



TRIBUTE BANDS

By Bernard Baur

Uncool Becomes Über Hip

Back in the late Seventies we first began seeing bands who attempted to recreate performances by deceased artists such as Jim Morrison of the Doors, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. These pioneering acts took a lot of abuse from critics and fans who found the performers' slavish recreations to be more travesty than tribute. Not so today, as tributeers are receiving applause from all quarters. In fact, what was once decidedly uncool has become über hip — musicians who would have sneered at the thought of being in a band that recreates the look and songs of renowned artists are now putting their own special spin on a favorite legendary act or are starting a cover band that pays tribute to a musical era. How do you pull off such a project, and whom do you have to influence to get a well-paying gig? *Music Connection* spoke with those in the know — tribute performers, artist managers and club bookers.

ON THE RISE & IN THE NEWS

A couple of years ago, the Foo Fighters surprised patrons at a San Fernando Valley rock club called Paladino's. They were the opening act for a popular Van Halen tribute band, the Atomic Punks. The event shocked the music community so much that it got the attention of *Rolling Stone*, *Music Connection* and *MTV*. Even more amazing is that after the Foos finished their set, frontman David Grohl jumped from the stage, grabbed this writer and shouted, "I want a tribute band to open for us!"

He wasn't kidding.

There's something about tribute and cover acts that excite one's curiosity. So much so, that music publications and daily newspapers have recently featured major articles on them. A simple Internet search reveals the extent of their popularity, with over five million sites devoted to tributes and covers. Most are classic rock acts, but others spotlight artists as diverse as To Bob (Bob Dylan), 2U (U2), Coldplace (Coldplay), and Monkey Wrench (the Foo Fighters). Other popular Los Angeles-based tribute acts include Raw Power Rangers (the Stooges), the Ms.Fits (the Misfits), and Under Pressure (Queen).

Indeed, what used to be considered a light-hearted diversion, or even a joke among musicians, has become serious business. More than a few artists have crossed the line into tribute and cover work; and, the reasons for doing so are more varied than you may think.



"Female tribute acts are under a lot more pressure than their male counterparts. Doubters come to a show expecting to see a train wreck."

—MarkDawson

Mgr., The Iron Maidens

CAREER MOVE OR MIND SET

Conventional wisdom implies that musicians who play in tribute or cover bands couldn't cut it as original artists or are too old to get a record deal. But, that stereotype doesn't hold true. In fact, Kurt Cobain formed a Creedence Clearwater Revival tribute (Sellouts) years before evolving into Nirvana. And, *MC* found that our sources were not only highly creative, but that many of them also performed original material in other bands. In essence, their cover work is their day gig.



There's no doubt that the most popular tribute and cover bands can make a very good living. According to Jimmy D, who's a veteran tribute and cover act booker for a variety of venues (including Paladino's and 14 Below), "The best acts on the circuit can make thousands of dollars per night. Tribute bands earn the most, with top acts in L.A. pulling down \$1,500 to \$5,000 a show." And that doesn't include merchandise, CDs or anything else the act sells.

But, money wasn't the deciding factor for Swan Montgomery when he was asked to join a Led Zeppelin tribute band. At first, he thought it was a joke. "I initially declined," he says. "But then they said they had paying gigs set up, and that got me interested." Montgomery, who resembles Robert Plant, started studying the singer's mannerisms and vocal inflections. "I knew that portraying him would be a challenge," he recalls, "and that motivated me more than anything else." Fourteen years later, Montgomery is considered the "essential Robert Plant" in Led Zepagain. That title, by the way, comes by way of Jimmy Page (more on that later).

Some artists do follow conventional wisdom and make the jump due to frustrations with the record industry, or changing trends in music. Julie Dolan of the UndercoverGirls (an all-girl cover band) says, "I know a lot of artists who try to get a record deal, but when no one bites they get frustrated. That doesn't stop you from wanting to make a living as a musician, though." In fact, Dolan confirms, "At least in a cover band you know your music will be appreciated."

Ralph Saenz of the Atomic Punks and Metal Skool just wanted to play the music he loved. He recalls, "In the mid-Nineties grunge took over and hair metal was out, but we still had..."

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