

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: ROCK CONCERT SAFETY

by Paul L. Wertheimer

Principal, Crowd Management Strategies, 2052 Lincoln Park West,
Suite 405, Chicago, Illinois 60614-4708, U.S.A.

Abstract

Rock and roll, the music of the young, is middle-aged. Born in America, the first rock music event was held 41 years ago in Cleveland, Ohio. The 1969 Woodstock festival that ushered in the “age of peace and love” is now folklore. Many of the founding fathers – Bill Haley, Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley – are dead. Rock and roll, however, has gone on to prosper. Today, this music genre is a mature and ever changing art form and a mega-billion-dollar American business.

While rock and roll has matured and joined mainstream American culture, concert safety has remained in the shadows.

This paper’s overview of American rock concert incidents explores representative rock concert and festival problems over the past 40 years. While the type of concert incidents has varied over time, what remains consistent is the lack of a unified approach to make concerts safe. In America, too many concert promoters and facility managers act as though they are operating in the Wild West: free to call the shots and make the rules as they go along.

A brief critique of the *Guide to Health, Safety and Welfare at Pop Concerts and Similar Events* is also presented. This noteworthy report is bound to have an international influence on the management of rock concerts.

ILLUSION OF SAFETY

In the beginning ... there was trouble.

- **1952 to 1969**

On March 21, 1952, at the Cleveland Arena in Cleveland, Ohio, music history was made and a defining part of American culture literally burst on the scene. Rhythm and Blues artists Paul William, Tiny Grimes, the Rockin’

Highlanders, The Dominoes and others took to the stage to perform at The Moondog Coronation Ball. This seminal event would become known as the first rock and roll show.

The show set a precedent in other ways, too. People claimed that upwards of 25,000 tickets were sold for a venue that could hold only half that many people. Tickets were allegedly printed in response to the public's demand. All the seats for the dance and show were taken, and standing room on the dance floor was about all that was left. Gate-crashing and a general state of chaos brought on clashes and injurious fights between patrons and security. In reporting this event, the news media refer to the Coronation Ball as a "riot". As a result, the promoter, Alan Freed, was arrested. Thus, with the birth of rock and roll came the rumblings of future safety problems.

Freed and other pioneering promoters and security officials can be forgiven for their lack of crowd management skills. After all, they were at the beginning of a powerful movement not fully comprehended and without precedent. The concept of managing crowds, or the techniques to do so, were little understood.

The rock concert problems of the 1950s soon became the problems of the 1960s. Concert disorders and fan safety problems suddenly came to the forefront as a result of the "British invasion" of rock music that re-energized the American rock scene. Hysteria and crazes were typical crowd problems. Security techniques were criticized, but more often than not, fans were blamed for disorders. A writer for *Hit Parader*, a popular U.S. teen fan magazine of the 1960s, wondered about the future:

The girls who flip over the current breed of pop singers seem to be much wilder than those who swooned over Sinatra or even the ones who ripped Elvis Presley's clothing to shredded souvenirs. If this is the way audiences are blowing their cool over the Rolling Stones in 1965, how will the next generation of fans react?

That question was already being answered before the decade was over. For a moment, though, it seemed that the birth of the Hippie movement – youths living life-styles counter to established American culture – might bring "peace, love and understanding" to the concert scene. After all, there was the peaceful 1967 Monterey International Pop Festival, considered America's first major outdoor rock festival. Then two years later, on the heels of the failed experimentation with rock music at the staid Newport Jazz Festival, came the epoch Woodstock Music and Arts Fair Festival. Both the Monterey Pop Festival on the West Coast and Woodstock on the East Coast had been positive and exhilarating experiences despite massive crowds of

youths and the hardships such assemblages bring. While the indoor concert scene during those years was not as calm, there was hope things would change.

- ***1970 to 1979***

The hope of a new age was short-lived. Before the year of Woodstock was over came the brutal beating death of a concert-goer by Hells Angels (who were asked to provide security) at the Rolling Stones' Altamont concert in California. The hopes for a peaceful Woodstock generation rock scene lay mortally wounded, too. American rock festivals, soon became punctuated by promoter scandals, crowd mayhem, deaths and chaos. The Hog Farm Commune that provided Woodstock with unarmed Hippie security was often replaced by subscribers to the Hells Angels' club-swinging, gun-toting approach to crowd security.

