

NEWSDAY 2000

Rock stars moving to the corporate beat Rockers, corporations now sing in perfect harmony

By LETTA TAYLER

The year was 1968, the city was Los Angeles and Jim Morrison, the front man for the rock band the Doors, was screaming inside a recording studio - but not as part of a song.

Morrison had just learned his band mates were going to let Buick use the Doors' hit *Light My Fire* in a television commercial for its new car, the Opel.

"It's corporate! You guys just made a pact with the devil!" Morrison ranted, Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek recounts in his biography of the group. If the deal went through, Morrison warned, he'd "smash a Buick to dust" on stage. Buick, not surprisingly, backed out.

What a difference a few decades make. These days, stars from Lenny Kravitz and Liz Phair to Sting and 19SS are plugging anything from jeans and lipstick to computers and Pepsi. Electronica guru Moby models for Calvin Klein, the Backstreet Boys were brought to you by Sears and Got Milk? presents Britney Spears.

Once oil and water, popular musicians and corporate advertisers are collaborating at an unprecedented rate, particularly in the past couple of years. It's a trend that underscores rock's waning role as a counterculture force, while raising questions about the extent to which the performing arts are becoming just another marketing opportunity.

In rock's infancy, "You couldn't have had two more diverse entities than the corporate world and rock music," says Jay Coleman, CEO and founder of Entertainment Marketing Communications International, a firm that pioneered ties between pop music and advertising in the '70s. "The corporate world was scared of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, and the last thing the rock world wanted to do was, quote, sell out and commercialize."

Now, Coleman says, "For the most part it's a mutual admiration society. Most rock and pop and hip hop acts see that if they do it right, it's a win-win deal."

The many rockers who agree with that assessment include ex-Beatle Ringo Starr, whose latest tour is sponsored by Century 21 Real Estate Corp. In return for the sponsorship, Starr appears in one of the mega-firm's television commercials and chats on its Web site.

"When we were all 20, we were really anti-establishment," says Starr, who also is doing ads for Charles Schwab. "Now," he says of corporate tie-ins, "it's part of the business." Miles Copeland, the manager for Sting, who has become a frequent figure on television ads through a cross-endorsement deal with Compaq, put it more bluntly. "Nowadays, everybody's into making money," he says. Though no firm figures exist, entertainment industry analysts say the money poured into promotional deals with pop stars easily reaches hundreds of millions of dollars.

With rock pushing 50, it's not surprising that the genre has evolved from a voice of protest during the turbulent '60s to an integral part of corporate culture in the money-hungry present, according to Howard Kramer, associate curator of the Cleveland-based Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

And while hip-hop has replaced rock as the voice of youthful rebellion, its fiercely materialistic streak, which finds many rappers rhyming about Rolexes, diamonds and Mercedes-Benzes, makes it a natural for corporate tie-ins.

"The mainstreaming of, quote, rebel music is so omnipresent you can't pull it back," Kramer says. "And when something becomes mainstream, all elements of the mainstream will try to absorb it."

While it's questionable how badly Sting and Starr need the dough, many rockers may well use the money to pay the bills. Copeland argues that most performers sign only deals that don't conflict with their style or conscience.

The eclectic songwriter Tom Waits, who in the '80s successfully sued Frito Lay for hiring an impersonator to sing a tortilla-chip radio jingle modeled on his song Step Right Up, was unimpressed. The affiliations between products and pop stars are "all carefully engineered and tested," says Waits, who with Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young is among the few prominent rockers who just say no to ads. For example, he notes, "Nobody is coming out for caskets,"

If caskets are out, tours sponsored by alcohol companies are still in, and so, in rare cases, are those sponsored by cigarette companies.

Paying bills and increasing exposure aren't the only rewards from going corporate. In Sting's case, Compaq's sponsorship cushioned his touring costs and allowed him to keep down ticket prices, Copeland says. For baby boomer performers, television and radio ads also are an invaluable way to reach mature fans who are so preoccupied with families and jobs that they often aren't aware their favorite group has a new tour or album.

For all its early anti-establishment rants, popular music has never been completely immune to the corporate lure. In 1954, Elvis Presley did a radio jingle for Southern-Maid Donuts as part of his contract with the Louisiana Hayride show.

In the first megadeal of its kind, the Rolling Stones in 1981 let the perfume company Jovan sponsor the group's world tour. And who could forget Michael Jackson's Pepsi commercials in the mid-'80s, even if his hair hadn't caught fire during an ill-fated pyrotechnic stunt?

But it took a new generation of corporate managers reared on rock to fully realize its selling power.

"Kids look up to musicians," says Andy Hilfiger, the vice president of publicity for Tommy Jeans and the brother of Tommy Hilfiger, who has sponsored tours by Jewel, Kravitz, Spears and the Rolling Stones, among others. As part of the quid pro quo, those stars have modeled Tommy Hilfiger duds in various ads or worn them during performances. Coleman calls the tactic "borrowed interest," or "you are who you stand next to."

"If you're trying to sell automobiles to young adults, you want them to think your car is cool and that the brand they're driving is part of their lifestyle," he says. "So if you put a new car next to Ricky Martin, it says you're contemporary, you're fashionable, you're hot."

Waits sees it more cynically, particularly when ads feature well known oldies. "They take songs that already have value to you, they take that emotional information and then they wind it around a can of beer or a candy," he says.

Many corporations favor main stream performers who have just enough attitude to lure young fans but won't offend parents who dole out their allowance money. Hence Sears and Levis' decision to present this summer's tour of bubblegum popster Christina Aguilera.

Increasingly, however, companies are offering deals to edgier artists, realizing the potential for marketing counterculture itself. Take the cosmetics firm Urban Decay, which carries lipsticks with names such as Smog, Acid Rain and Roach.

How much further will advertising push into the concert arena? Much further, predicts Kramer of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, who sees live music shows eventually becoming a more sophisticated version of Formula I racing events, in which the drivers, their cars, their suits and their crews are covered with endorsements.

The only thing that would curb the trend, Kramer says, is if the public boycotted events that were saturated with product pitches. But so far, fans seem inured.

The ever-cynical Waits says he believes public acceptance of the rock-and-ads marriage is part of a larger trend in which consumerism has become religion and increasingly large monopolies serve as God.

"People don't know how to do anything anymore except shop," he complains. "Eventually, all the products will be owned by one company and someone you know will be singing the theme song."

