



THE

Medicine MAN

After a quarter century in business, Neo Sala is still prescribing the right cure for thousands of Spanish music fans. Greg Parmley flew to Seville for an appointment with the Doctor...

It's a hot, hazy afternoon in Seville, and out in the dusty car park, off duty riggers coax a stray kitten out from underneath a car. Given that the largest concert the city has ever witnessed is due to begin in just a few hours, there's a strangely relaxed vibe.

Inside the Estadio Olimpico, promoter Neo Sala is equally as calm. "Madonna tonight will be the biggest show ever in Seville," he says. "And there are many cities in Spain that have this potential. It's a market that can only grow. The weather is fantastic, the food is good, and the audience is hot."

Live Nation's Arthur Fogel is one of over 40,000 people in town to witness history being made, and having spent a quarter century helping to shape the rock 'n' roll market in his homeland, Sala is clearly proud of the results.

"Because of [dictator Francisco] Franco, rock music arrived late in Spain," he says. "Before the Euro we were at a disadvantage because the ticket prices were a lot cheaper. Now we're on a European level and we can compete, but for years we couldn't."

By the next morning, Madonna's *Sticky and Sweet* show – undoubtedly the only production to have ever combined a vintage white convertible, S&M dancers and a boxing ring within the first four songs of a set – has hit the front pages of every local paper, and Sala's reputation for pulling off special projects is once again secure.

SCHOOL DAZE

An only child, Sala was born in the province of Lerida in Catalonia, but from the age of two, grew up in Barcelona, 80 miles away. While many of the industry's current leaders

were born into their career, or began to hone their trade at university, Sala had no connections, and neither did he wait so long. An early developed passion for music saw him promote his first concert in 1976 at the age of 15. "I didn't know what a promoter was," he says. "I just wanted to put bands on."

Using his high school theatre, Sala sold 300 tickets for local psychedelic prog act Suck Electrónico Enciclopèdic (featuring singer/keyboard player Jordi Garcia who now works for him), but after his second show with British avant-garde rockers Henry Cow drew an 800-strong crowd six months later, the establishment took exception. "There were so many people with long hair who came that the school suggested I find another venue," he says. "The day after the concert finished, they also kindly suggested that I find another school. Which I did – I wasn't happy there."

Plugged into several foreign underground music scenes, for the next two years, Sala promoted acts such as National Health and Tim Blake from the UK, Cyril Lefebvre from France and Germany's Embryo. His university years (1980-1983) weren't much different, and despite studying pure maths, and later economics, Sala couldn't quite escape the lure of working with artists he admired.

So in 1982, as a collaboration between four like-minded friends, Sala formed Doctor Music Concerts, but it was an endeavour that quickly began to eclipse his studies.

"Half of my time was in the office and half was at university so I had to make a decision: either become a concert promoter or take a career as an economist," he says. The loss to the world of economics was live music's gain, and the following year, Sala left university. "My family were shocked," he admits.

Arthur Fogel – Live Nation

I have always enjoyed working with Neo. He is a true professional, an excellent promoter, and a good man.

Barrie Marshall – Marshall Arts

Neo was someone who started off by visiting me for a list of concerts we were doing as I was dealing with another promoter at that time. I probably had three meetings with him before we made a deal. The thing that struck me most about him was his amazing enthusiasm for music and artwork. His approach to marketing was always fresh for each act. He also understood the production aspects of shows. He is a very creative man who will always go from strength to strength. He has taken a long time to build his business and gain the respect of all who work with him. I am very proud to have been amongst the first to work with him.

Martin Hopewell – ILMC

I only have one big problem with Neo – he's way too good looking!

Jon Landau – Bruce Springsteen

Neo Sala is a superb promoter. We play all around the world and use all the best promoters and Neo is right up there at the top of our list. Neo loves Bruce, loves the music, has a great team and does a great job.

He's also very adventurous and has helped us tour beyond the typical cities, such as Barcelona and Madrid. Neo has taken us all over Spain, which is exactly what we want, and he's really been a factor in the extraordinary success that Bruce has had there.

Also, of all of our promoters, he knows more phenomenal restaurants than anyone I know!

Akiko Rogers – William Morris Agency

Neo was one of the first major promoters I met when I started in the business and we became fast friends. He's just lovely – one of the most kind-hearted, generous souls I've ever met – and there aren't enough great words for me to describe how I feel about him. We're kindred spirits.

