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'Won't Anybody Listen,' a documentary about the struggles of an Orange County rock band, screens tonight as part of the Hollywood Film Festival.

By RANDY LEWIS, TIMES STAFF WRITER

Hear Our Songs!

Well I hope you'll come and see me in the movies

Then I'll know that you will plainly see

The biggest fool that ever hit the big time And all I gotta do is act naturally

--"Act Naturally," written by Johnny Russell

Singer Frank Rogala and his cohorts in the Anaheim rock band NC-17 didn't have to act at all in "Won't Anybody Listen," a new documentary following the group's real-life struggles to hit the big time.

After nearly two decades plugging away to little avail, Rogala says he and his bandmates did start feeling foolish, and worse, as they collaborated with novice director Dov Kelemer on the cinematic story of their career.

"It basically killed everybody's spirit," Rogala, 43, says on his way to an editing session with Kelemer, who started work on "Won't Anybody Listen" in 1994 with the idea of simply interspersing concert footage of NC-17 with a few interviews to give the band something to sell at its performances.

"I discovered that I really need to play music no matter what," Rogala says. "The other band members sort of came around to thinking 'I've got to be productive, I've got to get on with the rest of my life,' and they ended up putting music on a back burner."

Seven years in the works, the feature-length "Won't Anybody Listen" has its world premiere tonight in Hollywood, as part of the weeklong Hollywood Film Festival. It's being distributed by Seventh Art Releasing, a company that specializes in documentaries. Films distributed by Seventh Art have garnered six Academy Award nominations. One of those films, "The Long Way Home," won the Oscar in 1997.

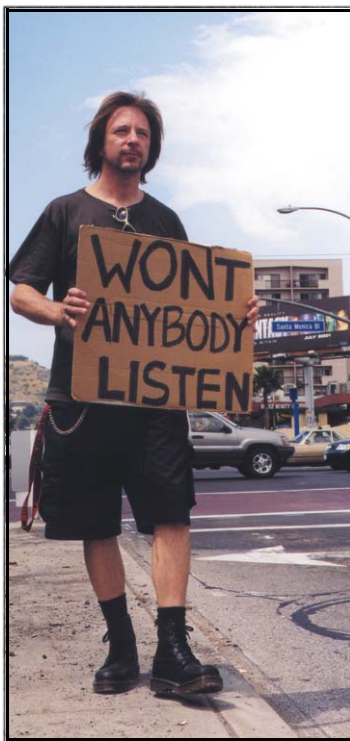
"We feel this is most definitely something that needs to be heard," says Sarah Jo Marks, Seventh Arts' senior vice president of acquisitions and development.

The company screens between 1,500 and 2,000 documentaries a year, she says, from which they choose to distribute about 10.

"There's always going to be public interest in music

films and music documentaries," Marks says, "just as there will always be interest in films about Hollywood and Hollywood history. People want to know how show business works.

"Seventh Art likes films that deal with social issues," Marks says, "and we wanted to showcase this film as an example of what is being done out there in the world of art."



DOV KELEMER

Frank Rogala of the band NC-17.

Some elements of that story may make "Won't Anybody Listen" sound like a giant downer, but Kelemer says he wasn't interested in simply telling the sad tale of an unknown band's frustrations.

"It's not a rockumentary," says Kelemer, who at 27 still lives at home with his mother in Hollywood because he's poured virtually all the income he's made in the last seven years into "Won't Anybody Listen."

"I think their plight really represented the plight of all musicians, and that reflects the struggle of all artists. People are now used to the VH1 'Behind the Music' documentaries, but this is the furthest

you could get from that."

Kelemer was a junior at Beverly Hills High School who hosted a local cable-access show "Rock America" when he met the band.

He had no idea about the realities of the music business that Rogala, his brother Vince, keyboardist Robin Canada and other members of NC-17 had already learned through years of fighting vainly to capture the attention of record label executives.

"These people who are on MTV picking up awards, everyone thinks they're all rich, but most of them are living no better than somebody working a minimum-wage job," Rogala says.

"The industry likes to glamorize it to sell things, but it has nothing to do with reality."

Kelemer, like most casual pop music fans, believed that if a band was fortunate enough to land a recording contract, the musicians were set for life.

What he learned and aimed to show in "Won't Anybody Listen" is that getting a deal "is just the beginning."

"There are bands selling hundreds of thousands of albums that still don't make any money,"

Kelemer says.

Kelemer had Rogala interview the record company people in the film who talk about how the business works.

That led to a couple of ironic twists for Rogala.

"These are people who had ignored Frank for years," Kelemer says. "But as soon as we called them up and said 'I'm making a documentary,' people are returning our phone calls, and Frank is getting freaked out. He's saying 'Where did they come from? All this time they've been ignoring me--now that we're going to make a film they'll talk to me.'"

Adds Rogala with a laugh, "It was really twisted. Here were all these people I'd been trying to get to for almost 20 years. I really had to hold myself back, because on the one hand I wanted to get them to listen to our tape, but I wanted to do a good job [as the film's off-camera interviewer] and make the movie work."

"One thing I was really struck by is how surprised they were at the questions we asked," Rogala said. "They'd never heard this stuff because we were the ignored artists, the people on the other end of the line who it was always easy to cut off."

During an interview with one executive for a major label, Rogala says, "I asked her to tell us about the artists on their roster so we could get acquainted with them. This woman had to call the label to find out who was on her label. She let us roll the cameras while she wrote the names down, and didn't even know how to spell them all. It was like some weird parallel universe."

Kelemer saw a parallel in his own journey to becoming a filmmaker. He studied film at Loyola Marymount University, which he attended despite his antagonism toward film schools and students.

"I worried that if I didn't go to film school," he says, "I'd spend the rest of my life worrying that I'd missed out on the secret knowledge that had been imparted to those who did. It took going to film school to learn that there isn't any secret knowledge."

As for NC-17, in addition to footage of the band playing live, the group also composed and performed the musical score.

The resulting soundtrack, says Rogala, "is one of the best records we've ever done, but I had to finish virtually by myself" after the rest of the band shifted their attention to other careers.

NC-17 still plays when shows come up and will work on future albums, but for the other band members "their focus has changed from where the band was the primary dream and goal of their life," Rogala said.

"That's part of the struggle for the band," says Kelemer. "They have to come to terms with why they're doing what they're doing. A lot of people are doing it solely for recognition or to be rock stars. If they make it, that's great. But 99.999% are not making it, and for those who don't, what are they left with?"