

OPINION

Secrets from the swag suite

The stars pick up free stuff in a posh gift lounge at the Canadian Country Music Awards

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Martina McBride is tiny, but she has size eight feet and her calves measure 13½ inches around, and we know this because Cassandra Rush measured them.

Rush has a company called Sassy Cassy's, which makes stylish "calf-fitting" boots, and she had been in business exactly four days on Sunday afternoon when one of country music's biggest stars wandered over to her little booth, sat down, tried on a pair of boots called Susie Q and pronounced them rather fabulous.

George Canyon is not tiny, but rather brawny, but he knows from dainty, because he picked up a pair of the most delicate opalite drop earrings that you can imagine from Kelsey's Vanderhorst's KV Bijou booth, a little treat, he said, for his wife.

Richard Marx is neither tiny nor brawny, but he has a sweet tooth, so sweet that he had an entire box of Red Velvet, Orange Chocolate Hazelnut and Caramel Crunch cupcakes from Craig and Melanie McDougall's Frosting Cupcakery booth delivered to his dressing room.

And so it went, from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., deep in the heart of Vancouver's GM Place, as country music star after country music star went "shopping" in the posh gift lounge at the Canadian Country Music Awards. (The show's live taping from 4 to 6 p.m.)

So what exactly is a swag suite, and what's the big deal about this one?

Well, it usually goes like this: a VIP event is held, and because people who make cool stuff want famous people to wear/eat/use it, they send boxes of their cool stuff to the venue for the celebrities to take what they want, for free, and everyone goes home happy.

So, Ray-Ban might ante up a bushel of its trendy shades for the Golden Globes, and when Tom Cruise is spotted wearing them a week later, well...

But the CCMA gift lounge? Now that was a gift horse of a different colour, sort of a swag suite with a conscience.

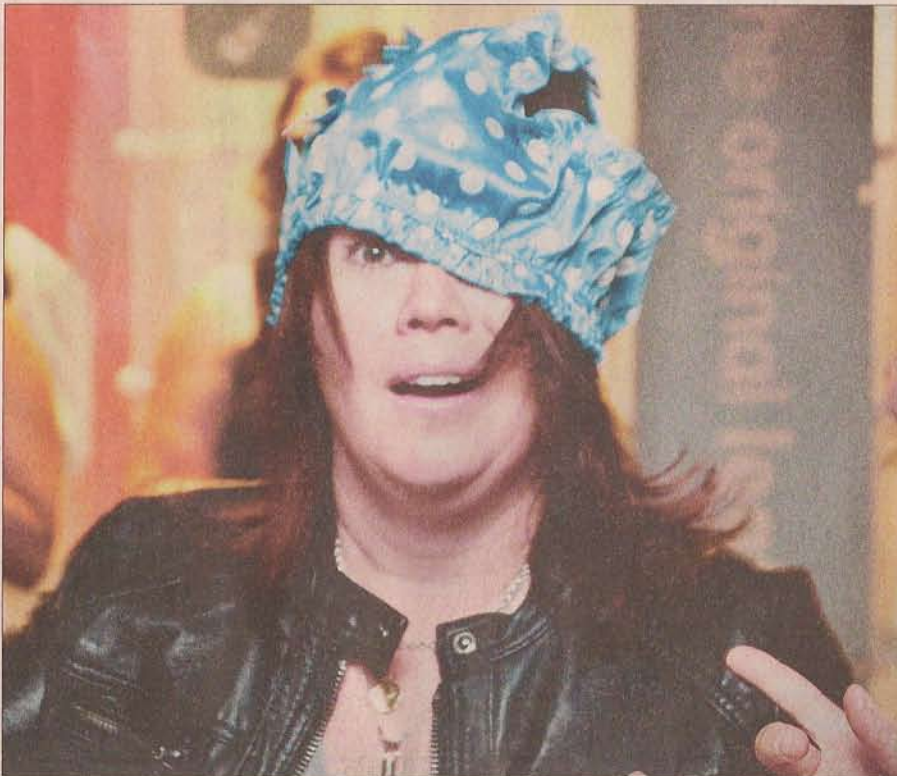
For one thing, all the loot was local, most of it from small Metro Vancouver boutique businesses.

