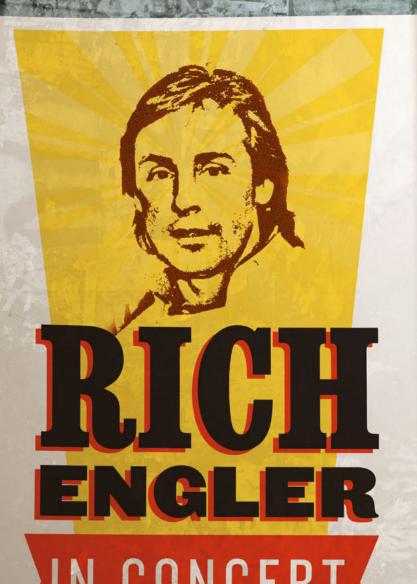
BIGLER N CONCERT





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WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY SUMMER 2015







## ENGLE

**BONA FIDE PITTSBURGH** MUSIC SCENE LEGEND, HAS LIVED A CERTIFIABLY

ROCK & ROLL

Not the kind that finds him either mobbed by legions of adoring fans or sleeping one off in a gutter near you. Instead, both on his own and as one-half of the DiCesare-Engler empire, he spent nearly 50 years bringing the world's most popular (as well as some of the most cutting-edge) music to Pittsburgh as a concert promoter. According to his count, he presented up to 5,000 shows, while also becoming co-owner of Pittsburgh's famed Stanley Theatre.

By Rob Conroy



or a kid growing up in Creighton,
Pennsylvania, from watching Elvis
Presley's wiggle being blotted out by
a screen on *The Ed Sullivan Show* to rubbing
shoulders with the superstars—it's been quite
a thrilling ride." Creighton, Engler notes, is so
small that it "still has one traffic light and they
probably don't even need that."

Now, just over a decade after he stepped down from his position as the Regional President/CEO of Clear Channel Entertainment, Engler is both back in the promoting business and happily shedding some light on the vagaries of that ride. In December 2013, he published his first book, Behind the Stage Door: A Promoter's Life Behind the Scenes. The paperback chronicles the story of his life as a promoter through the most memorable—or at least the most printable—of 80 backstage stories (or "tracks" as he calls them) from all periods of his concert-promoting career. "I called the chapters 'tracks' because I wanted them to be like a record."

There are not many promoters out there with the memory, experience, or storytelling ability to pull off such a project. Additionally, promoters fill a unique and oft-neglected spot in the music business, one that has to balance a sixth sense for which bands to book months in advance with an equally strong ability to anticipate what bands will want. That means catering to a band's or artist's needs, often

at a moment's notice and to great financial detriment if the requests or pre-show problems are not rectified. The book reads like a breezy collection of vignettes filled with near-disasters (a 1981 Ozzy Osbourne show at the York

County Fairgrounds for which Engler's York staff had neglected to hire security), endearingly bizarre interactions (Frank Zappa proselytizing on a very personal and unpaid level for then-New York Governor Mario Cuomo's ill-fated Presidential bid), and enduring friendships with music-business professionals (Graham Nash, Huey Lewis, guitarist Alex Lifeson of Rush). Still, there's an underlying sense of Engler's hustle and genuine dedication on nearly every page.

As remarkable as Engler's journey has been, though, the fact that Engler put the whole thing together without the aid of contemporaneous diaries or notes is even more noteworthy. "These experiences are all ingrained in my brain," he says, partially because he did not fall into the trap that so many music-business professionals do. "Never took any drugs and that's how I survived. That's how I was able to be a successful businessman and remember all

these things. I have no fried cells!"

WORKI

**Behind The** 

RICH ENGLER-

A Promoter's Life Behind The Scenes

Lifetime music fan that he is, Engler did not enter the music industry as a businessman but rather as a musician playing drums in a high school band—despite being a trumpet player. As Engler tells it, the bass player for the Royals, a surf band at his high school, told him that if he played drums he could show up for the band's Saturday practice. There was only one catch—Engler had drumsticks but did not have a drum kit. So he improvised, using whatever components he could rustle up. "My Dad's friend had some conga drums and bongo drums and I thought I could create a makeshift set-and I borrowed a cymbal from the band room and a stand. So I show up at my first practice and the other guys go, 'What is this?' And I go, 'Oh, this is the latest thing.' And they said, 'You have no bass drum!' And I said, 'Well, you play bass—that's enough to carry it!'

