



Sympathy for the Devil: Dead Rock Stars Sell Their Souls

Jimi Hendrix's Image Will Adorn A New Energy Drink, But Some Profits Go to Charity

By **SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES**

Jan. 24, 2007 — - In the booming energy drink business, one newcomer promises to help clear the purple haze around your brain: "Liquid Experience" will carry the iconic image of Jimi Hendrix, who died of a drug overdose after a short-lived, rock-studded career.

The non-alcoholic drink -- produced by New-Zealand based Beverage Concepts and due to hit the market in April -- is just one of many products from cars to baby clothing that are capitalizing on the star power of aging or dead rockers.

Celebrity and estate sales accounted for \$3.5 billion in licensing ventures in the U.S. and Canada this year, according to Licensing Letter, a tip sheet that provides industry data for executives.

"Celebrities and estates are getting stronger -- it's not just dead rock stars," said publisher Ira Mayer, a baby boomer who says he watched Hendrix's last performance of "The Star Spangled Banner" in 1970. "We all have our own audiences and emotional connections."

Though Hendrix doesn't make Forbes magazine's Top-Earning Dead Celebrities, Hendrix's estate still made \$6 million in 2004. The richest dead rock star is Kurt Cobain, with an annual income of \$50 million, followed by Elvis Presley, John Lennon, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, George Harrison and Bob Marley.

Healthy Drink, Unhealthy Lifestyle

To some rock aficionados, the message of "Liquid Experience" is paradoxical -- an ostensibly healthy vitamin-imbued drink tied to a raucous guitar player who suffocated to death from a barbituate overdose at the age of 27.

And many who hold Jimi Hendrix in musical god-like status say his image as been poisoned. Flea, bassist for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, told the Associated Press that the greatest guitar player of all time had been "cheapened" by commercial venture.

But the Hendrix family defends the Liquid Experience deal.

Janie Hendrix, Jimi's sister, who is CEO of the family's Seattle-based company, said Beverage Concepts agreed to give back a percentage of sales to education and music-related charities and to drug rehabilitation programs. They also hope to sponsor a guitar competition for young people.

"Jimi was a huge inspiration to people," said Hendrix of her brother, who wrote 110 songs during his

tragically short career. In the 1990s, after a series of lawsuits, the family gained control of his music. "He transcended generation, color, sex and race, and that legacy continues to last."

Bob Merlis, publicist for the Hendrix Experience, says the drink deal is not out of bounds. "I don't think it's egregious," he says, "It's a standard grocery product, not arsenic. The market for his music is growing younger and younger."

Rock Still Rocks

Jimi Hendrix and other celebrity rock stars are effective advertising tools in a new era of cross-generational marketing, when age means less than lifestyle. .

In television commercials, Led Zeppelin is background music for a Cadillac commercial. The Who, The Rolling Stones, Bono and John Mellencamp shill for cars, insurance companies, iPods and trucks. Target's latest ad campaign features the Beatles' "Hello, Goodbye."

This kind of advertising appeals to both young and old and is a new shift in marketing, according to Matt Thornhill of The Boomer Market, a company that advises the marketing industry on how to reach the 77 million consumers born between 1948 and 1960. "This is the generation that has been the traditional target of product marketing: the 18 to 34-year-old group. But half of those consumers have now aged out of that demographic -- yet refuse to believe they are getting old," he said.

As a result, companies redefined their strategies. Age doesn't matter in today's marketing -- it's life styles.

"I don't know why they would affix an energy drink to a dead rock and roll guy," joked Thornhill.

Still, Thornhill sees the genius in the Liquid Experience marketing campaign: expanding a product's reach by appealing to 20-somethings, but designing it for the boomers.

"It's a perfect marketing tool and has the best potential to straddle two generations," Thornhill said. "Using an aging rocker is the best way to interest the baby boomers."

Good for a Gag Gift

But some in Generation Y are more skeptical about the appeal of "Liquid Experience."

"When I see these ads, I think, 'Please don't ruin the image for me,'" said Amanda Schupak, 25 and a youth scene reporter for Forbes magazine. She listens to both the Rolling Stones and the new indie rock band Cursive. "The classic artists have idol status," she says.

Still, she understands the power of marketing. "It's hard to argue when some stars are able to make more money from the grave than many are making while they're alive."

Would she buy Liquid Experience? "I might just once and give it away as a gag gift," Schupak said.

Blender.com editor Mike Errico's online music magazine caters to 26-35 year olds with a "snarky attitude." He says he is excited that he will be attending a concert with Bob Seger -- a 1980s rock star whose song "Like a Rock" is featured in Chevrolet commercials.

Blender readers are still in awe of classic rock. Errico says, "It was a much different music industry then, with fewer choices, and these rock stars were able to make a deeper impression. Hendrix was pre-Internet, pre-MTV and pre FM radio in some cases -- you didn't have an iPod, you had a record collection, and in terms of number of songs, it was vastly smaller."

The grand-scale living of the legendary rock stars was elevated to cult status, and new bands have continually tried to emulate the sheer power of the 1970s rock culture.

"It's like evolutionary biology," said Errico. "Business savvy music makers are in awe of when the dinosaurs ran the earth. Today's bands make music in their apartments and garages. None have the gigantic studios of Led Zepplin and Pink Floyd, where they were blowing drugs and money out of the air vents."

The danger, said Errico, is that the star is remembered for all eternity by the product he endorses. Does anyone care that George Forman, who now sells cooking grills, had a boxing career?

Neal Ferrassani, a 28-year-old Web developer from Los Angeles, who used to work as a major-label recording engineer, has listened to early classic rock all his life. But he sees hypocrisy in marketing to his generation.

"Those are my musical heroes," said Ferrassani,. "I'm not sick of hearing the bands, but I'm sick of seeing them on TV. The day I hear Nirvana when Courtney Love is hard up for cash, it's going to kill me."

Hearing today's indie band Postal Service hawking for UPS doesn't offend him. But when he heard Led Zepplin on a Cadillac ad, he turned off the channel. "My heart sunk," he said.

"The '60s generation was anti-establishment, and they gave us a lot," said Ferrassani. "We grew up with their music and thought they were a pretty cool generation. But now they chew themselves up and spit themselves out. They have lost their souls in the process."

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