

Rock for Sale

By Michael Lydon

In 1956 when rock and roll was just about a year old, Frankie Lymon, lead singer of Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, wrote and recorded a song called "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?" It was an immediate million-selling hit and has since become a rock classic, a true golden oldie of the sweet-voiced harmonizing genre. The group followed it up with other hits, starred in a movie, appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show, toured the country with Bill Haley and the Comets, and did a tour of Europe. Frankie, a black kid from Harlem, was then thirteen years old. Last year, at twenty-six, he died of an overdose of heroin.

Despite the massive publicity accorded to rock in the past several years, Frankie's death received little attention. It got a bit more publicity than the death in a federal prison of Little Willie John, the author of "Fever," another classic, but nothing compared to that lavished on the breakup of the Cream or on Janis Joplin's split with Big Brother and the Holding Company. Nor did many connect it with the complete musical stagnation of the Doors, a group which in 1967 seemed brilliantly promising, or to the dissolution of dozens of other groups who a year or two ago were not only making beautiful music but seemed to be the vanguard of a promising "youth cultural revolution."

In fact these events are all connected, and their common denominator is hard cash. Since that wildly exciting spring of 1967, the spring of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, of be-ins and love-ins and flower-power, of the discovery of psychedelia, hippies and "doing your thing" — to all of which "New Rock," as it then began to be called, was inextricably bound — one basic fact has been consistently ignored: rock is a product created, distributed and controlled for the profit of American (and international) business. "The record companies sell rock and roll records like they sell refrigerators," says Paul Kantner of the Jefferson Airplane. "They don't care about the people who make rock or what they're all about as human beings any more than they care about the people who make refrigerators."

Recently, the promoters of a sleazy Southern California enterprise known as "Teen Fair" changed its name to "Teen Expo." The purpose of the operation remains the same: to sell trash to adolescents while impressing them with the joys of consumerism. But nine years into the '60s, the backers decided that their '50s image of nice-kid teenagerism had to go. In its place, they have installed "New Rock" (with its constant companion, schlock psychedelia) as the working image of the "all new!" Teen Expo.

By the time the word gets down to the avaricious cretins who run teen fairs, everybody has the message: rock and roll sells. It doesn't make money just for the entertainment industry — the record companies, radio stations, TV networks, stereo and musical instrument manufacturers, etc. — but for law firms, clothing manufacturers, the mass media, soft drink companies and car dealers (the new Opel will "light your fire!"). Rock is the surest way to the hearts and wallets of millions of North Americans between eight and thirty-five — the richest, most extravagant children in the history of the world.

From the start, rock has been commercial in its very essence. An American creation on the level of the hamburger or the billboard, it was never an art form that just happened to make money, nor a commercial undertaking that sometimes became art. Its art was synonymous with its business. The movies are perhaps closest to rock in their aesthetic involvement with the demands of profitability, but even they once had an arty tradition which scorned the pleasing of the masses.

Yet paradoxically it was the unabashed commerciality of rock which gave rise to the hope that it would be a "revolutionary" cultural form of expression. For one thing, the companies that produce it and reap its profits have never understood it. Ford executives drive their company's cars but Sir Joseph Lockwood, chairman of EMI, the record company which, until Apple, released the Beatles' records, has always admitted that he doesn't like their music. The small companies like Sun and Chess Records which first discovered the early stars like Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry were run by middle-class whites who knew that kids and blacks liked this weird music, but they didn't know or really care why. As long as the music didn't offend the businessmen's sensibilities too much — they never allowed



outright obscenity — and as long as it sold, they didn't care what it said. So within the commercial framework, rock has always had a certain freedom.

Moreover, rock's slavish devotion to commerciality gave it powerful aesthetic advantages. People had to like it for it to sell, so rock had to get to the things that the audience really cared about. Not only did it create a ritualized world of dances, slang, "the charts," fan magazines and "your favorite DJ coming your way" on the car radio, but it defined, reflected and glorified the listener's ordinary world. Rock fans can date their entire lives by rock; hearing a "golden oldie" can instantaneously evoke the whole flavor and detail of a summer or a romance.

When in 1963-64, the Pop Art movement said there was beauty in what had been thought to be the crass excreta of the Eisenhower Age, when the Beatles proved that shameless reveling in money could be a stone groove, and when the wistful puritanism of the protest-folk music movement came to a dead end, rock and roll, with all its unabashed carnality and worldliness, seemed a beautiful trip. Rock, the background music of growing up, was discovered as the common language of a generation. New Rock musicians could not only make the music, they could even make an aesthetic and social point by the very choice of rock as their medium.

That rock was commercial seemed only a benefit. It ensured wide distribution, the hope of a good and possibly grandiose living style, and the honesty of admitting that, yes, we are the children of affluence: don't deny it, man, dig it. As music, rock had an undeniably liberating effect; driving and sensual, it implicitly and explicitly presented an alternative to bourgeois insipidity. The freedom granted to rock by society seemed sufficient to allow its adherents to express their energies without inhibition. Rock pleasure had no pain attached; the outrageousness of Elvis' gold lamé suits and John Lennon's wildly painted Rolls Royce was a gas, a big joke on adult society. Rock was a way to beat the system, to gull grown-ups into paying you while you made faces behind their backs.

Sad but true, however, the grown-ups are having the last laugh. Rock and roll is a lovely playground, and within it kids have more power than they have anywhere else in society, but the playground's walls are carefully maintained and guarded by the corporate elite that set it up in the first place. While the White Panthers talk of "total assault upon the culture by any means necessary, including rock and roll, dope and fucking in the streets," *Billboard*, the music trade paper, announces with pride that in 1968 the record industry became a billion-dollar business.

Bob Dylan has described with a fiendish accuracy the pain of growing up in America, and millions have responded passionately to his vision. His song, "Maggie's Farm," contains the lines, "He gives me a nickel, he gives me a dime, he asks me with a grin if I'm having a good time and he fines me every time I slam the door, oh, I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more." But along with Walter Cronkite and the New York Yankees, Dylan works for one of Maggie's biggest farms, the Columbia Broadcasting System.

Mike Jagger, another adept and vitriolic social critic, used rock to sneer at "the under assistant west coast promotion man" in his seersucker suit; but London Records used this "necessary talent for every rock and roll band" to sell that particular Rolling Stones record and all their other products. For all its liberating potential, rock is doomed to a bitter impotence by its ultimate subservience to those whom it attacks.

In fact, rock, rather than being an example of how freedom can be achieved within the capitalist structure, is an example of how capitalism can, almost without a conscious effort, deceive those whom it oppresses. Rather than being liberated heroes, rock and roll stars are captives on a leash, and their plight is but a metaphor for that of all young people and black people in America. All the talk of "rock revolution," talk that is assiduously cultivated by the rock industry, is an attempt to disguise that plight.

Despite the aura of wealth that has always surrounded the rock and roll star, and which for fans justified the high prices of records and concerts, very few stars really make much money — and for all but the stars and their backup musicians, rock is just another low-paying, insecure and very hard job. Legend says that wild spending sprees,