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"Nobody can play these albums like we do. Nobody!" says Craig Martin, left, the creative force behind Classic Albums Live, here rehearsing the Rolling Stones' *Let It Bleed* for a second-anniversary show tomorrow night at the Phoenix Concert Theatre.

Classic Albums Live creator Craig Martin has huge ambitions for his two-year-old concert series, which recreates the greats note for note

Born to run the show

BY SAMANTHA GRICE

Craig Martin is having a blast. Not only does this evening's rehearsal of the Rolling Stones' *Let It Bleed* album mark the second anniversary of his rock 'n' roll brainchild Classic Albums Live — note-for-note live recreations of such revered works as Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy* and Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* — but this performance will put Martin back where he is happiest, on centre stage.

"I never sing! The last time was for the Stones' *Exile on Main Street* show two years ago, and that was it. My life is just scheduling now," he says and laughs.

Martin is referring to the hectic business of running the Classic Albums Live machine, which, over the past two years, has employed 120 musicians to recreate 36 classic albums for more than 200 shows that pack in 1,000 fans a night, primarily at the Phoenix Concert Theatre in Toronto but also all over North America.

For this evening's rehearsal, 13 Toronto musicians are gathered in a west-end studio to put the finishing touches on what will be a note-for-note translation of the Stones' 1969 album — including a harmonica player, a harpist, two keyboardists and a conga-drum player, among others. By the end of tomorrow night's performance at the Phoenix, 20 musicians will be onstage, including a sitarist and a fiddler as well as a gospel choir for the opening of *You Can't Always Get What You Want*.

"That's the whole point of the series — we don't use any samples or tapes," explains Martin of the typically large number of players. "If the song calls for a gospel choir, we'll bring in a gospel choir."

Or if it requires a children's choir — as in the case of Pink Floyd's *Another Brick in the Wall* — Martin will arrange that, too. A casting call to friends and family found him 20 kids to sing in the choir, and he says that show is a definite highlight from the past two years.

"But I have goosebump moments like that for every show. When we did Springsteen's *Born*

large group of like-minded musicians who continue to come out and play, even though Martin says he doesn't pay them nearly enough.

"We've had members of Crash Test Dummies, Nelly Furtado, Moist and David Usher. We've had players from just about every major Canadian band come through the door."

But nothing pleases him more than the e-mails from fans who get this music, which was created in a time long before music videos. "We used to open up records and listen to them, and we used our imaginations to

about the all-ages shows that have turned into family affairs; kids born 20 years after this music was created have taken an interest in their parents' vinyl collections. "They are getting savvy and starting to smell a rat," he says of today's pop music.

So, does this mean the success of Classic Albums Live has exceeded his every expectation? "No! It's nowhere near it! We're supposed to be selling out the amphitheatre three nights in a row. Nobody can play these albums like we do. Nobody! We're doing something historical. Where is everybody?" he asks with tongue only barely planted in cheek. "I'm happy with my crowds, don't get me wrong, but it should be bigger; it should be 10 times bigger! We should be funded by the government. We should be playing *Dark Side of the Moon* in China!"

Nonetheless, he doesn't see the project coming to an end, and he can't wait to get onstage tomorrow night.

"Singing on this album has been huge. I get to be rock 'n' roll Craig again."

Classic Albums Live's second-anniversary show plays tomorrow night at the Phoenix Concert Theatre. For more information go to www.classicalbumslive.com or www.ticketmaster.ca.

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'It takes people back to their panelled basements in Scarborough'

to *Run*, the Mayor, David Miller, came out — and he was cheering and rocking right out. For me, that says a lot about his platform. He's a guy who really loves the city, and he loves rock 'n' roll," says Martin, who unashamedly admits he judges people by the music they listen to. "If I meet someone and they say they don't like the Stones, well, don't come to my house for a barbecue," he says.

Thankfully, he has found a

create the songs in our head. We all know what the Hotel California looks like, we all have a different interpretation of what the girl is singing about in Pink Floyd's *The Great Gig in the Sky* because we didn't have some self-serving video slamming imagery down our consciousness," he says emphatically. "This is something that takes people back to their panelled basements in Scarborough."

Martin is also pretty happy