



David McMillan/Photograph; below, Mario Anzueto/Reuters (Jagger) and Ryan Lennon/Getty Images (Aguilera)

LOOK WHO CAME TO AMBER'S BAT MITZVAH Amber Ridinger, crowned, with Ashanti, left, and Ja Rule, who performed at her party in Miami.

Wedding Singers? Not!

By ALEX WILLIAMS

JA RULE stopped by a party at Shaquille O'Neal's mansion in Miami Beach the Friday night before last as a favor to the host, who asked him to grab a microphone and rock the house to surprise his guests. He obliged, he told friends, but for only two numbers. Ja Rule, the platinum-selling rapper accustomed to Madison Square Garden, could not afford to strain his vocal cords. He had an important gig the next night. He was playing a

Stars are eager to take lucrative gigs at private parties, but please don't tell the whole world about it.

Miami steakhouse. The occasion was a bat mitzvah.

The next night he displayed considerably more fire, performing for more than an hour in front of 215 friends and relatives of Amber Ridinger, 13, sometimes barking out their names as he rapped. But that wasn't all. As he closed out the set, another superstar, Ashanti, joined him onstage for three numbers. As they performed, Amber stood onstage with them, in a \$7,000 Dolce & Gabbana dress, waving to the crowd, particularly her deep-pocketed parents, Loren and J. R. Ridinger, the founder of an Internet marketing company.

The Ridingers, who recounted the evening in an interview, proudly acknowledge that their booking two pop stars for a party that would typically call for a kitschy cover band wearing ill-fitting tuxedos was a social achievement, even in Miami money circles. In this case the stars worked free as friends of the family, the Ridingers said. But for the mega-rich, Mr. Ridinger said, a superstar's fees should be no deterrent.

PRIVATE PERFORMERS Mick Jagger was paid millions to appear at David Bonderman's birthday party. Christina Aguilera sang at the wedding of a Russian billionaire on the Riviera.

"If people can afford to do it, it certainly does make a party special," Mr. Ridinger said. "It brings an electricity to it you otherwise couldn't create."

The concept is not hypothetical. Disco throwback acts like KC and the Sunshine Band, young stars like Beyoncé Knowles and Christina Aguilera, and even legacy acts like Elton John, the Rolling Stones and Paul McCartney have all taken part in an increasingly common star-for-hire side business, quietly signing to play the occasional but very lucrative private party, be it a wedding or a birthday bash.

"It's definitely a growing trend," said Erik Marshall, a partner at Hank Lane Music and Productions, a company that recruits stars to perform at private and corporate events in New York. He said he has handled events involving Neil Sedaka, the B-52's, Blues Traveler and Billy Joel.

"You used to hear about it maybe once a year, even as recently as five years ago," he said. Now, he added, his company handles more than 20 such gigs a year. The stars command fees that can range

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From left, Andy Hertzog/Associated Press; Albert Ferrer/Reuters; Jeff Christensen/Associated Press

SINGING FOR CAUSES Elton John will perform to benefit his AIDS foundation, and Paul McCartney played a birthday party, giving the proceeds to Adopt-a-Minefield. Beyoncé Knowles was too expensive for a sweet 16 party on a reality TV show.

airwaves, can cost a party giver more than \$100,000 once all the expenses are added up, said Mr. Marshall of Hank Lane Music, which has hired the band for events.

David E. Monn, an event planner in New York, who says that more than half of the private functions he has done lately have involved name entertainers, stressed that the artist's fee is usually only one of many expenses for the client. Stars "don't just come with themselves," he said. "They come with a brigade, from all over the world."

Mr. Monn said for one party, "a big name," whom he declined to identify, came with 38 people, many of whom had to be flown in. Production costs alone were more than \$200,000. "It's like buying a horse," he said. "The horse is the cheapest part. Feeding and caring for it, that's the most expensive thing."

While aging acts may bank most heavily on private gigs, young stars at the peak of their fame are hardly immune from temptation. In September, Ms. Aguilera appeared in gossip columns around the world after she sang at the wedding of Andrei Melnichenko, a Russian billionaire, on the Côte d'Azur for a sum said to be in excess of \$1 million. (A spokeswoman for Ms. Aguilera would not discuss details of the wedding but confirmed that the singer had performed.)