As early as 1972 there were frequent calls to end rock festivals. Local governments went to court to try to stop them. Critics accused the rock establishment of 'rip-offs' and suggested limiting festival sizes to more manageable capacities.

In Chicago in 1970, a Sly and The Family Stone concert turned into a riot that started at the city's lakefront Grant Park and spread to the downtown when the group failed to appear. There were at least 100 injuries and considerable property damage. This was not an exception but representative of the festival and concert problems of the time. Shooting by armed security, gate crashing, overselling of concerts, festival seating and poor crowd planning continued to boil along with the turbulent times. Promoters and facility operators took a defensive posture and dismissed the continuing concert problems as simply a cost of the rock business.

Then came that cold night of December 3, 1979, when the American rock and roll scene was shaken to its foundation and rock concert crowd management gained legitimacy.

Eleven concert-goers were crushed to death trying to enter Cincinnati Riverfront Coliseum to see the British group, The Who, then considered to be the world's most popular rock band. The response by the promoter, facility management and band was classic rock and roll: perfunctory regret laced with denial for responsibility. The promoter was not responsible. The venue operator was not responsible. The band was not responsible. Initially, the fans were blamed.

This time, the public and government officials did not believe the rock industry. Cincinnati and other communities quickly banned the use of festival seating and mandated door opening times and adapted other crowd management recommendations. Many communities also required public assembly facilities to apply for licenses that asked questions about crowd management planning issues. Today, The Who concert tragedy remains in the psyche of the American public as the measuring rod upon which all rock concert incidents are compared.

- ***1980 to 1989***

Once outdoor festivals began to die out concert violence erupted in and around venues. Sports stadiums became an alternative site for outdoor festivals. Festivals in such venues often did not fair well.

The acid rock group The Grateful Dead continued to earn its reputation as the preferred rock group of the drug culture. In its wake the band often left injured fans and scores of over-dosed concert-goers in first-aid centers. One of the more publicized deaths attributed to heavy-handed security occurred in 1989 at The Grateful Dead concert in New Jersey, where a fan was beaten to death allegedly by private security.

During this period fans continued to be victimized by festival seating. A 19-year-old Good Samaritan was stabbed to death trying to stop a fight in a festival seating crowd at a Judas Priest concert. Part of the legal settlement included the banning of festival seating at the Washington state venue.

In 1981 a court ruling prohibited police from participating in mass pat-downs (that is, contraband body inspections before patrons entered a concert). Private security effectively filled the void.

Before the decade was over, gang violence began to make its presence known. The shooting death of a concert-goer at a 1986 Righteous Brothers concert is but one example. Meanwhile, the punk rock movement produced a new form of social mayhem known as slam-dancing and flourished in small overcrowded venues. Traditional hostilities between fans and security or police continued to result in clashes.

With The Who tragedy behind them, the American rock industry continued to resist development of national guidelines or standards. Fear that doing so would be costly to their business, they argued that standards could not be written.

- ***1990 to the Present***

Festival seating injuries and deaths continued into the 1990s. In 1991 three concert-goers were crushed to death at an AC-DC concert in Salt Lake City, Utah. For one of the fans, a 14 year old, it was his first concert. The irony of the Salt Lake City tragedy was that a law prohibiting festival seating was already on the books, but it was ignored.

The North American Concert Promoters Association said that as a result of the Salt Lake City incident, it would vote on the idea of banning festival seating at its next meeting; members voted against a ban. The International Association of Auditorium Managers remained silent over the matter. More research on festival seating was needed, the groups maintained.

As outdoor events again became popular, a lack of thorough planning continued to plague them. A free outdoor concert at Boston's City Hall Plaza turned into a melee when it was overrun by the presence of 10,000 more people than expected. A similar situation developed when an MTV beach festival turned riotous, causing approximately \$200,000 damage to the small resort town of Belmar, New Jersey. Trouble came when at least 20,000 more people, above the approximately 40,000 expected, were attracted to the two-day event. Promoters informed the town of the possibility of the additional fans just one week before the event. There was no way to plan for the additional influx. The final crowd estimate during the festival ranged from 75,000 to 100,000 people.

Guns N' Roses was busy in 1992 living up to its image as rock's most reckless band. In that year alone, the band was responsible for at least \$400,00 in property damage and innumerable of injuries.

