

Rocker Fella



KASHA VAN SANT talks riders, British musical pride and the fate of the record industry with the don of music promotion

Picture the scene. Your favourite music artist is coming to town, hysteria is mounting as they haven't played a live gig in eons and all of a sudden British dates are announced. Most people panic and scour the web and ticket hotlines. Dawn heralds fingers on redial, like trigger happy gunslingers some will succeed in their quest, others will fail. For the victor, the spoils: gloating, anticipation and the opportunity to sell tickets on. For the vanquished begins a slow ascent towards the hallowed peak of a glimpse at their revered one. And thus ensues the analysis of the music press for last minute offers and the seductive online auction websites brazenly extorting their wares. More anguish follows, hair pulling and being at the mercy of those who not only exploit the artist and irritate the promoters, but also damage what entertainment has been about since the camp fire sing-along.

Harvey Goldsmith needs no introduction as he has been the head honcho of the live entertainment industry for years, considered by many 'in the know' as a British institution. In fact his CBE is probably testament to his contribution towards maintaining the feel good factor over the years. He of course brought us Live Aid, The Rolling Stones and The Led Zeppelin Reunion last year.

Of the latter he enthuses how essential it is that the British nation create a tangible monument to the great and good of the British music industry. Housed in AEG-owned The O₂ in Greenwich it has already caused a massive stir and is likely to eclipse the music themed cafés of this world. It is high tech stuff with smart cards recording the experience so that visitors can continue their adventures at home via the dedicated website.

"In America they have the rock and roll hall of fame, country music hall of fame and the sports hall of fame, and they recognise the history and tradition of music and sport. In England we don't have that at all, we have the Brits but they are really just about current news. So we've never had a proper place to reflect on our great talent hence the British Musical Experience was born."

Harvey is charismatic and straight talking; he clearly knows his stuff, which he has learned over the years. But his career began in a surprising arena.

"I started as a student and I studied pharmacy, became social secretary and rag chairman and ended up running the entertainment for 12 universities around the south coast."

This doesn't surprise me at all as I draw the parallels and conclude that his current role still sees him

dispensing a universal panacea through the joy of music and entertainment. We talk briefly about him "doing his parents proud" and allaying their fears of switching from the security of a stable career path into the polar opposite. I ask him what the highest point of his career was. He ponders a while,

"Oh God, I can't answer that question. Maybe getting my CBE because that was a high point for my mum and dad really."

I am finding that nothing rattles this man; he is calm and business like. Even his approach to the artists he works with follows this strict protocol. I enquire about the methods he uses to select acts and the ones who stand out as his favourites.

"I only work with acts that I like. Otherwise I can't work with them. So all the people I work with I either get on with or have a relationship with. It just makes the thing more of an experience."

"Many years ago I did Alice Cooper and on the rider for the list of personnel there was a Mister Snake, who was a member of the road crew. But he turned out to be a python and I had to get a very warm room for him!"

So how about artists pulling out at the last minute? Despite the financial implications, he cites illness as the only factor.

"The last time that happened was when we had two shows booked for Pavarotti in the UK and we had to cancel both because he got diagnosed with cancer. That was the end of it, but unfortunately these things happen."

We speak about reality music shows, which Harvey states make "great TV" and I enquire of his own singing abilities, touching upon karaoke singing. He tells me about having sung in Chinese much to the bemusement of the Mayor of Beijing and the Minister of Propaganda. I imagine his dulcet tones belting out Mustang Sally in Cantonese. He brings me back from my reverie.

Is this a litmus test for the difficulty of working with artists in general?

"Yes." His prompt reply makes perfect sense. I ask the difficult question of his most successful promotion. After citing the aforementioned 'Big Three' of Live Aid, The Stones and Led Zeppelin, laughing he adds,

"There are too many I don't know where to start really! I mean they are all hugely successful and I don't know what the measure is; I suppose Bob Dylan and Eric Clapton at Blackbusch Aerodrome probably holds the record for the biggest number of tickets sold on a one day concert. That was 175 000."

For the sake of objectivity I have to ask about the lowest point in his career, knowing full well that Harvey Goldsmith can take the rough with the smooth. He doesn't disappoint.

"We had a rough time towards the end of the millennium. I suppose when we did the Eclipse Festival which was a complete abject failure."

So how did he come back from that?

"You just have got to be solid and confident enough to know that this is a blip and you have got to move on and get on with it."

Harvey Goldsmith seems unfazed by anything, even his inability to be star struck is down to his attitude towards stars being a purely business one. This also extends to going above and beyond his duty when it comes to keeping them happy. I cannot resist the unusual rider request question. He laughs,

What of musical mentoring and his own Get Your Act Together TV show?

"I had an email from one of them saying that they are doing a deal with Vodafone."

So what does Harvey think about the state of the record industry?

"The record industry is a mess and I am afraid it's probably not recoverable, the great record companies have watched themselves disappear and are fast disappearing and they've done nothing about it except panic at the end. They need to pull their boots straps up and get on with it but I'm not sure whether they are capable of doing that."

I have stumbled upon the golden nugget, he continues,

"And that's a shame; the fact that new technology has over swamped the traditional way of artists selling a product is a problem for artists because they are just not earning the money that they should be. I'm scared that business will become too greedy. I hate the whole way that tickets are distributed and that needs sorting out, I hate the secondary ticket market because that's not what we're in the business for. I'm glad that there's constantly new talent coming up but there's one big problem. We're not creating the next generation of super groups. We need to do that."

Speaking of super groups and icons, who would he like to work with that he hasn't?

"I got close to, but never really got to bring over Elvis Presley and that's probably it." ■