

Heavy hitters

7876E Metal polishes image at Concrete convention

By BRUCE BRITT
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For many people, the term "heavy metal" conjures up a wealth of unsavory images.

Though hard rockers have been combating prejudice for years, most people with inexperienced ears cling to a stereotype popularized in the film satire "Spinal Tap": slow-witted wastrels blowing their fortunes on drugs, drink and overwrought stage shows.

There is evidence that such stereotypes may have had some credence. Currently, metal veterans such as Alice Cooper and members of Aerosmith have horrified fans with the details of their near-fatal toxic exploits.

But heavy metal is gradually changing its fast image. Clean and sober acts like Bon Jovi, Warrant and Winger have emerged recently and proved themselves to be some of the music industry's shrewdest businessmen.

Heavy metalists Van Halen established their own publishing enterprise before their 1978 debut album hit record store shelves. Hard rockers Poison secured their Enigma/Capitol Records contract through vigorous self-promotion.

To these and similar acts, a studded-leather ensemble is the dress-for-success equivalent of a Brooks Brothers suit. For seasoned head-bangers, as well as the hordes of heavy-metal hopefuls, there is the Concrete Foundations Forum, an annual convention devoted to the skull-crushing music, operating on the theory that heavy-metal artists and people associated with them have more on their minds than just sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

The gathering, which is being held this weekend at the Sheraton Universal Hotel, is hosted by Concrete Marketing of New York.

"Five years ago, the industry looked at metal as a dirty Kleenex," explained Concrete Marketing president Bob Chiappardi. "Concrete was very instrumental in bridging the gap between the underground and the music business community, and this convention celebrates that fact."

According to some record industry insiders, the Foundations Forum is essential for anyone interested in breaking into the heavy-metal industry.

"It's a great opportunity for the entire hard-rock/metal community to get together and discuss every-



Bands like Princess Pang hope to find a showcase at the Concrete Foundations Forum.

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thing from marketing to tour sponsorship," said Columbia Records marketing director Jay Krugman.

"It's a firsthand chance to see bands that are starting to make some noise in the industry," said KNAC-FM promotion director Tom Maher, whose Long Beach station programs primarily heavy metal and hard rock. "We see it as a viable force in the industry."

"It's the metal week of the year," said Metal Blade Records marketing director Jon Sutherland. "Any-

one who is anyone in the metal industry will be there."

The convention made its premiere last year to sellout crowds, where the topic was winning legitimacy within the pop-music industry. This year's focus will be on cultivating new talent. Every registrant's convention kit will include a 23-track audiocassette featuring songs by unsigned acts.

Metal Hammer magazine, a leading hard-rock journal, will subsequently run interviews with all of

the tape's listed bands in an upcoming special issue. Newer bands like Shotgun Messiah and Princess Pang also will be featured during showcase performances this weekend at the Park Plaza, the Palace and the Country Club.

"If I owned a paper mill, I'd cultivate the forest," Chiappardi explained. "I'd plant trees early to ensure I'd have something to build with tomorrow. That's all we're doing by focusing on unsigned acts at this year's convention — planting early."

Panel discussions this year range from "Understanding Music Publishing" to "A Star Is Born — The Development of a Career." Other themes include equipment endorsements, artist management, international distribution deals and videos.

This sort of professionalism is a far cry from the primitive methods employed during the the early-1970s dawn of heavy metal. Though hard-rock pioneers like Led Zeppelin, Alice Cooper and Deep Purple enjoyed large followings, they actually sold fewer records than many of today's lesser heavy-metal acts.

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THE FACTS

- **What:** Concrete Foundations Forum, a convention for heavy-metal artists and executives.
- **Where:** Sheraton Universal Hotel, 30 Universal City Plaza, Universal City.
- **When:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday through Saturday.
- **Tickets:** Registration is \$150. For more information, call (213) 392-5401.

Experts say heavy metal started to realize its profit potential in 1974, with the emergence of a New York band named Kiss. Led by singers Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons, they proved themselves masters at merchandising. Kiss toured constantly and pioneered current merchandising techniques, such as selling T-shirts and programs at concerts.

"Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons are some of the best businessmen around," Chiappardi said. "These guys are very concerned about how they come across and keeping in touch with kids and the streets. They're definitely no fools."

Working from Kiss' blueprint for success, heavy metal grew in prominence during the mid-1970s. With help from FM rock

stations, bands like Black Sabbath, Foghat, Aerosmith, Cheap Trick and Queen won huge audiences with little or no support from top-40 stations.

Heavy metal was dealt a sobering blow in the late-1970s with the arrival of the minimalist punk and new-wave movements. Heavy metal, with its macho, virtuosic excesses, was deemed clownish and outdated.

"Everybody was beating up on us," Metal Blade's Sutherland re-

called. "We realized we had to gang together to survive."

It was around this time that Chiappardi established Concrete Marketing with his associate, Walter O'Brien. Their first clients were Grim Reaper and Metal Church, two bands that played a grinding, hyperspeed brand of rock known as "thrash."

To get a feel for how to best promote these acts, Chiappardi and O'Brien spent three months on the road with Grim Reaper. They discovered some fans had established thrash newsletters and radio shows. Utilizing this underground network, Concrete set about creating enthusiasm at the retail level.

"We found we worked best with acts that didn't get a lot of radio or MTV airplay," Chiappardi said. "We like what I call 'retail acts.' We find that if the retailer is really excited about what they're selling, they'll actually help you sell records with in-store play. They create a buzz that radio and MTV can't ignore." 3