Pop Talk: Rock and roll never forgets

by George_Varga

Heaven and Hell is the band name that two current and two former members of heavy-metal pioneers Black Sabbath chose for their recently launched reunion tour.

ROCK REUNIONS - Ladies and gentlemen, welcome back (from top) Crowded House, Genesis, The Police and Rage Against the Machine. CNS Photo.

Depending on one's musical taste and appetite for nostalgia, Heaven and Hell is also an apt description for the 2007 rock concert season. No year in recent memory has witnessed quite as many potentially lucrative reunion tours by so many major and not-so-major bands.

The charge is being led by such long-dormant acts as The Police and Genesis, followed by comparatively more recent groups like Crowded House. And the number of bands who are suddenly, if not improbably, springing back to life in this nostalgia-fueled Year of the Reunion keeps growing.

"The word 'reunion' used to have a weird stigma," said Coachella mastermind Paul Tollett, whose recent festival featured the reunited Rage Against the Machine, Crowded House and Jesus and Mary Chain. "But I think there's less of a stigma now."

Other groups that are now back together and on tour, or who will be hitting the road soon, range from Bob Seger & The Silver Bullet Band to The Stooges, whose first new album since 1973 came out last month.

In England, the groups Squeeze, The Only Ones and James have recently reunited, while the pioneering industrial band Throbbing Gristle has just completed its first album in 25 years and has recently started a European tour. The return of the Spice Girls is being touted for the fall.

"This year, the buzz is about the reunion tours, not the Rolling Stones coming back again or The Who doing their fifth 'farewell' tour," noted Gary Bongiovani, the publisher of Pollstar, the concert industry's leading weekly publication.

"The Police has exceeded everybody's expectations, and I understand Genesis is also doing well. What you're starting to also see now is bands from the '80s and '90s coming back together."

The reunions are fueled, in varying degrees, by pride, ego, revived creative impulses and stalled solo careers. The biggest inspiration, however, is often an eagerness to cash in one last time (although some bands, such as

Kiss, have repeated their "reunion" tours on an almost annual basis).

The major paydays that can result for even a marginally accomplished act - Motley Crue's 22-city reunion tour in 2005 grossed $40 million - are often far greater than most of these bands enjoyed in their creative and commercial heydays.

"The bottom line is always important," said Bongiovani. "These are musicians - that's how they make their money. And a lot of them, as they are getting older, realize that it's now or never."

And one reunion - according to John Wojas, the vice president of Viejas Entertainment - begets another.

"When musicians from defunct bands see other bands reuniting and making a lot of money, it inspires them to put aside their differences and get back together," said Wojas, who has booked shows by Crowded House, Squeeze and such veteran rockers as Lynyrd Skynyrd, Mountain and Badfinger (three of whose four founding members are now deceased).

But it takes more than money to get a band back together, said Tollett, who should know. In addition to this year's reunions by Rage Against the Machine, Crowded House, and Jesus and Mary Chain, in past years Tollett has been instrumental in persuading such bands as The Pixies, Bauhaus and Gang of Four to reunite to perform at Coachella.

"There's no amount of money that one show could offer," Tollett said. "There has to be something internally that happens to get those musicians back together. I've learned that if you lead off with money, you'll never get a band to reunite to play at Coachella. It always offends them, because people have been throwing money at these bands for years.

"So, you have to offer other reasons, besides money. One might be telling them: 'A lot of current bands are influenced by you, and a lot of fans - who weren't around 10 years ago - never had the chance to hear you perform live."

Many of the bands have responded to Tollett's reasoning by not only playing Coachella, but using the festival to kick off lucrative tours.

"I didn't really try to gauge how successful our reunion tour would be; I had no idea," Pixies frontman Frank Black, 41, said. "I think we did it just right. Five years, five records, then sit around for 10 or 11 years."

IRON MEN

While some of this year's newly reunited groups, such as The Police, include all of their original members, others, such as Genesis (which is touring without singer Peter Gabriel) and Smashing Pumpkins (which apparently will feature only two of its four founding members), do not.

So the fact that Heaven and Hell is really the early 1980s version of Black Sabbath, minus original singer Ozzy Osbourne and original drummer Bill Ward, may just be a matter of semantics. The Heaven and Hell tour, which teams third-generation Sabbath singer Ronnie James Dio and second-generation Sabbath drummer Vinny Appice with the band's original guitarist and bassist, was prompted by the April 2 release of the compilation album "Black Sabbath - the Dio Years."

