

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS: First Victor James Nesrallah wrote the songs. Then he performed them, recorded them, produced them, marketed them . . .

Victor victorious

Do-it-all musician sells pieces of his talent to finance new CD

Victor James Nesrallah

When: 9:30 p.m. tonight
Where: Penguin Club, 292 Elgin St.
Tickets: \$6 at the door

By Lynn Saxberg

Citizen correspondent

If Victor James Nesrallah lived by the title of his new recording, *Always Dreaming*, the full-length CD might still be a figment of his imagination.

But the Ottawa singer/songwriter is one of those rare artists with both creativity and business sense. He not only wrote, performed and produced the 10 songs contained on the new release, but also came up with the financial plan and marketing strategy to back it.

A big part of the plan involved enticing investors, says Nesrallah, settling into a comfy couch in his roomy old apartment off Elgin Street. A grand piano and recording equipment take up most of the space in the next room. The coffee is brewing and Daniel Lanois' *For The Beauty of Wymona* is on the stereo.

The singer/songwriter drafted a proposal and set out to sell 50 "shares" in the album. So far, 45 have been sold to friends, family and fans — as well as dentists, lawyers and other professional types.

"(They're) people who are interested in helping an artist, but not necessarily looking for a great return on their investment," Nesrallah says.

He's celebrating the CD with a release party at the Penguin Club tonight.

Of course, it helped that Nesrallah had a proven track record.

The 39-year-old musician is well-known to folk and country fans in the Ottawa Valley. He's been playing professionally since the '80s, has released two cassettes, a handful of singles and had his songs included on several CD compilations. His music is played regularly on CBC Radio.

The new CD, released independently on Nesrallah's Free Flying Music label, is the songwriter's first full-length disc. It has more of a pop flavor than country or folk, but it's an eclectic, intelligent, almost spiritual style of pop that will bend the ears of those who like Bruce Cockburn or Bruce Hornsby.

Nesrallah's fluid voice embraces evocative lyrics, mostly about relationships, in melodic songs that range in tone from the sad, poignant *Turning the Page* to the catchy, guitar-laden *Real Love*. The jazzy *Always* features a lonely soprano saxophone figure played by Peter Kiesewalter, while other local guests include guitarist

Terry Tufts and singer Lynn Miles.

A tall man with an unruly mane of dark curly hair, Nesrallah grew up surrounded by music.

He is the youngest child of four born to one of the first Middle Eastern families to settle in Ottawa. Nesrallah's grandparents came to Canada from what is now Lebanon; his grandfather played the "mijwiz," a traditional Middle Eastern instrument.

Nesrallah's parents' home was a centre of Ottawa's Lebanese community. People gathered there for "hafli" celebrations — the Lebanese equivalent to the Irish ceillidh — to mark weddings and religious events, always with music in the house.

Nesrallah played guitar and studied clarinet, drums and singing during high school. After graduation, he found work on railroads and oil rigs in Alberta, a "woodshedding" period that he says allowed him to develop his guitar technique.

He returned to Ottawa in 1979 to launch a musical career by playing solo gigs, writing songs and learning piano. Although record companies have expressed some interest over the years and Nesrallah made a few trips to Toronto to play showcases and meet label executives, no deal materialized.

Nesrallah realized he had to learn the business end of the industry so he took part in music-business workshops and taught himself.

"I thought I'd better get a keen sense to this business side of things," he says. "It is strictly a negotiating thing. These people are doing business and they want to be able to talk to somebody who appears to know about business."

The next step for the CD is to get it distributed and start touring. Nesrallah hopes the album will open the doors to more radio airplay and help him get a management deal.

In the meantime, he's busy being his own manager and promoter, and is scheduled to appear on CBC's *All In A Day* today.

He performs with a full band, including drummer Bruce Wittet, guitarist Dave Binder, bassist Phil Bova and singer Suzie Vinnick, at tonight's CD release.

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— VICTOR JAMES NESRALLAH
Singer/songwriter

