

Houston Chronicle

Wednesday, Aug. 20, 1997

Stones bridge a cultural divide

BENEATH the Brooklyn Bridge, the worlds of corporate America and rock 'n' roll forged another link this week, proving once again that the musical movement founded on rebellion against authority has become a part of the establishment itself.

The Rolling Stones announced Monday that Sprint Corp. will be the sole sponsor of the band's U.S. tour. Sprint is shelling out millions for the partnership, but it has an innovative idea of how to recoup its investment.

Sprint customers and folks switching their phone service to Sprint will get first dibs on the best tickets to the Stones' upcoming "Bridges to Babylon" tour. That should snag thousands of new customers for the telecommunications company, which also will ride on the Stones' coattails with a series of television commercials touting the partnership.

There was a time when such a deal would have been unthinkable. Not only were the musicians reluctant, Madison Avenue took a very dim view of rock 'n' roll. A lot of bands were nervous about "selling out," said Jay Coleman, president of EMCI, the company that brokered the deal between the Stones and Sprint. "And trying to sell rock 'n' roll to Madison Avenue was tough, because the image was sex, drugs, anarchy - all the things corporate America was uncomfortable with. The CEOs had not grown up with rock 'n' roll as part of their life, so they didn't understand it."

Breaking the, barriers

It was the Stones who broke the barriers by signing the first deal with a corporate sponsor in 1981. Jovan fragrances, an aggressive little brand wanting to introduce a new kind of cologne called musk, paid \$500,000 to sponsor the Rolling Stones' North American tour.

"The Stones are good businessmen, and the costs of touring were starting to spiral," Coleman said. "Sponsorships were another way to defray costs."

The Stones followed up their deal with Jovan by signing up with Budweiser, official sponsor of the 1989, 1990 and 1994 tours. Unlike the relatively paltry half-million paid by Jovan, Budweiser paid big bucks to hang out with the Stones.

"The tours provided an excellent way to promote the Budweiser brand," August A. Busch IV, vice president of marketing at Anheuser-Busch, said Tuesday.

Others jump on the bandwagon

Other musicians obviously have taken notice of the Stones' success. The Who inked a deal with Miller Genuine Draft. Pepsi paid millions to Michael Jackson. In addition to sponsorships, rock songs now serve as the soundtrack for countless television commercials. I wish I had a quarter for every time I've heard Bob Seger's *Like a Rock* used to sell Chevy trucks.

As a sign, sponsorships are coming of age; the dealmakers aren't just beer and soft drink companies anymore. Paul McCartney's recent tour was sponsored by Visa. Phil Collins signed a deal with Sears.

Sponsorship revenues have been a welcomed boost for bands because the concert business has fallen into a funk lately. Total concert revenues for contemporary music dropped from \$1.4 billion in 1994 to \$950 million in 1995. It recovered somewhat last year, but it still has a long way to go before catching up with 1994 - the last year the Stones went on tour, by the way.

It appears most fans have taken the sponsorship trend in stride, especially if bands are careful not to turn the concerts into overblown commercials. For instance, Sprint will have booths at concert sites, but the company's logo will not appear anywhere near the Stones while they are onstage.

"The idea of any stigma from a sponsorship is long gone for most consumers," said Ron Rodrigues, editor in chief of *Radio and Records*, an industry publication. "It's become an accepted part of the landscape."

Which raises the question, what has changed more to make these deals possible: rebellious rock 'n' roll or staid corporate America? According to Howard Kramer, assistant curator at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio, the answer is corporate America.

"Business is finally wising up to the fact that popular music is the language of contemporary culture," Kramer said.

That may be attributable to the fact that many of today's CEOs grew up on rock 'n' roll. Sprint's chairman, said to be a huge fan of the Stones' music, said he is "thrilled" about the company's association with the Rolling Stones.

"Keep in mind," Kramer said, "the Stones are about the same age as the members of most corporate boards."