

HIT THE JACKPOT

As David Sneddon makes his first million, we look at songwriters who have made their fortunes

By John Dingwall

THIS week, David Sneddon joined the ranks of the people who write songs to make the world sing, then coin in the royalties while they sleep. Sneddon has just become a millionaire thanks to a behind-the-scenes songwriting career to relatively unknown acts, Nate James and Van Velsen, who have been successful across Europe and Asia. And the original Fame Academy winner from Paisley, who bagged a £1million contract from the show then quit because he didn't like being famous, is part of a growing breed of people whose earnings accumulate as they write lucrative songs.

Scots songwriter John McLaughlin says many make today's pop stars look like paupers in comparison, even when the songs are flops in Britain. He said: "Some of my biggest records have been by people the UK public haven't heard of, such as David Charvet from Baywatch. We sold nearly two million singles with him in Europe. "It wasn't released here, but the song called Leap Of Faith was a massive hit. Another band we have is D-Side who only release records in Japan. We expect to sell 100,000 copies of their album over there and it has already sold 40,000 in Japan in one week.

"If you consider I won a BMI award for a million airplays in America for the 5ive song When The Lights Go Out, that gives you an indication of what it means to have a hit in the US. If you just have one massive hit you can live off it forever. Somewhere in the world it will be played on radio, and a No.1 song appears on compilations and on music TV. When a band perform the songs on tour, the writer gets a share of that too. There was a power cut in New York a couple of years ago and my royalties went through the roof for When The Lights Go Out. Every news item had needed a song and they all picked that one."

John has written hits for Westlife, Busted, Blue and also tutored Sneddon on songwriting. He added: "David struck me as someone who was going to do well as a song writer. He wasn't comfortable being in the limelight and he knew coming from reality TV that the industry would be unforgiving. He used Fame Academy to open some doors and he had the talent to deliver. I'm delighted for him."

Every time a song is played on a radio station, an organisation called the PRS adds a payment to the songwriter's royalty cheque. It's no wonder bands such as Orson are realising that writing songs for other people can be lucrative. The recent Sugababes hit Easy was written by Orson's Jason Pebworth, who explained: "Sugababes are looking for new stuff all the time. We went into the studio and gave them a couple of ideas and they liked them."

John also believes producer and songwriter Mutt Lange could be one of the richest people on the planet. Lange wrote Bryan Adam's Everything I Do, I Do It For You, the longest running No.1 in the UK at 16 weeks, and Woman In Me Needs A Man Like You and Man, I Feel Like A Woman for his wife Shania

Twain, as well as dozens of other hits. John said: "I wouldn't be surprised if Mutt Lange was a billionaire. Shania's records account for over 50 million albums sales."

It seems the Swedes are among the best when it comes to writing worldwide pop hits and have their own hit factory in Max Martin. You might not have heard of him, but he's written songs for Kelly Clarkson, The Backstreet Boys, N'Sync and Bon Jovi. "Historically, the Swedes have come up with brilliant songwriters, going back to ABBA," John explained. "Max Martin was in a hard rock band but saw the potential of writing pop songs."

Others, such as Paul Anka and Lucie Silvas, sometimes opted to give some of their own songs to others despite being singers themselves. Lucie was the brains behind Will Young's recent chart-topper Who Am I? as well as writing tracks for ex-S Club member Rachel Stevens, Liberty X, Michelle McManus and Gareth Gates.

And having written My Way for Frank Sinatra all those years ago, Paul Anka has no regrets. "That song has penetrated so deeply," Paul explained. "I understand that and it is really hard to write anything like that again. To have that in my arsenal, I'm just glad it's one of those songs I was lucky enough to write. The song was tailor-made for Sinatra, but the record company were annoyed that I didn't want to record it myself. But it wouldn't have been as successful if I had released it." John added: "My Way is a song that means Paul would never need to work again. It is played in every country around the world all the time."

Deacon Blue's Ricky Ross has also enjoyed a recent windfall running into millions thanks to having songs recorded by James Blunt, KT Tunstall and ex-Spice Girl Emma Bunton.

Referring to Blunt's Stateside success, Ricky admitted: "It's gratifying for my bank manager I have to tell you. He couldn't be happier. It's great for me and it's great for James because he is a wonderful person."

While Rob Davis, 59, is just as successful as the woman he helped achieve a comeback - Kylie Minogue. Rob, formerly guitarist with Seventies pop group Mud, co-wrote Kylie's Can't Get You Out Of My Head with Cathy Dennis. John said: "Rob Davis was one of the first people I co-wrote with. He is a multi-millionaire mainly because of Kylie Minogue."

Michael Bolton, who has made a career out of singing other people's songs and has a new album of Sinatra classics coming out next week, added: "The songwriters of some of the great songs love it when a singer keeps their legacy alive with a variation or version of a song created by the writer. Sammy Cahn has a body of work that will be recorded until the end of time and was a first port of call for Frank Sinatra. They love it when artists like myself reinterpret their songs."

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