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YES, THEY'RE THE GREAT PRETENDERS

BY JON BAUMAN

HOW CAN THIS HAPPEN in America? If I plunk down my hard-earned entertainment dollars to see a group called the Coasters, it's got to at least have something to do with The Coasters, right? Somebody has to have had some connection to "Yakety Yak," "Charlie Brown," "Poison Ivy" and all the other classic hits that made The Coasters the first group to be inducted into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, right?

Not necessarily. In fact, Carl Gardner, who sang virtually every Coasters lead and is the holder of the federally registered trademark of the name, has spent years trying to shut down shows by Coasters impostor groups. But even with the trademark as a weapon, his task has proved nearly impossible. He is more than entitled to quote his creation Charlie Brown and ask "Why's everybody always pickin' on me?"

Impostor groups are everywhere. In a sophisticated form of identity theft, dozens of them are performing around the country at theaters, festivals and fairs. Often they perform on the same oldies bill as one another, duping consumers and stealing the remuneration and the applause due to the real pioneers of rock and roll.

It hasn't happened to me. But when I was a member of Sha Na Na, which began paying homage to vintage rock and roll in the late 1960s, I met almost every one of my childhood idols, the people who sang those songs. I'm honored to call them my friends. And I'm distressed to see so many of them suffer while impostors take their livelihood and, what's worse, their glory.

It's done cleverly. There's usually at least one really old guy in the phony group, so that you can sit out in the audience and say: "That must be the Real One." A young lady recently told me that she was taken by her parents to see what she thought was her favorite group, "The World Famous Platters," for her Sweet Sixteen party. She reports that "Rooster," the lead singer, told her he sang lead on all the Platters hits and then "proceeded to deface my Platters albums with his autograph." You see, she'd noticed that no one listed on any of her album jackets was even remotely related to a "Rooster."

A group claiming to be the Shangri-La's ("Leader of the Pack") has actually gained legal rights to the group name in a court settlement, but even under existing law that still doesn't entitle them to the group's history. I once saw two "Shangri-La's" barely out of diapers hold up the hand of the "Real One" and say: "And this is Mom," implying that she was both a member of the original group (which she wasn't) and their mom (which she also wasn't).

The perpetrators routinely provide “documentation” so that they can sell sham and underpriced packages to agents and promoters. My favorite piece of documentation is an apparent authorization to use a group’s name from the mother of one of the group’s former singers. The singer was deceased, which was immaterial since he’d quit the group 40 years before anyway and appears to have signed away his rights to the group’s name at that time. What was more interesting was that his mother had died four years before the authorization was signed. Miraculous!

I have been told by several musicians who back up these impostor shows that they’ve seen instances when one of the phony groups didn’t make it to the gig. So some of the fake “Coasters” who’d just performed changed out of the red spangly suits into the blue spangly suits and reemerged as “Drifters”! You got a problem with that?

And the people behind all this know how to work the system. If they are sued, they just keep making motions to run up the fees and try to bankrupt the real artists, who’ve in many cases been ripped off all their lives to begin with and are lucky to have anything left at all. And, yes, there is an underlying issue of race here. The vast majority of the groups that are being knocked off are African-American.

The impostor group problem can affect all generations of musicians, but I suspect it’s at its worst right now. The early pioneers of rock and roll were just too faceless. It will be harder to knock off groups from the music video era. But I’m sure someone will try.

That’s why I’ve been working with the Vocal Group Hall of Fame to pass legislation which will help solve this problem in perpetuity. We’re planning to introduce a bill in California which has already passed in Pennsylvania and is being considered in about 12 states as I write. The bill requires that an authentic member of the “recording group” must appear in the “performing group,” unless the performing group owns a legitimate federally registered trademark to the group’s name.

If you want a gut-wrenching experience, try watching a baby boomer audience leap to its feet at the end of an impostor group show. The audience so clearly thinks it’s honoring the body of work, the legacy, the deep pleasure this music has given them since their youth, the way this music brought people of different races together in America and helped change the world.

They don’t know they’re applauding the wrong people! Come to think of it, you may have been in one of those audiences and been duped yourself. How can this happen in America?

JON BAUMAN, better known as “Bowzer,” was a member of the singing group Sha Na Na and is currently performing in “Bowzer’s Rock ‘N’ Roll Party.”