

Whether we like it or not, rock music today is in the hands of Big Business. This can either be a working partnership or else an acrimonious marriage-of-convenience, in which one feels exploited and the other let down. In such circumstances, the only outcome can be litigation and divorce, and a lot of bitterness on all sides. On the other hand, the record companies and management agencies are absolutely essential in building the career of a band, and though such an observation may seem trite, it's worth bearing in mind that your progress towards stardom will be considerably easier with the backing of an efficient and enthusiastic management. A case in point is a new band called Phoenix. John Verity, Jim Rodford and Bob Henrit are all former members of Argent, which broke up at the end of last year. I met John and Jim (Bob Henrit was holidaying in Greece) at the Trident offices in Soho, and asked them what had happened to Argent.

Money

Jim: "We were doing an American tour, and Rod (Argent) was getting fed up with it. He wanted to take some time off the road to write and work out what he wanted to do. It had got a bit stale anyway — a bit silly. And it was economically silly too. We weren't making enough money to keep it going like that. Well, three months before the end of Argent, John and I decided to form Phoenix anyway as a separate thing. We asked Bob if he was interested, and he said, yeah sure. So that's how it all started."

Confident

Since then, a careful plan of promotion has been bubbling away. Verity and Rodford had a lot of material already written which was unsuited to the Argent lineup, but which now forms the bulk of their first album, released in the last week of September.

John: "By the end of January we'd written and demoed the whole album, so since then it's just been recording and mixing. I think we finished it around May or June."

Hadn't all the waiting around proved a source of frustration? Jim agreed vehemently. "Yes, it's been very, very frustrating. We've been straining at the leash. But then again it's probably good for us in some ways — we're so eager to get out and play that it's been stoking the fires, all that bottled-up energy."

PHOENIX

PREPARING FOR FLIGHT

The band's biggest asset is undoubtedly the years of experience they have all had in music. They are confident of success because they know about every angle of the business, from musicianship and songwriting to board meetings. Just how important to them is financial backing and promotion? Jim: "It's imperative to the way we want to do it. We could start all over again from rock bottom, but there's no point — management companies would rather have us anyway, and we might as well capitalise on what we've already done. We're a good gamble for them and they're a good gamble for us."

Record Deal

John: "If a record company has to choose one of two bands for recording, they're going to choose the one that has good management behind them. And you can't really get anywhere these days without a record deal." Jim: "We employ management — that's the way we look at it." John: "We've got a very good relationship with our management at the moment. You all stand to gain something from it. But if you feel your management is doing you a big favour, that's not a good relationship to work with."

Although Rodford and Verity look amazingly youthful, a few probing questions revealed that they have both been in bands since around 1961. At that time the rock industry hardly existed here. Did they think that, since then, things have got out of proportion? Are we too obsessed with amplification and other equipment nowadays?

Jim: "Well it's all relative. When the Beatles played Shea Stadium they had all the brand new Vox gear with the Beatle cabinets, and that sort of power was unheard of. Then there was the Richmond Jazz Festival in 1965. The Who were there, and Townshend used three Vox 100 watt tops with Beatle cabinets. Entwistle had four T60 bass cabinets driven by two AC 50s. And everybody freaked out — they were using so much power. Beck was on next with the Yardbirds. He was furious! So of course he had to use *four* Vox amps."

John: "At one time, in the very early days, all you had going for you was an atmosphere. You could never hear the singer, even through a Marshall or a Selmer 100 watt P.A."

They contend that having a good sound system is absolutely vital, and worth breaking your wallet for. I hinted that perhaps they were in a stronger position than struggling small bands, simply because, with a record deal in the bag and the extensive October tour with Aerosmith, their management is prepared to shell out for any amount of expensive gear. In other words, they have the freedom to pick and choose that comes with financial security. But both were anxious to point out that they have been through far less prosperous times, in the years when they were unknown. Did they think it was harder or easier for young bards today than it was for them?

Jim: "I'd say harder, simply because you've got to have more equipment these days. It goes hand-in-hand with the other factor, which is lack of venues." John: "In Leeds between about '65 and '68 there were about twenty pubs that had bands five nights a week."

School dance

Jim: "Another difference is that people were charged admission then. It gave it a sense of occasion. But if people get in for nothing they don't really care. My kid's just started playing in a band, and all he can do is the school dance. There are no youth clubs any more. Kids don't go to youth clubs now. That's the difference, basically, and I think it's a big one. And gig fees haven't gone up at all. I used to play for £15 a night in 1961, and a lot of bands are still being paid that."

John grinned nostalgically. "And I can remember being followed down the street by a crowd of kids, just because I had a guitar!"

by Peter Douglas