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## Rock 'n' Roll Hits the Multiplex

*Cinemas Broadcast Concerts In Bid to Fill Weeknight Seats; Fish, Chips, Starsky, Hutch*

By ELEENA DE LISSER

ON MARCH 29, pop star Prince kicks off his "Musicology" tour in Los Angeles. The cheapest seat at the Staples Arena will be \$49.50. But there is an alternative. On the same night, more than 40 Regal Cinema movie theaters around the country will simulcast the concert live. The most expensive seat? \$15.

Coming soon to a theater near you: one-night-only broadcasts of performances by top acts like Linkin Park, Beyoncé and Gloria Estefan. After years of churning out new multiplexes and, in some cases, winding up in bankruptcy court as a result, movie-theater operators have decided that they're in the business of entertaining, not just screening movies.

While the financial picture has improved for theater exhibitors, the industry has plenty of ven-



See Prince on a pauper's wage: For more on his Regal Cinema simulcast concert and other movie-theater offerings, see page D2.

ues it needs to fill seven nights a week. Despite the success of films like "Finding Nemo" and "Lord of the Rings: Return of the King," admissions fell 4% in 2003, and box-office sales fell by just under 1% to \$9.5 billion, according to the

Motion Picture Association of America.

In an effort to reverse that slide, theater operators are expanding their offerings on a number of fronts. Many are adding amenities, such as reserved seating, which has been toyed with for years. And there are ongoing efforts to tempt moviegoers with better food (and sometimes alcohol). Loews Cineplex Entertainment, with 150 theaters, intends to add more special screenings for parents with young children, after the success of such events in limited markets last year.

But the most intriguing development is the emerging marriage of convenience between theater operators with lots of empty seats on weeknights and the troubled record companies, which are grappling for ways to reach new audiences. Movie theaters turn out to be an excellent venue to showcase music from upcoming

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## Cinemas Broadcast Concerts to Fill Empty Seats

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CDs or DVDs of concerts. In the past year, popular musical acts such as Coldplay, Linkin Park, Avril Lavigne and country-music sensation Kenny Chesney have all been seen on movie-theater screens—in simulcast concerts or premieres of DVDs. Upcoming acts include Duran Duran and Tim McGraw. (To find out about special events, check out Web sites for your local movie-theater companies.)

The faux concerts are a good way to help theater operators recoup investments in expensive digital systems. AMC Theatres and Regal Entertainment Corp., the two largest theater operators, have both spent heavily installing new equipment that enables them to show digital video and high-definition content. Regal has invested \$75 million in the past three years on the upgrades, which it is installing in all 5,300 of its screens. AMC said it expects to have 80% of its 2,500-plus screens outfitted by year's end. Regal says it should recoup its investment within three years, thanks in part to the placement of alternative entertainment like Prince.

### 'Live Monsters'

AMC and Regal are both hoping to attract consumers like Margaret Kozikowska, a 27-year-old who 13 years ago in her native Poland spent over \$1,000 and traveled for two days to see Depeche Mode live in concert in Budapest. This month, Ms. Kozikowska paid \$10 and got to see David Gahan, Depeche Mode's lead singer, in the flesh promoting his new DVD called "Live Monsters" at the Regal Cinema Union Square theater in New York City. The theater showed concert footage from the DVD on a 40-foot screen. "Seeing him so close had something dreamy about it," said Ms. Kozikowska after the event.

During the 1990s, theater companies spent big bucks building big boxes, where theatergoers could sit in stadium seats and enjoy movies in surround sound. The construction didn't come cheap and theater chains piled up a mountain of debt. Several operators went out of business or had to file for bankruptcy. Today the dark clouds have cleared and the balance sheets of the big companies have gotten strong enough that they're looking to do more mergers and acquisitions. But in a market jam-packed with screens (there were more than 35,000 at last count), and blockbuster movies debuting on thousands of screens every opening weekend, the consumer has become in-

### Let Us Entertain You

Some movie theaters that are dialing up their amenities and services in a bid to become broader entertainment destinations.

