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HOT SPOTS



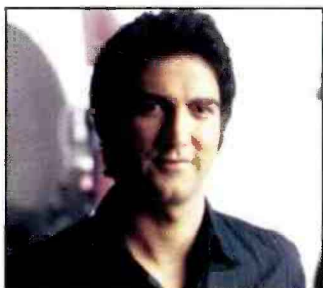
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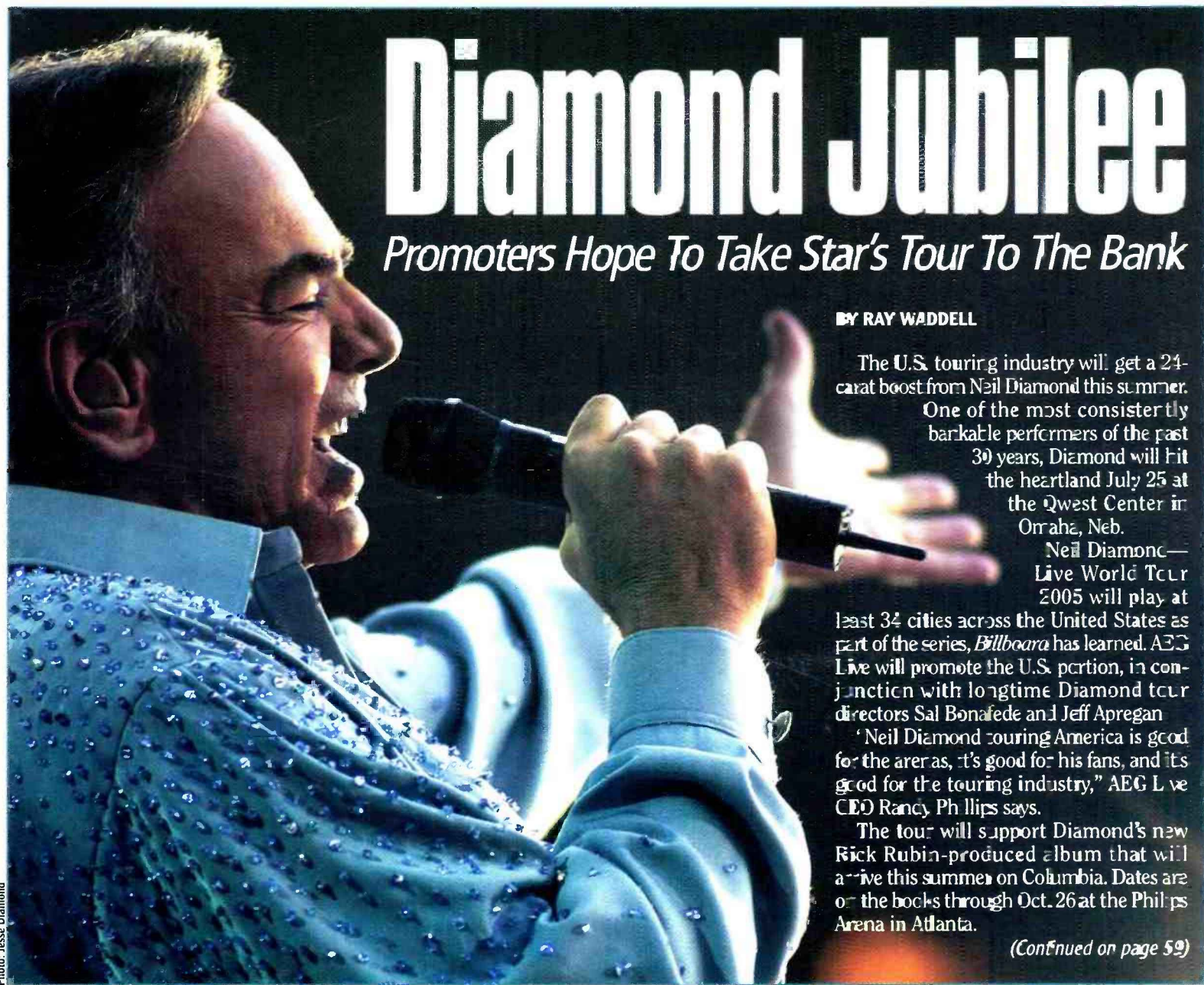


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Diamond Jubilee

Promoters Hope To Take Star's Tour To The Bank

BY RAY WADDELL

The U.S. touring industry will get a 24-carat boost from Neil Diamond this summer. One of the most consistently bankable performers of the past 30 years, Diamond will hit the heartland July 25 at the Qwest Center in Omaha, Neb.