There's a good reason he's been around for 25 years and is still one of the top promoters, and that's because of how generous and honest he is, which is hard to find these days. Once I do a deal with Neo that's it, I never have to worry again. He inspires real long-term loyalty in the people he works with and is always my first call in Spain. Neo's success is well deserved and it's indicative of his generous spirit that he still has these relationships 25 years later.



Neo with Keith Richards at Keith Richards & the X-pensive Winos Madrid concert in December 1993

A DOCTOR IS BORN

Sala has always focussed on the details. His artwork is always thoughtful and original, and the public perception of the company carefully considered. Such a fastidious nature was apparent even when naming his company.

"The summer before we started the company I was in Boston for a month to improve my English," Sala says. "I went to the Doctor Pepper Festival in New York to see Johnny Winter. From that I got the idea of Doctor Music – the idea of healing people, or making them feel better through music. Our first catchphrase was "the healthiest way to do Spain".

As the company began to grow, the

number of partners involved shrank from four to just one. "We all loved music and were the same age, but quite quickly it became just me," Sala says. "One got married and had a child, the other started a successful street poster operation that we use today, and the third moved into theatre and musicals."

"I didn't know what a promoter was – I just wanted to put bands on"

Having rarely worked with domestic acts, the first Doctor Music tour was three dates with UFO in February 1983. "At that time it



Neo with Tina Turner, Spanish tour, May 1987



You are one of the most innovative and creative promoters we have ever had the privilege to work with over the years. A promoter who listens to music, music and more music.



Marshall Arts Ltd.

International Agency & Concert Presentations
Unit 6, Utopia Village, 7 Chalcot Road, London NW1 8LH, England
Tel: +44 207 586 3831 • E-mail: info@marshall-arts.co.uk • Web: www.marshall-arts.co.uk

Emma Banks – Creative Artists Agency

I have worked with Neo and his staff for many of the acts I represent. A few years ago he took Peter Mensch and I to a restaurant so far out of Barcelona I thought it was in Madrid but he was right to do so – it was some of the best fish I had eaten for a long time. Neo will go the extra mile (sometimes literally as on this occasion) to make sure everyone (band, audience, manager etc) has a good time in his country.

Rob Hallett – AEG Live

During the Backstreet Boys tour, Neo said he wanted to take us to a restaurant outside of Barcelona – Can Fabes. As international superstars, driving in a van for 25 minutes to go to dinner isn't something you normally do, but I persuaded the boys. The chef – Santi Santamaría – closed the restaurant and brought out the best food and wines he had, and the boys all still talk about that meal to this day. It's one of my favourite restaurants in the world.

There are a handful of European promoters that I would consider a personal friend, and Neo is certainly one of them. Neo's career has mirrored my own in a way. We're a similar age, we started at the same time and we've grown together. He's a good man, a good partner and I trust him implicitly.

Inigo Argomaniz – Getin Spain

The three Doctor Music Festivals were incredible achievements, especially considering their location in the middle of the Pyrenees, and both the U2 and Springsteen tours were superb, especially considering the rate of ticket sales, which is not normal in Spain. But what people may not know about Neo is that any meal with him is great. He is an incredible wine connoisseur, and the meals always end in unforgettable conversations.

Gus Gómez – LD Eventos

I worked for Neo as a production manager for 11 years, and since leaving to start my own company, he's still my client. As a boss, he allowed me to develop my skills with a lot of support. We both see things the same way and care a lot about doing things the right way for our clients. And we both want to do things to the best of our abilities.

I learnt everything I know from Neo and I'm still learning from him. If I hadn't gone to Doctor Music, I probably wouldn't be in production and it's happily been my career for 20 years. I hope we can continue to work together for another 20 years at least.



Neo with Bruce Springsteen at Plaza de Toros Monumental in Barcelona, July 1992

was difficult to transfer money outside of Spain and agents were asking for a 100% advance. I turned up at the Pan Agency offices in London with a briefcase stuffed full of English pounds. It was the first time I met Carl Leighton-Pope – he counted it all."

Back home, the promoting landscape of the time was dominated by two warring companies: Gigs run by Carlos Moysi and Gay & Co., helmed by Gay Mercader. "I couldn't get the big names so I started out promoting small bands and jazz acts," he says.

"One of the agents who began to give me more and more acts was Barrie Marshall, who at the time was doing things like Stanley Jordan, Chick Corea and Al Jarreau," Sala says. "Of course Barrie was also doing Paul McCartney and Tina Turner."