For another, the proprietors and designers were on hand, not only rubbing elbows with country greats but promoting B.C. while they were at it.

Which is exactly how Gabrielle Durning, who owns the Uptown GiftBox Company in White Rock and who was tapped to "swag" the CCMAs, planned it.

"Everyone has the perception of this kind of thing as swank, of giving things to people who don't need it," said Durning.

"But in this time of recession, I wanted to leave behind a charitable footprint."



COLE ROBERTS PHOTOS

Jann Arden didn't take anything but had fun hamming it up with a pair of sexy underthings.



Erica Ehm and Jason Priestley with Gabrielle Durning, whose Uptown GiftBox Company was tapped to 'swag' the CCMAs.

That meant a glitzy 3,000-square-foot space filled with several dozen B.C. entrepreneurs showing off their wares, as well as a charitable corner where paintings and album covers were signed by the stars to be auctioned at a later date.

The custom sunglasses at Carla D'Angelo's booth were a big hit, for instance, not just for their West Coast native Indian designs by Alert Bay artist Corrine

Hunt, but because for every pair sold she donates \$2 to a breakfast program for first nations children.

So, there was all that altruism and business savvy to make you feel warm and fuzzy.

There were also busy bloggers posting updates in one corner, and Abbottsford's *Canadian Idol* alum Greg Neufeld quietly crooning in another.

And then there was all that swag.



Buffy Sainte-Marie, looking much younger than her 70 years ('It's the gym, girl, the gym'), tried on boots and pronounced the lounge 'great.'

From fair-trade coffee (Paul Brandt "loved" it) to magnetized leather baby bibs, from hand-tooled leather wallets (George Canyon picked out a billfold) to gourmet edibles, from hand-crafted jewelry (McBride went for a chunky necklace) to energy drinks, the shopping baskets filled up faster than you can say *You Were Always On My Mind*.

Folk music icon Buffy Sainte-Marie,

who on Saturday was inducted into the Canadian Country Music Hall of Fame and who looks decades younger than her nearly 70 years ("it's the gym, the gym") said, "I don't get to the lounges, but this one is great."

"As artists, we travel a lot. We do get to shop, and it's so nice to see everybody in their community."

Paul Brandt, Aaron Pritchett, Hikk, the Wilsons, High Valley, Edson Drive, Doc Walker, Gordon Buford, Colin James, the Higgins, Joe Farrell, Crystal Shawanda — they took a turn hitting the mini-mall, looking nothing like the coiffed, coutured stars who would later take stage, but more like the folks behind you in the line at the coffee shop.

Johnny Reid, prompted by lounge host Erica Ehm, launched into a perfect *a cappella* performance of smash *Dance With Me*, after explaining that he asked a lounge helper to put out his loot.

"I asked her, 'If you were my wife, what would you get?'" laughed Reid and his wife, who is expecting their fourth child, got designer flip flops one thing. (As for Reid, he later picked up five CCMA awards.)

Jann Arden, who didn't take anything, instead planted a pair of sexy derthings, from Panty by Post, on head.

Aaron Pritchett's basket was stuffed with bras, including a lacy red one, his fiancée, "because they won't fit" and said the lounge was "incredible, first one I've been to like this."

The *Bachelorette*'s Jillian Harshaw chose her man, Ed, on the controversial reality show, "it's overwhelming with all the exposure."

B.C.'s own Jason Priestley, the show's host, arrived in white T-shirt and jeans and then came back later in a fancy suit picking up, among other things, a custom case for baby wipes (he has a newborn baby at home) and a Buddha Board.

Reba McEntire was too busy to swing by, but her handler nabbed boxes of Canadian Cheddar and Chive, and Olive Oil and Cracked Pepper, from Heather Nichol's Gone Cracker counter.

"She said Reba and her husband love to drink wine, and that they'd be having some wine on the plane home and they'd be having my crackers with their wine."

As for McBride's fancy new boots, Rush said she's going to make the stars' custom pair and ship them to her, while newbie country songbird Victoria Banks nabbed a pair with four-inch heels and wore them later on stage.

You might have thought it a candy store for the stars, and you wouldn't be wrong, but for these B.C. entrepreneurs, the exposure to a national audience made it the hottest ticket in town.

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