

The Show Man

by Richard Langley

Peter Conlon

As I stood outside the Coca-Cola Roxy Theatre in Buckhead, waiting for entry into the office of Concert/Southern Promotions, I couldn't help but feel that I was attracting as much, if not more, attention as the throng that surrounded me: a gaggle of music lovers/musicians clothed in a garishly entertaining mix of old-school punk and new-wave attire. They were preparing to attend and/or perform in a music event that night at the Roxy.

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mission that day, however, was not to reminisce or to draw attention to myself, but rather to interview the noted Atlanta concert promoter Peter Conlon, of Conlon and Cooley fame. Soon, an energetic, 20-something lad wearing a cap and shorts, led me upstairs to the office of C/SP, which is above the Roxy.

The C/SP office was spacious, simple, and coolly chic. The only evidence in the low-key ambiance of Concert/Southern Promotions being the South's premier producer of music events were the photographs of music celebrities, the memorabilia, and the energy of the staff who know and love the music industry.

Likewise, Atlantans have been as excited yet coolly controlled about Concert/Southern events since 1980. That's when Conlon and his inspiration, the famed promoter Alex Cooley, formed Concert/Southern Promotions. As co-presidents of the thriving C/SP (which concert conglomerate SFX purchased for \$17 million in 1998), Conlon/Cooley currently produce 400 shows annually in the South, including the ever popular Music Midtown—which was held May 4-6—and the Chastain Park Summer Concert series. In addition to their connection to the Roxy (which, along with the Cotton Club, they restored and manage), they produce shows for the Philips Arena, the burgeoning Tabernacle, the Georgia Dome, and Conlon's favorite: the Chastain Amphitheatre, which Conlon and Cooley opened 20 years ago.

"We have a personal attachment to Chastain," said Conlon. "Our series people have been with us 20 years. There's a certain family atmosphere, the communal thing."

Due to Conlon/Cooley's influence, the countless high-powered and varied performers who have treated Atlantans at CSP shows over the years include Frank Sinatra, Metallica, REM, Whitney Houston, Burt Bacharach, and U2.

Looking very comfortable and relaxed even though it was nearing 7:00 p.m., Conlon had a very studied, very measured look and manner. The feel and décor of his office is equally as subtle as the rest of the office's ambiance. Lightly sprinkled with signed photos of luminaries, including Bruce Springsteen and Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter, it confirmed all that I'd heard and read concerning one key aspect of Conlon's persona: that he is a very private person who, in an image-conscious industry, is not ego-driven. This humility exists despite the fact that he has worked with Bruce Springsteen (five times) and counts U2 and REM (who Conlon says have a friendly rivalry) and Jane Fonda (he hiked the Inca trail in Peru with her this past summer) among his celebrity friends.

"A lot of this business is ego management," Conlon said. "I'll deal with Bruce Springsteen all week long versus a first-time congressman."

And while Conlon would probably love to work his magic behind the scenes, he acknowledged that it's the Conlon/Cooley brand that sells tickets and green lights projects. Jimmy Baron of 99X's popular "Morning X" show echoes this sentiment. "Peter is an essential part of the Atlanta music scene, and there is no Midtown Music without him."

With all the joy he brings to music-loving Atlantans, I wondered what was Conlon's favorite musical era. For a moment, he was amusingly evasive, then, letting down his guard, quipped, "I'm still waiting on it." After confessing that I'm partial to the '70s, particularly disco, Conlon indicated that he's a big fan of early '70s rock like Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, and The Doors.

That was the era when Conlon made his initial impact as a concert promoter. As an undergraduate student at the University of Georgia, the ambitious and driven Conlon melded his passion for politics and music. (He is not musically talented.) He was the only person to sit on the committees for both the Interfraternity Council and the Uni-

Peter Conlon with Atlanta favorites, R.E.M.



**"I'll deal with Bruce Springsteen all week long versus a first-time congressman."
-Peter Conlon**

versity Union, which were often at loggerheads about what acts to book at the Coliseum. Soon, under Conlon's guidance, the IFC was booking burgeoning acts like the Allman Brothers, (future Atlanta denizen) Elton John, and Jethro Tull, among others—and more importantly, was turning a profit.

Craving a fresh take on politics and wanting to work for "a decent, honest man," Conlon jumped on Governor Jimmy Carter's Presidential bandwagon after graduating from University of Georgia in 1975 with a bachelor's degree. (Conlon is still tight with Carter, having served as his official consultant, as well as for the Carter Center and the Atlanta Project.)

