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**HEEBONICS**

# Young keyboardist is a rising country music star

By RACHEL BARSKY  
*Special to The CJN*

**A**t just 23 years old, keyboardist Dave Cohen is living a life most musicians can only dream of.

He's a member of Juno Award-winning country artist Johnny Reid's band; keyboard player for Canadian singer Amanda Marshall, and has toured alongside Reba McEntire, Tim McGraw, Blue Rodeo, Faith Hill and the Bare-naked Ladies, just to name a few.

He's been nominated for two Canadian Country Music Awards for keyboard player of the year; has made television appearances on *CMT Central*, *Canada AM* and *Johnny Reid Live at Revival*, not to mention appearances in a number of music videos.

Ask him how exactly he got to where he is today and Cohen calls it "lucky," but talking to the musician, it is clear that he is responsible for his own success – luck or no luck.

Toronto-born but raised in Calgary, Cohen began playing piano at age five, but he never studied in a conservatory setting. In Grade 10, he joined the PT Junction Blues Authority, a band formed by four other Jewish students. They won their high school's Battle of the Bands competition, and played at numerous Jewish events, as well as at Calgary's Kaos blues bar.

Still, growing up, Cohen didn't plan on becoming a professional musician. It was only in Grade 12, when he was accepted to Humber College's esteemed jazz program in Toronto, that

he really started to think about being a professional keyboardist.

During his time at Humber, Cohen joined the band Cavern, and then VanderPark, which is still around today. VanderPark was the most success Cohen had in independent music, opening for groups such as the Spin Doctors and Little Feat, and touring in eastern Canada.

Cohen also began to venture out on his own.

"While other people were doing school, I was downtown meeting people and making friends. There's no science to it," Cohen says about his early success.

"It's meeting people at the right place and the right time, hanging out in bars in Toronto."

He'd play with musicians just for fun, not realizing which artists he had performed with. That was how Cohen got his first major gig, as keyboard player for Marshall.

Marshall's people called out of the blue, says Cohen, and told him they had gotten his name from her drummer.

"I had met him three or four times, and I was totally shocked," he says. "I'd played with him for fun. I couldn't understand why me of all people – in my head, I was listing off 20 other keyboardists in town who were better known than I was and could have done it."

Soon Cohen was playing with Marshall at the 16th International AIDS Conference in Toronto, in front of 55,000 people. He started the show alone with a piano solo. "The biggest

crowd I'd ever played with before was about 1,000 or 2,000 people, so I was scared. But you get over it quickly."

Around the same time, in early 2006, Cohen had another breakthrough when he became Reid's keyboardist. After Cohen contacted a number of artists, managers and booking agents in the hope of getting some work, Reid hired him.

"It's beyond me. I wouldn't have hired me if I was them at the time!" Cohen said.

In January 2008, Cohen moved to Nashville because of the opportunities the music capital could offer.

In Nashville, everyone is approachable, he says. For example, Cohen wanted to meet Jimmy Nichols, one of Nashville's busiest keyboardists and music directors.

"His phone number is on his website, so I just called him up and went for coffee," Cohen says. "I just picked his brain."

In an industry that is essentially about "friends hiring friends," having excellent people skills is integral.

"Playing is a yes or no question – the other factors are if you are friendly, can you live in a 45-foot bus with five other people for weeks?"

Cohen attributes his people skills to his summers at the Jewish Camp BB Riback, along the shores of Pine Lake in Alberta.

"Camp BB set me up to have those



Cohen, left, during his days as a keyboardist for singer Amanda Marshall's band, enjoys some downtime with his bandmates Stuart Cameron, Rob Meisner, Andre Eccleston and Al Webster.

skills, to live with people you don't know in close quarters. That experience is not something everyone has to fall back on."

Cohen has learned "two truths" from the industry.

"Cellphone bills will always be very, very expensive, and you will always be paying rent for a house that you're not living in," he says, laughing.

Besides his work as a keyboardist, Cohen is also Reid's music director, running rehearsals and "making the band look good."

In Nashville, he plays at showcases for new artists, and he is *Canada Musician* magazine's new keyboard columnist. As well, Cohen plays other instruments, including organ, drum, accordion, guitar and bass.

He considers himself fortunate to have supportive friends and family.

"My parents have been unbelievably supportive," he says. "They get it – they get that it's a business, and they take it very seriously. You're selling yourself."

One day, Cohen would like to get into producing. He'd love to play with artists such as John Mayer, Bruce Hornsby, and Stevie Wonder. But for now, Cohen is happy to be exactly where he is.