

## POPULAR MUSIC



By Bruce Dancis

# Imitating the Beatles

## — A payday in the life

Though it seems like only yesterday to many of us, the Beatles broke up almost ten years ago. While rock has survived without them, no doubt to the surprise and dismay of the early '70s "Rock is Dead" theorists, there has been a continual search for the "New Beatles." Mercenary reasons account for much of the inspiration behind this quest, but it also reflects a genuine sense of loss over the warmth, humor, spirit, and beauty of the Beatles' music.

It quickly became apparent that two of the Beatles could not in isolation reach the heights they had as members of the band. Both Ringo Starr and George Harrison have produced solo albums throughout this decade, but with the exception of an occasional isolated song, it is hard to imagine either of them securing a record contract had they not been heirs to a great legacy.

John Lennon and Paul McCartney have, not unexpectedly (since they wrote and sang most of the Beatles' songs), made more of an impact. In the early '70s Lennon recorded half a dozen inventive albums. By the middle of the decade, however, he had moved into reclusive retirement, living on a farm in upstate New York with Yoko Ono and their children.

Paul McCartney has been by far the most commercially successful ex-Beatle, both from the records and tours he has made with his band, Wings, and through some spectacular investments giving him the copyrights to hundreds of memorable songs, including "Autumn Leaves," "Stormy Weather," and "Rave On."

Unfortunately, his ability to make a buck is about the only aspect of the Beatles heritage that McCartney has genuinely continued. Wings has always functioned as his back-up band, and its most recent album *Back to the Egg* (Columbia) is typical of McCartney's post-Beatles output.

Its best songs, "Getting Closer" and "To You" are catchy and sweet, but they evaporate quickly from one's memory. McCartney has always been partial to such lightweight fluff—remember his rendition of "Till There Was You" on *Meet the Beatles?*—but without the solidifying influence of Lennon, nothing restrains McCartney's penchant for producing the icing while forgetting the cake.

### Meet the Knack.

Although other bands have attempted to make a mid-'60s sound reminiscent of the Beatles', only in 1979 has a full-blown pretender to the vacant throne emerged. The band is called the Knack, a four-piece group from Los Angeles.

The Knack is the success story of 1979. Formed a little over a year ago, their debut album, *Get the Knack* (Capitol), and their first single, "My Sharona," are currently sitting simultaneously at the Number One positions on the *Billboard* charts. *Get the Knack* "went gold" (sold 500,000 copies) in 13 days; in the history

The only album that ever "went gold" faster than the Knack was the first U.S. Beatles lp. Are they slick imitators, or do they bring new energy to rock?

of Capitol Records, only *Meet the Beatles*, the Beatles' debut American lp, went gold faster. By the end of a mere seven weeks, *Get the Knack* was certified "platinum" (1 million copies sold) and is still selling rapidly.

The Knack, with the joyous concurrence of Capitol Records, possesses sufficient chutzpah to declare themselves to be the latter-day successors to the Fab Four. The title of their album bears an obvious resemblance to *Meet the Beatles*. On the back side of their album cover and in live performances, they use a stage set lifted straight out of *A Hard Day's Night*. Everything is brightly lit black on white, from each band member's white shirt with black pants, black ties and black shoes (like the early Beatles, they too have uniforms)



to the black amplifiers set against a plain white background.

The Knack have obviously spent a lot of time listening to mid-'60s rock and they have the genre down cold, from the clean sound of the guitars to lead singer Doug Fieger's clearly enunciated vocals. The Knack has combined the melodic bounce of the Beatles with some of the intensity and speed of New Wave rock. (By the way, the recent commercial success of performers such as Blondie and Joe Jackson has finally encouraged U.S. record companies to sign New Wave acts and enter into distribution deals with British labels featuring New Wave groups.) They've been able to revise and update the Beatles sound, not merely rehash it.

In addition to mammoth record sales, the Knack's quick rise

has provoked an unprecedented counter-reaction. One enterprising California anti-Knacker has even produced a "Knuke the Knack Sack" composed of "Knuke the Knack" t-shirts, buttons, and stickers. The demand for such paraphernalia is tremendous, particularly on the West Coast.

### Sacred memory.

Some of this hostility can be attributed to a desire to protect the memory of the Beatles. Never has a new band made such a public, not to say conceited, comparison of itself to a group with the stature of the Beatles. The Knack's music, whatever its merits, never approaches the brilliance of the Beatles'.

New Wave adherents, in particular, are upset by the Knack's climbing up on the back of their "movement." While some of the hostility can be written off as simple jealousy, the Knack obviously violates key New Wave tenets such as the celebration of spontaneity and an aversion to hype.