Neil Diamond—Live World Tour 2005 will play at least 34 cities across the United States as part of the series, *Billboard* has learned. AEG Live will promote the U.S. portion, in conjunction with longtime Diamond tour directors Sal Bonafede and Jeff Apregan.

"Neil Diamond touring America is good for the arenas, it's good for his fans, and it's good for the touring industry," AEG Live CEO Nancy Phillips says.

The tour will support Diamond's new Rick Rubin-produced album that will arrive this summer on Columbia. Dates are on the books through Oct. 26 at the Philips Arena in Atlanta.

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Photo: Jesse Diamond

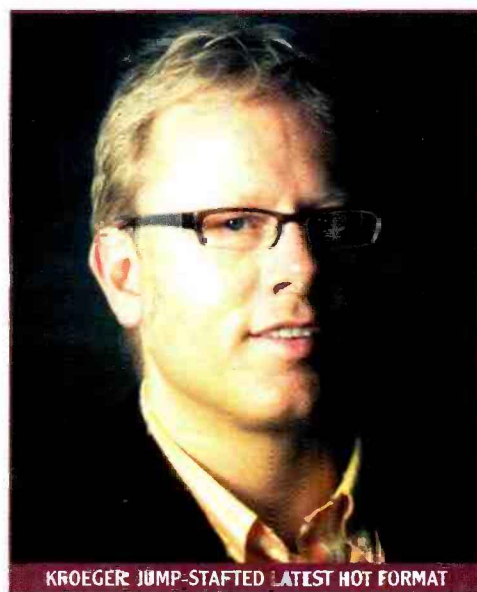
No Deal For HOB Concerts

BY RAY WADDELL

It's déjà vu for the House of Blues. For the second time in three years, the company has entertained the sale of its concert division, then ultimately stayed intact.

In news first tipped April 13 on *billboard.biz*, House of Blues Concerts is once again off the block, according to CEO Greg Trojan.

"We feel like retaining our concert business will generate more growth for House of Blues than selling it," Trojan tells *Billboard*. "[Selling] would have had to be a situation where we (Continued on page 61)



KROEGER: JUMP-STARTED LATEST HOT FORMAT

Radio Does Know Jack

BY PAUL HEINE

Radio's playlist liberation movement hatched in late 2001 at a birthday party in Winnipeg, Manitoba. A radio was blasting when Howard Kroeger, director of operations and programming for CHUM Broadcasting's Winnipeg stations, arrived at his friend's 40th-birthday bash. It was a competitor's classic rock station, and Kroeger used the occasion to conduct an informal focus group among the partygoers, most in their mid- to late 30s.

Whenever Boston, the Cars, Meatloaf, Super- (Continued on page 59)

Jack

Continued from page 1

tramp or some other '70s staple came on, it got an overwhelming thumbs-up from the Molson-enhanced crowd. But there was a noticeable lack of enthusiasm when Jimi Hendrix, the Animals, the Doors or other '60s icons played.

While the crowd dug connecting with music from their high school years, Kroeger noticed the station wasn't playing a lot of other acts his generation grew up with, like the Pretenders, Elvis Costello, Soft Cell and Tears for Fears.

Returning home, he pulled one of Joel Whitburn's *Billboard* chart reference books off the shelf and began feverishly compiling a list of songs from 1974 to the present that had a rock/AC flavor but were not getting much radio love. He ended up with a deep and wide potpourri.

With the help of Mike Dorn from Audience Research International, Kroeger made a format montage from the song list and had it tested during a CHUM strategic study. "It came back that the hole was absolutely huge," Kroeger recalls.

Kroeger always liked the "Bob" moniker used by a Minneapolis country station in the early '90s, so he adopted the handle in Winnipeg. "We wanted to present a personality for the radio station without having to go through all these names that have been used a gazillion times before, like the Hawk and the Bear," he says.

And so, on March 4, 2002, North America's first Bob FM was born on CFWM Winnipeg. In launching the station, Kroeger jump-started the latest hot radio format, which goes under various regular-guy names: Bob, Jack, Ben, Simon, Hank and others.

It encompasses a wide swath of music from the mid- to late '70s up to the turn of the century.

Variety is the name of the game, seemingly mimicking the iPod Shuffle campaign in its quest for odd juxtapositions of style and genre. The one common denominator is that these songs were all hits.

Launching two weeks into Canada's Bureau of Broadcast Measurement ratings survey, the fresh format debuted in Winnipeg at No. 1 among adults ages 25-54 and has remained there ever since—for nine consecutive ratings periods.

