

Songs for the children

The Sunday Times, Country Roads joining hands for a cause

By FEIZAL SAMATH

If not for the Sunday Times and Harpo, then attached to the Ramada Renaissance Hotel, a rare concert series that has enthralled many Sri Lankans would never have got on the road.

It all began in early 1988, less than a year after the Sunday Times began publication, when I crisscrossed the country as a journalist working for Reuters' news agency. Those were difficult times – government troops battling JVP insurgents and Indian peacekeeping forces containing the LTTE – and one of the reporting trips took me to a refugee camp in an abandoned warehouse in Trincomalee.

It was a moving story ... little children, care-free, running around with smiles blissfully unaware of the tragedy facing their families. A story, that like many others, moved the world and won me a byline in many of the top international newspapers. It was a great feeling. A few weeks later I visited the same camp; nothing had changed. I felt shamed, guilt pricking inside.

That was the turning point in a journey that continues to date – helping needy children through music. A country music lover myself, I felt I had to do something beyond the written word to help these people. Why not a one-off concert to raise money for children?



The first review: How the Sunday Times reported on the 1988 Country Roads show

That's how the Country Music Foundation (CMF), a not-for-profit charity with the tagline 'Helping the needy through Music' was formed.

Looking for a venue, Juragan Majid, co-founder of the CMF, and I walked into the lobby of the Ramada in mid-1988 to check out the cost of hiring a hall, completely raw in this game. Up came Harpo Gunaratne and listening to us, said, "Not to worry Feizal, we'll host the show." "You mean no charge for the hall?" I asked surprised. "Oh yes," he responded with a smile.

One hurdle over, I asked Vijitha Yapa, then editor of the Sunday Times, for support. No doubt my relationship with the newspaper as a columnist for the business pages helped and thus began a relationship that has stood the test of time.

The first 'Country Roads' concert was held in November 1988 on a shoe-string budget. It was a success and led to our first contribution – Rs 20,000 – to the Ministry of Rehabilitation for a children's orphanage in Colombo. The concert drew the attention of a few UNICEF staffers who were in the audience. Intrigued by the idea of using music to raise

funds for children, they wanted to get involved. Thus a one-off concert turned into a series that has gone from strength to strength spawning good music and raising money – some Rs 7-8 million in the 18 concerts that have been held so far.

So while the Sunday Times celebrates a milestone this month, the CMF is fast on its heels celebrating its own 25th anniversary next year. Both the paper and the CMF have gone through hard times – reporting on hard facts and bringing music to the people sometimes against all odds.

On one occasion, we wanted to cut short the concert at 8 p.m. because of an 11 p.m. curfew. But the crowd stayed on till 10 p.m., loving the music with just an hour to get home to beat the curfew.

Over the years, the CMF has travelled on a long and winding road, bringing music to the people from far and wide (musicians from Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Germany, Britain, the US, Italy, Canada, etc who donate their services) and utilizing the funds raised for a whole range of activities like building pre-schools and libraries, providing roof sheets for schools, tables and chairs for a school in an IDP camp, musical instruments, shoes, etc, etc. Our recent partner organization is Save the Children.

Here are views from some of the musicians who are part of the Country Roads family:

Tyronne Peiris from Cosmic Rays:

Those were wonderful times. We did it for a purpose; musicians playing free for so many years and raising money for children.

One of my most moving moments was when the compere referred to Asoka, our long-time drummer, who had died a few weeks earlier. I began to sing but for a moment was caught by emotion, and cried for the first time on stage. It took a little while to gain my composure.

Everyone who comes to these shows has their own story to tell which blends with the music which is all about people, their lives, their successes, their failures. Country Roads has been a wonderful experience and 25 years, wow, that's a lifetime,

Mariazelle Gunatillake:

As we look ahead forward to celebrating the silver jubilee of 'Country Roads,' I recall thinking at the time that here was a theme for a musical outreach which would showcase a brand of music that was extremely popular here in Sri Lanka, yet not highlighted before.

Being a guest performer at the very first concert, I became a part and parcel of the annual event and would look forward to it as I was able to sing songs that echoed the moods of many... the stories told in

this music related so strongly to everyday situations.... I loved it!

Dirk Maverick - Mavericks band from Germany:

The concert just three weeks after the tsunami was the one that touched me the most.

In 1994, we visited a school that the CMF helped build in the north. All the while another vehicle drove ahead to check for bombs on the street. Then a very warm welcome at the school – the smile of the children and their beautiful eyes, moments one would never forget.

Singer Astrid Brook – UK:

Singing 'Country Roads' together with all the musicians onstage at the end of every concert. This is such a beautiful song and it's very fitting that the concert is named after it. Singing this song with the other musicians generates that feeling of belonging to something bigger than myself, to a musical community,

which then is extended out to the audience, and then through the money raised, the music again touches the lives of children and people in remote villages that we will probably never meet. That is the power of music and of being a musician, to be able to touch people beyond any physical barrier, but directly through our hearts.

Co-founder Majid says seeing the first advertisement is a moment that cannot be expressed but felt.

"The making and presenting of the songs 'Song for UNICEF' and 'Water for Life' to bring out the cause of the concert are special moments in my diary. Furthermore seeing the picture of the first tube well built from the proceeds in strife-torn areas will never leave the mind," he recalled.

These past two decades have also taken the CMF through the winds of change in the music scene in Sri Lanka. Preferences particularly among the young have shifted from pop, disco, rap, hip-hop to what is called dub-step by today's generation. Clearly more emphasis is on sound than voices. Gone are the three guitars and drums days. Now it's live voices backed by recorded tracks from the Internet. Yet the CMF and its Country Road series have stood tall bringing in the lilting and meaningful songs of John Denver, Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel, Willy Nelson, Alabama, James Taylor, Dolly Parton, Creedence Clearwater Revival and even Dire Straits to many Country Roads' fans.

For our fans, await the 19th edition of Country Roads scheduled for February next year in Colombo and the 20th edition under planning in the Maldives, the first time the CMF is venturing outside to raise money for children abroad.

(The writer is the founder of the CMF)



Off to a grand start: The very first concert