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What made Wowii fail?

A young band's dream deal turned into a nightmare

"Wowii's music is the wave of the future: Sophisticated, energetic rock and roll, wry and witty lyrics. 'MAKIN' WOWII' is a remarkably visual album, capturing the essence of the group's live shows. They're heading into the eighties with style and panache, and a ready market of eager fans . . ."

—Record #6E-246 excerpt from a press release by Elektra/Asylum Records, October, 1979.

"Be ready for broken hearts and broken dreams; it's a risky business. Artists are not guaranteed anything. If you're looking for security, you're in the wrong business."

—Peter Lopez, John Galt
Band bassist, formerly of
Wowii, August, 1981.

P.T. Barnum once said, "There's a sucker born every minute," and the members of the now defunct rock band Wowii would have to admit to feeling the old-time showman was speaking about them. They recorded an album for Elektra/Asylum that was slated for an October, 1979 release, but through a series of circumstances that seemed to be beyond any kind of control, those master tapes are now tucked away in a record company vault, alongside who-knows-how-many other masters representing uncountable dashed hopes.

The case of Wowii isn't the first time—or the last—in which contracts have been ripped up, tours cancelled and careers ditched. In the record business, as in any business, there are unhappy pitfalls lying in wait for the beginner whose hopes for fame and fortune leave him blind to mistakes, exploitation, politics, cupidity

By LARRY JAFFEE



Music Exchange

and plain stupidity. Which is why many musicians hire business managers to take care of the percentages, profits and royalties. But even hiring someone to take care of the legal chores can't guarantee the musician will be protected.

Witness the spectacle in Nashville where the estate of Elvis Presley is probing the possibility manager Col. Parker ripped off the "King." According to one magazine article, Parker may have taken huge percentages, up to half, of everything Presley made. And Parker's ties to Las Vegas club managers are being examined too, because the fees paid to Presley were suspiciously small considering his ability to fill a hotel; and what about Parker's apparent proclivity for gambling (and losing big) in the very same clubs that allegedly got Rock n' Roll's top act for a song?

Time and investigation will illuminate that tawdry tale.

Meanwhile, harken to the details of Wowii's experience; a disaster for a group that seemed to have it made, then discovered even deals that look beautiful on the surface sometimes have a way of unraveling. And all the distractions of limosines, champagne parties, and dreams of standing-room-only concerts can't erase their memory of the underside of the recording business.

After signing a \$350,000 record deal with Elektra/Asylum in 1979—that's an exceptional amount of bucks for an unknown band—the

group cut an album in New York and enjoyed being the toast of Los Angeles. Then the band stood helpless as their contract and hopes for extraordinary success crumbled.

Re-formed now as the John Galt Band (a reference to the main character in a cult novel by Ayn Rand—a character, by the way, who snatches victory from overwhelming defeat) the musicians tell their story:

"We still don't know what the hell really happened. We're really not sure what went on behind the walls in L.A. between Joe Smith (Elektra's board chairman) and Joe Messina, our manager," begins bassist Peter Lopez.

Lopez, guitarist Heppi Petit, drummer Chino Cabal, guitarist Mark Resnick and singer Rafael Vigil met while still in a Miami high school back in the early 70s. Everything clicked. The group picked the name Wowii, and established an image of a band of teen-age heartthrobs in the age of sexual permissiveness. They built a faithful Florida following, then set out for New York, fame and fortune.

There they hired Joe Messina as their manager. Messina is a small-scale record producer who pushed the group in teen magazines and New York clubs. From 1976 to '78, Wowii stuck to playing standard material like Led Zeppelin, the Beatles and David Bowie. They also began composing and polishing a short, original set. It wasn't long before the group was booked into clubs like Trax, Great Gildersleeves, Mother's, My Father's Place and other showcases. Their following and paychecks grew apace.

At the same time, Wowii recorded two singles for Messina on his private label, Cartoon Records. The second single, "Forever," picked up a fair New York airplay. That, plus a full page ad in "Billboard" and a spate of teen magazine stories helped Messina interest Elektra.

Rhythm guitarist Heppi Petit recalls the occasion that clinched the deal: "We did a 30-minute showcase set in L.A. for Elektra and they were amazed. Joe Smith, Elektra's board chairman, came up on stage, put his arm around me and said, 'I'd like to welcome Wowii to Elektra/Asylum.' Thirty minutes later, the deal was signed." The deal included cash to produce the record.