<sup>\*</sup> Quotes in this article are taken from an interview conducted by the author in March and June 2014

When the Royals played their first wedding gig a week or two later, Engler was sufficiently impressed by the amount of money he netted-\$25 for doing something that he loved—that he convinced his father to help him finance his own drum set. Unfortunately, at first he was having trouble paying his parents back because the band leader wasn't booking many gigs, so he took matters into his own hands and asked if he could be the leader of the band so he could book shows for themhis first role in a near-promotional position. "I started getting gigs, we were playing everywhere," he says. "I kept increasing the quality of the band and we were playing and everything was good and all of the sudden February 9, 1964, came along...."

Like nearly every musician of his generation, Engler cites the Beatles' February 9, 1964, appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show as a complete game-changer for music and culture. "I'm watching this thing and I'm going 'Oh shit!" he says. "These guys are REALLY good and these guys can REALLY sing and I never heard music LIVE-or on TV-that good EVER! In 1964, this was the real deal and I knew we were in big-ass trouble because now everybody's going to want Beatles songs and everything was going to change, so I told the guys right then: we're going start growing our hair tomorrow, no more surf songs.... Thank God for the Kinks—those [early] songs were a whole lot easier to play!"

As the Beatles' popularity grew, so did the number of garage bands and so did the dedication of Engler and his bandmates. His band, which would ultimately be named the Grains of Sand, became very successful locally, so much so that they began booking themselves at places like Geneva-on-the-Lake, Ohio, and Daytona Beach, Florida, where they went for one fateful winter in 1968. While in Florida, they gained a super-talented new guitarist for all of one day, a blonde-haired southern gent who had just left his last band, the Allman Joys, after a dust-up with his younger brother Gregg. "Duane Allman was in my band for a

day," he says. "I was just like 'Where did this guy come from?' He was playing stuff that was, like, head over heels of what we were doing, so polished and so cool and I almost talked him into coming up North, but when I told him we lived in Pittsburgh, all bets were off!" According to Engler, Allman also confided to him that he was seriously itching to get back to work with his brother, even though they had come to blows the last time they were in the same room as one another. Needless to say, within a year, the Allman Brothers released their first album and southern rock was born ... but that's another story.



Ringo Starr and Rich.

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"Never took any drugs and that's how I surviveded because That's how I was able to be a successful businessmannew when and remember all these things. I have no fried cells? Whey was



Beach Boys and Rich.

As rewarding as the musical end of the band could be, as the Grains of Sand's success grew, Engler began getting bookings for his friends' bands as well, mostly because "we couldn't play two places at once." He began collecting 10 percent commission from each show booked and gaining very valuable negotiating experience. "What I didn't know was I was honing my negotiating skills with all these sharks at these clubs who would try to beat you out of the money, saying 'Hey, you started late, you're getting less'.... I learned that I wanted my money first! One thing led to another, and the next thing I know, I have a gigantic corral of acts all depending on me for bookings, so I started putting these other bands in."

Booking bands informally worked fine for awhile, but sometime in 1969 he got a call from the musicians' union informing him that if he were to continue to book bands, he would need to get a "theatrical employment agency license." Although he initially objected to the idea, he ultimately complied and thought that if he was going to do it at all, he was going to go

into it full-time and rent an office on Walnut Street in Shadyside. "That was also the same week that I met my girlfriend and still my wife, Cindy. And I put up a sign, 'Go Attractions: A Theatrical Employment Agency." It was a great location with a lot of street traffic. Engler says he had more bands coming in every week and was "making a substantial amount of money with my negotiating skills."

It wasn't long before Engler got a call from a college asking if he was able to book national acts. He had not previously, but after calling management teams in New York and Los Angeles, he got a comprehensive list of acts and their going rates and took his business to a whole new level. "The guy wanted two acts," he says, "and he asked if I could produce the show. I said 'Absolutely." And then his gears turned. "Do you need an opening act? I asked him. Because if you do, I got this great band for you: the Grains of Sand. I wasn't just doubledipping, I was triple-dipping! So I'd sell the act to the school for \$5,000, add 10 percent to that for my commission, and my band would maybe get \$1,000, although I never took

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commission from my band—I was just happy that my band could play."