Some estimate that Capitol Records has spent around \$1 million pushing the Knack, including the purchase of "Get the Knack" ads on the backs and sides of Los Angeles buses. Still, the Knack's sudden surge cannot be attributed solely, or even largely to, Capitol's capital. The Beatles invented a rock music with enormously captivating qualities. To the extent that the Knack have done their homework, their popularity is understandable.

But the Knack's slick and calculated image leaves one with the feeling that their first album should have been called "I Want To Mold My Band."

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## MUSIC

# The festival that works for artists, public, city

ChicagoFest had been pooh-poohed as bread and circuses for suburbanites. But this time it became a truly popular festival with Chicagoans—and with their mayor.

By Don McLeese

For the second straight year, ChicagoFest—a municipally-sponsored lakefront music festival—surpassed all expectations. For 10 days, the city of Chicago presented over 300 acts, attracted an attendance of nearly 700,000, earned a profit of around half a million dollars, and promoted an incalculable amount of good will. By almost any standard, the Fest has emerged, as its publicity releases state, as “the biggest music event in the nation.” What was last year an experiment has established itself as an institution.

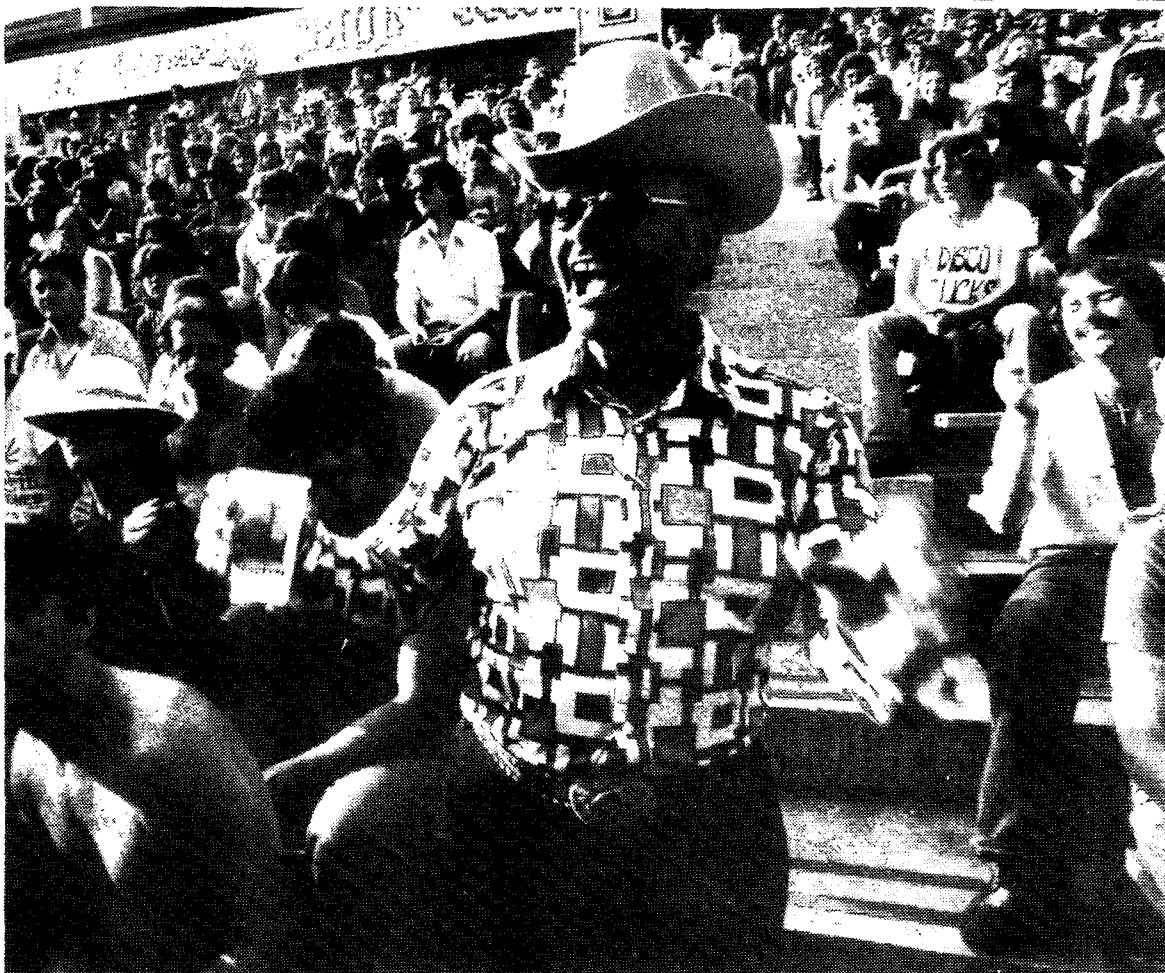
What business has the city of Chicago presenting a music festival? That’s what Mayor Jane Byrne asked herself shortly after her election last March. Attempting to erase all vestiges of former mayor (and arch political rival) Michael Bilandic’s reign, Byrne threatened to cancel the Fest. She claimed that the event had cost far too much in terms of labor and money, that it was more popular among suburbanites and out-of-towners than among city dwellers, that the city would be better served by a series of less ambitious neighborhood festivals. An immediate and insistent public outcry convinced Byrne that she had made a major political miscalculation. Without abandoning her plan for neighborhood celebrations, she made sure that what had been previously known as “Mayor Bilandic’s ChicagoFest” was quickly redesigned to become the highlight of “Mayor Byrne’s Summertime Chicago.”

