

Arts and Leisure: Concert venues are being invaded by graybeard stars

by *George_Varga*

The world is very different today than it was 25 years ago. But if a couple of pop music fans had been placed in suspended animation in 1982 and suddenly awakened now, they might think time had stood still, at least when it comes to concerts and the most popular live performers.

ROCK OF AGES - Break out the Ben-Gay, concert venues are being invaded by stars of the past and they are ready to roll. CNS Photo by Jacie Landeros. These fans would also find the record industry imploding and the future of the album in peril. And they would surely marvel at the related advances in technology, such as iPods, music-playing cell phones and various legal and illegal forms of downloading and sharing digitally delivered music.

But when it comes to concert tours, well, what decade is this again?

On Aug. 13, singer David Lee Roth rejoined Van Halen, the band he left in 1985, for a reunion tour that is swiftly selling out coast to coast.

"Usually, when a band comes back like us, it's rockers with walkers. This is anything but," said Roth, 52, trying to pre-empt any "geezer-rock" quips.

On Aug. 23, Stevie Wonder's first national tour in 12 years opened with a show in San Diego. It sold out in three minutes, despite a minimum ticket price of \$98, plus service charges. Every other date on Wonder's tour, most in venues at least several times larger than the 1,390-seat venue in San Diego, also sold out in record time.

This year's biggest concert treks are by Genesis and The Police, two recently reunited bands whose members are all in their 50s or 60s. Stadium concerts by both groups are now grossing as much as \$7 million per show, despite no new recordings by either.

Meanwhile, the veteran acts now wrapping up their annual summer tours could be from a concert schedule in 1977, not 2007.

"I had no inclination I would still be here now, 46 years later, carrying on the legacy of The Temptations," said Otis Williams, 66, the sole surviving original member of that fabled Motown vocal group.

The Temptations perform Sept. 6 at Humphrey's in San Diego with fellow Motown veterans The Four Tops. Other acts due soon at the bayside San Diego venue include Heart, Creedence Clearwater Revisited, The Doobie Brothers, Foreigner, Daryl Hall & John Oates (who also play two September dates at the 17,500 seat Hollywood Bowl), and America. MIAs in previous years, most of these bands will do big business in San Diego and across the country, according to Humphrey's talent buyer John Wojas.

"Our recent 'Hippiefest' show with The Zombies, Mountain and Country Joe sold out way in advance," said Wojas, 37, vice president of talent for AEG San Diego, the nation's second-largest concert booking and production company.

"Bob Weir sold out for us, Foreigner will sell out, and Heart will sell out. It's a good thing. Because if they didn't, venues and concert promoters couldn't stay in business."

Heart also played a late August date in northern San Diego County at Pala Casino, which will soon host such graying acts as Chicago and the Steve Miller Band. Another area casino, Harrah's Rincon, has upcoming shows by INXS, The Doobie Brothers and Peter Frampton.

In Alpine, east of San Diego, this year's Viejas Concerts in the Park series has featured such Viejas favorites as ZZ Top, The B-52's and Chicago. These same veteran acts draw well at concert venues across the nation.

"Is there any way to discuss this without using the phrase 'dinosaur rock'?" asked San Diego attorney Scott Pactor, 31, who runs the local indie label Cat Dirt Records.

"Dinosaurs once ruled the Earth. From a market perspective, they still do. But I have an appreciation for any band that makes it for 20 years - how can you begrudge them making a living? And I'm a huge Hall & Oates fan. If Christopher Cross and Michael McDonald were on a double-bill, I'd pay \$100 for a ticket."

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Many of these performers don't even have record contracts. And unlike Genesis and The Police, who reunited this year after lengthy hiatuses (10 years for Genesis, more than 20 for The Police), they draw well year after year.

"Most of these acts are the core of the summer concert business," said Gary Bongiovanni, 57, the publisher of Pollstar, the concert industry's leading weekly publication.

"Without them there'd be a lot of dead air, because they constitute such a large percentage of the concert business. Their core audiences go to fewer shows now. But when they do go, they want a good seat. And they can pay more than they could 20 or 30 years ago to get that good seat."

A lot more, even if many bands that once packed arenas now play in more intimate settings. With tickets costing up to 20 or more times what they did in the 1970s, filling a smaller venue today can be equally, or even more, lucrative.

Indeed, despite an overall decline in attendance last year compared to 2005, concert revenues in 2006 hit a record \$3.6 billion because of higher ticket prices. Last year's Top 10 U.S. tours attracted a cumulative audience of 38 million. Aerosmith, which had 2006's 10th biggest grossing tour, brought in \$58 million. The two youngest groups in the Top 10 were Bon Jovi, which was formed in 1983, and the Dave Matthews Band, which was formed in 1991.

The average ticket price in 2006 exceeded \$60 for the first time, but no matter because the costliest seats usually are the first to sell out. And like The Temptations' Williams, many of the most reliable ticket-sellers are surprised to even be working today.

Creedence Clearwater Revisited bassist Stu Cook laughed when asked how he might have reacted in 1973 (a year after Creedence Clearwater Revival broke up), if anyone suggested he'd still be touring today.