This arrangement worked out beautifully for Engler. He kept the triple-dipping arrangement at least into 1972, booking national acts in Pittsburgh and other Pennsylvania cities. One such act was Yes, then at their

artistic (if not commercial) peak and touring to promote their Close to the Edge album; the Grains of Sand were, of course, the opening act. However, this time what had never been a problem became a problem, as Engler tells the story, since Yes arrived when Engler was onstage playing the drums. When Yes's manager found out that Engler, the promoter, was in the opening band instead of being present to cater to his band's every need, he went apoplectic. Although the show wound up going off without a hitch, Engler received a call the next morning from Yes's New York agent, one of his mentors, who was none too pleased. In fact, she could not believe he—the promoter—was playing in the opening band. "She said 'You have to decide what side of the stage you're going to be on—are you going to be behind stage or are you gonna be onstage?' I said, 'I'm going to be behind stage and I'll never play again.' She said, 'Thank you. I'll talk to you later.' I told the band the next day that I was leaving them, and I was both feet on the ground as a full-fledged promoter/ booking agent at the same time."

After that Yes show, he shifted gears, focusing exclusively on promoting shows, not just in Pittsburgh but in nearby towns like Johnstown and Erie. Engler is proud of all the many "firsts" he brought to Pittsburgh including—as a solo promoter—David Bowie and another act, then completely unknown to Pittsburgh, that proved to be one of the most prescient and profitable relationships into which he entered over the next 15 years. That was the band Genesis, who at that time were on their first small tour of the U.S. By this time, he had changed his business name to Command Performance Agency. "Back in 1972, I was promoting a Lou Reed show at the Alpine Ice Arena at the Forest City exit and I was working with a couple guys from Greensburg called Sideshow Productions. I booked Lou Reed, and the agent told me that I had to take this other act from England and

they were called Genesis." He was leery, but they were cheap-"either \$500 or \$750"and his trepidation went away when the show started. "So the show starts, Peter Gabriel walks onstage and he has the flower outfit with the big head and the big yellow petals," he says. "And people—back then, this was the drug era, man-they were, like, totally freaked out and the band just went over like gangbusters." He laughs at the memory, but at that point he knew he was onto something. "I knew this band was destined to superstardom and I jumped on their bandwagon. I couldn't wait to call the next day and say, 'Hey, when can I get Genesis back?' And [the agent said], "How was Lou?" And I said, "Lou was Lou and it was great, but I want Genesis again."

Engler had gotten in on the proverbial ground floor with an artist that gained huge commercial and, at times, critical respect.

Because of that early trust, "we did multiples at Mellon Arena, had them at the Syria Mosque and I had them at the Stanley Theatre, then the big one [in the late '90s] at Three Rivers Stadium did 55,000 people."

Which gets to the heart, perhaps, of why Rich Engler was (and is) a great promoter and a Pittsburgh legend. "I always tried to stay ahead of the game—my mind was always thinking about not what was popular now but what was going to be popular tomorrow or next year," he says. "I would search all the radio and records and Billboard and Cashbox back then and the British newspapers, and find out what's going on in Australia and Great Britain and Canada ... wherever these acts were, I always tried to stay ahead. And I still try to do that today but...." He pauses. "Today is a different world."

But we're getting ahead of ourselves.



so I told the guys right then: we're going start growing our hair tomorrow, no more surf songs.... Thank God for the Kinks—those [early] songs were a whole lot easier to play!"

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Cultural Trust approached DiCesare-Engler Paul McCartney and Rich. with an offer to purchase the building and preserve it, they could not pass it up. "We never really felt that we were out of the woods because it's a business—I mean, we made money, we made a good living, but you never knew when it was going to end and the [Stanley] was expensive to operate," he says. "But we were "And for the next
25 years, we basically
ruled—little did we
know what we were
going to achieve."

In late 1973, Engler got a call from Monroeville-based promoter and real estate mogul Pat DiCesare, the man who hadperhaps most famously—brought Engler's beloved Beatles to Pittsburgh in September 1964 for their first and only appearance in this town. According to Engler, DiCesare who has also just published a book about his promoting experiences—made the call because he recognized both Engler's passion for the music/artists, and his ability to make deals/money. "He wanted to concentrate on real estate and was basically burned out of the music part of it and he said you seem to love what you do. I said I do—I love it every day, the negotiating and everything," Engler says. "And Pat said this could be a good opportunity: hopefully you'll make some money in the music side and we can parlay that into the real estate. So we shook hands and DiCesare-Engler Productions was born in the fall of '73."

