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Women's Music Tour Handpicks Backers

The hottest music tour of the summer features only women and is backed by "clean" sponsors chosen for their charitable or politically correct ways.

The tour, called Lilith Fair, is the brainchild of singer Sarah McLachlan and is a bold break from the music industry's hard-and-fast male-centric rules. Never put two women on stage back-to-back, and look for corporate sponsors targeting young men, the typical ticket buyers at rock shows.

Lilith Fair - its name drawn from a Hebrew myth about a woman who saw herself as equal to Adam -turns the industry's rules upside down. Starting in Seattle on July 5, the tour will fill its stage with a rotating lineup of 10 acts a day, including pop sensations Jewel and Sheryl Crow, promising newcomers Fiona Apple and Beth Orton, experienced country singers Mary Chapin Carpenter and Emmylou Harris, folk rockers Shawn Colvin and Joan Osborne and jazz singer Cassandra Wilson.

Most major tours and rock shows this summer have corporate backers like Guinness beer, Skoal smokeless tobacco and Vans skateboard shoes. But Lilith has a bookstore chain, a retailer of women's shoes and a maker of skin-care products. All picked for their high-minded ideals and the amount of money they dole out to charities.

Ms. McLachlan and the tours organizers created four categories into which marketers might fit. The "learning" sponsor is Borders Books & Music, the Ann Arbor, Mich.-based book superstore chain. Nine West, the retailer of trendy women's shoes, has given millions to fight breast cancer, so it became the "wellness" sponsor. Biore, a unit of Andrew Jergens, has no category but was chosen for its promise to donate money to charities "promoting the health and welfare of women."

Lilith Fair's categories for the official "spirit" and "shelter" sponsors aren't filled yet and may not be. Ms. McLachlan and her organizers could easily have filled them, but the tour rebuffed some national marketers, such as Detroit automakers, because they didn't fit the Lilith criteria. "Socially conscious businesses is what we wanted," says Ms. McLachlan. "No child labor, no animal testing, but community oriented."

In breaking the mold of rock shows, Lilith Fair may also be just what a moribund pop-music concert business needs. After years of groundbreaking and adventurous touring shows, such as Lollapalooza, the summer concert business is struggling. Summer now accounts for two thirds of all concert ticket sales, which in 1996 were "lackluster," according to Pollstar, the concert trade publication. Pollstar reported consumers spent an estimated \$1.05 billion on major concert ticket sales last year, up slightly from 1995, but well below the record of \$1.4 billion set in 1994.

Promoters -complained that escalating financial demands of artists led to higher ticket prices, which then turned off the public.

Early signs are that Ms. McLachlan's tour will outshine others this summer, including Skoal's R.O.A.R. tour, which is struggling to fill venues. Tickets for Lilith's 32 dates are selling briskly. "Lilith has acts that get significant airplay on a variety of radio stations," says Gary Bongiovanni, editor of Pollstar.

Lilith Fair also comes as women are breaking through in other areas of popular entertainment. At the same time Lilith is touring, the Women's National Basketball Association will be playing its inaugural season, with teams based in major cities and a slate of games that will be broadcast on network television. Putumayo, the women's clothing company, has launched a record label that focuses on women artists from around the world. And time Warner's Rhino records introduced a new music series earlier this year called Heart Beats that was developed by Rhino female executives for, but not limited to, women consumers.

Lilith Fair could have sold itself to some very high bidders but resisted the opportunity. At one point Lilith Fair organizers talked with hot apparel maker Tommy Hilfiger about sponsorship. Hilfiger executives asked what it would cost to be title sponsor of the tour, but Lilith Fair said that wasn't available; the tour organizers wanted a handful of "symbol" sponsors rather than a "Tommy" tour. Hilfiger is now talking with other tours.

Vanity Fair also planned to be a sponsor, but the celebrity magazine wanted to bring its advertisers "on board," according to Andrew Klein, of Entertainment Marketing & Communications International, the Stamford, Conn.-based company assisting Ms. McLachlan in finding sponsors. Since some of Vanity Fair's advertisers might not "be clean companies both sides decided it wasn't going to work out. It would have gotten too sticky," says Mr. Klein, the director of business development.

A sponsor that was accepted, Borders, has received some negative publicity recently because of its attempts to fight off workers' attempts to unionize. Ms. McLachlan concedes she was unaware of management's antiunion stance, but she says the retailer still makes the grade. "As a company what they are giving to the public for the most part is good," she says.

All of Lilith Fair's sponsors will get down and dirty at the events - selling hard like the best of capitalists. Biore will hand out samples of its Pore Perfect strip, which removes blackheads. Borders will set up a store under a tent that will sell CD albums of Lilith Fair performers. Tour artists will also show up in Borders stores for live performances. Portions of the music sales on tour and at store events will go to charity.

"This is a first for us, a very cool thing," says Jody Kohn, director of publicity and promotion for Borders Group. "The artists represented at Lilith are compatible with what we sell, what we believe in and who our customers are. Our stores are so psyched about this."



Singer Sarah McLachlan has organized this summer's Lilith Fair music tour