"If someone had told me that in 1993, I would have responded with the same laugh," said Cook, 62.

"We play about 75 shows a year now and have done more than 1,000 since (drummer) Doug Clifford and I formed Creedence Clearwater Revisited 13 years ago. That's far more than we played with Creedence Clearwater Revival with (now-estranged bandleader) John Fogerty in the '60s and '70s.

"Our 13 years have proved to us that people only care about the music. If you're playing with heart and having fun, the names of the band personnel fade into the background. People can tell if it's real, and that's all that matters to most music fans."

PUNCHING THE CLOCK?

Yet, while the song (if not the actual band members) remains largely the same, the dominance of classic rock acts in the concert industry could be a mixed blessing.

With drug and alcohol problems often many years behind them, some bands sound better than ever. Others just go through the motions, resting on their laurels and letting their nostalgia-fueled music bolster their bank accounts.

"There are definitely bands that simply perform for the paycheck," Pollstar's Bongiovanni said. "But, by and large, most of them are very good showmen. They've learned the art of stagecraft and performance. Their voices may not be as strong, but they can play their instruments as good or better today, perhaps because the drug haze has cleared."

Kenny Weissberg, who booked the Humphrey's series in San Diego for 23 years until retiring last fall, is ambivalent.

"I always felt conventional and even a bit ashamed to keep going back to the well over and over for Air Supply, Gordon Lightfoot and numerous other acts that seemed like they were tired or just phoning it in," Weissberg, 59, said.

"But as long as San Diegans wanted to see these performers, why would I foist only my personal tastes on the public? And a lot of these heritage acts remain consistently strong performers. America, The Doobie Brothers, Richie Furay, Southside Johnny, Emmylou Harris, Boz Scaggs and Tower of Power deliver the goods every time they hit the stage."

The Temptations' Williams and Heart singer Ann Wilson, 57, both believe their respective bands have maintained their standards, despite many lineup changes over the years.

"If you do it long enough, you try to make it as perfect as possible," Williams said.

Wilson, whose debut solo album, "Hope & Glory," comes out Sept. 11, sounded equally committed.

"We've been through highs and lows," she said, "and times when people ask: 'Why are you still doing this?'"

You haven't had a hit in years.' We say: 'What's a hit got to do with it? We do it because we love it.' If I was forced to retire from Heart, I'd form a new band."

Such longevity aside, the music industry has been rocked by several major changes.

Where bands used to tour in support of new albums that provided most of their profits, the concerts now are the big moneymakers. Major record labels, which once prized originality and nurtured young talent for years, now drop any act that can't produce an instant hit, as does radio.

And in an age of file-sharing, ring-tones and instant YouTube videos, music has become both more ubiquitous and less essential to younger listeners. Consequently the shelf life for most new acts is more fleeting and precarious than ever.

"The fact we have a loyal fan base that has stayed with us over the years is a testament to our work ethic and our success during a period when music was more important to people," said Hall & Oates' John Oates, 58. "We've worked our butts off and made a lot of people happy, so it only makes sense they want to come and hear us.

"My son is 11 and he downloads music, like most kids. He's attracted to songs that catch his ear, but has no interest in who the band is. The whole framework that created fan loyalty has been destroyed. I'll ask him, 'Do you want to get the whole CD?' And he says, 'No.' That doesn't bode well for long-term careers."

In the past, many veteran bands played almost exclusively for fellow baby boomers - fans who literally grew up with them. Today, these acts are increasingly drawing multigenerational audiences.

Hall & Oates, in particular, have a new cachet. Brandon Flowers of The Killers and Ben Gibbard of Death Cab for Cutie have both cited the duo as a major influence. And an upcoming mash-up album by Gym Class Heroes will mix songs from the emo-meets-hip-hop band's 2006 album, "As Cruel as School Children," with 40-plus tracks by Hall & Oates.

"I've noticed a wholesale change in our audience's age over the past year, and it's been great," Oates said. "Young artists should pay homage to their inspirations, just like we did with The Temptations and all our childhood heroes."

But does the consistent drawing power of bands that have been around 30 or more years hurt new acts when

it comes to concert bookings?

"I don't think they're impeding younger bands," said Tim Mays, 52, the owner of the Casbah, San Diego's oldest alternative-rock venue. "Older concertgoers probably have no interest in going to see a younger band. And younger acts mostly aren't to the level where they can play the venues or charge the money these geezers do."

Pollstar publisher Bongiovanni attributed the dominance of these veteran acts to the simple law of supply and demand.

"Concert promoters will sell tickets to a flower show, if there's a demand for it," he said. "Veteran acts get booked because there's a demand for them. If it was true of the young acts, they would get booked in those venues, too."

The last word goes to The Who's Pete Townshend, 62. The latest edition of his pioneering band recently completed a world tour after releasing its first new album since 1982.

"In 1975, when punk came along in London," Townshend said, "I issued a challenge: 'If you really want this particular stage, come and take it from me.' No one did. The challenge stands."

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