

Agency Sending Big Names on the Road

TRIAD BRACES FOR BUSY SUMMER

BY PAUL GREIN

LOS ANGELES Acts that aren't getting heavy airplay on contemporary hit radio could run into trouble on the road this summer. That's the view of top executives at Triad Artists, the locally based agency which is booking summer tours by Wham!, Tina Turner, Men At Work, the Pointer Sisters, Chaka Khan, Morris Day and Kenny Loggins, among others.

"Acts out there this summer are going to have to rely on current airplay," says John Marx, Triad's director of the contemporary area. "With any act that isn't a superstar, if the airplay isn't substantial, there is reason to worry that the dates may not do well."

Rob Kahane, who works with

Marx in the contemporary area, notes that Morris Day's lack of a major hit has prompted the agency to be somewhat conservative in booking his tour, set to begin in late September.

"A lot of people would like to see Morris in arenas," Kahane says, "but we're going into 3,000- to 5,000-seat halls and do multiple days. Even though 'Purple Rain' did \$50 million to \$60 million at the box office and the Time album sold more than two million copies, we're still going to go out and play real close to the vest."

Kahane adds that hit radio has replaced AOR as the most important format in influencing ticket sales. "It used to be the rule of thumb that if you had a tremendous amount of AOR airplay you were a ticket seller," he says. "The reverse is now true. If you are a major hit act, you know the kids are going to run out and buy tickets."

"Your Tom Pettys and Kenny Loggins—people who for years have been relying on AOR airplay—are now convinced that they've got to break a single. Huey Lewis is a perfect example of someone who sells a lot of tickets quickly because he's totally accepted in mass at hit radio. The same is true of Madonna."

Kahane also notes that packaging will be very important this summer. "The key to the summer is getting back to basics and packaging," he says. "The key is to be a young act that sells tickets, because there's plenty of situations for support this year. If a young act is starting to break, I think they'll work quite a bit."

Some intelligent packages which Marx and Kahane cite include Eric Clapton hiring Graham Parker & the Shot as opening act; Don Henley buying Katrina & the Waves; Tom Petty taking on 'Til Tuesday, and Tina Turner signing Glenn Frey.

Triad was formed last September, when the 10-year-old Regency Artists, the largest agency specializing in personal appearances, merged with a literary agency and an acting agency. Triad is run by Peter Grosslight and Richard Rosenberg, who were also partners at Regency.

Marx and Kahane also worked at Regency, having moved over to that agency in 1982 from ICM. "Before John [Marx] came over, Regency was real hit-and-miss in the contemporary area," Grosslight acknowledges. "It was mostly middle-of-the-road, pop and black."

But now Triad is solidly entrenched in contemporary music, as its summer tours by Wham!, Men At Work and Tina Turner attest.

The Wham! tour is set to encompass 21 cities and focus on arenas. "Initially it was going to be a stadium tour," Marx says, "but we altered the plans to incorporate more markets. If it were a stadium tour, they could only do so many dates, because you need a day to set up and another day to load out."

Grosslight acknowledges that there has been some skepticism about the change. "There's been some speculation, which I imagine would be normal after a stadium tour is talked about and then it's changed, that the reason for the change is a lack of confidence in their ability to do the business. But

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Key Showcase. Suzanne Vega, third from right, receives visitors following her recent show at the Bottom Line in New York. From left are Ron Fierstein, Vega's co-manager; Michael Leon, A&M's vice president of East Coast operations; Nancy Jeffries, the label's director of East Coast a&r; Gil Friesen, label president; Vega; Steve Addabbo, co-manager; and Jerry Moss, A&M's chairman of the board. (Photo: John Bellissimo)

EMI's Portnow Seeks Roster Diversity

Worldwide A&R VP Cites Return to Black Repertoire

SAM SUTHERLAND

LOS ANGELES Veteran a&r executive Neil Portnow's new post as EMI America's vice president of worldwide a&r finds him shepherding the label's talent base toward a broader, more diversified array of genres. That mission, following a period of more specialized talent development for the Los Angeles-based Capitol/EMI division, is a welcome one to the former musician, producer and label president.

"There was a determination several years ago that, between the two labels then owned by EMI, EMI America would focus on the country side and Capitol would focus on the black side," recalls Portnow, who moved to EMI late last year. "Artists were moved to the two rosters accordingly."

"In 1985, however, that simply doesn't work. When such a high percentage of music is coming from or influenced by black artists, we'd be foolish or at least remiss in not being involved with that area. So we'll be back in that area, in a significant way."

For Portnow, that return to black repertoire is "personally exciting." While with RCA Records' a&r team during the mid-'70s, Portnow was actively involved with r&b stylists, notably writer/performers Grey & Hanks and a then-unknown singer named James Ingram, whom he signed to the label.

"He never really flowered at RCA," Portnow acknowledges. "I signed him about two months before I left for 20th Century-Fox, and he was later dropped."

