

Selling the sizzle: the life & times of Fastbuck Nelson

By **KAREN RAWLINES**

Beyond the glitz and glamour surrounding bands that frequent your favourite venue, there is often an enigmatic presence sheltered by a mere table boasting cotton t-shirts and vinyl records.

This is a world generally overlooked by your average show-goer, but one that is quite prominent in rock and roll today. Mike "Fastbuck" Nelson is a merchandising technician, or "the merch guy." Currently employed by such prominent acts as Sloan and Thrush Hermit, Fastbuck revels in his new found glory.

"One man's rise to the top. Uphill battle all the way. Night after night on the road, trying to keep track of money and numbers...."

Fastbuck has apparently lucked into a piece of the rock and roll pie that is so coveted by this society. He is realistic, however, about the stability surrounding any aspect of the music industry.

"I wouldn't call it [merchandising] a career, but it's definitely a fun thing to do for a little while when you're out of school. I've been really lucky by having friends who happen to be in bands. I guess I've got a good job. It's a great job to have." A great job indeed, Fastbuck.

When on tour with a given band, Fastbuck is heavy-laden with responsibilities. It may seem as though is job entails solely the commercial exchange of product for cash, but it is above and beyond this.

"Not stealing the money is a part of it. There's also making sure you know exactly how many shirts you have, where the money is. Sometimes it gets pretty confusing, but it's pretty straightforward. There's a lot of boring driving, late nights, early mornings on the road, bad food."

Fastbuck is quick to acknowledge that he has not al-

ways been a part of the lucrative tour merchandising. There were also less advantageous times, times when he was an independent merchandiser.

"Back in my indie merch days... my free lance days.... Those were the days when I was just making merch for myself, you know? For the love of the sale. But, eventually, I think everybody needs to make money to survive, so I have signed to a major band. I'm playing it one day at a time. You still get the huge thrill of the sale, though."

It's this dedication and pure love of his job that has made him a success story for those behind the scenes. He has a concrete understanding of his place in the grand scheme of the tour, but also a positive attitude surrounding his job. Rock and roll relies on him as much as the music.

"I think it's always been, to a certain degree, about the merch. Rock and roll is about entertaining people and the music is about entertainment, but also, when you come out to a show, people want something to take home with them to remember the show or the band by. Almost a badge to say that they were there. A t-shirt is the classic rock and roll way of getting that across. I think a lot of people, when they go to a rock show, they want to go home with a shirt."

The shirt may be important to the souvenir-seeking fan, but the merchandiser is obviously not the focal point of the evening's entertainment. Fastbuck acknowledges this fact.

"I think as a merch person, though, you have to be ready to accept the facts that you're going to be in the shadows."

True to most commercial trades, certain urban myths surround even the seemingly innocent. The age old question of whether a cotton shirt will shrink or stretch is one such myth.

"I'll let everybody in on a little secret," confides Fastbuck. "It'll shrink or it'll stretch, depending on what I think they want. I don't think it's just about rock and roll t-shirt sellers. I think at the shopping mall you'll get that sort of thing, too. It's cotton. If you throw it in the dryer, it will shrink.

The mechanics of it are so profound."

Being privy to such pro-

found knowledge, Fastbuck offers advice to those trying to make a go at the merchandising life.

"First off, it helps to maintain some self-confidence. You're not second fiddle: you're important. You're there doing your own job. Although they're the stars, you've got to be proud of what you do and just stick with it, and you'll have a lot of fun."

Despite our harsh eco-

nomie climate, Fastbuck has maintained a sunny attitude. This hard work and determination has earned him a place as Thrush Hermit's tour manager for dates in the United States of America.

Things may not always be, as Mike "Fastbuck" Nelson puts it, "selling like proverbial hot cakes" but, like Huey Lewis, his heart of rock and roll is still beating.



Although Mike "Fastbuck" Nelson was not on his guard when this photo was taken, he knows what to do if he gets jumped: "I'd just hang on to the money and run." *photo D.A.*

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