It was a wise reversal. With eight stages operating continuously for nearly 10 hours a day, the Fest offered a diverse blend of headliners, curiosities and promising local talent. On one evening alone, listeners were forced to choose among Willie Nelson, Gil Scott-Heron, Sam & Dave, Albert King, Don McLean, and the Flying Burrito Brothers—all appearing on different stages at the same time.

Little wonder that so many Chicagoans considered the Fest an entertainment bargain. For an admission price of \$5 per day (\$3.50 in advance), one could wander between stages from noon until midnight. For those who tired of the sheer amount of music, the Fest also offered a cinema showcase, a roller-skating rink, a disco, a pinball arcade, and special areas for children and senior citizens.

## Artists and businessmen.

For local performers, ChicagoFest represented a dream showcase opportunity. In addition to another payday (and a fairly equitable one), the Fest exposed artists to larger and more diverse audiences than they ordinarily reach. Bruce Iglauer, owner of Chicago-based Alligator Records and manager of many of the acts that appeared on the blues stage, said the Fest was valuable for his performers because “so many people come from out-of-town or the suburbs or are too young to be served booze (in the clubs) and wouldn’t have a chance to see our artists otherwise.” With the overflow crowds at the consistently popular blues stage, local standouts like Fenton



Upper right: Albert Collins. Above: Koko Taylor.

Robinson and Son Seals reached more people in an hour than they might in weeks of working the club grind.

For participating Chicago businesses, ChicagoFest was a bonanza. A local newspaper and various radio stations reaped promotional benefits by associating themselves with Fest stages and services. The beer companies sponsoring many of the stages were rewarded with sales of around a million and a half cups. Fest food was provided by a cross-section of Chicago restaurants.

The city of Chicago benefited as well. While there was some debate over how much the Fest in '78 cost the city—guesses range from “just about broke even” to a loss of \$900,000—there’s no question that the '79 Fest made money. Furthermore, with practically every downtown hotel offering some sort of package, the Fest has become a tourist attraction, pouring thousands of dollars into the city. Finally, the Fest indicates to the Chicago populace, cynical from so many years of corruption and cynicism, that the city of Chicago is interested in more than just picking the pockets of its constituency. For at least 10 days a year, the city gives something back.

Not that there isn’t room for improvement. A major com-



plaint from the musicians concerned the sound. More than one act had flown in its own sound man, only to be told all the boards were to be run by Chicago engineers. David MacKenzie, who was plagued by interference throughout his folk stage set, maintained, “There’s no reason as long as they were so professional about everything else, that they can’t be professional about the sound.”

A more serious problem was overcrowding. Because the Fest’s existence had been imperiled, promoters relied on a “blockbuster” approach—booking a few big names who would guarantee a huge draw. A final day appearance by the group Chicago amassed a total crowd of 120,000, which left little room for breathing, let alone listening to music.

The Fest now must decide whether its function is to be truly representative or overwhelmingly popular (and profitable). While

this year’s ChicagoFest took a “bigger is better” approach, an ideal Fest would more effectively mirror Chicago’s diverse musical heritage—interspersing headliners and promising pop-oriented talent with the gospel choruses, salsa bands, Irish fiddlers and others who represent Chicago’s musical vibrancy. While some stages reflected adventurous booking policies, others seemed to operate from a “business as usual” perspective—booking only the predictable, professional, “safe” acts whose agency affiliations were their major recommendation.

The previously lukewarm Mayor Byrne, now basking in the Fest’s success, is already talking up the possibility of an AutumnFest and a WinterFest. A series of free outdoor jazz concerts will be held the last week in August, and other city-sponsored musical activities are in the works.

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