

Rock and Roll Dope

John Sinclair

1968

Now that things have cooled down a little for the MC5 and myself after all the excitement of recent weeks maybe I can get into some of the things I promised when I started this column—although the stuff you’ve been reading about the MC5 saga serves as an illustration of the original point: that there’s a lot more to the rock and roll industry than just paying your \$3.50 and digging the show stoned on your ass. All those things you read about in the last three or four issues really happened.

It all ties in, too. One of the many things on my mind for over a year now is the enormous failure of the Detroit area rock and roll scene to be recognized as the major happening that it is, and my reasoned conclusion is that the club-owners around here, and the people in power in the local (white) music industry, are more or less a bunch of hicks who don’t know what they’ve got in their own greedy little paws. Consequently, they can’t do anything with it, and the scene just gets more and more desperate. All the bands in this area have played the same round of clubs over and over again with negligible economic progress, although the music keeps getting better every week just because so many bands are working in front of people regularly and get the chance to grow. But the rewards so far are so slim as to be almost invisible, and everyone just gets more frustrated day by day.

There are some elementary things that should be said here before I go any further. First, people should realize by now that the American (and to a worse degree, the British) rock and roll scene is an enormous hype created by greedy personal managers, club owners, record company executives, producers, public relations men, and (for the most part) innocent or’ ignorant young musicians who go along with the program because they don’t know any better.

You don’t really dig a band because the men in it play good music—it’s more to the point that certain bands are “hip” and therefore are to be adored and idolized by all primarily because they’re “hip.” A group can record a first album of material that is fairly competent, interesting, and, to some extent, musical (the Cream and the Doors, for example) and within a few months be hailed as the newest superstar rock phenomenon, just because the hype is so heavy,

The whole “hip” thing gets so ridiculous, especially in the face of the music the “hip” bands play when they come to town. Of all the concerts I’ve dug in the past two years, say, the only recording bands that really killed me were Canned Heat, Big Brother & the Holding Company their second night: Paul Butterfield on his first Grande concert, and the Who. The rest varied from interesting and pleasant with good vibes but lightweight music (Grateful Dead, Airplane, Blue Cheer, some others) to obnoxious, jive and/or on huge fantasy ego trips (Jimi Hendrix, the Cream, Moby Grape, and other less illustrious dudes).

I don’t want to bore you with my feelings about this shit, but I’ve watched some of the most incredible bullshit cheered and applauded and jacked off to from the floor of the Grande Ballroom. John Mayall’s band got a standing ovation at the end of a boring, untogether, shoddy set of milked-out blues, and even the musicians were dumbstruck at their reception. They couldn’t believe it. but they took it all in anyway—they knew they didn’t have anything to do with it, it was all in the audience’s head, but who would ever turn down a standing ovation? And why?

I know a lot of people don't like to hear all this, but it gets so weird that I have to say something to preserve my own self-respect. The music as a natural fact, and the musicians as natural persons, have so little to do with their popularity that it's frightening. After Traffic, a competent low-energy English jack-off trio, played the Grande you could hear the psychedelic chatter on Canfield for weeks.

"Did you see Stevie Winwood at our Dairy Queen! He had purple shoes on and he was right down there man! Wow! At our Dairy Queen! Jesus!" What the fuck this has to do with anything but Hollywood 1940s star-worship consciousness and mindless image-gobbling, I just don't know. He sure wasn't playing any purple shoes.

Another thing to be aware of is the out-of-town phenomenon, which means that any band that comes here from somewhere else, with a record out, is automatically worth hearing, while bands who live here have to work for years to build up a following so they can make their amplifier payments and hold on until the recording contracts come in. And to add to this bogue scene, the people in power here have seemingly conspired to keep the local bands from breaking out nationally so they can continue to book them in for minuscule money.

For example, the Grande Ballroom pays usually \$1,000 and up to \$5,000, \$2,000 being average for a guaranteed drawing power, while the Detroit-Ann Arbor bands are paid from \$51.00 (one-set scale) to a ceiling of maybe \$500. The SRC topped that figure once or twice in their prime, but the top is \$300 to \$350 for everyone but the Rationals, who are the second-highest-paid local band there. The last time the MC5 played there, for example, with the Blue Cheer on a Sunday evening, we received \$150 from our good friends at the Grande. And there were maybe 1500 people there.

In San Francisco in 1966 the local bands were built up through a healthy booking system (the same two or three bands for two or three nights in a row at the ballrooms) and healthy public exposure through the dance poster scene so that they became major drawing powers without records or any other traditional factors in their favor. They were given equal billing with outside groups, and in some cases (the Airplane, the Dead, Big Brother, Moby Grape) received top billing over national recording stars.

This has never happened in Detroit—the local groups are treated as if the management is doing them a favor by letting them play there, and paid accordingly. Unless a band is really persistent, it doesn't get a decent chance to build a following so it can become a drawing power in its own right. With six different local bands a weekend at the Grande, all attention is focused on the outside act, the local bands get one or two sets a weekend to turn the audience on with, and they don't get a chance to really stretch out and relax so they can play their best music.

The smaller clubs all over the state, seeing the Grande's success (it is the best dance-concert house in the Midwest), follow suit on a smaller scale just because they don't know any better. Every night the clubs open there are at least two different bands, with the complete bill changing every night. If these places switched to a more progressive format, booking for weekends instead of one-nighters, they'd start making a little money. And if they haven't got it bad enough, the booking agents and promoters around town stick them right in the ass week after week by hyping awful bands that kill crowds and by keeping them on the one-nighter treadmill. I'd be happy to go into this in more detail with club owners who'd be interested in trying a new and lucrative approach to their booking.

These are a few of the problems. I'll try to run down some more of this shit next time if nothing comes up in the meantime. The only answer I can see is the emergence of hip young heads in the music industry who have a little more on their minds than money and ego-games. The field is wide open right now, and the changes are being made bit by bit.

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