

Hometown music worth rooting for

BY SANDRA SPEROUNES, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM MARCH 26, 2011

EDMONTON - With apologies to Roald Dahl, this Danny is no champion of the world, but Edmonton's Danny Fournier is one of the biggest promoters of the local music scene.

The musician, gig booker, and label owner is also the founder of the first Edmonton Music Awards, a two-night celebration of local talent at The Haven Social Club. Singer-songwriter Jeff Morris is the front-runner with six nominations, including best solo artist and best album for *Original Songs On A Borrowed Guitar*, followed by pop songstress Cara Albo with five.

Tickets to both shows tonight and Monday are sold out — the venue can only host 150 people — but fans can watch a live stream of Monday's ceremonies, starting at 7 p.m., on The Journal's website.

Performers for the second night include two of the nominees for best roots/folk artist, Wool on Wolves and The Provincial Archive.

Fournier says the goal of the EMAs isn't only to reward excellence, but to let more people know about the city's music scene.

"There's a handful of nominees I had never even heard of before, that I had no idea were in Edmonton," he says. "I had never heard of Jeff Morris, but through this, I got introduced to a new artist and that's exciting."

Three awards will be announced at tonight's festivities — people's choice, artist to watch, and best live performance, all decided by 1,745 online votes from fans.

Ten more awards, selected by a range of non-Edmonton judges such as radio broadcaster Alan Cross, will be presented Monday. (EMA organizers didn't want their main ceremony to compete with tonight's Junos.) Each winner will receive a framed piece of art.

"Anything you can do to bring local recognition to local artists is a good thing," says Cross, who hosts *ExploreMusic* and *The Ongoing History of New Music*, two nationally syndicated radio shows.

"With the Internet, there's an infinite supply of music out there, so it's easy to get lost in that ocean. Local event such as this give hometown music fans something to root for.

"While it's just as easy to access a song from, say, a band from Minsk as it is from across town, it's also important that local music be celebrated. I've seen and heard a lot of good bands out of Edmonton over the last year and something like these awards are hopefully a step toward getting them provincial, national and then international recognition."

Fournier isn't the first to come up with the idea of local awards, but he's the first to make it a reality. He remembers joking about it with a group of friends, then decided he wasn't kidding around.

Last November, Fournier asked fans and bands to submit nominations. More than 1,100 did, and based on their input, five, six or 10 nominees in each category were selected. Initially, he was just going to list the winners on his website, but

he received so much positive feedback, he decided to organize two ceremonies with the help of The Haven's owners, gig promoter Steve Derpack, and local ticket service, yeglive.ca.

Award presenters include Il Duo, a pair of comedic tenors; members of the Prairie Wrestlers Alliance; and Alan Cross (via video).

"I'm overwhelmed," says Fournier. "The fact that it's got to this point, I'm already ecstatic."

Fournier, a native of Prince Albert, Sask., was destined to nurture musicians. His father, Laurent, was a guitar teacher; his grandmother, Margo, was the director of the Prince Albert's Boys' Choir. (Her name graces a rec centre in their hometown.) His sister, Megan Fournier-Mewis, is an opera singer, while his brother, John Paul, is a comedian.

After learning guitar, playing in a few bands, working in a record shop and studying marketing and sociology at the University of Saskatchewan, Fournier got a job with a major record label, BMG, "putting up posters in HMVs." He was promoted and moved to Edmonton in 1999, started playing bass in a band, Headruin, then was forced to make a tough decision – accept a job transfer to Calgary or stay in Edmonton with his bandmates.

Fournier stayed, but a few months later, he had an epiphany. He didn't want to be a rock star, he wanted to help other musicians achieve their dreams.

"While opening for Trevor Hurst when he was doing his solo project, I realized I didn't like living in a van," says Fournier.

"Even on stage, I remember thinking about the business side of things. It just dawned on me – I like working with bands and developing bands and helping introduce people to bands."

So, five years ago, he started his own company, Oddball Productions, to release albums, book gigs, sponsor songwriting competitions, and teach aspiring musicians about the ins and outs of the industry — from gig fees to cultivating social-media savvy fans.

"The music industry isn't rocket science, but there are some rules," says Fournier.

"If more bands took those steps instead of just waiting for those steps to happen, they'd be a lot better off. It's easy to talk about goals, but how are you going to get there

"As an artist, you are a business and all businesses need to have a mission statement, a vision. I love working with bands and helping them build their business."

Sooo ... what are his goals for the Edmonton Music Awards?

"No. 1: Not to have my wife's water break before the shows," laughs Fournier, who will welcome his first son sometime over the next three weeks. "But we know we need to have an all-ages venue for next year."

And definitely a larger one.