What they achieved is easily tracked through even the most cursory glance at any newspapers between 1973 and 1998: bringing a vast variety of acts to Pittsburgh, plus nearly every concert ad from those years bears the "DiCesare-Engler" stamp. One story we'll leave for book readers is the amazing bill of Eric Clapton, the Band, and Todd Rundgren in 1975—an amusing story he also makes quite compelling.

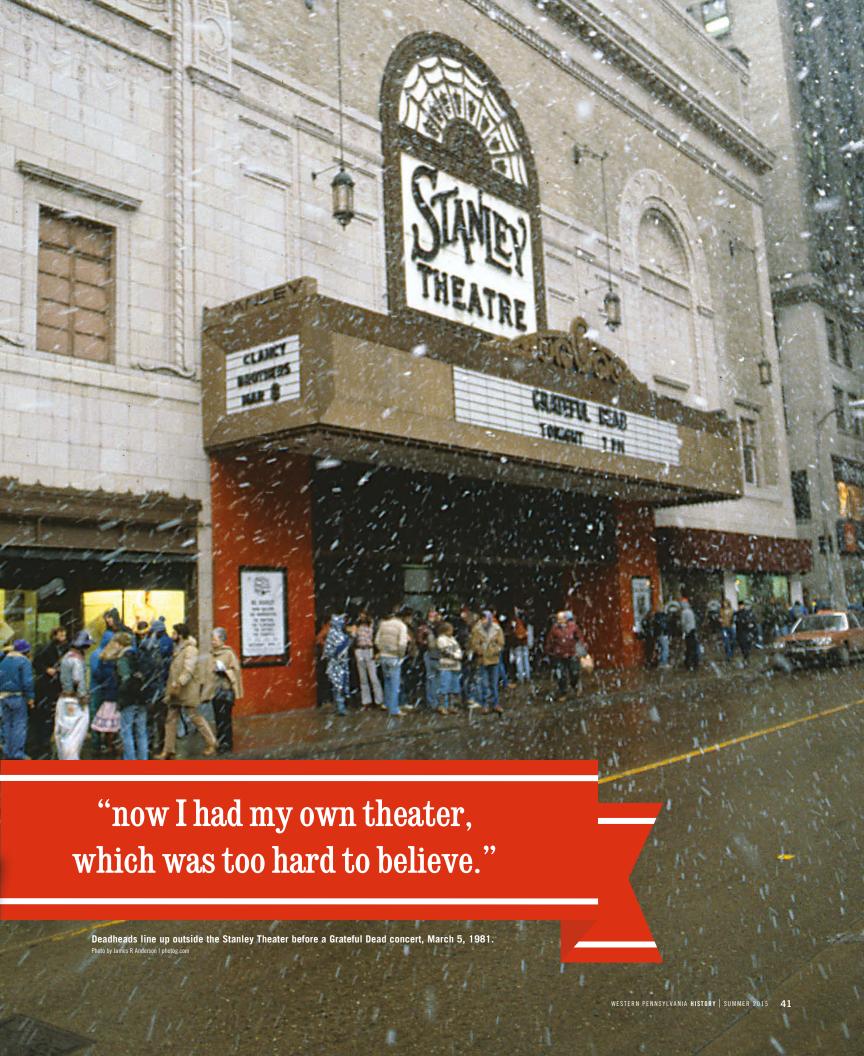
In addition to regularly working with the