No one in Wowii knew the business end of their trade. That's why they'd hired Messina. The band contends that he acted as their legal advisor and had power of attorney to sign their names to deals. Messina denies acting as their legal advisor and points out that the contract was signed between Elektra and his own production company. An L.A.-based attorney is credited with actually negotiating the deal.

As the ink dried on the official papers, the band began a brief search for a producer. They tried for such big-name sound polishers as Roy Thomas Baker (Queen & The Cars), George Martin (The Beatles) or Tom Dowd (Aretha Franklin, Chicago) but found everyone was booked months or years ahead. So the young musicians, anxious to get underway, settled on Messina.

"They didn't give it enough time to find a producer," says Maxine Sartori, Elektra's East Coast director of A & R. "You can't do it in one day. You just can't say I want Roy Thomas Baker."

Lopez recounts the band's misgivings about their manager-turned-producer: "When we got the deal, it seemed such a short ticket to success, but I didn't think Joe could be objective about the sound anymore. He had grown too involved with the band, even musically. We fought, but it ended up with Joe producing." Drummer Chino Cabal adds, "we always wanted to use a name producer, somebody else. Maybe that person would bring out a little more what we really sounded like."

Messina insists he warned the band that acting both as manager and producer put him in a conflict of interest, but the decision was finalized by the band. The album was due in less than four months. The master had to be finished, approved and pressed in time for an October, 1980 release. A cautious Elektra decided to give the band a trial to see how Messina and the group would do on their own. The sessions began at a New York studio called Sound Mixers.

Though auspicious for the musicians, the sessions set off suspicion and distrust between Elektra and Messina. Sartori recalls that she wasn't able to listen in on sessions and that Messina didn't return her calls during the group's three months in the studio. And, she adds, the \$130,000 it cost to record the album seemed steep to Elektra.

Added to those troubles was a conflict over the band's already recorded single, "Forever." Messina insisted that the cut be dropped when Elektra refused to act as distributor for Cartoon. But Lopez points out that "Forever" was one reason for Elektra's interest in the first place.

Despite the haggling, the album was finally finished and Wowii thought they'd managed to create quite a product, even with Messina producing. But Elektra wasn't so happy. Wowii's transition from live to tape apparently just didn't turn them on. Ten days after the cassettes of the album were distributed to Elektra executives, no one had taken the time to listen.

It was the group's first inkling that something had gone wrong, very wrong. Messina excused the problem, saying that the day after he arrived with Wowii's tapes, the Eagles delivered "The Long Run," their first album in two years. The Eagles stole the limelight he says now, so Wowii moved to a back burner.

Finally, Elektra heard the tapes in a listening session. Messina insists the listeners thought the tape was "tremendous," but that at least two tracks needed to be remixed. Messina took the tracks back to the studio for rework. The new master was then transferred to cassettes for another in-house evaluation. Unfortunately, Messina insists, what happened next was "accidental sabotage." Messina discovered that the cassettes were not properly encoded. "The right channel was too heavy with high frequency. They sounded like hell!"

"I immediately called the company to tell them to stop the presses," Messina says, and Elektra said they'd take care of it. But the tapes went out anyhow and the evaluations were quite negative. Messina says he tried to get new tapes into Elektra's hands, but they weren't interested in hearing another cassette. "They said it sucked, and it did." Messina insists that a West Coast band called Shoes was emerging at Elek-



FORWARD PAGE: WOWII (L to R) Mark Resnick, Chino Cabal, Heppi Petit, Rafael Vigil, Peter Lopez. Under contract to Elektra/Asylum—before their deal dissolved in confusion.

ABOVE: Several members of Wowii are trying to do it again, this time under the name John Galt—a character in an Ayn Rand cult novel who wins out against overwhelming odds.

tra at the time, having beaten Wowii's album by two weeks.

The group and Messina still hoped Elektra's then-president Steve Wax would be their ace in the hole. He'd been an enthusiastic supporter at the beginning. Messina says he managed to get a good tape to Wax and had won his backing for reviving the album. But the day the manager and Wax were to meet, Messina learned that "Wax no longer works here."

