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# Soundtrack To A Cause

Walmart, Best Buy, Coke and Clear Channel join forces to bring home the message of 'A Very Special Christmas'



The *Very Special Christmas* series marks its anniversary with a Christian album (inset) and another featuring acts like **MARTINA MCBRIDE**.

For 25 years now, *A Very Special Christmas* has attracted some of pop, rock, country and hip-hop's biggest names to record original and exclusive songs for the holidays—with the first two volumes among the top-selling holiday titles of all time. In the process, the series has also raised more than \$110 million for the Special Olympics, a message that has gotten lost through the years.

"We talked to a lot of people who'd say, 'Oh, yeah, I have that album—the red one with the Madonna-and-child stick figure logo on it. Wow, I didn't know that it benefited the Special Olympics,'" says **Lou Raiola**, president/CEO of Warp Speed, a cause-marketing agency that spearheaded the ad campaign and partner outreach for *A Very Special Christmas*' 25th anniversary. Special Olympics chairman/CEO **Tim Shriver**, whose brother **Bobby** is a founding partner of the *Very Special Christmas* series, adds, "The albums were sold on the strength of great music, not on the strength of a great cause. Now we're trying to broaden that message so that when you buy a great album, you're doing something great for others, too."

To that end, the Special Olympics and Warp Speed have assembled an extensive marketing plan to get the word out about a pair of new records released for pop and Christian audiences by Big Machine and Word. Walmart and Best Buy will help promote the albums at retail, with the latter selling a deluxe version of Big Machine compilation *A Very Special Christmas: 25th Anniversary, Bringing Joy to the World* with five catalog tracks in its music department and at 300 Best Buy Mobile locations, marking a rare music-retail foray for the specialty retailer.

Coca-Cola will support the project by making "Something in the Air," an original song featured on *Bringing Joy to the World*, the theme song for its 2012 Christmas campaign. Other marketing partners were brought in to reach a more nontraditional audience. Upscale health club Lifetime Fitness, for example, will promote and sell the album at 100 locations nationwide (a first for the chain), while the Bowling Proprietors of America will pro-

mote the album through music videos and by selling it at more than 4,000 bowling centers across the country.

The music itself will receive a heavy push from Clear Channel, which will put new songs from **Train** ("Joy to the World") and **Jordin Sparks** ("Do You Hear What I Hear?") into national rotation and air \$7 million-\$8 million worth of in-kind, public-service custom programming throughout the holiday season starting Nov. 22. And on Dec. 8 and 9, Gospel Music Channel will air the two-part special "A Very Special Christmas: 25 Years of Bringing Joy to the World," hosted by **Vanessa Williams**.

Big Machine is also helping film new videos from Train, **Martina McBride** ("Please Come Home for Christmas") and **Cheap Trick** ("I Want You for Christmas," a holiday take on its "I Want You to Want Me"). The compilation also features new and rare contributions from **Rascal Flatts**, **Jewel**, **Vince Gill**, **OneRepublic** and even K-pop act **Wonder Girls**. Word's *A Very Special Christmas: Today's Top Christian Artists, Bringing Peace on Earth*, will feature new and rare songs from **Jason Castro**, **Point of Grace**, **Natalie Grant**, **Needtobreathe** and others.

"There's so many more charities now than there were 25 years ago as far as places to do albums for charities," Big Machine founder/president/CEO **Scott Borchetta** says. "There were moments for a while where I was like, 'I don't know if we could pull it off,' but once we got some of these great artists onboard it made us realize how special this property could be again. We're very proud the record's on Big Machine."

Borchetta's involvement ultimately comes down to CMT's **Brian Phillips**, who enticed the Big Machine head and his wife, **Sandy**, to join Shriver at the 2011 Special Olympics in Athens to witness the event firsthand.

"Brian's been on our Christmas records' trust board for five or six years now, and is a deep believer in the power of our movement and our athletes," Shriver says. "He's been talking for years about finding ways to re-energize this brand, so Brian gets a lot of credit for convincing Scott there was something to see." ●●●

