

Tina Shafer

NEW YORK
SONGWriters
CIRCLE
DIRECTOR/
PRESIDENT

The head of the New York Songwriters Circle talks about the organization's growing slate of artist services.



Inspired by the famed songwriter rounds at Nashville's Bluebird Café, the New York Songwriters Circle has long provided a home for the city's local acoustic scene. The company's twice-monthly showcases at the Bitter End in Manhattan's Greenwich Village have featured an impressive roster of artists who've gone on to enjoy successful careers, including Norah Jones, Gavin DeGraw, Vanessa Carlton, Lisa Loeb and Jesse Harris.

In recent years, the company has been expanding its ambitions, launching an annual songwriting contest, starting a monthly "Loft Series" of educational seminars and releasing a compilation album in November featuring some of the circle's most accomplished artists. It's also started songwriter circles in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and Los Angeles and is going international in February, with chapters in Milan and Hamburg.

The company hosted the finale of its fourth annual songwriting contest Nov. 18-19 at the Bitter End, featuring performances by 12 finalists selected from more than 4,000 entries.

Kate Voegelé, the winner of the inaugural contest in 2006, has since secured an Interscope deal and a recurring part on the CW network's "One Tree Hill." This year's grand prize includes \$10,000 cash, a Gibson guitar, an invitation to record with producer Glenn Barratt and to perform with John Oates of Hall & Oates, as well as live performance opportunities.

Since 1991, the circle's director has been singer/songwriter Tina Shafer, whose songs have been recorded by artists like Celine Dion, Donna Summer and Bette Midler. In an interview with *Billboard*, Shafer talks about the circle's aims and its expanding artist-development efforts.

How would you describe the fundamental purpose of the Songwriters Circle?

I always believe what goes around comes around and that's one of the reasons why I believe the circle works. It's kind of a farmland to nourish and discover new talent. It's where all these people come to us and we try to find the right connections for them. We are much more interested in partnering and servicing than we are in owning and taking.

Can the Songwriters Circle format be applied to any genre of music, these independent organizations acting like mini A&R companies?

I think that [scenario] is the future. I have a really small listening team with people I really respect and love, and that is the innermost heart of our company because it's really my ears and our decisions. And I'm sure that could go across the board for any type of music.

When I was a little girl growing up in the '70s, so much of music was produced and managed by people that were musicians. I'm a musician, and I'm a writer and an artist, and I get what it is to be that, so I feel like I have this edge when I listen to people's art.

The business got so thrown off the track—they took it out of the hands of the artists and musicians and put it into business hands, and we were just like a Campbell's soup can. It wasn't about the music.

What's coming back is understanding what great content is. Absolutely. You take some of the top producers—the Arif Mardins, the Russ Titelmans—all these people really knew music. That kind of went by the wayside for many years and that's coming back, and I couldn't be happier.

It's called the Songwriters Circle, but many writers who have come out of there have

gone on to artist careers themselves. Do you focus on developing talent with the potential of becoming both writers and artists?

There are two tiers in the company. One tier is that every song that comes into the circle, I flag with my team if I love that song. It may not make the top 12 for a contest or it may not be the next Kate Voegelé, but if the song is amazing, I will give it to our music supervisor and say, "Hey, can you try this at 'One Tree Hill' or whatever?"

What sort of stake does your organization have in the artists?

We get a fee that an agent would receive if we get a song placed in a film or TV [show] or an ad, just like anybody else. We're partnering—we're not taking publishing, we're not doing any of the old-school things. And then the second thing is, for the [songwriting contest] winner, we have an 18-month period to try to find them a proper home, either a publish-

ing deal and/or a record deal—and that's it. So basically, we're asking them to trust us for a year-and-a-half to try and find them great homes.

Singer/songwriter music seems to be more difficult to spread virally than other genres. Does the Internet facilitate the success of certain types more than others?

I wish I had a crystal ball. I can only say that I have found that if great content gets a chance to be heard, if it gets to be on a TV program, then I think that your chances are huge, that people will love you and will want to spread the word. I think being a singer/songwriter is probably more of an intellectual, cerebral-based genre.

But look what happened to Norah Jones. I remember her talking to me at the Bitter End. I was like, "What are your fears? What are your fantasies? You just moved to New York." She's like, "I just want to own a VW Bug and

sell 10,000 records and just do my jazz act." And I'm like, oh, my God, she got that times 500 trillion. So who knows?

What kind of response have you had in other cities?

It's been great in every city, but different. [In] Boston, we're partnered with Berklee [College of Music], and it's all songwriters from the college, so that's been explosive, it's always sold out. Chicago is at Schubert's, the best club for that genre in Chicago. And the kids have nowhere to go, so they're excited. We're trying to give a home to a genre that hasn't had a home. The only one that's really different is L.A.—what they want to see are established hit writers, and maybe bring along one up-and-comer, so [it's] a little bit different balance than what I originally had.

In Milan, we're opening in February, and that's going to be established acts because the stars have never done anything like this. They're going to have circles with their established talent. So it's going to be a little bit flavored according to the state or the country.

Why did you pick Italy for the international start?

Well, it kind of picked me. This guy named Dado kept Facebooking me and sending me stuff and talking about how much he loved what we did, and I said, "Well, hey, dude, you want to start a Facebook group there for us? And maybe we could get some talent to our contest." And then the next conversation was—he had a great manager—"Well, what about us doing a circle here? Everybody would go crazy." They're over the moon about having a Songwriters Circle there.

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