Happy with Sala's efforts for his jazz artists, it was Marshall who gave Sala his first big break in May 1987, elevating Doctor

Music to a national level overnight. "He gave me the Tina Turner tour when I was just 25," Sala says. "The two big companies were so

"I'm not a fan of email, but even the fax was a killer"

busy fighting with each other that they didn't even react – I think they were probably just pleased that the other one didn't get the show!"

The tour played two nights at Plaza de Toros Monumental (cap 16,000) in Barcelona, Rockódromo at Casa de Campo (50,000) in Madrid and Estadio de Mestalla in Valencia (45,000), after which the word on Sala got out. Then the following year, when Michael Jackson's *Bad* tour was due to roll into town,



The 1998 Doctor Music Festival site

Happy 25th Anniversary

Neo Sala

Doctor Music Concerts

From Arne Worsoe and all at ICO Concerts

ICO Concerts · 1a Rosenberggade · 1130 Copenhagen Denmark · www.concerts.dk

ICO CONCERTS

CONGRATULATIONS NEO,
ITS BEEN GOOD WORKING WITH YOU
FROM PSYCHEDELIC FURS TO BON JOVI.
DON'T THINK WE'VE HAD A FAILURE YET!

FROM ROB
AND ALL AT AEG LIVE

AEG LIVE

Paul Charies – Asgard Promotions

Neo's a very good guy. Sadly, due to the way the industry works I haven't worked with him regularly for a long time now – for about ten years. One recent concert that comes to mind though was an amazing show he promoted for Jackson Browne. It was Jackson's first show there [Spain], I think. It went incredibly well, and was very well organised. Well done on 25 years Neo, and keep on doing it!

Carlos Asmarats – Encore

I worked for Doctor Music for eight years from 1989 and Neo was a great teacher. When he was planning the first edition of the Doctor Music Festival, he held a meeting with all the staff, told us about his plan and asked our opinion. We all said, 'we think this is crazy. We shouldn't do it'. But he'd already made his decision and went ahead with it anyway. The artistic success of the festival proved that we were all wrong but he was right!

Neo's also very good at doing big shows – arenas and stadiums – and he's always surprising us. Like when he did two shows for Bruce Springsteen at Barcelona Stadium. I'm sure that many of the Spanish promoters thought he was crazy but he sold out the shows, and he sold them out quickly. Well done to the Doctor Music team on 25 years.

Andy Wooliscroft – Primary Talent

I've been working with Neo since Doctor Music started, and it's always good to work with both him and Jordi Garcia. He is really into music and has a great knowledge of it...it's always refreshing to work with someone who has a passion rather than just a business mind.

The biggest shows we did with Doctor Music were with The Spice Girls in 1998, but it's always good to work with them, and others have included John Cale and Patti Smith. I'd like to offer my congratulations on the consistent, quality work and for lasting this long in a difficult business.

Albert Salmerón – Animadas

For several years, Neo was also the president of the Spanish Promoters' Association. The annual dinner was always held at the very best restaurants in the country and Neo always brought the best wines and champagnes from his home, which literally meant dozens of bottles – enough for about 40 promoters. (Imagine how much 40 promoters together can drink!)

Even after he stepped down as president, he still continued to provide wine and champagne. He's a cool guy and a real gentleman.

Sala got a call from Jackson's agent, Sal Bonafede. "I don't think he realised how young I was," Sala says. "The same year that we did Jackson, we did Whitney Houston with Barrie Marshall, and then suddenly we were there.

"It grew very quickly after Tina Turner," he continues. "We were the first to introduce reserved seating for shows [in 1988], we did Paul McCartney in 1989, then in 1992 we got Dire Straits' *On The Street* tour, which (until this summer when we broke the record with Bruce Springsteen) sold the most tickets of any international act in Spain – we sold over half a million on 21 shows."

Less than a decade after it began, Doctor

"I realised what it was like to be short of money and I think it was good for me"

Music had proved it had the remedy for international bands in Spain. But Sala's achievements have not stopped there, and in 2005, he set a national record for selling out a U2 tour (82,000 tickets) in six hours, and in August this year, Doctor Music topped the *Billboard* Boxscore chart when Bruce Springsteen grossed over \$14million (€9.7m) for two shows at Camp Nou (72,000) in Barcelona.

