

COVER STORY

High Achievers

YTV honors 27 young Canadians for their outstanding business sense, creative ability and valor in the face of death **BY MIKE BOONE**



CHRISTIAN HEBERT

Tarzan Dan will deal the formal-wear industry a blow **Saturday**. The Toronto disc jockey — cohost of the fifth annual YTV *Achievement Awards* — is doing the gig in what he wears for his day job: baseball caps; jeans; leather jacket... maybe a tuque or two. “No way for a tuxedo!” the effervescent Tarzan Dan (Freeman) booms. “I wore a suit to the Junos and no one recognized me. The YTV Awards people want to keep everything free-form and spontaneous.”

Tarzan Dan’s podium partner, Weird Al Yankovic, also will dress down for the occasion. The cohosts — whom producer Morgan Earl calls “Goofy and Goofier” — will bounce around the stage of the National Arts Centre in Ottawa looking and acting like a couple of loosey-goosey street kids.

Tarzan Dan has never been host of an awards show. But he says the Hit List is “pretty fast and kooky and nutty and crazy,” redundant adjectives he hopes will apply to the two-hour telecast that honors 27 young Canadians, each of whom receives a statuette and \$3,000. “It should be controlled bedlam,” the cohost promises.

Earl, a grandfather who cheerfully describes himself as “an old coot who’s young at heart,” and who has produced more traditional awards shows like the Junos and Genies, is in charge of bedlam control. He promises to deemphasize commercial sponsorship (blatant plugs have marred previous YTV awards telecasts) in favor of “an audience-driven show.” Says Earl, “Our loyalty this year is totally to our audience. I wasn’t here in the past, but you can imagine a show in which sponsors and politicians are heavily involved.”

The suits have been exiled to the wings this year. Earl and his crew will try to entertain viewers with an unpredictable telecast that the producer compares to vaudeville in its heyday. “It has to be fast, seamless, funny, outrageous. There has to be lots of energy so they don’t hit the clicker button,” says the producer of his 12- to 24-year-old target audience. “There’s no long sketches. If it doesn’t work in 30 seconds, it doesn’t work.” What viewers will see is lots of snappy features and performances by some of the Achievement Awards laureates.



INSTRUMENTALIST MARC-ANDRE GAUTHIER (ABOVE); VOCALIST MARIE-ALICE DEPESTRE (MIDDLE); AMELIA PETER-PAUL AND GRANDMOTHER, MARY JANE JADIS: AMAZING



CLAIR PERRY

Tarzan Dan and Weird Al are there to enhance the video sensation. They met 18 months ago when the American satirist visited Toronto to promote his new CD. Dan and Yankovic clicked immediately. “It’s scary,” says Dan, “and it’s even scarier to think that it’s Weird Al you’re clicking with.” Their rapport will be put to the test in front of an audience. Although the show is taped, the cohosts will have to be able to think on their feet and ad-lib to cover the inevitable glitches. “Being live doesn’t scare me,” says Dan. “I totally trust Al. If we get into trouble, he’ll just have to swallow a live chicken.”

Not likely: Yankovic is a vegetarian. And while there will be plenty of laughs, the aim of the Awards is to recognize some remarkable young Canadians. “Teens get the bad rap,” says Dan. “You never hear about teens doing something amazing.”

The Awards will honor some amazing kids. Tarzan Dan is astonished by Marc Boutet, the 18-year-old winner of the entrepreneurship award. Boutet, a native of Ste. Foy, Que., invents software and sold \$57,000 worth of it last year. “When I was his age,” Dan recalls, “I was working at a pizza joint and hoping to get a date.”

The award that rivets everyone is YTV’s bravery citation. Amelia Peter-Paul, a 12-year-old native Canadian who lives in New Brunswick, protected her grandmother from a scissor-wielding psychopath who stabbed the young girl repeatedly.

“They’re amazing,” says Tarzan Dan. “I’m almost embarrassed to be in the company of these kids.” □