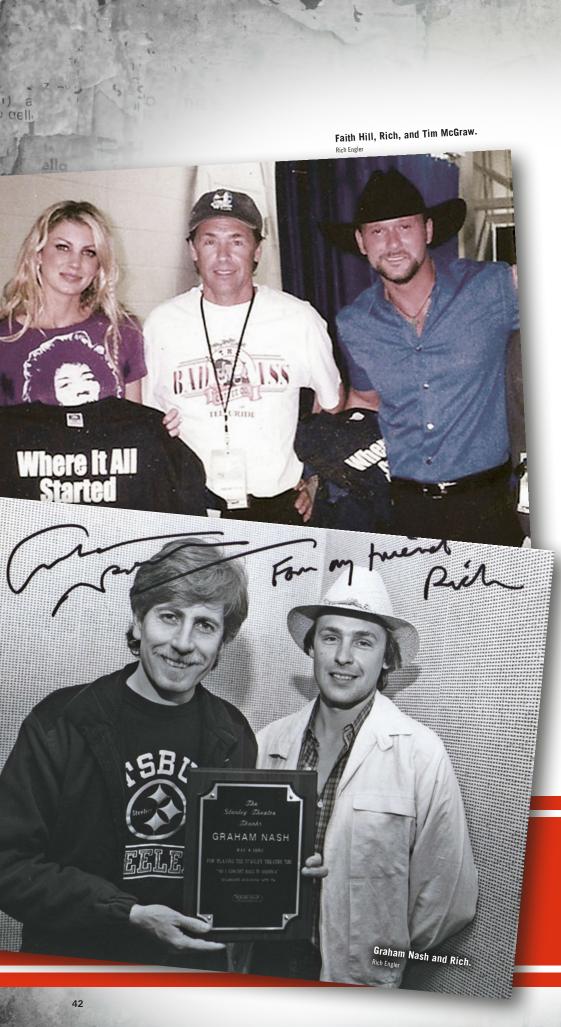
CIVIC ARENA CORPORATION Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania A 1990s promotional piece for the Civic Arena highlighted its retractable roof.

Civic Arena and being the first promoters to book shows at both Oakland's much-mourned Syria Mosque and at Three Rivers Stadium, the D-E team were the first to regularly utilize what was then a renovated-but-down-on-its-luck movie house in downtown's "red light" district called the Stanley Theatre.

"It was a dying movie theater—with 3,500 seats, it was just too big for that" by the mid-1970s, he says. And it got to a point where every time DiCesare-Engler would put





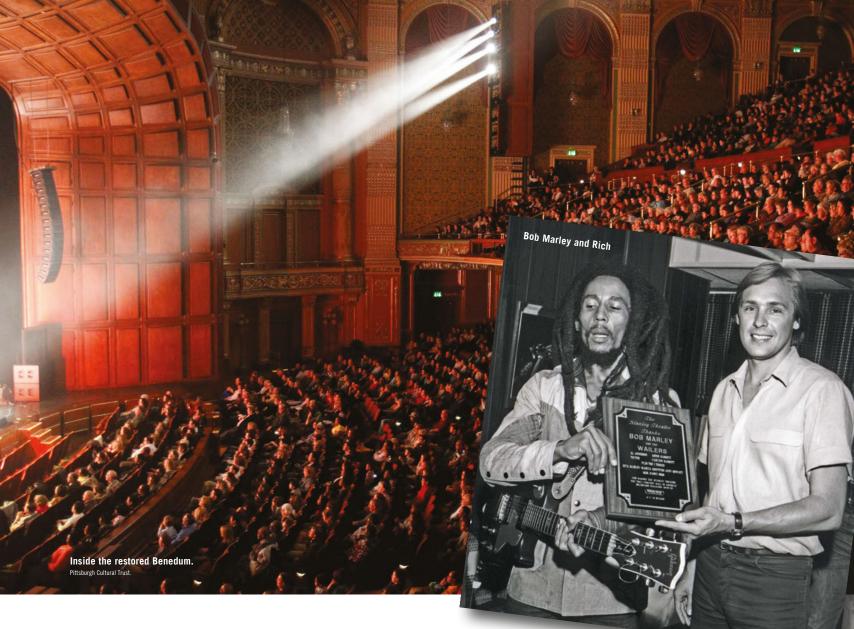


on a show at the Stanley, the house manager would ask the pair what was stopping them from buying the building. Eventually, Engler says, it became an offer they couldn't refuse, and in early 1977, the team took a huge risk and purchased the aging theater. "We took a small business loan from Warner, and Pat and I put everything up," Engler says. "I had to put my house up in the mortgage, Pat had to put his house up, our cars, everything—so if we would've lost, we would've lost our lives."

As a result, Engler & Co. threw everything into making the new Stanley a success. While Engler is by nature a friendly, outgoing guy who loves all aspects of his career, he is rarely more animated than when talking about the early days of the Stanley. "We were running scared but running hot because we knew that we had a facility that we could call home," he says with a smile. "I was, like, possessed with booking. I started not only booking rock 'n' roll, but jazz (Roy Ayers, Al Jarreau), country, rhythm 'n' blues things, comedians (George Carlin, Rodney Dangerfield) ... we took it from a dying movie house to the number one theater in the country, according to Billboard magazine [who presented them with an award for that]. Once a couple bands started, everybody wanted to play there-word got out that this is one of the biggest theaters in the country and these guys really want to make it happen."