"The truth is, no matter what they call us, we'll always be Black Sabbath," Dio said from a New York tour stop. He was the second of a dozen lead singers to replace Osbourne in the band, which will likely celebrate its 40th anniversary next year with a tour featuring Osbourne and drummer Ward.

Dio's return prompted Osbourne to put out a press release declaring "there is only one Black Sabbath" and that "Heaven and Hell has nothing to do with Black Sabbath." Dio was unfazed, while Heaven and Hell guitarist Tony Iommi (the only member of Black Sabbath to play in all of the many incarnations of the band) says Osbourne has no problems with the Heaven and Hell tour.

"Just before this tour started I had dinner in Los Angeles with Ozzy and Sharon (Osbourne's wife and manager), and there are no problems at all," Iommi, 59, said.

"I think that the original lineup of the band with Ozzy and this one with Ronnie are the classic ones. After spending the past 10 years touring with Ozzy in Black Sabbath, it's nice to do this tour. It's the first time I've been on stage in 30 years and not played (the songs) 'Paranoid' and 'War Pigs.' We really wanted to do this, but we didn't need to do it."

Dio offered additional rationals, while taking a swipe at other recently reunited bands.

"It wasn't a case of 'Whoa, we can make a lot of money if we get back together,'" said the singer, who - depending on the source - is either 57 or 64. "But we've been as surprised as anybody at the reaction. Our Radio City Music Hall concert sold out in 20 minutes.

"It shows you that this generation of Black Sabbath was something people had never forgotten and always wanted to see again. Plus, we're getting all these young kids coming to the show, too. So, I think that's different from The Police or whoever else is reuniting this week, because they're doing it for all the wrong reasons."

POLICE WORK

The Police, which last toured in 1986 before acrimoniously disbanding, is expected to earn at least $100 million from the North American leg of its world tour alone. The Anglo-American trio is playing several Los Angeles-area concerts this summer, including a June 23 show at Dodger Stadium.

While only singer-bassist Sting, 55, has thrived as a solo artist, The Police's other two members - guitarist Andy Summers, 64, and drummer Stewart Copeland, 54 - are both well-off from their past Police earnings. But both have said they felt frustrated that The Police had never said a proper "farewell" to its fans, and the two were stymied by Sting's repeated refusals to regroup for concerts or a new album.

He admitted as much at a March 12 press conference in Los Angeles with Summers and Copeland to announce the trio's reunion tour.

"If you'd asked me the day before I made this decision, I would have said: 'You're out of your mind.' My head was somewhere else," Sting said. "I woke up one morning about three months ago, and thought: 'I'm going to tell Andy and Stewart we should do this tour.' It will surprise them and it will surprise the world. It is a part of my life I've sort of run away from for 25 years.

"There's no reason why we shouldn't be 25 years better than we were - and we were good then. We're wiser and a bit more mellow."

Not so, apparently, Van Halen.

The hard-rocking Los Angeles band was poised to undertake a reunion tour this summer with original lead singer David Lee Roth. But it fell apart even before tickets could go on on sale.

The decision to abort the tour came shortly before guitarist Eddie Van Halen announced he was entering a rehab facility. Earlier this year, he fired original band bassist Michael Anthony, whose position was then assumed - however briefly - by Van Halen's 16-year-old son, Wolfgang.

But for every reunion that goes askew, many do exceedingly well. In 1994, The Eagles' dizzyingly successful "Hell Freezes Over" reunion became the first rock tour ever for which top ticket prices exceeded $100 a seat. The band has continued to be a big draw ever since, even though it has not released an album of new songs since "The Long Run" in 1979.

"If you're going to reform in any way, shape or form, you should be creating new product, because that is what secures and validates your legacy," said Dio, who proudly notes that his compilation album with Black Sabbath contains three new songs.

Yet, there is strong evidence to suggest releasing an album of new material can be a detriment for a recently reunited band. Aging fans who are eager to revisit the music of their youth - and are willing to pay big bucks to do so - want to hear the classic songs they grew up with, period.

