Instant replay

Joining bands who sell concert CDs, Clear Channel is set to make discs available immediately after the show

By Steve Morse, Globe Staff, 7/29/2003

How many times have you gone to a concert and wished you had a live recording of it? In the past, the best way to get one was from a bootlegger who charged hefty prices for recordings with quality so poor it could make the dog wince. There were a couple of exceptions, notably the Grateful Dead and Phish, that allowed fans to tape their shows with decent audio gear. But most acts quashed any live recordings of their shows and thus opened the market to pirates.

That's changing. Not only are a growing number of bands recording their shows and selling them to fans online, but music industry titan Clear Channel, after testing instant live CD production in a couple of local clubs, is about to announce that it's moving the program into larger venues.

Clear Channel has joined forces with the Allman Brothers Band to roll out its "Instant Live" CD program in two North Carolina amphitheaters starting this weekend: Saturday in Charlotte and Sunday in Raleigh. For these dates, Clear Channel expects to use 27 CD burners, each of which can turn out eight copies in 3 1/2 minutes. Proceeds from sales of the instant CDs -- expected to be a three-CD set that will cost at least $20 -- will be split equally between the band and Clear Channel.

"The Allmans are a band that varies their set list every night and play different versions of their songs, so the fans are always interested in what they're doing," said Steve Simon, a Clear Channel executive vice president who is in charge of the instant CD program nationwide. "The Allmans seemed like a perfect place for us to start at the amphitheater level. They were our focus all along. And they're very comfortable playing without a net."

"We're going to give it a shot. We think it's worth trying," said Allman manager Burt Holman during a recent show at the Tweeter Center in Mansfield, where Clear Channel set up a mixing board backstage for a test run (though no CDs were released).

For an industry locked in a battle against downloading -- and struggling to convince young listeners that popular music is worth paying for -- the recording and selling of live CDs is a promising revenue stream. The CDs will be available to concertgoers immediately, making them an easy impulse buy before downloaders get ahold of them. Also, the variation in set lists and shows could make the CDs collectors' items.

Here's how it will work. Imagine, as you take in a show at the 19,900-capacity Tweeter Center, that dozens of CD burners are whirring away in a back room, pumping out
hundreds, perhaps thousands, of copies of the show.

Later, as you're shuffling out, there'll be tents, booths, and maybe kiosks stocked with live CDs of the show you just saw -- already for sale. Don't want to buy one just then? Maybe you will once you've been sitting in traffic in the parking lot for 45 minutes. Simon envisions vendors with CD-stocked mailbags slung over their shoulders and wireless credit card machines selling music car to car.

Some bands have already beaten Clear Channel to the punch. Pearl Jam, Peter Gabriel, and the Who have been releasing their own live tour CDs via their websites. And the Rolling Stones have recently sought advice from Pearl Jam on how to do it. "It's not the most original idea that Clear Channel ever had," said Pearl Jam guitarist Stone Gossard.

The main difference, though, is that the bands that run their own live CD programs mail the finished recordings to fans several days later (in the case of Pearl Jam -- check out pearljam.com for details) or sometimes weeks later, rather than deliver them on-site right after the show.

"We looked into selling the CDs after the concert but decided against it," said Pearl Jam's sound mixer, Brett Eliason. "The technology exists, but the logistics are difficult. What do you do with people who might have to wait 20 minutes after the show? . . . There are a lot of hurdles having to do with public-security issues and with labor fees at the venue."

However, conglomerate Clear Channel owns and operates 41 amphitheaters around the country, giving it an advantage.

"Since we have on-site staff already, we don't have to enter into new leases and make new deals," said Simon. "And we can use direct consumer marketing. A record company doesn't know who buys its records in a store. But we know who buys our tickets."

Some fear that bands such as Pearl Jam might get pushed around by Clear Channel in the future, since Clear Channel could seek a chunk of the profits if the band uses one of its amphitheaters. So far that hasn't happened.

"No one has said anything to us," Pearl Jam manager Kelly Curtis said during the group's recent three-night run at the Tweeter Center, which is owned by Clear Channel. "Besides, they know that we're too testy and too grumpy to be asked about it."

Some bands, such as Phish, send out downloadable music for MP3s after each show (Pearl Jam also does that). But going a step further and sending out mastered CDs is a potential boon to consumers who are tired of paying exorbitant prices for pirated bootlegs. Pearl Jam started its CD series after realizing that illegal bootlegs were costing fans $40 to $50, said Curtis. So now the band gives fans soundboard-quality, double CDs for $12.98 for fan club members and $14.98 for the general public. Still, fans who order through artist websites have to be patient. Gabriel, who charges $25 for a double CD through his "Encore Series," makes fans wait at least three weeks to receive it.

Pearl Jam started its "Bootleg Series" three years ago by persuading Sony Records to release recordings of every show on the tour to retail stores (the 72 CDs sold a combined 2.4 million copies, or more than 30,000 per show). For this tour, though, Sony is expected to put out just four or five to retail stores, hence the band's desire to connect to consumers directly through the Internet.

Pearl Jam manager Curtis is fine with that; the band's catalog in retail stores was just
getting "too messy," he said. (Sales through the Internet, however, are much smaller, averaging 2,000-3,000 per show, according to Tim Bierman, who runs Pearl Jam's fan club.)

All eyes are now on Clear Channel to see what numbers they will post. So far, the company has only tried selling live CDs at the club level in Boston, where it has proved popular. For an April show by the Samples at the 700-capacity Paradise Rock Club, more than 25 percent of the audience bought a CD for $15, and the sound quality was impressive. (The on-site manager of the program is Laurie Gail, former music director for WFNX-FM.)

Some bands have nixed the program because it could compete with their own CD release parties and events. But many local acts have signed up in recent months, including Kay Hanley, Spookie Daly Pride, and Machinery Hall.

Clear Channel co-CEO Don Law said the "Instant Live" program essentially provides "seed money" for up-and-coming bands at the club level. They pocket the money (half of the $15 sale price for recordings of club-level acts), rather than having bootleggers get it.

"It's been nothing but great for us," said Dan Millen, who manages Spookie Daly Pride. "Sometimes Clear Channel gets a bad rap for being the evil empire, but this has been artist-friendly. They also sent us an extra case of 120 CDs and we've been selling them on the road, where people have been snapping them up."

Clear Channel, which has also contracted with jam-band moe to sell live CDs for its upcoming tour, is in discussion with other acts. The ink is not yet dry, so Simon is reluctant to name them. He does add that the company is hoping to get some of the CDs into retail outlets and is in discussion with Tower Records and Newbury Comics.

"Personally, I've always loved live discs," said Simon, who once helped manage the band Boston. "Live recordings are the opposite of anything that is canned."

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