"Every year, we beat out Radio City Music Hall, we beat the Forum in L.A., we beat everybody—and we weren't in a race, believe me, we just wanted to pay the bills! We had a hell of a mortgage, and huge overhead—the

"Every year, we beat out Radio City Music Hall, we beat the Forum in L.A., we beat everybody"



cost of heating and cooling that building was monumental for two guys-we weren't a big corporation, we were two guys with probably 15 employees. We never had backing and we were only as good as our last show."

But, Engler says, buying the Stanley was "a real turning point not only for us, but for the city because after the deal was closed, we opened the door and started doing shows. Now people had a reason to stay in the city after 5 o'clock; everybody was now eating dinner in the city and going to see a show. It was like a treadmill for me because I did all the booking, I made all the deals with the acts and managers. It was quite thrilling, actually, because I not only was doing something I really loved and my life's dream, but now I had my own theater, which was too hard to believe."

Although DiCesare-Engler booked many noteworthy shows throughout the six years that they owned the Stanley Theatreincluding the inaugural show in Prince's eyebrow-raising 1981 "Controversy" tour ("My mouth dropped open when he came out in just women's underwear simulating sex acts on the stage ... well, the lights were so dark, I don't know if I should use the word 'simulate.' People got a real show!")-none are as legendary as Bob Marley's final show on September 23, 1980. Engler firmly believes that Marley, who was already sick with the cancer that took his life eight months later, knew it would be his last performance. "In my wallet, I have a photo of Bob Marley and I which was one of the last pictures of him alive with a guitar in his hand," he says. "And he knew

in his mind that it was his last show ... and his band kinda knew. And Rita [Bob's wife] did not want the band to come to Pittsburgh. And he looked so bad, yet performed so beautifully that night that it was amazing."

Despite their success with the Stanley, expenses for such an old building continued to mount—so much so that when the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust approached DiCesare-Engler with an offer to purchase the building and preserve it, they could not pass it up. "We never really felt that we were out of the woods because it's a business—I mean, we made money, we made a good living, but you never knew when it was going to end and the [Stanley] was expensive to operate," he says. "But we were After a \$43 million restoration, it rechristened the Benedum Center for the Performing Arts and is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Plus, in typical fashion, Engler had engineered an attractive golden parachute for the company and for Pittsburgh concertgoers. While the Stanley became the preferred midsize concert venue for Pittsburgh from 1977 to 1983, no other promoters had been using the other 3,500-seat, stately historical venue "up the street" in Oakland, the Syria Mosque, in which Engler-both as a solo promoter and in the early DiCesare-Engler days-had begun booking shows during the early 1970s. Engler saw a great opportunity as the Stanley's days were quietly (secretly, in fact) winding down, and put in a call to the Shriners who owned the Syria Mosque. "The [Syria Mosque] was sitting up there, so before we signed a deal with the Cultural Trust, I signed a deal with the Shriners to not only get exclusive rights to shows at the Mosque, but to move our offices into the Syria Mosque," he says with a grin. "I said, 'How would you like to have all of the action we have at the Stanley at the Syria Mosque?' And they said, 'For real?' I said we need a liquor license to sell beverages at adult shows and we signed the paper. It was like clockwork."

Thus began DiCesare-Engler's second golden era, which featured shows as diverse as the Ramones and Replacements to Kansas and Frank Zappa, all in a plush, intimate setting. Unfortunately, though, come 1991, the Shriners laid out other plans for the building. "We were about three years into a five-year lease that was renewable for another five years and we got a call from the Shriners asking for an emergency meeting," he explains. At the meeting, the Shriners told DiCesare-Engler that they were selling the building, and that D-E had to move. "They wrote us a check and said we had two weeks to get out. And at 12:01





