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'Hey, hey. My, my. Rock and roll will never die.
There's more to the picture, than meets the eye. Hey,
hey. My, my.'

—Neil Young



Some things have
changed in rock and
roll ... but it's still the
same old game

The Business of Rock

By COLLIN CANRIGHT
Times Staff Writer

The game is the same. Only the stakes have changed. With the shock of Elvis Presley's swiveling pelvis, rock and roll became the popular music of a restless American youth.

At the same time, it became synonymous with the music industry.

Many critics feel the industry's tremendous growth since the '50s and '60s has doused the creative spark in rock and roll. They say there is too much commercial drive.

Those in the industry say rock and roll has always been commercial music.

"During that time, it was always a business," Lou Simon, a former executive with Epic and Mercury Records, said. "To think that the music industry is not a business is ridiculous."

But Murray Allen, manager of Universal Recording Corp. in Chicago, says it's different now.

"It's more of a business than music," Allen said.

"The typical group gets together to make money," he said. "The sole purpose is not to make music — it's to make money. Music is the vehicle to make money."

"An awful lot of rock musicians are more entertainers than they are musicians," Allen said. "They aim their music to be sold. When a rock group writes a song, they want that song to appeal to the mass audience so they

will sell a lot of records. They don't write a song to go down into the time capsules as being a great piece of art."

Allen has been in the music business since 1947, playing saxophone behind such musicians as Stevie Wonder and The Platters, and recording for major record labels.

If rock has changed in its 30 years, he said, it is in the amount of money to be made and the number of people making it.

"A few groups here and there are selling millions and millions of records," he said, "where other groups don't sell anything. There's big money to be made and there's little money to be made, but there's nothing in the middle."

The reason is economic — the influence of a recessionary economy and rising production costs.

Robin McBride produced the Ohio Players and Buddy Miles for Columbia Records in New York, managed Folkway Records and worked for Mercury Records in Chicago. He now runs VU Records in Chicago.

"The last several years is the first time an economic recession has had any serious effect on the music business," he said. "The cost of a major label launching a group today is much higher, even allowing for inflation."

As a result, he said, record companies are becoming more cautious in signing new acts.

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MORE ON TODAY'S ROCK & ROLL, SEE LIVING, D-1

Rock and Roll still the same old game

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"Record companies tend to be looking for acts that are going to develop into a new Foreigner because recent public response to those acts is the most immediate," he said.

Allen agrees.

"I think it (business) has an adverse effect because nobody wants to try anything new," he said.

"I don't think record companies want to try anything new. They say they're looking for unique acts, but if they really hear a unique act, they wouldn't know what to do with it. They usually hire some act that almost sounds like some other act, but is a little different."

Simon disagrees.

"In order to win in this business, you have to be sufficiently unique," he said.

"In the '50s and '60s, a lot of liberties were taken in the industry because the industry was growing, the economy was growing and consumers' available income was growing."

The economic climate since the late

'60s is making companies "more discriminate" in the talent they sign, Simon said.

"The fact is it's not too much of a business," he said. "Business is reacting to the need to stay in business."

Opinions on the question are as varied as the backgrounds of those asked.

Corky Siegel, a Chicago blues musician, said the music business always has been tight.

Siegel has played in blues and rock bands for 16 years, performing with all the major acts. His bands are highly acclaimed by critics and audiences.

"In terms of getting a record deal, it was always difficult," he said. "The reason people feel it's more of a business is probably because it's harder to make a living."

Siegel and others agreed business is necessary, but separate from music.

"Business and music are two separate art forms," he said. "When I go to Des Moines, I don't go there for the audience, because I could play music in my own home. I go there for the money."

Business is to the advantage of the established musician, Siegel said. Others agree.

"I don't think it's (business) a bad thing," Mike Franklin, manager of Futuresounds music service, said. "I think it's always been like that. It just wasn't revealed that much before."

Simon said the ills of the business were hidden during its period of great growth. With the decline in growth, the ills have surfaced, he said.

Peter Leonardy said musicians have adapted to the tightening of the business since the '60s, becoming more competitive and better trained.

"The big money just isn't there anymore," he said. "The average musician just isn't going to make it."

Leonardy has worked as a guitarist since 1964, backing Bo Diddley and Dave Mason, among others. He works as an aide at Chicago's Columbia College, and as an engineer at Chicago Tracks studio.

"They (musicians) know what they're doing, instead of stumbling around like we used to," he said. "In the older days,

you just had to know three chords."

Now, musicians must be trained to read and arrange music, and be able to play anything that is put in front of them. Versatility is the key, he said.

"It's real sad that it's this way," Leonardy said. "I think you lost a heavy spark of originality. The fun has gone out of the business."

Employees to be paid

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on a fixed income.

Councilman Margaret Pardinek expressed concern about individuals who would be forced to pay the higher rates — although they can't afford to — while some homeowners who are delinquent on their bills are allowed to get by.