Sonic boon

This free mobile recording studio is building musical bridges across the city

ANDRES VALENZUELA
STAFF REPORTER

In a city as culturally diverse as Toronto, access to professional music equipment and studio space remains heavily dictated by postal codes.

For emerging artists across different neighbourhoods, financial barriers, lack of sustainable funding for community programs and geographic divides often make it difficult to collaborate and record high-quality music.

Although free digital audio software, like GarageBand, allows young artists to demo ideas at home, it cannot replace the professional gear, proper acoustic set-ups, and hands-on mentorship required to produce industry-standard tracks.

To break down these barriers, Ruben Esguerra, a Juno-nominated musician, educator and leader of New Tradition Music — a Toronto-based arts organization and music ensemble that bridges ancestral Afro-Indigenous music with contemporary urban sounds — co-founded Wheel It Studios, a mobile recording initiative designed to bring the studio directly to the artists.

"The project came out of the need to have a program where space wasn't an issue," said Esguerra, who developed the concept alongside lead producer Savilion. "The idea was to create a mobile studio: instead of the artist coming to us, we go to them, setting up in spaces where they feel comfortable working on their music."

What began in 2018 as a hyperlocal setup in community centres quickly expanded into a citywide movement.

By packing their vehicle with laptops, audio interfaces, studio monitors, microphones, professional recording software, and sound isolation panels to build pop-up recording booths on site, Wheel It Studios eliminated distance as an obstacle, enabling young talent from the north and south sides of Jane and Finch, as well as artists from across Toronto and the GTA, to write and produce music together.

The service is completely free for artists, who can book sessions simply by reaching out through the studio's website.

For Esguerra, the core mission is to build bridges through art.

"Music allows collaboration to take place across neighbourhoods, age groups, cultures, musical genres and genders," he said. "How can you love your neighbour if you don't know your neighbour? Music creates a culture of understanding and peace."

That sense of unity and ownership strongly resonates with the nearly 40 artists who participate in the program.

Wesley Solomon, an Indigenous hip-hop artist who performs as RezMade, joined the initiative in 2023. For him, the studio provides both a creative outlet and a vital platform for advocacy.

"For so long, marginalized people have not had the proverbial talking stick; we haven't had the chance to grab the microphone and really be listened to," Solomon said. "I try to use my voice to speak out against injustice. Programs like this give a voice to people who wouldn't necessarily think their opinions matter, allowing us to flip and control our own narrative."

Beyond socio-political expression, the mobile studio offers a collaborative sanctuary where artists from different backgrounds cross paths.

For Sky Say, a young R&B singer-songwriter who joined the program two years ago, the experience expanded her perspective.

"We come from all different parts of the world, not just different parts of the city," Sky said. "I've learned so much through other people's stories and sounds. In a loud and busy world, this program reminded me to make time for music and value who I am as an artist."

By fostering cross-generational mentorship between established producers, partners and emerging talent, the initiative is laying the groundwork for long-term cultural empowerment across the city.

Later this year, Wheel It Studios will launch a 13-track album created by the participating youth and mentors. To mark the release, the team is planning a special showcase and graduation ceremony featuring live performances, participant certificates, and the premiere of the project's lead single and music video.

"For young people getting into the arts," Esguerra said, "the goal is to master your chosen skill and follow your purpose. Once you're able to do that, you're going to have success and peace."



ANDRES VALENZUELA PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

Ruben Esguerra co-founded Wheel It Studios, a mobile recording initiative designed to bring the studio directly to the artists.

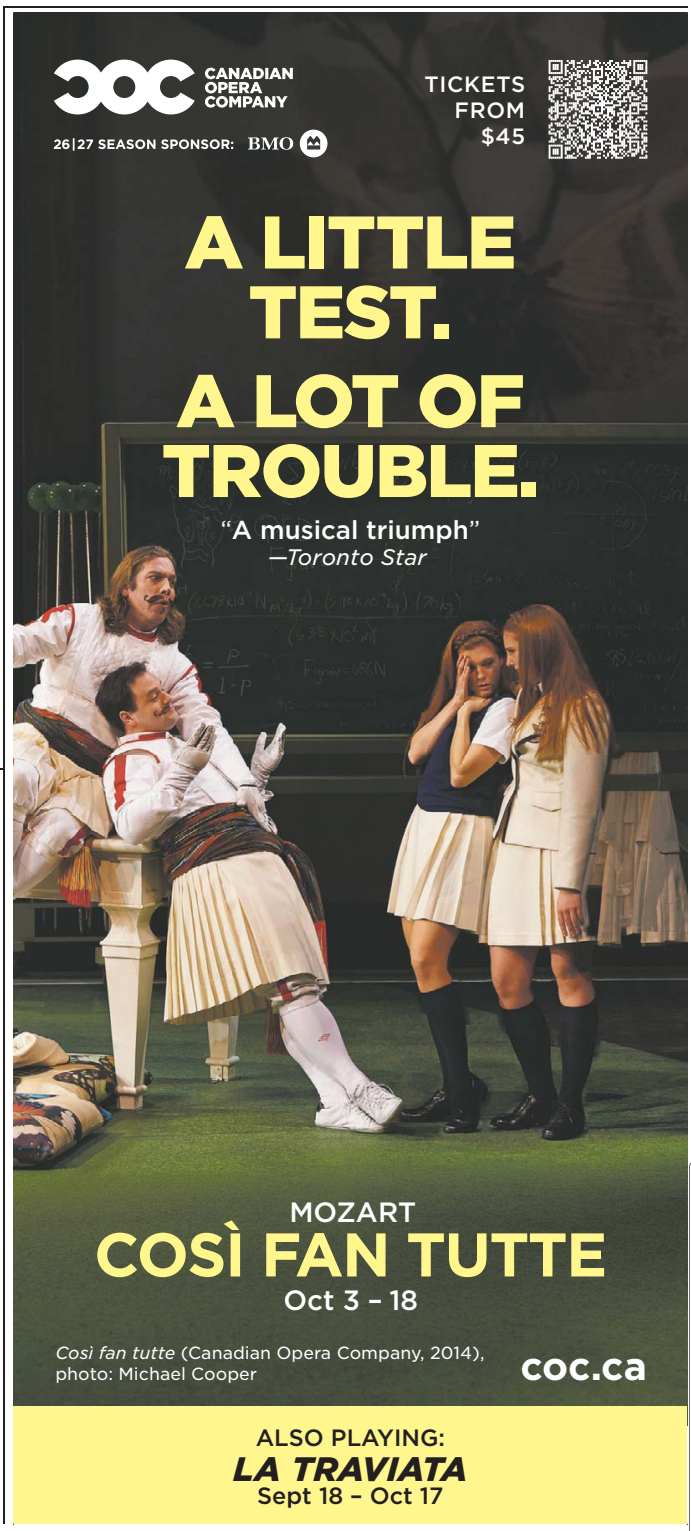


"Programs like this give a voice to people who wouldn't necessarily think their opinions matter," said Indigenous hip-hop artist RezMade.



"In a loud and busy world, this program reminded me to make time for music and value who I am as an artist," said Sky Say, an R&B singer and songwriter.





pressreader
PRINTED AND DISTRIBUTED BY PRESSREADER
PressReader.com +1 604 278 4604
COPYRIGHT AND PROTECTED BY APPLICABLE LAW