LIVE MUSIC

THE TRAGICALLY HIP RECEIVE 2021 JUNO HUMANITARIAN AWARD

By Andrea Gunn

Published May 19, 2021

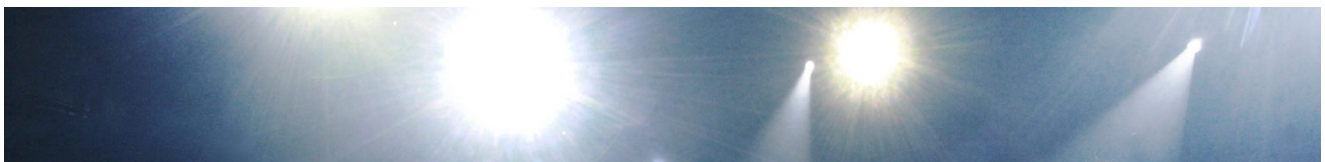
"MAKING OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD A BETTER PLACE"

Their first JUNO award – in 1990 – was for "most promising group of the year." And The Tragically Hip certainly lived up to their promise. They went on to win 14 more JUNOs and were inducted into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame. At this year's JUNO ceremony on June 6, they'll receive the 2021 Humanitarian Award.

The Humanitarian Award recognizes outstanding Canadian artists or industry leaders whose humanitarian contributions have positively enhanced the social fabric of Canada and beyond. Members of The Hip – Rob Baker, Paul Langlois, Gord Sinclair, and Johnny Fay – will receive the award from Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson from Rush (the 2015 Humanitarian award recipients).

The Hip also will perform at the JUNO event, with singer Leslie Feist on vocals. This will be the band's first televised performance since lead singer Gord Downie died in 2017. The event will be broadcast on Sunday, June 6 at 8pm on all CBC platforms: CBCmusic.ca/junos.

Rob Baker, the band's lead guitarist, talked about getting this award, the importance of supporting local causes, and one of his favourite Kingston musical memories.



BERNARD CLARK PHOTOGRAPHY

"It feels strange to receive a humanitarian award," he says modestly. "We just try and make our neighbourhood a better place." Charitable work has always been part of the band's ethos. Most recently, the band has been working with the Unison Benevolent Fund, which provides emergency relief services to people in the Canadian music industry, both musicians and crew members. "Things have been pretty bad in our industry," says Rob. "We know people who lost tours, who are out of work, and are clinging to their livelihoods. We don't want to lose an entire industry to COVID!"

The Tragically Hip have been raising awareness and money for the fund, including through proceeds of their "Courage" masks. Learn more at https://thehip.com.

And while they continue to support national causes, the members of The Hip have always prioritized Kingston projects. "In the early years," says Rob, "we never shied away from doing benefit shows. Our first big one was for Almost Home. We put on a concert at Fort Henry with The Pursuit of Happiness. Almost Home [which provides support for families with sick kids in Kingston hospitals] had just secured a place but didn't have the funds to renovate it and make it into what it could be – what their *dream* was. So, we were able to raise a significant amount of money for them."

We accepted our award for Canadian Entertainer of the Year at the Junos in 1991.

Photo taken by @barryrodenphoto

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"You just start small," he continues, "but then you get a taste for it. You can see the impact of your support [for a small charity], and you start to dream a little bigger."

And sometimes, a cause hits really close to home.

"Joe Chithalen was a friend," says Rob somberly. "And we had great plans to play together … and that didn't happen. The unexpected has a way of poking its head up every once in a while."

Joe Chithalen, a talented Kingston musician, died tragically in 1999 at the age of 32. In his honour, the Joe Chithalen Memorial Musical Instrument Lending Library – Joe's MILL – was established. The library loans out a variety of musical instruments at no charge to Kingston residents. The Tragically Hip have supported Joe's MILL since its beginning.

MUSIC BUILDS COMMUNITY

So, why is Joe's MILL so transformational? Why is having access to music and musical instruments so important, especially for young people? For Rob Baker, "it's just being able to have the *opportunity*. Not everyone is going to play an instrument; not everyone is going to have dreams of making albums or touring the world. But [access to music instruments] is just such a good way to investigate yourself and build community with other people. The connection that music makes with people! And not just the way music connects with a person's heart and mind, but the way it connects them with *other* people. It really does build community. So, if you can extend some of those opportunities, then, by all means, you *need to do it*."

KINGSTON MUSICAL MEMORIES

Kingston live music venues are shuttered for the time being. But Rob has fond memories of two special concerts here in Kingston, one as a performer and the other as an audience member.

"At the Leon's Centre, coming up on five years ago, [The Tragically Hip] played our final show. And I remember being on stage and looking over, and my wife and son were standing side stage. And I kind of gave them a little smile. And two or three years later, I was standing side stage there with my wife, watching my son [Boris Baker, bassist for Kasador] on stage, warming up for The Glorious Sons. And he looked over at us and gave us a smile. And I saw that look in his eye. We both recognized that this flip had happened. And that was a pretty special moment for me."