At the same time, rap concerts continued to earn their reputation for violence. So dangerous had many rap concerts become that one venue, Madison Square Garden in New York, banned them from performing at their facility for about five years. Among the rappers who could still find a venue to perform in was Ice Cube. Ten people were shot or stabbed outside a Seattle facility following an Ice Cube concert at the end of 1992. At a recent Chicago show, Ice-Cube pleaded with gang members in the audience to prove that his concerts could be held without problems. The show ended without incident.

- ***Trends***

Contrary to what the American rock industry would have the public believe, the concert safety environment remains unstable. The fact is, more effective safety nets – effective safety regulations, guidelines and techniques – must be developed for concert crowds and the individuals within them. Poor crowd management planning, festival seating, unskilled and untrained security and ushers still threaten public safety. They are among the cost-savings techniques the rock industry uses to enhance its profit margin. In the U.S., maximizing profits is too often placed above fan safety and enjoyment, according to safety critics and concert-goers.

The future for American concert-goers, especially those who follow today's alternative, rap and heavy metal rock music scenes, will be more of the same mixture: dangerous environments, missing safety nets, ill-trained security, irresponsible performers, and promoters and facility operators often concerned more about profit than safety.

For the short run, the American rock industry will probably maintain its posture of denial and inaction. In the long run, this posture will fail because more Americans are knowledgeable about the concert scene, especially fans of the 1960s and 1970s who are now parents. These former concert-goers helped the National Parent Teachers Association pass an anti-festival seating resolution at the PTA's 1992 national meeting and also worked successfully to place the festival seating issue in the Life Safety Code of the National Fire Protection Association this year.

Now there is Britain's landmark *Guide*, which is sure to add fuel to the American concert safety debate. Hopefully in the not too distant future it will be possible to present to the members of this seminar an American rock concert guide of similar significance.

Major Reported Rock Concert Incidents in 1992

(Expanded 7/93)

Concert\Festival	Location	Festival Seating Used	Deaths	Injuries/ Fights	Arrests/ Ejections	Significant Property Damage
Ice Cube	Seattle, WA	No	0	10/Yes	50/NA	Yes
Guns N' Roses	Bogota, Colombia	Yes	0	20+/NA	Yes/NA	\$165,000+
Guns N' Roses, Metallica and Body Count	Oakland, CA	Yes	0	50/NA	NA/NA	\$30,000
Metallica	Chicago, IL	Yes	0	NA/100	Yes/NA	NA
Lollapalooza Festival: Red Hot Chili Peppers, Ministry and other acts	Chicago, IL	Yes	0	91/NA	Yes/30	\$13,000
Cure	Chicago, IL	Yes	0	NA/50+	Yes/NA	NA
Guns N' Roses/Metallica	Montreal, Canada	No	0	11/NA	12+/NA	\$200,000+
Music festival: Arrested Development and other acts	Boston, MA	Yes	0	24/NA	24/NA	NA
MTV music festival: Kriss Kross and other acts	Belmar, NJ	Yes	0	30+/100+	33/NA	\$200,000
Ozzy Osbourne	Irvine, CA	Yes	0	0/0	0/0	\$100,000
News Kids on the Block	Seoul, Korea	No	1	50/No	No/No	No
Lollapalooza Festival	East Troy, WI	Yes	0	Yes/NA	217/NA	NA
Lollapalooza Festival (two-days)	Mountain View, CA	Yes	0	185/NA	NA/NA	NA
Lollapalooza Festival	Long Island, NY	Yes	0	NA/NA	116/NA	NA
The Wrecking Ball: Skid Row, Megadeth, Pantera,	East Troy, WI	Yes	0	24+/NA	123/NA	Yes
Totals:	-	12	1	495+/250+	575+/30	\$708,000+

Some figures may actually be higher; NA- Not Available. Compiled by Crowd Management Strategies © 1993

THE POP CONCERT *GUIDE*: A U.S. VIEWPOINT

The *Guide to Health, Safety and Welfare at Pop Concerts and Similar Events* is deserving of considerable praise. This document expands upon the *Code of Practice for Pop Concerts* prepared by the Greater London Council following the death of a concert-goer at a 1974 David Cassidy rock concert. In the *Guide's* approximately 150 pages are requirements, recommendations and insights for, anyone responsible for or interested in, promoting a concert event. It is a thorough and professional work and the product of the public and private sectors of the British rock concert field.

