Oldies but goodies

Veteran rockers raked in the most concert dollars this year, but country and TV-inspired acts are emerging on the scene.

By Richard Cromelin, Times Staff Writer

The 2006 concert landscape looked a bit like a pop music rest home, shaped for the most part by artists who have been at it for three decades and more, according to the 2006 North America tour rankings released this week by the trade magazine Pollstar. The Rolling Stones and Barbra Streisand topped the list, and the Top 20 was littered with old-timers, including Elton John, Billy Joel, the Who, Def Leppard, Journey and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

And the biggest thing on the 2007 horizon? A reunion of Genesis, featuring Phil Collins.

It's been that way for years, as baby boomers, the demographic with the dollars, direct their concert bucks to the acts they grew up with. But despite the continuing dominance of the veterans, the 2006 results reflect some new currents in the live entertainment area, including a trend-bucking contingent of country acts, a groundswell of television-generated attractions and a traveling circus.

Country acts have traditionally been a strong concert draw, and four country tours (five, if you still consider the No. 25 Dixie Chicks a country act) registered in the Top 25: Tim McGraw and Faith Hill (No. 3, with a gross of $88.8 million), Kenny Chesney (No. 7, $66 million), Rascal Flatts (No. 12, $43.6 million) and Toby Keith (No. 16, $38 million).

"If you look at who the country acts are that are selling tickets, they're all relatively young, compared to the rock acts that are selling tickets," Pollstar editor-in-chief Gary Bongiovanni said after issuing the figures. "I'm not exactly sure why, but it bodes well for the country music business, I suppose."

A conspicuous interloper among the Celines and Bon Jovis of the Top 10 was the No. 5 entry, Cirque du Soleil's theatrical extravaganza "Delirium," which grossed $82.1 million.

"That was something of an experiment," Bongiovanni said. "Although they've been very successful in their extended runs, this was the first time that it's ever gone out as an arena tour, and it's been a very successful experiment."

That success, as well as the rise of the "American Idol" concert tour (No. 19, $35 million), suggests a future for theatrical hybrids and music-television synergy.

"I think you're going to see more of that kind of stuff," Bongiovanni said. '"So You Think You Can Dance,' the TV shows that have translated into live attractions.... 'High School Musical' is huge, there will probably be a 'Hannah Montana' tour next year, and never underestimate the Cheetah Girls. There's a whole crop of acts that are born on TV and then emerge in the live market."

Those shows might bring more teenagers and preteens into the arenas, but they'll have a way to go before they can challenge the likes of the Stones, whose "A Bigger Bang" tour topped the list for the second straight year, with receipts of $138.5 million.

The rest of the Top 10: Streisand (No. 2, $92.5 million), McGraw and Hill, Madonna (No. 4, $85.9 million), "Delirium," Celine Dion (No. 6, $78.1 million), Chesney, Bon Jovi (No. 8, $59.7 million), the Dave Matthews Band (No. 9, $51.3 million) and Elton John (No. 10, $46.9 million).

It all added up to another growth year in the concert business, whose total revenue in North America increased 16% over 2005, to $3.6 billion. The number of tickets sold for the Top 100 tours was 37.9 million, an increase of 4.4%, and the average ticket price rose 8%, to $61.45.

"A good year. I wouldn't call it a great year," said Bongiovanni. "It wasn't a year where promoters were out crying heavily about how bad they did...."
"Part of it just may be that a greater sense of reality has set into the business," he added, citing the example of the Beverly Hills-based concert promoter Live Nation, which had its first full year as a public company after being spun off from the radio giant Clear Channel Communications Inc.

"Now they've got to make money. In years past, I think they were as concerned with market share as they were with actually making money," Bongiovanni said. "So that shift in emphasis, I think, has brought a little bit more of a sobering reality to talent buying — being a little bit more conservative in your bidding, which affects not just Live Nation but all the other companies that are bidding against them. So there's a little greater level of sanity to the business."

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