Playing private parties has even become prime-time entertainment. Last January MTV introduced "My Super Sweet 16," a reality show that takes viewers to lavish birthday celebrations for wealthy girls. In the show's first episode two friends in La Jolla, Calif., pressure the father of one of them to hire Ms. Knowles for their joint sweet 16 party at a Hard Rock Cafe. But confronted with an asking price of \$500,000, the family decides to scale back and instead hires Unwritten Law, a local punk band.

Last May press reports in Britain said that Philip Green, whose company owns Top Shop and other stores, had hired Ms. Knowles and her group, Destiny's Child, to play his son's bar mitzvah. Ms. Knowles had been brought in, many accounts said, after Justin Timberlake accepted the gig but pulled out because he underwent throat surgery.

Ken Sunshine, a spokesman for Mr. Timberlake, denied those reports. "Justin never got invited and never ever agreed to perform," he said. (Ms. Knowles confirmed to Vanity Fair that she did play a bar mitzvah in the South of France, but she declined to discuss specifics. A spokeswoman for Mr. Green did not respond to a request for comment.) Mr. Sunshine points to Barbra Streisand, whom he has represented for years, as an example of how performers can improve their image by just saying no, even to enormous paychecks for minimal effort.

"You can only imagine how much money she's turned down for private parties over the years, and she's had a pretty good career," Mr. Sunshine said. For those who do agree to sell their services, he said, "there's definitely a cheese factor."

Don't Call Them Wedding Singers

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from \$25,000 to more than \$1 million, event planners and music industry people say. And the entertainers almost always insist on one other thing: that the public not find out.

Before committing to a private date most stars or their representatives carefully read the guest list and demand a clause in the contract forbidding publicity: no press, no cameras, no video. The secrecy, say people involved in these functions, stems in part from the stars' insecurity. They worry that cashing a six-figure check for a couple of hours of rocking out for Aunt Alice or Cousin Bobby will make them look like sellouts — or, maybe worse, wedding singers. The last thing they want is to be associated in the gossip pages with an event that smacks of elitist excess.

"You don't want it to seem like you're doing it for all the wrong reasons," said David Tutera, a party planner in New York, who has been involved in parties with music stars.

But for the hipper breed of business mogul with the right connections the opportunity offers little but upside. Not only do they get the party of a lifetime, but they also gain a status symbol few can match. None of your friends are going to crow about scoring front-row seats for an Elton John concert, after all, if you had him perform at your birthday party.

"It can be seen as over the top when really the reason you hire a top entertainer is to give your guests a once-in-a-lifetime experience," Mr. Tutera said.

Several people familiar with such parties say that the largest market for them are baby boomers (or those born just before the boom) who are now well into their prime earning years and earning a lot. Unlike the Ridingers though, they are usually not looking to sign up the hottest young rapper on the scene. They want to mingle finally with the stars they grew up listening to on the radio in their Volkswagen Beetles.

For the corporate chieftain who once wore bell-bottoms, what better way to confront a dread milestone birthday like 50 or 60?

WHEN David Bonderman, who runs an investment company in Fort Worth, turned 60 three years ago, he shelled out millions (newspapers reported anywhere from \$6.75 million to more than \$10 million) to lure no less than the Rolling Stones to jam for a few hundred guests at his party at the Bellagio in Las Vegas. (Representatives of Mr. Bonderman and the Stones declined to comment.)



Guillermo Caballero/Getty Images

THE BAT MITZVAH GIRL Amber Ridinger with her mother, Loren, and her father, J. R., an Internet marketer.

Neilman Marcus holiday catalog. Sir Elton is promising to perform a 90-minute one-time-only private set for anyone willing to pony up \$1.5 million, which he says he will donate to the Elton John AIDS Foundation. The only stipulations are that the party take place in 2006 in the mainland United States, that it have a guest list of no more than 500 people and that it not be held for commercial purposes.

The British press has said that Sir Elton also performed at the wedding of Peter Shalson, a British financier, in London in 2001, but Fran Curtis, a spokeswoman for the singer, declined to confirm the gig. Nor would she discuss where another client, the Rolling Stones, made private appearances.

"For many reasons," Ms. Curtis explained in an e-mail message, "private concerts are private." Parties of this magnitude are rare enough to be

"It becomes a showoffy thing," the agent said.

People in the music industry say the lure of such work for performers is obvious: a big paycheck and an adoring crowd. Even rock stars who are concerned that they will appear vapid or trivial if word gets out can be seduced by pay that can exceed \$100,000. In their case they have to do it in front of a series of familiar songs in front of a small crowd that feels honored just to stand in the same room with them. There is no fear of empty seats.



David Bonderman

Philip Green



Philip Green