

## MUSIC

# Honey Jam's sticking power

Urban talent showcase that launched Nelly Furtado's career keeps the buzz going

BY ELIO IANNACCI

When the words "Canadian music," "live performance" and "female-centric" are strung together in the same sentence, most people automatically think of Lilith Fair. But for Ebonnie Rowe, founder of Honey Jam — an all-female-artist showcase that takes place each year in Toronto — nothing could be further from reality.

Forget the cliché of Sarah McLachlan, barefoot on a patchouli-scented stage, surrounded by a posse of guitar-slinging folkies in mom jeans and loose tank tops — to ever-dwindling audiences. Honey Jam, which has actually been around since 1995 (pre-Lilith), launched the careers of Nelly Furtado and Jully Black and attracts a hip, multicultural, multi-genre, pool of artists who use and fuse branches of urban music (think hip hop, house, soul, rap) to express themselves.

This year's showcase, which will take place on Sunday at the Mod Club, is a perfect example of just how distinct and transformative a women's music line-up can be.

"Honey Jam changed my life," recalls Ms. Furtado. "It's what I will always see as my big break in the business." In fact, Ms. Furtado — who was recently announced as a star recipient on Canada's Walk of Fame — was so marked by her Honey Jam experience 13 years ago, she agreed to sponsor this year's event via her own record label, Nelstar.

From female rappers, soul singers, dance-club acts to pop and hip-hop ingénues, each artist (aged from 15 to thirty-something) represents a part of Toronto's scene that is rarely heard on MuchMusic, MTV or mainstream radio.

"This isn't a beauty pageant," Ms. Rowe says. "These are strong urban artists here that need exposure and guidance. This is the type of opportunity that could help jump-start a major career."

Ms. Rowe, a former legal sec-



Sisters Kyla (left) and Qwyn Charter are two of the 300-plus women who lined up for hours to audition. DARREN CALABRESE FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

**Honey Jam changed my life. It's what I will always see as my big break in the business.**

Nelly Furtado

retary turned promoter, and now chief executive officer of a company called PhemPhat (which produces Honey Jam), says the creation of the showcase came from sheer frustration. "When I started it in 1995, female artists were not getting recognized or respected so I decided to step in and make some space for them. After 15 years, the need is still there.

"There are still so many horror stories of women who sing or rap that are not taken seriously or sign blindly on the dotted line only to have their careers side-swiped," she emphasized.

She stressed that an artist going through the Honey Jam process gets an audience, free

tutorials on the music business and tips on how to grow as an artist, "just by signing up."

The panel of experts Ms. Rowe gathered this year — who were plucked from major record labels and a variety of influential channels of the entertainment industry — were part of the showcase judging and audition process that took place in June.

One of the most experienced judges, vocal coach Elaine Overholt, who has worked with legends such as Tina Turner, Dionne Warwick, Chubby Checker and Ray Charles, helped Ms. Rowe create an artist tutorial this year to help the finalists un-

derstand the dynamics of the occupation of "performer" — especially during the digital age.

To get a sense of Honey Jam's potential, one need only to rewind to 1997, when a 19-year-old Nelly Furtado was discovered at a Honey Jam open mic while freestyling over a trip-hop track.

"Before I left Honey Jam that night, I had a producer's business card in my hand and met my manager, Chris Smith, who I'm still with today," says Ms. Furtado. "A few weeks later, I was in the studio recording demos. It was a dream come true."

Ms. Rowe immediately saw the chain reaction of Ms. Fur-

tado's chart triumphs.

"She was the first Caucasian to perform at Honey Jam and ended up changing everything for us," Ms. Rowe says. "Her success was connected back to us and people took Honey Jam more seriously — they started realizing that it provided a space where music, culture and ideas expanded."

To honour Ms. Furtado's historic Honey Jam moment, Ms. Rowe asked a few of the singers from this year's Honey Jam showcase to re-record her biggest hit, *I'm Like A Bird* (proceeds for the iTunes sales of the song will go to YWCA).

Two of the featured singers on this newly released cover version who will be featured in the showcase are 21-year-old twin sisters Qwyn and Kyla Charter, two of the 300-plus women who lined up for hours to get their shot at the Honey Jam mic.

"Toronto has its own Whitney Houstons and Alicia Keys all over the city," notes Kyla. "This is where they get tested, challenged and supported. I know I've never been this inspired before at any other type of event I've been to. It's already made me sharpen my game and be a better performer."

House music singer/musicalian Tiff Mak, 23, who hails from downtown T.O., had her own reasons for trusting Honey Jam as a launch pad for her career. "I asked around and the word was, it had nothing to do with being on *Canadian Idol*, being overtly sexualized, or processed or manufactured for the sake of sales."

The youngest performer at this year's showcase, 15-year-old rapper Reema Major, hails from Kansas City and moved to Toronto in 2009 to be part of the Canadian hip-hop scene.

She is adamant that Honey Jam is an anomaly in North America. "There is nothing like this that supports urban women in music where I'm from, and there needs to be."

» Special to The Globe and Mail