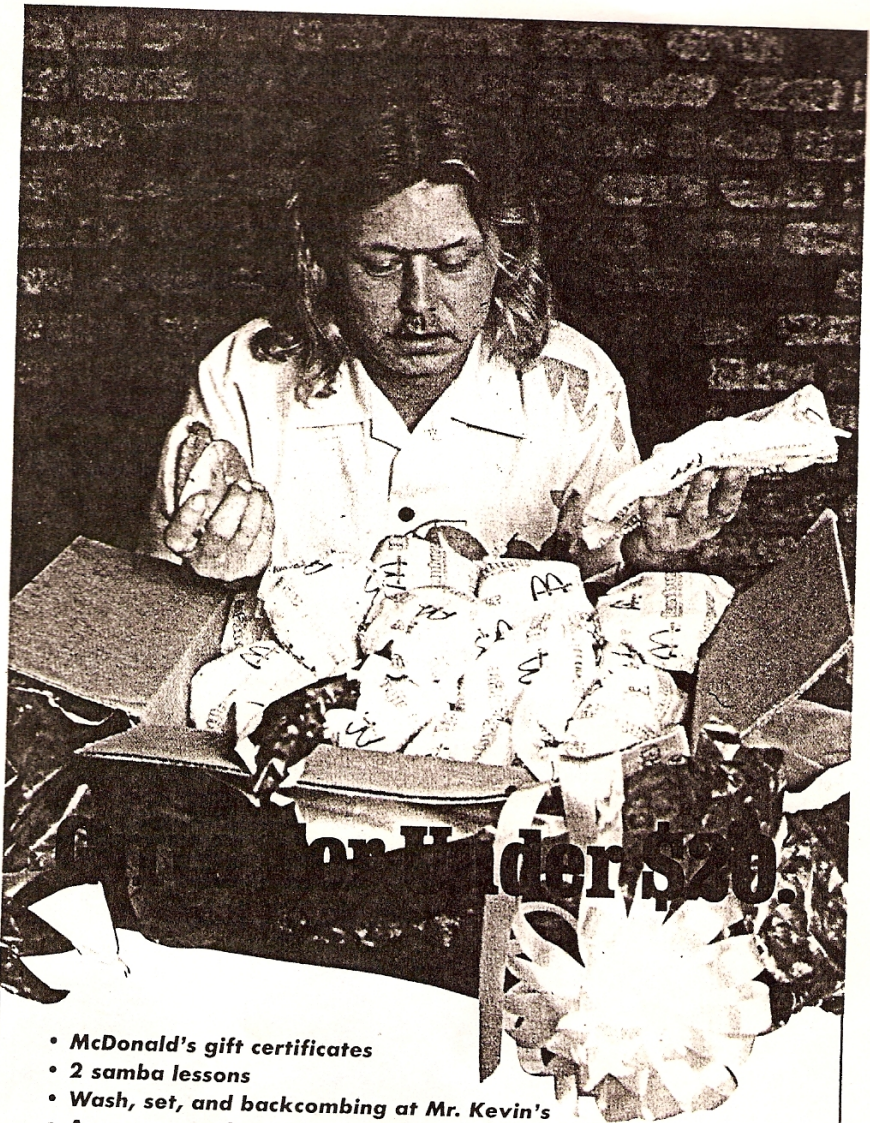
Messina says he told Elektra's new chairman about the hassle "and he freaked, but he couldn't run the record company by himself . . . the support wasn't there." Support within Wowii was weakening too. Singer Vigil and guitarist Resnick were so angry over the fiasco they quit the band and moved back to Miami.

Pressing on, Messina learned that company executives considered the project nothing but a problem and that Wowii might have to find another home or settle for a later release. Messina also found himself wrestling with the promotion department. They told him they felt the record wasn't good enough to get played on the radio. Messina says he took the tapes to five New York deejays and all seemed to like it. Elektra didn't buy that.

Ken Buttice, senior vice president of A & R tells it this way: "When we got the record, nobody in the company thought we could do anything with it." Based on the tapes that were tributed, "it was decided that the record was nothing." He added that he wasn't even impressed by the live performance.

But Lopez remembers it differently. "They saw the band and loved us, and when they heard the record, they hated it. Now if that isn't politics, I don't know what is. When I say politics, I mean the shifting of conflicting personalities and of power."

Sartori summed it up when she explained that every standard Elektra contract stipulates that the album must be acceptable to both the artist and the company. "Wowii's record was just not acceptable." ■



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