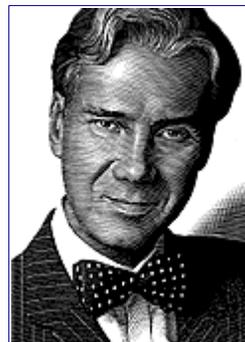


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# MusicToMyEars

by Timothy White  
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## Going For The Gold, Or Just A Cash Equivalent?

Sometimes life is most instructive to the spectator. Two weeks ago, I had a skiing accident during a family trip. It left me with torn ligaments and a separated shoulder bone but also the winter vacation perk of spending additional time at home with my wife and sons as we watched the Olympic Games and the Grammy Awards. Both events, for all their public controversies and political posturing, were ultimately eclipsed at their core by raw talent and the passion to refine it—particularly in the joyfully unjaded figure skating of teenage gold medalist Sarah Hughes and in the charmingly unaffected performances of contributors to the Grammy album of the year, O Brother, Where Art Thou?

Yet both events seemed at a crossroads in their purity of purpose. As our culture ascends the slippery slope of Late High Capitalism—an era in which profit becomes its own justification—it was touching to see Olympic champions and their kin recalling previous medal glories, some of which extended to nether branches of their own family trees. But it was depressing to see latter-day medalists' triumphs in amateur sport equated with modern deals for product endorsements.

The latter remarks dovetailed in recent memory with a January chat this writer had with Ravi Shankar; his wife, Sukanya; and their daughter, Anoushka. We talked at their Manhattan hotel, hours before they attended a stand at the Makor nightclub by young singer Norah Jones—Ravi's 22-year-old daughter by Oklahoman Sue Jones. The Shankars were as thrilled with the prospect of seeing Norah sing as they were with the fact that Ravi was nominated for a Grammy Award (he went on to win) in the best world-music album category for Full Circle/Carnegie Hall 2000 (Angel Records). Asked how he felt about Grammy recognition, Ravi grinned and said, "It's a great honor," and the 81-year-old added with a giggle, "but it's still a great honor to be able to play."

Just as in the Olympic Games, where many highly promoted athletes were surpassed at critical junctures by

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unsung and underestimated competitors who rose to the moment, it's a serious mistake in popular music to discount seasoned recording artists without affording them the benefit of the doubt. This columnist's first night out after the skiing mishap was a concert at the Fleet Center in Boston by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young (CSN&Y). Here was a group I hadn't seen live since a June 1970 gig at the Fillmore East in Greenwich Village; I was amazed at how good they remained and how effective their more recent material was, from Crosby, Stills & Nash's 1982 hit "Southern Cross" to Young's 1989 "Rockin' in the Free World" and his ode to Sept. 11 heroism, "Let's Roll."

During the evening, I heard friendly complaints from two fellow CSN&Y concertgoers about how difficult it has become to discover worthy new acts via today's indie promotion/pay-for-play-infested radio. I urged them to buy Kate Rusby's *Little Lights* (Compass); Starsailor's debut album, *Love Is Here* (Capitol); and Norah Jones' *Come Away With Me* (Blue Note); as well as *Evangeline Made: A Tribute to Cajun Music* (Vanguard), featuring John Fogerty, et al. I expanded on my own Starsailor-related advice and caught the band's March 5 date at New York's Irving Plaza. The confident sound of the acoustic-guitar-centered rock combo was stunning in its careful melodic contours. Lead singer James Walsh has a vibrantly impulsive voice; it trespasses listeners' psyches with the suddenness of an interrupted dream. Highlights by the quartet from the North West of England included "Coming Down," "Lullaby," and a cover of John Lennon's "Jealous Guy."

For all the major-label time and funds wasted on rented digital downloads, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, or other monopolistic dead-ends addressed in my last column ("The Music Industry's Web of Intrigue," *Billboard*, March 2), if labels would simply strike equitable bargains with more budding talents like Starsailor—a band that could be huge if it stays the course—and help to supply the A&R essentials as each act's catalog accumulates, we'd have more new headliners that the public would fill stores and venues to support. Which brings me to a clarification of a passage in that March 2 essay. While writing that piece on my computer with one hand (my other throbbing arm held in a brace and sling), a clumsy random keystroke inadvertently deleted three lines of a paragraph near its conclusion, the blunder going unnoticed as the final draft was transmitted to the *Billboard* production department. As a consequence, an ex-BMG executive was misquoted. With sincere apologies for the error, but hewing to the text's critical theme, reprinted herewith is the entire section as it should have appeared:

"Almost as disappointingly elusive as online music profits are the rising numbers of out-of-power music and media executives who once undermined artists' cases for copyright and contract issues before assorted industry

and government bodies, only to sometimes flip their respective positions after parachuting from their respective posts. This was evidenced by a recent statement from former BMG U.K. & Europe president Richard Griffiths, just hired as international president of a U.S. management firm, who now amazingly asserts that it's not selling product that matters most in today's music business power game but rather brokering artists. 'If we take that critical mass of artists from day one,' boasts Griffiths, alluding to his new company's 'big' management roster, 'everyone has to play with me.' The blunt detachment of his strategic viewpoint on talent was rivaled only by his new employer's withering statement characterizing Griffiths' decision to depart his prior profession: 'In the record business, people are realizing that record companies only care about selling records, therefore they don't care about long-term careers.' "

In fairness to Griffiths, a veteran label exec not known for personal callousness, he was merely evaluating a roster of musical talent from the same market-share perspective he had acquired during his career at BMG and Epic. Yet even in these current hard times, there remains a pervasive music industry attitude that the market clout of the castle in which one toils is far more important than the cares of the artists and customers the palace potentates are there to serve. If, as a professional community, we can all follow the music and not just the money, doing so in a spirit more Olympian than oligarchic, a hopeful future might ensue.

Back in January at Makor, once Anoushka Shankar had escorted her parents back to their hotel following Norah Jones' early-evening sets, she returned alone for Jones' late show. She sat beside the bandstand, cheering her half-sister on. Afterward, Anoushka leaned over and confided, "Isn't she fantastic?" Yes, she is. And all of us, whether fans, family, managers, label execs, or trade journalists, need to be on hand for the right reasons as Jones grows, doing our part to help turn the often graspingly shrill music of business into a giving and socially enriching business of music.

-- *Timothy White*