From the standpoint of an American crowd safety professional it is something to envy, because it shows that reasonable and effective standards for crowd safety can be established for rock concerts.

In America, the U.S. rock industry has resisted periodic efforts to standardize rock concert safety techniques. The International Association of Auditorium Managers and the North American Concert Promoters Association, and others, have repeatedly claimed that creating guidelines such as those contained in this new *Guide* could not be done. Promoters, facility operators and security firms who disagreed with this position were left to rely on their limited crowd safety experiences and resources.

The closest America has come to proposing rock concert standards occurred after the 1979 "Who" concert tragedy. Following the incident a citizen task force was commissioned by the City of Cincinnati to propose safety standards. I served on the task force and prepared its final report, which contained 108 crowd management recommendations and techniques. The report went through four printings, in the process becoming a de facto industry reference in North America.

Coincidentally, one of the task force's recommendations was that the U.S.-based International Association of Auditorium Managers (IAAM) ought to develop national rock concert guidelines. The IAAM created a foundation with that in mind, but when the money was raised, the mission was changed simply to sponsoring occasional crowd management seminars.

- **Questions For The *Guide***

Notwithstanding the praise which the *Guide* deserves, there are areas it leaves unexplored when evaluated from an American standpoint and in the context of American crowd safety concerns. Here are some examples:

Why isn't the performer's responsibility for crowd safety outlined?

Using a sampling from the Rock Safety Database™ and relying on other sources, it is obvious that performers often provoke injurious situations by their spontaneous actions or through premeditated contractual arrangements. This may include jumping into the pit area (as Kurt Cobain of Nirvana did in Chicago this year), telling fans to ignore security or the police (as the lead singer of the rock group, Ugly Kid Joe, did this year), or requiring by contract that fans in the front rows be able to rush the stage (as Madonna has done in the U.S.).

These irresponsible actions need to be curtailed. The responsibilities of performers for helping to provide a safe concert environment should be outlined.

Why isn't there a limitation on the use of festival seating?

The inherent safety problems of standing room only environments (called festival seating in the U.S.) should be addressed directly. No matter how hard Americans try to make it work, injuries and deaths continue. The *Guide* spent considerable time telling readers how to work around crowd crushes. Another approach to standing room only crowding could be to require new crowd density standards for festival seating areas. In November 1993, the U.S. National Fire Prevention Association passed a new model Life Safety Code regulation defining festival seating and banning it in certain public assembly buildings without a life safety evaluation.

The crowd disorders caused by festival seating do currently appear to be a greater problem in the U.S. than in Britain. This will probably change as the MTV generation expands and cultural and attitudinal differences lessen. Be prepared for the possibility that British rock fans will start acting more like their North American counterparts. Similarly, those who monitor spectators at American sporting events are watchful of changes in fan attitudes and actions that resemble unfavorable characteristics of European sports fans.

Why doesn't the *Guide* include guidelines for the consumption of alcohol at rock concerts?

Excessive alcohol consumption at U.S. concerts frequently sparks or escalates safety problems. That is why at concerts in the U.S. the sale of alcoholic beverages is often limited or prohibited. This type of safety standard technique might be of value in Britain.

Do safety officials have clear on-scene emergency authority?

Crowd safety incidents have been complicated as a result of unclear emergency responsibilities of safety officials. The need to determine when an emergency situation exists and the type of response needed should be the responsibility of safety officials.

The trend in the U.S. is to give emergency authority to public safety officials and not to promoters or facility operators. In 1992, nine college students were crushed awaiting entry to a City College of New York benefit basketball game. Police were criticized for not taking emergency action to prevent these deaths. However, police had been directed to patrol the outside of the facility, not the interior, where the incident occurred. In Cincinnati after The Who incident, city officials quickly passed an ordinance giving police and fire officials on-scene emergency authority.

- **Conclusion**

Among the *Guide's* strengths are: effective guidelines for public safety, safety responsibilities, crowd management, planning, staffing, and structural design. Inclusion of discussions on sound dynamics, pyrotechnics, impaired vision and strobe lighting issues add additional value to the report.

The *Guide's* positive contribution to rock concert safety is bound to be felt in North America and elsewhere. Every effort ought therefore be made to insure a wide distribution for this report.

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