

10-Year Old Pace Concerts Gears For Great Outdoors

Allen Becker: 'Amphitheatres Spearheading Live Entertainment in Southwest'

The last minute preparations were underway backstage at the Southern Star Amphitheatre for the Bryan Adams concert. Louis Messina, president of Pace concerts, surveyed the crowd of 18,000 fans that gathered on the plus lawns of Houston's new outdoor theatre, their blankets and picnic baskets spread out as far as the eye could see.

As one of the nation's leading concert promoters, Messina had been through this many times before. Pace puts on more than 400 shows a year, including dates for some the biggest names in the music industry. Headliners like Bruce Springsteen, Eric Clapton, Phil Collins, Willie Nelson, Julio Iglesias and Frank Sinatra populate the Pace concert schedule.

Yet, the Southern Star concert had a special significance for Pace Concerts and its parent company, Pace Management Corp. The new amphitheatre signifies another new direction for Pace, which from its Houston base has focused on the Southwest's leisure market through the thorough marketing of concerts as well as stadium events and theatrical productions.

"Amphitheatres are spearheading live entertainment in the Southwest," says Allen Becker, partner and co-founder of Pace Management. "Through our concert division, Pace is in an excellent position to secure the talent it takes to bring out crowds, 20,000 to 30,000 strong, to these large outdoor facilities."

In addition to Southern Star Amphitheatre in Houston, Pace operates South Park Meadows in Austin and Mud Island in Memphis.

According to Becker, the steady influx of young professionals to the Sun Belt's key metropolitan centers is the kind of demographic trend around which Pace's amphitheatre strategy is centered.

"The baby boomers have grown up and they want—and will pay for—quality entertainment," Becker says. "Moreover, today's young professionals are more selective. They want a relaxed environment in which to enjoy concerts. They don't want to wait on line for tickets like they did 15 years

ago, and they do want to bring their children along."

Taking all these factors into consideration, Pace is banking on the amphitheatre venue to lure these young and affluent patrons.

Pace is the brainchild of Becker and his partner Sidney Shlenker. Their early success was linked to the Houston Astrodome, for which Pace booked a number of trade shows. In time, they began to fill the Astrodome datebook with more ambitious programming. They devised an event called the "Thrill Show," a daredevil spectacular show, that continues to deliver huge crowds to the arena each year. Pace also booked the Astrodome's first concert, an event that marked the company's entry into the concert field.

"It was a time when rock concerts were changing the face of live entertainment," Becker recalls. "Today, concerts are as much theatrical as they are musical."

In 1975, when Messina joined Pace, the concert division began to flourish. Messina's reputation as a daring promoter, whose gut instincts more often than not proved to be correct, began to emerge.

"Messina always kept his eye on new talent," Becker says. "This has paid off for us when yesterday's unknowns become today's stars."

Today, Pace is the nation's third ranked presenter/producer of concerts and generates approximately \$16 million in gross revenue from the sale of 1.3 million tickets each year. Indeed, Pace fills large arenas with more than concerts. Its stadium event division brings truck and tractor pulls to more than four million spectators a year.

Pace Theatrical Group Inc., formed only three years ago, has amazed industry professionals with its ambitious and successful approach to marketing Broadway on the road. PTG is now one of the top three presenters and producers of theatrical engagements, offering subscriptions seasons in 11 cities.

Las Colinas

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particularly in light of the recent decision to form a Texas Music Commission?

CROW: As far as the business side of music goes—taking it out of the realm of the arts and putting it into the realm of industry—the state of Texas has a long way to go. And there could be more cooperation between the cities. We would like Austin especially to really feel allied with us. Las Colinas could be a key ingredient in focusing statewide efforts and creative projects that would force this industry onward. In terms of the Texas Music Commission, it's a great start. But let's hope nobody fools themselves into thinking that it's enough.

POPE: I think it's fair to say that other states have spent more on the economic development of their music and entertainment industries than Texas has. Now maybe the state of Texas is trying to catch up.

BILLBOARD: Will music video productions speed that "catching up" process along?

CROW: To refer back to one of your earlier questions, something that we really underestimated when we built this thing three years ago and one of the biggest surprises we have had, has been the viability of MTV. Boy, has it come on in a positive way for us and for the rest of the Texas industry in general.

KELLY FERRO

World Reunion

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One of the strongest Texas-based labels is Word Records in Waco. Word's distribution pact with A&M has boosted Amy Grant to new heights, and while the label is expecting "perhaps our strongest sales results ever in the second half of 1985," says Word chairman of the board Jarrell McCracken, sales within the state have accounted for part of the increase. "We're selling more and more product in Texas each year. Music sales as a whole have taken a slight dip because of the decline in oil prices and the agricultural malaise in Texas, but things appear to have levelled off."



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