Vietnam and Watergate were Conlon's impetus to enter politics. "I saw the hypocrisy at two levels," he said. "One, we don't mind sending all our youth away to a war without any conscience from the government, and on the other hand, our leaders had an apparent lack of regard for the laws of our

nation. It was like a double whammy. And, it was like, if I don't get involved at this stage of my life, when will I?"

Naturally, Conlon wanted to organize benefit concerts for the Carter Presidential campaign, but Phil Walden (the head of Capricorn Records) filled that role. So, Conlon effectively served in various key fiscal and media-related roles for both Carter's Presidential campaign and for his 1980 reelection campaign. Initially he served as a political aide to Campaign Manager Hamilton Jordan and later became executive assistant and White House liaison for the administrator of the Small Business Administration. But it was his role as the national fund-raising director for President Carter's reelection campaign that cemented Conlon's drive for a career in concert promotion. In addition to his fiscal responsibilities, Conlon organized benefit concerts. Within a few years of returning to Atlanta, Conlon had teamed with Cooley.

Since he is such a skilled negotiator and has a gift to assuage even the most temperamental personalities, I wondered if he had ever considered a full-time career in politics. He said he had flirted with the idea, but realized, "I don't like the level of candidates, and what people have to give up to do it. If anybody would put themselves in that process, no wonder you're getting the things you're getting."

Unlike so many of the one-shot acts in both politics and in today's flavor-of-the-month music scene, Conlon (and Cooley) have achieved staying power by being honest, determined, and professional businessmen. "If you know what you're doing and treat people right, it's a great city to promote in," he said.

And Conlon likes the end result of his efforts. "There's a certain fun in seeing people enjoying what you are doing." He fondly remembers, and is proud of, many of his Chastain shows, including the Don Henley show earlier this year, Brian Ferry's set 10 years ago, INXS's show the year before lead singer Michael Hutchence died, and one Philips Arena show in particular: Springsteen's two-night stand this past summer. "They were

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Peter Conlon with The Wallflowers.

great shows," Conlon noted. "Even Bruce said they were great shows. His manager, Jon Landau, told me that they were two of the best shows that he has seen Bruce do in years."

Conlon said he recognizes, and appreciates, radio's role in bringing music to the masses, but stressed that it needs to do more to establish artists' careers. He confirmed my belief that the transitory nature of the industry's personnel, who go from job to job like free-agent hired-guns in sports, is not healthy for the industry.

"The industry is not conducive to fostering growth," he noted. Which, in a twisted way, is a good thing, because as Conlon pointed out, "There are a lot of bands that are just not as interesting as the personalities of Bruce, Billy (Joel), or Elton ... You wouldn't want to hang out with them." Then he waxed nostalgic about how amiable and accessible hugely successful artists like Springsteen and REM are, while maintaining their artistic and commercial credibility.

A major part of Conlon's professional satisfaction is, "that despite Atlanta's growing pains over the last five years, the majority of our city's concert-goers are extremely polite—even at a Metallica show. People here treat people differently," he added. "I wouldn't want to do that show in upstate New York or in New Jersey."

Regarding New York, specifically New York City, and the left coast bastion of media/entertainment, Los Angeles, I asked the (thankfully) devoted-to-Atlanta Conlon a hypothetical question, If the perfect scenario manifested itself, would he consider moving to NYC or to LA? He hesitantly leaned toward LA—NYC wasn't an option. "You would have to pay me a tremendous amount of money to live in NYC now, but I would have jumped at it 20 years ago."

Even though Atlanta is a burgeoning site for e-commerce, Conlon said he is not a proponent of digital streaming. To him, nothing can replace the live experience, "The Internet will be great for research, promotion, and maybe even certain amounts of distribution, as long as they (the Internet companies) learn to play the game and pay royalties." I concurred with his strong belief in attending concerts live, and pointed out that when I come home after a bleary-eyed day at work in front of the computer, I barely want to check my e-mail. Conlon added, "People need to be bumped into. They need to be part of that jostled crowd. I call it the tribal gathering. They have to do it every now and then."

I confessed that as I begrudgingly enter my post-Gen X years, my ability to party hard has diminished. Conlon comforted me by admitting that he has experienced this unfortunate phenomenon, too. "I used to go to all of our shows, every show—Cotton Club, Roxy, everything. And it was getting to be too much." He now mainly attends the major shows.

Conlon's understanding his own concert-going limitations and his prophetic work-related advice in our technology-obsessed times was inspiring. "The more people use their computers, the more they are going to want to go to concerts," he predicted. After I've finished writing this piece, I will be more than willing to forget about my technical world. Maybe seeing a local concert isn't such a bad idea. **N**