

# The Impact of Music

**An Interview with Paul Cothran,  
Vice President and Executive Director, VH1 Save The Music Foundation**

**EDITORS' NOTE** Prior to assuming his current post, Paul Cothran served as Director of Health and Community Programs for the Big Apple Circus from 1997 to 2004. From 1992 to 1997, Cothran served as Director of Corporate and Foundation Relations at Pace University. Before this, he was Development Director for the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. Cothran also served as Director Development for the Community Research



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Initiative on AIDS and Director of Corporate and Foundation Relations at Fordham University. Previously, Cothran was Development Director for National Medical Fellowships and Senior Account Executive for United Way of New York City/Tri-State. He was also Co-Founder and Vice Chair of the AIDS Treatment Data Network. Cothran attended Fordham University.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** VH1 Save The Music Foundation ([www.vh1savethemusic.com](http://www.vh1savethemusic.com)) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of education in America's public schools by restoring music programs in cities across the country and raising awareness about the importance of music participation for the nation's youth. Since its inception in 1997, nearly \$49.5 million worth of new musical instruments have been donated to 1,850 public schools in 100 cities, benefiting over 2.1 million children.

## What was the origin of the VH1 Save The Music Foundation and how has it evolved?

The foundation came about in 1997 after then President of VH1, John Sykes, volunteered as Principal for a day in a New York City public school – PS 58 in Brooklyn. He was disturbed to see the condition of that school's music instruments, which were being held together with duct tape. As a music channel, we felt we could adopt this school and do something about their music instruments. John then realized that it wouldn't help when the public affairs team began looking into how widespread this problem was.

The team found that cutting school music programs was not just happening in New York City but across the nation. These programs were among the first to go as schools faced budget constraints. So that stimulated the birth of VH1 Save The Music.

The foundation began as a public affairs initiative of VH1. We would collect used instruments, have them refurbished, and donate them to the schools. But that didn't allow us to provide the schools with packages of instruments that were specific to their needs and it didn't allow us to provide instruments that were appropriately sized for school-age children.

So we chose to become an independent nonprofit organization. Each year, we conduct a fundraising campaign, and use the money that is contributed to purchase new packages of music instruments for the schools.

## How challenging is it to track the impact of this program?

We make every effort to monitor the impact that we're having. When we give a school a grant of music instruments, there are certain eligibility requirements that we put in place to ensure the sustainability of that program.

First, we make the school district a partner in the process; they provide in their budget for certified music educators for their schools. As long as that teacher is there, our grant of \$30,000 worth of music instruments will be there. We also require that they make music a part of the core curriculum, a part of the school day, so that every student has access to it and it's not just 10 kids at day's end.

Right now, we are in about 1,800 schools nationwide. We send out an annual survey to all of our schools verifying who the music teachers are and what the time frames are for the music classes during the school day. We also ask the school to share stories with us about the impact that reintroducing music has had on the school.

## With economic challenges and increasing school cuts, is the problem getting worse?

Today, it feels a bit like we're running in place. While we're working with many communities that embrace the impact of music education, there are other communities that are suddenly faced with huge budget deficits and have to start cutting.

But there are some great things happening in many communities, like in West Virginia where we're working with state officials to restore music education in all 55 counties. They recognize it's important to the education of their students and want to make sure that every student in West Virginia has access to music education.

## How do you advocate that these programs are not perceived as a luxury?

We work to educate district officials throughout the school year. We have members of our program management team who make presentations at national conferences every year to make sure they're aware we're here and that we want to work with them, and to make sure they're aware of the impact and importance of music education.

That process is getting easier since many people realize there has been a narrowing of the curriculum and too much of an emphasis on preparing students for standardized tests. We have to get back to ensuring that students can express themselves, think creatively, and be innovative. The only way you're going to do that is by developing the whole person and instilling that creative, critical thinking skill in them at an early age.

## You have built relationships with a select group of musicians, actors, and athletes who serve as ambassadors. How critical have those partnerships been?

We've always had strong support from the entertainment community; any artist understands the importance of this organization and can talk about the impact music has had on his or her life. But we want to communicate to students that there are many different avenues they can take – it doesn't mean that studying music in school today is necessarily going to lead to being the next great pop star, although that option is available to them. So along with the pop stars, we also celebrate people like Bernie Williams, a New York Yankee great and also a Latin Grammy artist, and Condoleezza Rice, former Secretary of State who has a background as a concert pianist. There are many successful people who say that musical study has been at the core of their success. Our ambassadors can also get the word out about our foundation and help us fundraise.

## How important is having Viacom's senior leadership supporting these efforts?

If you don't have that commitment from the top down, it makes it more difficult to get people energized and engaged. We are enormously pleased to have the support of the Viacom leadership, and Tom Calderone, President of VH1 and Chairman of the foundation's board, is an incredible advocate and spokesperson. There's a real commitment throughout the company to making this world a better place. It comes from everyone working here, from senior management on down. ●