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MUSIC; The Shrinking of the American Band

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WHEN Dr. Lou Cox, a Manhattan-based clinical psychologist, gets a call from a rock band, he knows what to expect: a band on the verge of splitting up. Beginning with Aerosmith in 1985, he has worked with nearly 30 bands and the pattern has almost always been the same. "Unfortunately, I'm usually called in when things have gotten pretty bad," said Dr. Cox. "They're at the point of saying its not worth it."

Last Friday, the most prominent and well-documented band-therapy case became that of Metallica, when the film "Some Kind of Monster" opened in Los Angeles and New York. It chronicles the two years the speed-metal band spent in therapy with Phil Towle, a performance coach who has also worked with the bands Stone Temple Pilots and Audio Slave.

But Metallica and Mr. Towle's other clients are hardly alone. The music world -- full of notoriously volatile and dysfunctional types who have long preferred to rock it out, not talk it out -- has become more receptive to therapists and their ministrations. Though the notion of seeking help remains one of rock's dirty little secrets, some of these therapists have become a regular part of band retinues; Bon Jovi, R.E.M., Motley Crue, and Aerosmith have all relied on shrink sessions, as have smaller groups like the female alt-rock trio Sleater Kinney. And Dr. Cox is one of several therapists who have made a career of helping bands excavate deep-rooted resentments, break through communication blocks and negotiate power struggles. Dr. Cox and his colleagues say dozens more prominent bands have also sought their help, though doctor-patient confidentiality prevents them from naming names unless given permission.

Dr. Nancy Sobel, a licensed psychologist in Los Angeles who has worked with musical groups for nearly a decade, said bands (and their record labels, which have a financial interest in keeping bands together) have kept pace with society at large and become more receptive to therapy. "Ten years ago it was all you could do to get people to show up for meetings," she said.

The therapists say their general approach is similar to that of family counseling; bands' dynamics, they said, are similar to those of marriages (in that they rely on longterm, consensual bonds) and sibling relationships (in that they frequently involve rivalries). And as in family therapy, band members are encouraged to hash out problems as a group rather than submit to individual psychoanalysis. In discussions about their work, these practitioners used an amusing combination of music-industry lingo, "Behind the Music" type narrative, and pop-psychology terms to describe their methodologies. According to Dr. Cox, bands go through several emotional phases. There is the honeymoon period when group members are in love with each other, he said: "The music is really happening, they've signed a record deal and they're going up against the world."

During this period, the band postpones conflict, sidestepping matters both mundane (you stole my groupie) and complicated (you stole my wife). "No one," Dr. Cox said, "wants to spoil the party." But as every viewer of VH1 knows, fame inevitably brings complications. In "Why Successful Bands Fail," a chapter from his forthcoming book, "Egos at Work," Dr. Cox writes, "It is usually at the point when the honeymoon period is ending and the high of success is waning that the tension produced by the band's dysfunction reaches the boiling point and forces the band into a confrontation with its own internal self-destructive forces." If the problems aren't dealt with, the band begins to unravel.

Substance abuse problems make things worse. In the case of Aerosmith, Steven Tyler's and Joe Perry's drug addictions were a major problem, said Dr. Cox. "They were out there," he said, "and we couldn't even address the other band issues until that problem was taken care of."

Money is another major flashpoint. "If you haven't got a method for dividing it up, it can get pretty hairy," said Dr. Cox, who like the other therapists stays clear of his clients' business affairs.

In the music industry, it often seems as though every single act harbors anger toward its record label. But Dr. Sobel argues that this disillusionment can corrode the band itself, not just external relationships. "The original idea a lot of these groups have about the music gets disrupted by commercialism and that is a tremendous loss that is difficult to resolve," Dr. Sobel said.

Therapists are also addressing another classic source of band drama: the tensions and discomforts of life on the road. Tour life can be so challenging, in fact, that Dr. Cox said he is sometimes called in for a "tune-up" before his clients hit the road. "The bubble that people exist in on tour is so distorting and it can breed a lot of trouble," Dr. Cox said.

Dr. Sobel, who has toured with some of her clients, added: "In a dysfunctional family there are three unspoken rules: don't talk, don't trust, don't feel. In order to survive on the road, those unspoken rules unwittingly come into play. You can't admit that you're tired or hurting."

John Hipple, a senior staff counselor at the University of North Texas who works with a number of "baby bands" in the Denton area and one Grammy Award-winning group he declined to name, invites band mates to discuss their different expectations, from who will write the lyrics to who will schmooze with the audience during a show. "If expectations are clear and finely tuned, you have less difficulty," he said.

Dr. Cox makes a point of first speaking to band members individually. "Everyone," he explained, "has a piece of the truth." These one-on-one discussions are then followed by a two-day workshop, which, among other things, points out the difference between a "high performance" and "dysfunctional" team. Dr. Cox then talks to bands about the ego: "If I can get them to decriminalize the fact that they all have egos, then you can get past it."

Mr. Towle, Metallica's therapist, has his clients confront people outside of the group as well. In one particularly uncomfortable scene in "Some Kind of Monster," the bass player Lars Ulrich has a sit-down with Dave Mustaine, who formed the heavy metal group Megadeth after being booted out of Metallica in 1983.

"Have you thought about what I went through?" asks Mr. Mustaine, choking back tears. "It's been hard to watch everything you guys do turn to gold and everything I do backfire." (Though it's not revealed in the documentary, Megadeth underwent therapy in the 90's.) Mr. Ulrich admits to feeling "some guilt," but tells Mr. Mustaine, "I find it difficult to believe that everything you dealt with in the past 20 years is rooted in the Metallica thing."

Mr. Towle, who was paid \$40,000 a month for his services, said later, "As they got deeper into exploration of their own personalities and relationships, it was only natural for them to think about relationships that weren't resolved."

As a preventive measure, Dr. Sobel said, some managers have begun to call her in to evaluate a band just after it has been signed. "I'll meet with the band for half a day and then go back to management and say, 'Here are the potential problems,' " she said.