



Photo by Ron Kuzyk

Juno award winners Deborah Klassen and Michelle Sim.

## Oakville woman helped produce award-winning Gospel Album

By Carol Baldwin  
ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

Deborah Klassen, a singer from Trenton, Ontario, may have been declared winner of the Juno Award for Best Gospel Album in March, but she didn't do it alone. And she is the first to acknowledge that. During her acceptance speech, the Canadian gospel singer did, of course, thank all those involved in creating her winning CD, 'Legacy of Hope: A Tapestry of Timeless Hymns', including her Oakville executive producer Michelle Sim.

A Juno celebration party was held the following week at a private home in Oakville. However, Sim, who is also entitled to a statue for her mantelpiece, hadn't received her Juno by then.

"I'm stunned," Sim says of the win, explaining that 'Legacy of Hope' was a project that she and Klassen tackled on their own, with no financial backing. "Gospel music is not pop or hip right now."

And, she adds, since the winning CD offers "inspirational" gospel music rather than gospel music with a country, rock or blues bent, producing the CD was even more of a risk for these two Christian women. However, they persevered, raising over \$50,000 for a project that ultimately led them to the Juno's ceremony.

The two women met through a 'Performance and Music Industry Seminar' that Sim presents each year.

"I knew I had to help this person. If I had a million dollars I would invest it in her," says Sim, of the award-winning gospel singer.

But she didn't have a million dollars. So Sim had to find money to produce the CD as well as a way to market it. Since there isn't any gospel radio or television stations in Canada, the Oakville woman approached '100 Huntley Street' to do a live-to-air CD release party. And although the well-known television program initially reject the idea, its producers did, in the end, agree.

"Then they used Deborah's CD as a promotion, and we've gone through over 11,000 copies. That's amazing for people who don't have any proper, consistent exposure," Sim says with pride, claiming that the CD has actually healed people who have listened to it. "There are doctors using this. Psychiatric wards are using this. It just has this healing component to it."

As for Klassen, the CD came at the end of a healing process, which saw the gospel singer through a serious bout of depression and her 10-year-old son through a rare form of cancer.

The Trenton singer has been singing since age three, when she sang her first solo on stage. "I'm from a musical family... We sang together as a family and we would travel to different churches. So, I just grew up singing gospel music," she says, adding that, as an adult, she has also taken voice training.

Now, at the height of her career, her second CD has won a Juno Award. "It was amazing, totally a thrill," she exclaims. "It's the highest music honour that our country can give. It's just a total thrill... You work all your life for this moment."

The songs on 'Legacy of Hope' are traditional hymns, as the subtitle suggests. But, with the exception of one or two, they are not sung traditionally. Some all-time favourites would not even be recognized, were it not for the lyrics. For example, 'The Lord is My Shepherd', is arranged almost like a Gregorian chant, and a few of the other well-known hymns on the album have a pop influence, reminiscent of Enya or Celine Dion. Klassen even adds a Celtic flair to a song or two.

This eclectic mix of gospel tunes also won Inspirational Album of the Year at the Canadian Gospel Music Association awards. "They maintain the integrity of the song, but they are done with fresh arrangements," explains Klassen. "There's jazz influence, and blues influence and classical, and high church organ. There's just a variety that weaves a wonderful tapestry, a great piece of art."

'Legacy of Hope' is available at Good Books (114 Thomas St.; 844-3102) or on Klassen's website at [www.deborahklassen.com](http://www.deborahklassen.com)

Klassen will be appearing on '100 Huntley Street' on May 29th. She will also be the featured artist at a benefit concert on Wednesday, Nov. 29th at the Oakville Centre for the Performing Arts.

"We want to raise \$20,000 for Salvation Army's Lighthouse," says Sim, suggesting that tickets will probably be priced at \$75.

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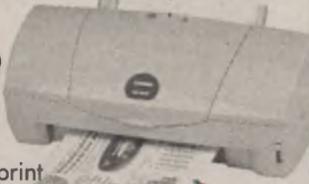
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