Watching Clint Eastwood at an Alamo Drafthouse



MOVIE THEATER	LOCATIONS	EXTRAS
<b>Alamo Drafthouse Cinemas</b>	4 theaters in Texas	Serves up dinner and a movie, simultaneously—including theme menus like Chinese food for a martial arts film. And patrons can order beer and wine. On April 10, the Austin location will have a live performance of Tracy and the Plastics, a multimedia musical act.
<b>AMC Theatres</b>	218 theaters in North America	Some locations show special premieres of concert DVDs. Upcoming acts include Duran Duran on April 26 and Tim McGraw on Aug. 30.
<b>Loews Cineplex Entertainment</b>	150 theaters	Some theaters in New York and New Jersey have reserved-seating sections with waiter service. In New York City, Loews offers "classic film" revivals, where admission is rolled back to \$5, and moviegoers get a concession voucher worth \$5.
<b>Muvico</b>	13 theaters in Florida, Tennessee and Maryland	Muvico's "premier theaters" have a swanky adults-only section with a bar, dining room and a separate entrance into the theater, where you watch the film from cushy loveseats. Admission costs \$17 and includes valet parking and free popcorn.
<b>National Amusement Corp.'s Cinema de Lux concept</b>	Six theaters, in Los Angeles; Philadelphia; Louisville, Ky.; White Plains, N.Y.; and Fairfax, Va.	In Los Angeles, there's live stand-up comedy before the movie, and in Philadelphia, student filmmakers can screen short films. All theaters have bathroom attendants and a concierge for services like dinner reservations.
<b>Regal Entertainment Group</b>	550 theaters under the Regal Cinema, United Artists Theatres and Edwards Theatres banners	"One Night Only" concert series shows simulcast concerts on select screens. Upcoming events include Prince, March 29; Mercy Me, a contemporary Christian group, April 13; and Hanson, the family trio, April 19.

ured to what were once novel breakthroughs in amenities.

"People used to drive to get stadium seating," says John McCauley, senior vice president of marketing for Loews Cineplex. "It's crazy because now everybody has [stadium seating] and now you've got to come up with something else."

On a recent Tuesday night, that "something else" was the live broadcast of Turner Network Television's "Inside the NBA" program from a Magic Johnson Theater in Los Angeles. (Loews

manages the Magic Johnson chain.) As part of the TV program, multi-Grammy award winners Outkast performed three songs to a crowd of 2,000 people who showed up for the Tuesday.

Depeche Mode's Mr. Gahan says his music developed a following during the 1980s through live performances. Screenings in movie theaters are just the latest incarnation of this and a "new fresh way to get the music across," he says.

Alan Skversky, who recently watched a simulcast YES concert with his nine-year-

old son at a Regal Cinema in Emeryville, Calif., said that the screening was the next best thing to being at the actual concert. "After every song everybody just erupted," Mr. Skversky said, noting that several attendees came wearing YES T-shirts and were dancing in the aisles.

At one point there was a "technical glitch," he says, and the audio and picture went out, though the concert resumed within minutes. "Obviously, you always prefer to see a group live," Mr. Skversky said, but the \$10 price tag made it easier for him to afford to go with his son.

### Reserved Seating

Theaters that aren't equipped to do live simulcasts are pushing more service, particularly in the area of food. Loews Cineplex last fall started testing reserved seating with waiter service in a handful of its theaters. Mr. McCauley of Loews says a theater has to experience a lot of sellouts and be located in a "highly, densely populated area" to offer the service. At National Amusements Corp.'s "Cinema de Lux" concept in Los Angeles; Philadelphia; White Plains, N.Y.; Fairfax, Va.; and Louisville, Ky., the theaters sport niceties like leather seats and assigned seating. Muvico, a Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based movie exhibitor, has special posh seating sections in its "premier theaters."

Outside the big urban centers, cinema "drafthouses" that sell alcohol are improving their menu offerings and redesigning their theaters. While this concept has been around for a long time, more of these theaters are now getting first-run movies and some are now franchising their concept to bring it to a wider audience.

In Texas, patrons attending screenings at a nine-theater chain called Alamo Drafthouse, can enjoy a beer and fish-and-chips while watching new movies like "50 First Dates" and "Starsky & Hutch."

Eric and Christine Freedman of Austin, Texas, go to an Alamo theater about three times a month and have their own particular routine. Mr. Freedman says they arrive at least 20 minutes before the movie starts and he typically orders beer and a "Raging Bull Pizza" (Canadian bacon, sausage and pepperoni). About midway through the picture, he treats himself to a root-beer float for dessert.

Eating while viewing means less time spent away from their baby and less money for the babysitter, says Mr. Freedman. "This way I get dinner and the movie at the same time and I save a couple of hours."