Portnow's own years at 20th, where he was appointed president in the wake of RCA's purchase of the label, further buttressed his expertise with black acts. The roster there included such top black performers as Stephanie Mills, Carl Carlton, the Staple Singers, the Ch-Lites, the Dells and Leon Haywood.

When 20th Century-Fox Records was absorbed directly into RCA, Portnow moved to Arista, where he became vice president for West

Coast a&r and general manager. Once again, black pop was a priority, extending to close work with Ray Parker Jr. and a pivotal role in bringing Jermaine Jackson to the label. Still, Portnow stresses his own long-standing commitment to a broader talent arena, encompassing pop, rock and other idioms.

In assessing EMI America's current roster and future plans, Portnow cites a variety of issues that are shaping his strategy. "EMI's image has been in the forefront of the rock'n'roll area," he says. "If we accept that there's a movement toward rock Americana, considering the huge success of a Springsteen or a Fogerty, and the raves for such new bands as Lone Justice, then we're already there."

Portnow cites George Thorogood (signed through a deal with Rounder), Jason & the Scorchers, the Del-Lords, former Stray Cat member Brian Setzer and Cats spinoff Phantom Rocker & Slick as EMI artists tied to this trend.

The company's roster has generally been selective, Portnow says. Yet he notes that it had risen to as many as 57 acts in recent quarters. Now the active roster has fewer than 30 acts, but Portnow adds that he was spared the villain's role in achieving this reduction.

"Fortunately for me, [label president] Jim Mazza felt that the cuts could and should be achieved before I officially started. That would've been a hell of a way to start off as head of a&r, as an axeman."

Selectivity is especially important to Portnow in terms of what he sees as current market forces and industry necessities. Talent development today compels labels to take a more active creative role in shaping new artists, in contrast to the more *laissez faire* stance most companies held during the '70s, he notes.

Portnow agrees that most majors are now exercising their editorial options more forcefully. "If you go to a record company, part of the reason should be to utilize their experience and expertise in creative fields, not just marketing."

Internationally, Portnow sees EMI as balancing needs within each territory against worldwide prospects. "We look toward worldwide deals for all acts," he says. "We don't pursue licensing and distribution situations outside EMI very often." Thus, major distribution pacts with other labels here and abroad have been largely avoided.

For the present, Portnow is restaffing the a&r department and evaluating possible new signings. He says he's emphasizing new artists, although he adds that there remains competitive validity to competition for established acts.

BY KIM FREEMAN

NEW YORK Consultancy aimed at helping radio stations define and target their desired demographics has long been an accepted trade tool. The principles of tapping core and potential fans would appear to be naturals in advising an artist's career, a notion that Atlanta-based radio consultant Lee Abrams developed several years ago. Abrams' clientele as an artist consultant includes much of Island Records' roster, plus Yes, the Alan Parsons Project, Asia and other veteran rockers.

Applying statistics to the delicate area of musical artistry is a tricky business, and Abrams is quick to note that the services he provides are more along the lines of information than creative advice. Queried as to why such research isn't employed by more artists or record companies, Abrams says many people "fear it will hurt the creative process."

Abrams, who runs his artist consultant business under the Lee Abrams Inc. banner, adds that his expertise and research facilities are of particular interest to British acts who want to keep tabs on the Amer-

ican market.

Abrams says a consistent finding in his work is that longtime AOR stalwarts have been plagued by the notion that "the hit single is the fashionable, save-all cure." According to Abrams, the single "sure helps, but it must be done on the band's own terms; otherwise it will affect their core audience."

A recurrent term in Abrams' career critiques is "misevolution," a concept he applies to artists pursuing an "unnatural" course. In Abrams' opinion, Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty, Pink Floyd and Phil Collins have evolved properly in these days of top 40 domination. Acts that Abrams says he would like to work with comprise a longer list. They include Rush, Neil Young, Bob Seger, Thomas Dolby, Molly Hatchet and "any of the new generation of jazz artists like Pat Metheny."

A case in point is the Alan Parsons Project, which continues to have some artistic clashes with Arista Records, according to Parsons' partner Eric Wolfson. "Arista is reasonably obsessed with the hit single," he says, "and we had turned into just another entity. We lost our adventurous musical ap-

proach and our objectivity."

Scuffling at the common approach of evaluating product after it's finished, Wolfson calls Abrams' service "a constructive, positive method on which to build. It's unbiased, factual research."

Despite a heavy promotion campaign, last year's "Ammonia Avenue" album was "disappointing saleswise," says Wolfson. Recruited after the Project's next album, "Vulture Culture," was already in the can, Abrams concluded that the Project had lost the innovative edge it started with. Specifics included the unpopularity of the band's move toward "soft vocals" in recent efforts, says Wolfson, who contributed many of them.

"Instinctively, artists tend to shy away" from what Abrams provides, says Chris Squire of Yes. Noting that Abrams hasn't interfered with the group's own creative direction, Squire says the consultant merely provides "a window to the outside. Most artists go through tunnels and forget what's going on around them. Working with Abrams has made me more media-conscious."

Thanks to the Burkhart/Abrams radio consultant firm, Abrams has a

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