Making MUSIC for a CHANGE

Being able to help others while having a great time—it’s the best of both worlds. That’s what Irwin Nussbaum, UH’s associate dean of students, has achieved with the University’s MUSIC for a CHANGE concert series which he launched last spring with three concerts. For the 2000–01 school year, the concert series featured 10 shows last fall and 10 this spring.

Among the performers that Nussbaum brought to the University this past fall were Grammy Award–winning artists Shawn Colvin and Alison Krauss and Union Station, as well as Richie Havens, Odetta, Jonathan Edwards, and Patty Larkin. Those performing on campus this spring included Christine Lavin, Richard Shindell, Northern Lights, and Tish Hinojosa. Upcoming spring shows include Lucy Kaplansky on April 27, Cheryl Cormier on May 12, and David Mallet on May 18.

Already booked for the 2001–02 MUSIC for a CHANGE series are return engagements by Edwards on Sept. 14, Larkin on Dec. 7, Erin McKeown on Sept. 28, and Vance Gilbert on Oct. 26. Nussbaum also confirmed that The Capitol Steps, a Washington, D.C.–based group renowned for its biting political satire, will perform at the University as part of the series during Fall Weekend (Oct. 12–14).

The genesis of the series arose during a chat Nussbaum was having with Fred Sweitzer, associate dean of the University’s College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions. “Fred and I share a love of the same kinds of music—folk and acoustic—and we agreed that it was a shame that there wasn’t enough of this music on campus and that students and others weren’t being exposed to it,” he said. Sweitzer then encouraged Nussbaum to develop a concert series featuring that kind of music for the campus.

Nussbaum had run a similar concert series, called Sundays at the Capitol, when he worked at Amherst College in Massachusetts. Featuring such well-known performers as Bonnie Raitt, Mary Chapin Carpenter, and Krauss, the series raised a significant amount of money for local nonprofit agencies in the Amherst/ Northampton area.

As director of the University’s Center for Community Service (CCS), Nussbaum wanted the University of Hartford series to be one that would benefit local nonprofit agencies. He said that it was Sweitzer who came up with the name for the series. “This is really all about helping our neighbors and friends help change people’s lives,” according to Nussbaum.

When Cheryl Cormier arrives on campus May 12 to perform her MUSIC for a CHANGE concert, she will be on familiar ground. The country singer attended The Hartt School for two years, where she developed a love of classical music and opera but knew that singing opera would not be for her. It was when she started listening to singers such as K. D. Lang, K. T. Oslin and Bonnie Raitt that she began to realize that it was country music that spoke to her soul.

The proceeds from the Alison Krauss and Union Station show, about $800, went to Foodshare, which provides food to needy families throughout central Connecticut. Other nonprofit organizations that have benefited from the concert series include Habitat for Humanity, the Juvenile Diabetes Association, and Covenant to Care (a Bloomfield-based organization that helps meet the needs of abused, neglected, and impoverished children in Connecticut).

Covenant to Care Associate Director Lois Coatsworth told the Hartford Advocate that being involved with the MUSIC for a CHANGE concert is about much more than raising money. “It’s more getting your name out there and raising awareness,” she said, noting that more than 300 people attended the Jonathan Edwards concert that benefited Covenant to Care. “That kind of platform for a small nonprofit is very valuable.” As a result of the concert, the organization received a donation of Beanie Babies, which will come in quite handy at the holidays, and an elementary school teacher asked her to come speak to fourth- and fifth-graders about poverty. “Those are two contacts that I would not normally have made,” she said.

Nussbaum notes that some of the nonprofits benefiting from the concerts are groups with which the University and CCS have had partnerships, while others have asked to get involved after hearing about the series. He encourages representatives of nonprofit agencies to call him if they would like to get involved.

“All we require of the nonprofits is that they help promote the event [with which they are connected] via their membership list, and that they provide five volunteers the night of the show to help sell refreshments and artists’ merchandise and to talk about the work of their organization to the concertgoers,” he said.

Nussbaum admits that he’s been a bit selfish with the series. “I’m seeing the music I want and getting to meet some wonderful performers,” he says. But he’s also seeking suggestions for artists for future concerts. “People should e-mail me [nussbaum@mail.hartford.edu] with names of performers or names of local nonprofits that could be helped,” he said, or to be added to the mailing list.

MUSIC for a CHANGE is a concert series that benefits everyone, he says. “It’s a chance to help Hartford-area nonprofits and [hear] some wonderful music. What could be better than that?”