Inspired by the success in Winnipeg, Rogers Broadcasting launched Jack FM in Vancouver in December 2002, under PD Pat Cardinal. Today, there is a Bob, Jack, Joe or Dave in every major Canadian market except Montreal. Each of the country's three radio titans—Rogers, Corus Radio and CHUM Broadcasting—program variations in multiple markets.

FIDGETING PROGRAMMERS

Initially puzzled by a format that fractures some of radio's time-honored programming tenets, U.S. broadcasters have since embraced the concept. "The first time you sit down with somebody to schedule what everybody calls 'train wrecks,' you might see a little fidgeting going on," Joel Folger says amid bursts of devilish laughter. A for-

mer programmer, Folger works with Kroeger advising U.S. stations on the format. He prides himself on helping PDs "unlearn many of the principles that [they], as a programmer, have come to believe are set in stone. You can play songs from different [musical] formats on the same station."

In one form or another, Bob, Jack and their offshoots have hit the air in markets including Los Angeles; Chicago; Philadelphia; Dallas; Detroit; Washington, D.C.; Atlanta; Denver; Kansas City, Mo.; Salt Lake City; Austin; Sacramento, Calif.; Indianapolis; Des Moines, Iowa; Tucson, Ariz.; and Texarkana, Texas.

"One of the interesting things that came out of this is that wide can be a format once again," Kroeger says.

While the new approach is most evident as an adult top 40/classic hits hybrid, it is also being felt at formats as disparate as modern rock and country. It subscribes to the credo that train wrecks should be celebrated, not shunned. Don McLean's "American Pie" into the Pet Shop Boys' "West End Girls"? No problem. Harry Chapin's "Cat's in the Hat" into Lipps, Inc.'s "Funkytown"? You bet. U2's "Desire" into the Spinners' "Rubberband Man"? Bring it on.

Though it waves the "We play anything" flag with pride, the format focuses on music that appeals to 35- to 44-year-olds while tossing maxims about fit and compatibility out the window. Classic alternative from the '80s is abundant: Tears for Fears, Simple Minds, Talking Heads, Soft Cell, INXS. That meshes with the acts that first put MTV on the map, like Men at Work, Dexy's Midnight Runners and Duran Duran, and with that decade's pop-rock crossovers from Bryan Adams, Toto, Prince and the J. Geils Band.

But there is also room for dance and funk from the Commodores, Kool & the Gang and Wild Cherry. Seventies classic rock is another cornerstone, with Foreigner and the Steve Miller Band taking prominent seats at Bob and Jack's table. And don't forget adult top 40 from the '90s and today, encompassing Sugar Ray, Smash Mouth, Avril Lavigne and Matchbox Twenty.

In short, it is the only place on the dial where Grand Funk Railroad, Norah Jones and the Georgia Satellites peacefully co-exist. Libraries range from 700 to 1,100 songs, with most Canadian stations leaning toward the top of that range. And that has brought Loverboy, Honeymoon Suite and Corey Hart back in a big way.

MAINTAINING FOCUS

Kroeger admits some programmers are tempted to toss any constraints out the window, "but the stations that will remain successful are the ones who focus their resources on finding out what the right songs to play are."

"At the outset, it's a nearly equal split between the classic rock '70s and the pop-rock '80s," Edison Media Research VP of music and programming Sean Ross says. "As it has evolved, there's a little more '90s and a little less '70s, but the pop-rock '80s is still the center."

Spanning the youngest edge of the baby boom and the older end of Generation X, the 35-44 demo is nostalgic

for the music it grew up on. In addition, Kroeger believes consumers tend to obsess on what was hot 20 years ago. In the '70s, the '50s-inspired "Happy Days" was a TV smash. In the '80s, people looked back to the Vietnam War era of the '60s through films like "Platoon" and "Full Metal Jacket." In the '90s, TV's "That '70s Show" became popular, and there were movies about Studio 54.

Now, it is the '80s' turn. "As you approach your middle to late 30s, those pangs of nostalgia get louder and louder," Kroeger says.

Meanwhile, the explosion of peer-to-peer file sharing and the popularity of mix tapes have conditioned consumers to expect—and demand—more variety, Kroeger reasons. "The last several years became a real awakening period for people's musical taste buds," he says. "I'd have Abba and the Clash on the same tape. That's what this whole thing is all about. Plus radio has been niche-formatted to death. Now variety has become a niche."

Some believe Jack and Bob's real drawing power stems not from the music but from the variety, novelty, surprise and "radio without rules" stationality. "To the extent you can still do a 2.5 share on a signal-challenged station in a crowded market, that's probably true," Ross says. "But it's even better if you've got a classic hits hole or an '80s hole, or even better, both."

