

Just Don't Bring Your Guitar

There are highly successful athletes who can't resist the temptation to try one more thing before they leave the spotlight: Life as a musician



BOB LATHAM

Knowing my twin loves of sports and music, my sister combined them in a Christmas gag gift: the 2005 CD "Oh Say Can You Sing?," which features songs performed by Major League Baseball players. As recording artists, these guys are very good baseball players—though Ozzie Smith's rendition of Sam Cooke's

"Cupid" is oddly compelling. I will, however, give them all a pass since they were doing it for fun and charity. While the performances are, for the most part, not terrible, none of the players would advance far on "American Idol." By the same token, don't expect to see Susan Boyle playing outfield for the New York Yankees anytime soon.

And there is a reason for that. It is best explained in John McEnroe's autobiography, "You Cannot Be Serious." As his tennis career was winding down, McEnroe toyed with the idea of becoming a rock musician, as did other of his tennis-playing contemporaries such as Mats Wilander, Pat Cash and Yannick Noah—with Noah actually becoming a very popular act in France before he became even more famous in America for fathering the center of the Chicago Bulls. McEnroe, however, had the good fortune to marry a rock star, Patty Smyth, who one day sat him down and gave him a reality check on his talent: "The lord doesn't let you be one of the greatest tennis players that ever lived and then be Keith Richards. It just doesn't work that way." Similarly, the thought of Keith Richards playing Wimbledon doesn't work.

The MLB album reminded me of the legions of athletes who attempt, seriously, to embark on second careers as musicians, expecting to get the same adoration they had as athletes. Perhaps they are driven by the thought: "Hey, I put a lot of dedication and hard work into becoming a pro athlete, so if I do the same thing in another field I will get the same results." Some may see it as a way of enhancing or maintaining their celebrity; some might be trying to summon up the adrenaline rush they had as athletes; and some simply may be padding an outsized ego. Whatever the motivation, the Smyth Doctrine is largely intact.

Certainly the nadir of the athlete-turned-singer was Carl Lewis's massacre of the national anthem in 1993. I also recently saw gymnast Carly Patterson, whose 2009 debut album "Back to the Beginning" was undistin-

guished, do disservice to the tune. Shaquille O'Neal was on the forefront of a wave of NBA stars who tried to reinvent themselves as rappers with "Shaq Diesel" and "Shaq Fu—Da Return," which the usually reliable website *allmusic.com* charitably describes as showcasing Shaq's "moderate rapping talents." Of course, with the rivalry between Shaq and Kobe Bryant, Kobe could not resist the temptation to put out his own rap album, "K.O.B.E.," which still awaits the acclaim of a grateful nation, as do Ron Artest's "My World" and a host of others.

There are some limited exceptions to the Patty Smyth theory. Jack McDowell of the Chicago White Sox and his band V.I.E.W., which was the opening act for a

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Smithereens tour in the '90s, might fall into this category. *Allmusic.com* describes V.I.E.W., which later morphed into Stickfigure, as "generally decent"—not particularly high praise, but certainly moving from mere musical proficiency to professionalism, a distinction far

too many athletes ignore. And if there is one genre of music where athlete-musicians have been more viable, it would be in smooth jazz. Former New York Yankees center fielder Bernie Williams was nominated for a Latin Grammy for his 2009 album "Moving Forward" and the late, great basketball player Wayman Tisdale hit No. 1 on the contemporary jazz chart in 2001 with "Face to Face."

Most athletes considering a foray into a musical career, however, might be wise first to consult another vignette from McEnroe's book, which is refreshingly self-effacing—and in line with the advice Smyth would eventually give him. McEnroe tells a story that took place at Wimbledon in 1982. In his early days of learning the guitar, he would use downtime between rounds of a tournament to tinker with the instrument. On this occasion, he was in his hotel suite working on David Bowie's "Suffragette City" and "Rebel Rebel" when someone knocked on his door. It was none other than Bowie himself. "Come up and have a drink," Bowie said. "Just don't bring your guitar." ■

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