo, who defected from Cuba in 1961, was considered one of Cuba's great musicians and one of the great figures of *charanga*, a sound he is widely credited with revolutionizing by adding bongos and cowbells. Fajardo's last recording was his participation in *The Cuban Masters, Los Originales*, a Pimienta Records CD of Cuban legends that also featured Israel "Cachao" López, Alfredo "Chocolate" Armenteros, Carlos "Patato" Valdés, and Francisco Aguabella.

LEILA COBO

Sony/ATV Tree has re-signed Gretchen Peters to a new, multimillion-dollar songwriting and co-publishing contract. She has been affiliated with the company for 10 years. Peters' songs have been recorded by Trisha Yearwood, Pam Tillis, George Strait, Martina McBride, and Patty Loveless. She is currently working on music for an animated film scheduled for release next spring.

PHYLLIS STARK

Tommy Boy and the Warner Music Group (WMG), which owns 50% of the label, are nearing the end of negotiations to terminate their relationship, which will see the label free from corporate ownership and returned to independent status. Sources suggest that negotiations have reached the horse-trading stage, with the two partners dickering over who gets to keep what catalog and which artists. Also up in the air is what happens to the funding that WMG is under contract to provide until May 2002, sources say. Apparently, WMG is pushing for Tommy Boy to retain a greater portion of artists and catalog so that its payout will be lower. Once the deal is completed, Tommy Boy is expected to remain an ongoing entity, although what size and form the company will take has yet to be determined.

ED CHRISTMAN

Early on-sales for the return of Billy Joel and Elton John's Face to Face co-headlining tour are off to a record-setting pace in the Northeast. A sixth show for Philadelphia's First Union Center will go up Saturday (15) for Feb. 24, 2002, and is expected to join previous sellouts for shows on Feb. 13, 15, 17, 19, and 21. Boston's FleetCenter will go on sale with a fifth show for Feb. 2, joining previous sellouts for Jan. 22, 24, 29, and 31. The Hartford (Conn.) Civic Center has sellouts for Feb. 4, 6, 8, and 9, and the MCI Center in Washington, D.C. has sellouts for Jan. 13, 18, and 20. "We're not just going into the Northeast—we're taking it over," says Dennis Arfa, responsible agent for Joel; John is booked by the Howard Rose Agency. Clear Channel Entertainment will promote all of these dates. Last year's Face to Face tour grossed \$59 million from only 31 shows.

RAY WADDELL

Columbia Records has merged its urban and crossover radio promotion departments and eliminated the position of senior VP of urban promotion (*Billboard Bulletin*, Dec. 10). VP of crossover promotion Lisa Ellis has been upped to senior VP of urban/crossover promotion. Columbia Records Group executive VP of promotion Charlie Walk said in a statement that the changes were made "to provide our artists with a greater opportunity to excel at multiple radio formats."

RASHAUN HALL