

**ROAD TO RICHES?**

## By Jeff Millar

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**T**IME was when an enterprising young man on the gentle side of draft age would, for Popsicle money, peddle that brand of salve which he obtained by sending off a coupon from the back cover of Boy's Life magazine ("enclose only \$2!"). Or he'd run a paper route, or sack groceries after school.

Ah, innocence.

Nowadays there are some Houston teens whose weekend jobs earn them up to \$1200 a month. Of course, that's gross. There are salaries to deduct, and commissions, and amortization of equipment.

But it still comes to more than mowing lawns.

These entrepreneurs are vendors of rock 'n' roll. Traffic in thunk-and-twang has become big business. The rustle of green is as much a part of Big Beat orchestration as the electric organ.

Both as a hobby and as a means of picking up a few bucks, Houston youngfolk have taken to running around in fours (lead guitar, rhythm guitar, organ and drums).

Most appreciative of this phenomenon is Wes Evans, who owns the two Evans' Music City stores which are among the principal outfitters of local R&R musicians.

"Every morning when I get up, I pinch myself," said Evans, waving a sheaf of papers which indicated that his gross sales for a recent month was exactly double what it was the same time last year.

Although Evans' Music City is a general music store (it sells band instruments as well), Evans credits "easily 75 percent" of his sales to R&R paraphernalia.

The first thing that teens (and their parents) learn is that outfitting a group is about as inexpensive as launching a yacht. Even the most inauspicious debut must be equipped with what appears to be enough electric gear to build a tracking station.

"It would be conservative to say," ventured Evans, "that the better-equipped local groups have about \$10,000 wrapped up in their gear."

Parents find little Rick begging for guitar lessons when a year ago he had to be dragged screaming to piano

class. Evans explains this situation by observing that not only is rock part of What's Happening (and pianos aren't) but also that R&R instruments are easy to learn to play.

"It takes a long time to learn to make the piano sound like anything at all," says ex-piano teacher Evans. "But with amplification, we can make 90-day wonders out of beginners on guitar. They're just as hard as pianos to play WELL. But they're easy to play BADLY."

The first thing the 90-day wonder alumni aim to do is to hit the big time teen clubs and blow everybody's minds with their groovy new sound.

And the line for prospective mind-blowers forms at the right at Houston's teen big time, "The Catacombs."

The teen membership club, whose 15-to-20-year-old members run the place with adult supervision, conducts auditions every Tuesday night, whereupon an average of eight new groups will turn up, according to the club's adult booker, Bob Cope.

"We accept maybe five a month as backup bands, groups to play while the name band is between sets," said Cope.

Notice that's "accept" not "hire." To be able to appear at the groovy Catacombs, newcomers, says Cope, usually work for exposure (which means like nothing). They hope that working before the 1300-odd teens who crowd the place on a week-end will lead to for-pay work. Cope says it usually does.

When a group does start working for money, it's usually for \$50-\$75 an evening, which, after it's split four to six ways, isn't much more than the take for trimming Mrs. Schwartz's hedge.

But should a group manage to appeal to the mercurial Houston teen, it suddenly finds its timorously raised prices speedily met. The buyer's market becomes a seller's.

Cope says he pays between \$500 and \$1000 to top local groups. Nationally popular groups get three times that much. Cope said his deepest dip into the Catacombs' kitty was to pay off the McCoys (of "Hang on Sloopy" note).

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# FANATICS CLICKED, DRAW \$1000 A NIGHT

Rock 'n' Roll—continued

Life at the local top is relatively serene. One watches one's manager pencil in \$1000-a-night dates all the way through July and reads Cashbox and Billboard, hoping that the latest record will click and lead to a locally-popular group's Nirvana—The National Break (a "break," in record-biz language, means a record's selling solidly in areas beyond the artists' home region).

It is generally conceded (except by fans of The Coastliners, the No. 2 local group) that the current top local group is Neal Ford and the Fanatics. Neal Ford and the Fanatics consists of Neal Ford, who is 24 and sings, and the Fanatics, who are five sidemen. Although Ford is the leader, he splits the group's fees equally with his partners.

Directing the fortunes of NF&F is 26-year-old Richard Ames. In January, 1966, Ames was peacefully studying seismographic charts in his family's Ames Oil Co.'s offices when his brother Steve asked him for help.

At that time (he's since quit) Steve was organist for the then-\$250-a-night NF&F, a group that wanted to make a record but which had no one to produce it (i.e., put up some of the money).

"I told Steve I'd help, that I'd manage the group, but on the condition that everyone understand it was a business and would be run in a businesslike manner," said businessman Ames.

The Fanatics agreed to Ames' ground rules. No drinking in public, no narcotics, best behavior when working and no dating any of the 612 members of the Neal Ford and the Fanatics Fan Club (they're too old for the girls anyway).

The first record didn't do anything, but the second, "All You Have to Do Is Dream" (an Everly Bros. oldie-goldie), got them started. Their latest, "Be My Girl," has sold 20,000 in Houston and, more importantly, has become a pick hit in Milwaukee and Birmingham.

Ames at present keeps himself busy penciling in those aforementioned \$1000-a-night dates ("right now, it's just a matter of picking up the phone and seeing if the night the guy's asking for is open"), working with Hickory Records on the Fanatics' next release and counting his and the Fanatics' money (he gets a commission on the

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# OF 300 RECORDS, TWO SCORE BIG

Rock 'n' Roll—continued

bookings and a royalty on the recordings; The Catacombs' Cope donates his services). And tending to his seismograph recordings.

Not as directly involved in the financial cross-pollination but undeniably a most important influence in the rock biz are Houston's two Top 40 stations, KILT and KNUZ.

The real money in the R&R business is in personal appearances. Fees for in-person gigs go up in direct proportion to record sales—and records will never sell unless the rock stations play them.

The big moment for fledgling rock groups with a new record arrives at KNUZ when a group of five or more jocks and music librarians sit down for the station's weekly music meeting. It is there they will pick the seven or eight new records to add to the station's play list. The competition is deadly.

"We get probably 300 review copies a week," said KNUZ program director (and noon-to-3 p.m. jock) Buddy McGregor. "Of that number, maybe 30 are worth listening to all the way through. Seven or eight go on the play list, and maybe one or two make it on the survey.

"We counted up the other day," he said. "There were 17 local records going around. Two were getting played."

The Federal Communications Commission ban on payola (accepting bribes from record promoters to give new records air play) has blocked the road a few jocks used to get rich fast. Jocks still get in on a piece of the legitimate action by serving as MC's for dances and concerts. Fees range from \$10 to \$50 in Houston, much higher in some other cities.

Whatever the beginner's chance of success in the R&R biz, high competitiveness and deep intensity is considered by some therapeutic for its practitioners (in addition to keeping them off the street).

The good succeed (on occasion) and the bad do not (except when they get the breaks).

In fact, the whole affair bears a rather startling resemblance to something many of today's teen-agers don't see much of, which is Life.