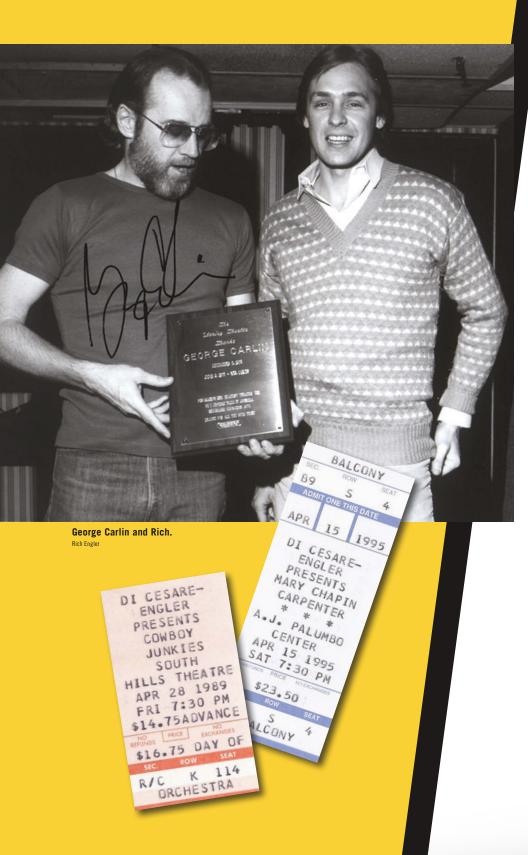
"Bands in the '70s, '80s, and '90s toured to promote their record. Now they tour to make money because there isn't any record and that's where all their money is made."

a.m. the day after we left, the wrecking ball hit the building. It was an ugly situation." Since then, the site of that historic and beloved venue has served as a parking lot for the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

But even post-Syria Mosque, DiCesare-Engler continued to ride high—opening the A.J. Palumbo Center as a viable concert venue with Depeche Mode, the Peterson Events Center with Counting Crows, partnering in the venture that became the Star Lake Amphitheater, staging a record four stadium shows in 1994, and bringing in Bruce Springsteen for the first concert at PNC Park. Unfortunately, Engler says, the music business tide was turning as the '90s progressed: "Everything started to change," he says. "Bands in the '70s, '80s, and very very little into the '90s toured to promote their record. Now they tour to make money because there isn't any record and that's where all their money is made."

This shift placed smaller companies like DiCesare-Engler Productions—companies that no longer held a venue to call their own—in a precarious position, particularly as ticket prices skyrocketed and fewer people flocked to shows as the 1990s progressed. "Because touring became the lion's share of their money rather than record sales, that's where the business went crazy," Engler says. "Their guarantees [i.e., what the artists demand as payment regardless of ticket sales] drove ticket prices to crazy heights, and it became a wild world."

In that shifting environment, it was only a matter of time before multinational entertainment conglomerates like Clear Channel Entertainment formed and began eyeing big fish in individual markets, including Pittsburgh. By the time Clear Channel approached DiCesare-Engler in 1998 with a proposed buyout, the writing was indelibly

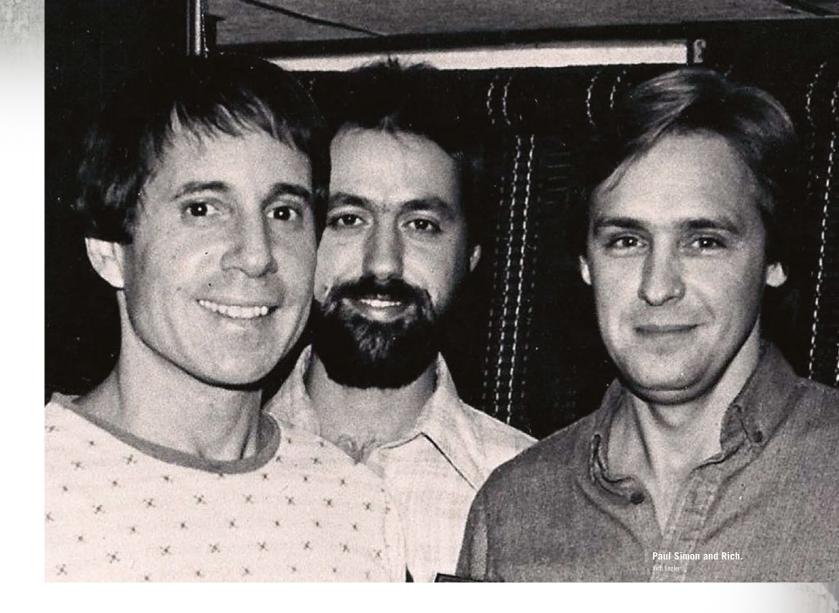


inscribed on the wall. "They bought our name, and the I.C. Light Amphitheatre (which DiCesare-Engler had built in Station Square)," he said, "If we didn't sell, we would've been crushed, because it was a 600-lb gorilla that was willing to pay anything for acts and get everything and we would've just been outbid at everything. *And* they bought Star Lake from the Texas company that owned it. Had we owned that amphitheater in Burgettstown, we may not have sold—but not having that big piece of real estate, that was the demise."