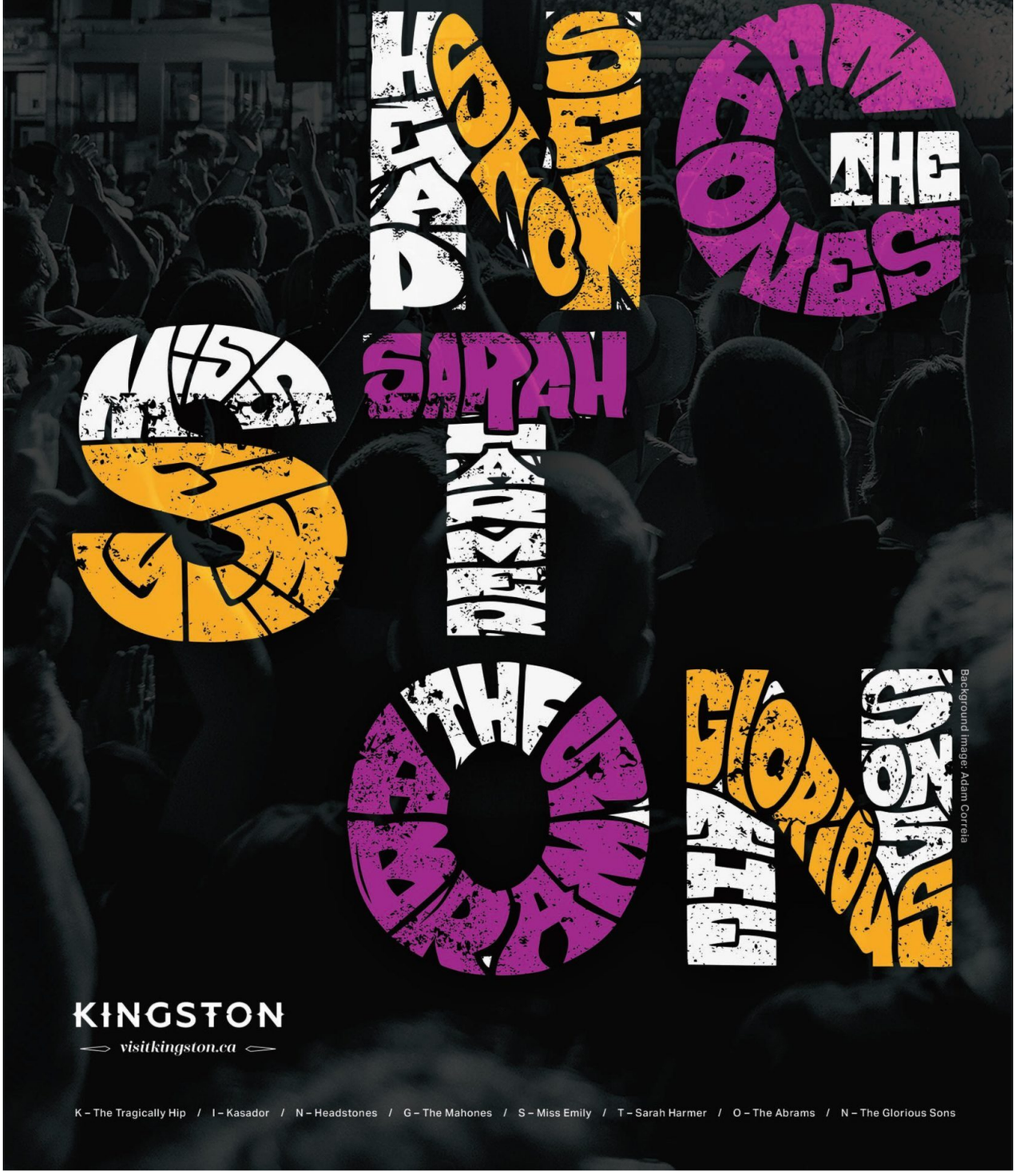
BERNARD CLARK PHOTOGRAPHY

INSIDER ITINERARY

Rob Baker and his wife, Leslie, have been sticking close to home this past year. They're both avid cooks and enjoy trying out new recipes. But, Rob says, "we realized that restaurants must be taking a beating due to COVID. So, we committed to ordering in once a week. We have our favourites – Chez Piggy, Harper's, Olivea, Wooden Heads. One of our favourite Indian restaurants, Curry Original, is temporarily shut down, but it's under new ownership and will be re-opening. Taste of India is also excellent. I have a friend in Toronto who says he has had to come to Kingston to get the best Indian food!"

Sticking close to home has also enabled Rob to discover some local treasures.

"I found a great little corner store on John Street recently," he says. "Daughter's General Store. Wow – that's a treat! Really enjoyed that place. It's kind of like a corner store. But everything in there is kind of upscale and interesting. You can buy orchids! Or, if you want a popsicle, you can go in, but they're not just popsicles, they're Mexican paletas – they're homemade, beautifully crafted popsicles that are fantastic! And they have so many interesting things that you're not going to get at a regular corner store."



JUNO'S POSTER IN SUPPORT OF JOE'S M.I.L.L.

Joe's M.I.L.L. is a registered charity in Kingston, Ontario founded by musician, Wally High, in memory of his friend and band member, the late Joe Chithalen, who was a talented bass player in several well-known Kingston bands. Joe's M.I.L.L. operates in tribute to Joe's love of music, so that anyone who wants to can enjoy playing music as much as he did.

All proceeds from sales of the poster will go to support Joe's M.I.L.L.

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