Folger compares Bob and Jack to early-'70s top 40 outlets like WLS Chicago. "You wouldn't be limited by [genre]," he says. "They'd go from Al Green to Creedence Clearwater Revival. For a big part of the audience, it's something they never heard before."

EXPLOSIVE RATINGS

Bonneville flipped AC KKLTV Phoenix to the new format, under the name the Peak, last May. "I spent a lot of time paying attention to the Jacks and Bobs in Canada before we started thinking about this project," PD Joel Grey says. "I thought we could do it ourselves."

Diamond

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These will be Diamond's first U.S. concerts since the 2001-2002 Three Penny Opera world tour. That 117-show outing grossed \$88.6 million and drew more than 1.5 million people to 117 shows, 98 of them sellouts, according to *Billboard* Boxscore. AEG Live also promoted that tour.

"We have a great relationship with Neil, and Sal and Jeff," Phillips says. "Basically, we are the promoters of the event, market by market. And, in conjunction with Sal and Jeff, we do the building deals and the routing."

Diamond's 2005 road work began in March with a sold-out tour of Australia and New Zealand promoted by Paul Dainty. The Down Under trek has been nothing short of a box-office monster: Fifteen dates have drawn 212,710 people and grossed \$14.6 million.

The tour continues in the United Kingdom and Ireland before arriving in the States in July. Barry Clayman at Clear Channel Entertainment Europe

is handling the U.K. portion. Diamond will be joined by his long-time touring band, which includes a horn section and backup singers.

Phillips says the "cycle is right" for a hugely successful run in the States, as well. "We will be adding dates, and there could be multiples in some markets."

Tickets will go on sale in early May and will be priced "well under \$100," according to Phillips.

"Neil insists on keeping his ticket prices lower than other artists with a similar demographic, because he would rather play more shows for more people," Phillips says. "His philosophy on pricing is exactly the same as ours. That's how we were able to take Prince out for less than \$100 last year."

Still, Phillips insists, the deals are structured so AEG Live can realize a fair return, which is not a given in today's marketplace of high artist guarantees. "It's a tough deal, but we're not a not-for-profit company," Phillips says.

A workhorse on the road for years (he was the top solo touring artist of the 1990s, grossing \$182 million from 461 shows), Diamond's last tour was lengthy even by his standards.

"This [tour] was special, in the sense

that it really became more than a tour after the 9-11 tragedy," Diamond told *Billboard* at the time. "I got a sense that people were really in need of not so much entertainment, but to get on with their lives. It started as a tour and ended as a mission."

RADIO PHYSICS

Among the format's challenges, Folger adds, are "resisting the temptation to drill playlists down too far and [devoting sufficient energy to] creative writing."

Kroeger says Bob today is not the same station he launched three years ago. "The biggest thing is managing those expectations," he says. "It's radio physics: What goes up must come down. The format runs a really big library and attention has to be paid to balancing rock with pop/AC, because it's really easy to sound like a classic rock station one hour and an AC station the next hour."

Grey contends that "as long as the 'Oh, wow' records only come up once in a while," the format will avoid the problems that the Arrow format and '70s oldies stations encountered. "I think it does have legs."

Ross believes there will always be a hole for a station that combines '70s and '80s oldies. "The previous generation didn't want to go to three different stations to hear the oldies it grew up with," he observes. "And there is no inherent reason that it has to whither after a couple of years. Oldies and classic rock stations didn't shrivel up after a few years. The fact that every gold-based format has problems says something about PDs, not necessarily about the audience."

"The format is going to grow beyond belief in the next few years," Folger predicts. "In three years, you'll have a station with a wide playlist of all different kinds of music in every market. It's an exciting time for radio."

Grey believes radio audiences are clamoring for more variety and less repetition. "Everybody's crying out for that," he says. "And to some extent, we haven't been listening."

Diamond initially didn't intend to work so much on Three Penny Opera. "Once I realized what was going on out there, I called Sal Bonafede and Jeff Apregan and told them to fill up my dance card. I don't know if I could do it again, but I felt it was necessary."

At one point, industry speculation was rife that Diamond might tour in 2005 with his high-profile duet partner Barbra Streisand. One source told *Billboard* the proposed guarantee for a Streisand/Diamond date was in the range of \$3.5 million per show (*billboard.biz*, Oct. 13, 2004).

"A Neil Diamond/Barbra Streisand tour would have been absolutely huge," Phillips says. Talk persists that Streisand will tour in some fashion in 2005.

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