"It just speaks to the appetite for what people experienced in their prime - the audience in their prime and the musicians in their prime," said veteran Los Angeles music publicist Bob Merlis, whose past and present clients include Prince, John Mellencamp and Fleetwood Mac.

"It's kind of a nostalgic reference to when you were whatever age you were when things were going your way. This was the soundtrack of your life. And audiences are prejudiced against new songs they haven't lived with for 25 years.

"Plus, reunions are really helpful for boosting sales of a band's back catalog, because it gives you a marketing pivot. ZZ Top, who I represent, haven't had the good sense to break up so they can get back together."

Copley News Service

What was the name of that singer again?

Asked how many other lead singers besides him have been in the band, erstwhile Black Sabbath vocalist Ronnie James Dio replied: "I think there have been five or six."

In fact, at least nine singers have fronted this seminal heavy-metal band, which is now touring with Dio under the monicker Heaven and Hell. They include original Sabbath vocalist Ozzy Osbourne, who quit in

1977, rejoined in 1978, quit again or was fired in 1979, and then launched his ongoing solo career.

After a one-off reunion with the band at the 1985 Live Aid benefit concert, Osbourne did not perform with Black Sabbath again until a two-night stand in 1992 at the Pacific Amphitheatre in Costa Mesa, Calif. He next reunited with the band's three other original members in 1997.

That lineup has remained intact ever since, with one exception. Judas Priest singer Rob Halford, a San Diego resident, filled in for Osbourne at a 2004 Black Sabbath performance in New Jersey when Osbourne lost his voice. Dio, meanwhile, is now back in the band (currently billed as Heaven and Hell) for a third time, although he was replaced for two 1992 concerts by - drum roll, please - Halford.

But the person who holds the record for leaving and rejoining the most times is drummer Bill Ward. A founding member of Black Sabbath, he is now on his sixth tour of duty pounding the skins for the band. Take that, Spinal Tap!

But determining with absolute accuracy all of the musicians who have been in Black Sabbath - and when - is virtually impossible. Some recorded with the band, but didn't tour, while others only performed with the band (in some instances, for just a night or two). However, by cross-referencing several sources, including "The Encyclopedia of Rock Stars" and the Web site www.black-sabbath.com, it is possible to compile a reasonably comprehensive round-up of the various Black Sabbath lineups over the years.

You can't tell the players without a program

You don't have to be a math wiz to know how many members have been in Black Sabbath since the release of the band's self-titled debut album in 1969, but it helps:

Singers:

Ozzy Osbourne (1969-1977); Dave Walker (1977-1978); Osbourne (1978-1979); Ronnie James Dio (1979-1982); Dave Donato (1982); Ian Gillan (1983-1984); Glenn Hughes (1985-1986); Ray Gillen (1986-1987) Tony Martin (1987-1991); Dio (1991-1992); Tony Martin (1993-1995); Osbourne (1997 to the present); Dio (2007 as a member of Heaven and Hell, which is the third edition of Black Sabbath in all but name).

Bassists:

Geezer Butler (1969-1984); Dave Spitz (1984); Gordon Copley (1985); Bob Daisley (1986); Joe Burt (1987); Laurence Cottle (1988); Neil Murray (1989-1991); Butler (1991-1994); Murray (1994-1995); Butler (1997 to the present).

Drummers:

Bill Ward (1969-1980); Vinny Appice (1980-1982); Ward (1983); Bev Bevan (1983-1984); Ward (1984); Eric Singer (1985-1987); Bevan (1987); Terry Chimes (1987); Cozy Powell (1988-1991); Appice (1991-1992); Bobby Rondinelli (1993-1994); Ward (1994); Powell (1994-1995); Rondinelli (1995); Mike Bordin (1997); Shannon Larkin (1997); Ward (1997-1998); Appice (1998); Ward (1998 to the present).

Guitarists:

Tony Iommi is the only guitarist Black Sabbath has ever had. He is also the only member to play in every lineup of the band.

Keyboardists:

Black Sabbath has periodically included keyboardists over the years, although seldom prominently. Adam Wakeman, 33, who currently holds this position, also plays in Osbourne's band. He is the son of former Yes keyboardist Rick Wakeman, who was featured on Black Sabbath's fifth album, "Sabbath Bloody Sabbath," in 1974.

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