

THE APPRENTICES OF ROCK

Last year, Peter Cook put his heart, soul and bank balance in a daring attempt to revitalise cult punk rocker John Otway's dream to circumnavigate the globe on a record-breaking comic rock tour. Despite a turnaround in fortunes, the World Tour eventually failed. This article tells the story of the lessons learned. Peter is author of 'Sex, Leadership and Rock'n'Roll' – an entrepreneurs' guide to business, leadership, creativity, innovation and change. Here he continues the story of this 'comedy of errors' on a scale of classic spoof rock movies such as 'The Blues Brothers'.



Some background to the tour may be viewed at www.academy-of-rock.co.uk John Otway is a 50 something punk rocker with a string of daring attempts to keep his career alive in an industry where longevity is usually measured in months. His inventive powers have however meant that many of his ideas to extend his career have failed and this earned him the tag 'Rock'n'Roll's greatest failure'. However, failure has a romantic charm for some and this enabled him to develop a cult following which kept his career going for over two decades.

John Otway – The Patron Saint of Losers

Two hit wonder – 1977 – 'Cor Baby That's Really Free' with Wild Willy Barrett and 'Bunsen Burner' in 2002

Tricked Warner Brothers into signing him even though they did not want to, by manufacturing his own Warner Brothers records

Decided he wanted to be a rock star at the age of nine, when he discovered that you could get 100 girls to watch you in the school playground if you were prepared to drink a bottle of ink!

JOHN OTWAY – THE APPRENTICE OF ROCK

Here's the project in a nutshell:

Take a fading rock star

Add a big idea

Execute the idea well

And rejuvenate the star's fortunes

The big idea was to charter an Airbus, fill it with Rock'n'Roll adventurers and take them on a once in a lifetime trip round the World calling at Liverpool's Cavern, Madison Square Gardens, Caesar's Palace, Tahiti, Sydney Opera House, Shanghai, Dubai and London. A comic film 'rockumentary' was to be made to rival classic spoof movies such as 'This is Spinal Tap'. In previous articles we have learned about the perils of trying to use an airport with a runway too small for the plane, how John hired a travel agent who was incapable and unwilling to sell tour tickets and how the company's computer geek put so much firewall protection into the computer system that we lost thousands of pounds in orders. This had several comic but fatal consequences in getting the tour together. This time we'll look at some celebrity balls-ups.

ROCK'N'ROLL SUICIDE

How NOT to organise your record breaking World Rock tour

SIR BOB GELDOF NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR JOHN OTWAY?

It became apparent to all but John that we had run out of Otway fans with £4000 or £7000 to spend on his dream. At this point you can either give up or do something different. I had bumped into Sir Bob Geldof and thought there was a chance that we could find a way to involve 'Make Poverty History' and gain a wider interest in the World Tour at the same time. When I approached John on this, his lip curled in embarrassment.



Peter Cook surprises Sir Bob Geldof

Although this seems statistically unlikely, John had asked Paula Yates out on a date about 30 years ago – she declined. 'So what?' I asked. John replied 'Er well, I told her it was the last chance she would have to go out with a rock star ... I put this on the back cover of my book some years later when she was living with Bob and she was livid!' Only John Otway is capable of this! Of course the real problem was nothing to do with this. John really did not want anyone better known than himself on the tour, rather like some inventors that do not want to realise their invention for fear that it will be overwhelmed by the competition. To avoid being pressed on the 'Paula love triangle', Otway then suggested that Bob would bring a 'negative element' to the tour as 'poverty was depressing'. It sounds almost like an excerpt from 'The Office'!

The same resistance occurred whenever we picked up other celebrity leads. For example, we got a lead to get the Arctic Monkeys involved. They are big fans of John Otway and their involvement would have meant that we would solve the problem of selling the seats many times over. Once again, John's ambivalence led to a neutralisation of this recovery strategy when he asked 'Who are the Arctic Monkeys?' – a question which even Gordon Brown knows the answer to!

2 – NIL: STEVE HARLEY VERSUS THE CHEEKY GIRLS

We had secured the Cheeky Girls involvement in a bizarre burlesque disco punk idea for the Las Vegas gig and they were willing to join in with the fun. They would also provide us with national publicity as ‘Cheeky World Tour Air Hostesses’ - most people agreed that they are more photogenic than John Otway. But there was another problem looming on the horizon. John seemed to hate the Cheeky Girls, claiming that they were ‘tarts without talent’ – an interesting observation from a man who has pointed out on many occasions that he built his entire career on a complete lack of talent.

What then was the real problem? It turned out that Steve Harley of Cockney Rebel had been secured to play at Sydney Opera House. John Otway was in awe of Harley and this made John paranoid that Steve Harley’s ego would be offended by a kitsch disco act even though they would be in a different continent. We were told we could not even mention the Cheeky Girls for fear that Steve would go into an artistic rage and drop the World Tour. However, we had not sold any tickets from Steve’s involvement due to an Otway management balls-up and were in for a £100 000 bill for the pleasure of having him along. The Cheeky Girls offered us a range of badly needed promotional benefits, they were inexpensive and their act would have been an ideal counterpoint for the Vegas glam show. Something needed to change but sadly it did not. John put personal adulation above commercial considerations. We ploughed on with Steve Harley – no-one came and everyone lost.

The major business lesson from this comically sad tale is that personal preferences must never be allowed to crush good business sense. If an enterprise lacks the personal touch, admittedly it’s not likely to really perform, but if the business is solely run from the heart without using your head, it will never get to the point of performance. Although the World Tour balance sheet looked healthy in the mid term, ‘Cashflow Killed the Radio Star’. The impact of decisions avoided and general incompetence meant we eventually ran out of money with a deficit of nearly £250 000 to make the tour viable. What a glorious cock-up!

COMING UP

HOW NOT TO MARKET YOUR DREAM AT THE EDINBURGH FESTIVAL

JOHN OTWAY AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS

‘Sex, Leadership and Rock’n’Roll – Leadership Lessons from the Academy of Rock’, is available at Amazon.co.uk Tom Peters said of it: “Sex, Leadership and Rock’n’Roll is a marvellous book, which ushers in a new, creative era of challenge and change. Hooray!” Websites: www.academy-of-rock.co.uk for speaking engagements; and www.humdyn.co.uk for business consultancy.