At that point, DiCesare and Engler parted ways after their 25-year run, with Engler continuing on with Clear Channel Entertainment as the president and CEO of this region. As Engler tells it, "When we got bought by Clear Channel Entertainment, it was a no-brainer—[Pat] was always into real estate, I was always into music, so [Clear Channel] wanted me to stay on and they said you'll be President & CEO and Pat went his own way and continued with the real estate. We're friends and we had a great 25 years."

Engler stayed with Clear Channel for six years before deciding to move on. "It was much different," he says. "At DiCeasere-Engler, I made all of the deals, I negotiated all of the shows, I was on the front lines, and I made decisions in a New York second after doing some research and having a good gut feeling." Conversely, in his position at Clear Channel, "there were countless conference calls and over and over and over the same process and it wasn't anything that I liked or felt comfortable with. So I lived out my time with them and I parted ways in 2004."

It's heartening to see that Engler's contributions to Pittsburgh music over the years have not gone unnoticed, especially these days. In addition to the surprising success of *Behind the Stage Door*—surprising



because nationally published and promoted rock 'n' roll books have all but vanished from the shelves of what few bookstores remain in the U.S. and Pittsburgh—just last year Engler was the very first person inducted into the burgeoning Pittsburgh Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, which also raised \$80,000 for cancer care. "That was absolutely amazing and humbling," he says. "What an honor. To be first and to be recognized for my achievements it was really something. And now that I'm in, I'm going to be on the selection committee to see what's in store and who to honor."

He's also back in the promoting business after nearly 10 years of silence. "In parting ways with Clear Channel, I had to sign a noncompete and a confidentiality agreement, but that non-compete is over and I'm promoting again," he says. "The business has changed so much in the last several years. Purchasing an act and selling it to the public was always a dangerous sport, but now you not only need to sell tickets and have a decent turnout, you need to almost have a full house every time because of the way deals are laid out and set up."

That said, his first promoting ventures sold-out shows by Gregg Allman, Kansas, and Gino Vanelli-have thus far been very successful and he has plans for shows at Highmark Stadium and the Oaks Theater. He's also dipping his toes into management for the first time since the early days of DiCesare-Engler and is currently working with Wexford native and former American

Idol contestant Sydney Hutchco on her debut album, as well as negotiating with a current (unnamed) contestant from The Voice.

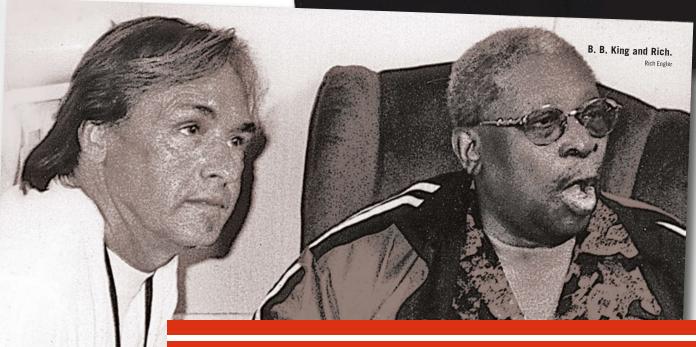
Although Engler is justifiably proud of his accomplishments and looking forward to the future, he has a clear-eyed view of his career and his role in the whole entertainment process. "I never really celebrated wins nor did I cry over losses, nor did I ever get too much a high or a low after the music," he says. "It was a business that I loved and I loved the music, but when I was at a show I hardly ever watched a show because—when you're a promoter, there's a lot of things that go on, so my two happiest moments were when the show started and when it ended. It's kinda cold, but so many things can go wrong in the middle."

"I was there for the musicians, fellow musicians, my friends, and I tried to get everybody some work. And my generation of music—it was ours, and I was a part of spreading the news."

Rob Conroy is a Pittsburgh-based lawyer/ advocate with a lifelong music obsession. He has an underused journalism background, a 10,000-strong record/CD collection, and a brain that retains incalculable minutiae about every great recording of the last century.

Autographed copies of Behind the Stage Door: A Promoter's Life Behind the Scenes are available at www.richengler.com or amazon.com for \$24.95 plus \$5 shipping. Contact musicworkzllc@gmail. com for enquiries about events.





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