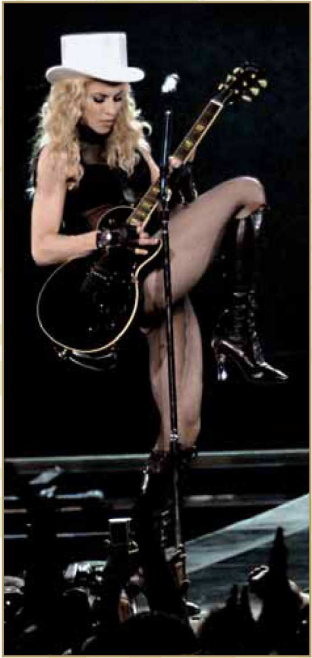
"I think it's the first time a Spanish promoter has done that. Although, I'd never heard of [the Boxscore chart] until we were No. 1," he jokes.

HEARING TEST

In a business built on personal relationships, it's easy to see why Neo gets the gigs. He's upbeat in nature, quick to laugh at himself and the situations around him, and wearing tight black faded denim and bedecked in silver jewellery, he's obviously still enthralled with music and the world in which he now plays such a part.

He worries about the effect of inferior quality MP3 music files on the listening habits of his future customers ("In reality, you're not hearing all of the music. Ears lose their sensitivity when you don't hear as much") and about music's anti-establishment nature being lost in a haze of consumerism.

"The risk of losing the spontaneity worries me the most," he says. "Rock 'n' roll has always been a symbol of rebellion but



Madonna at Estadio Olímpico, Seville 16 September 2008

lately everything is too organised and perfect. Look at these TV programmes like *X-Factor* which generate 'idols' – we risk losing the spontaneity and could end up just consuming products."

But if there's one specific bug bear within the business that most vexes the Spanish promoter, it's the effect of technology on working life.

"I'm not a fan of email," he says. "But even the fax was a killer. Before the fax, you could always say that the contract hadn't arrived; that the postman had lost it, and always win some extra time. And now with email, people expect replies in 30 minutes – you can't be available 24/7, but people expect it."

Perhaps this reminds Sala of the period between September 1988 and late 1990 when he managed Spanish hit act El Último de la Fila – the only period he's ever focused on domestic artists. "I discovered how tough it is to manage a band – they call you for everything!" he declares.

But it's email that has changed many elements of Sala's life, and he fondly remembers his early years when frequent trips to London would consist solely of running between meetings at agencies.

"These days I spend more time in my room reading emails than anything," he says.

"People are too busy to see you because they're doing emails. It's crazy."

Undeterred though, Sala still loves visiting London and uses the time to keep his ear to the ground for new talent. He stays in the same small Covent Garden hotel every time, which he describes as "like a family". "Besides, the fact that I'm in the UK means that people in Spain don't bother me that much so I can get more focussed," he says.

CLIMBING A MOUNTAIN

However, Sala manages to stay focussed – and he lists his most relaxing pastimes as sex, cooking and watching films/TV in that order! – it certainly appears to be working. This year alone, Doctor Music has promoted Queens of the Stone Age, Alicia Keys, Morcheeba, Bon Jovi, Crowded House and Bruce Springsteen. Not only is he promoting the majority of AEG Live's tours in Spain, but he is also picking up some Live Nation events too, the Madonna show being a prime example.

"I get on well with Arthur [Fogel]," he says. "He has great vision."

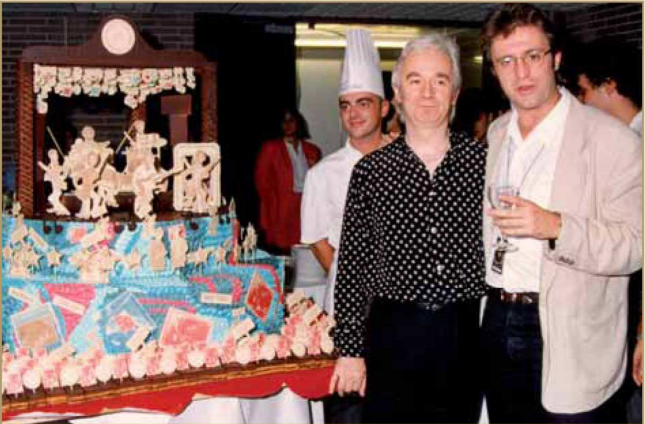
In fact it is somewhat ironic that the largest blip in Sala's career was caused by his own ambition, rather than any misplaced faith by his peers or senior industry figures. And the decision was one which almost bankrupted the company.

"We ran the Doctor Music Festival between 1996 and 1998," he says. "It was inspired by events like Roskilde and Glastonbury – a three-day festival with camping."

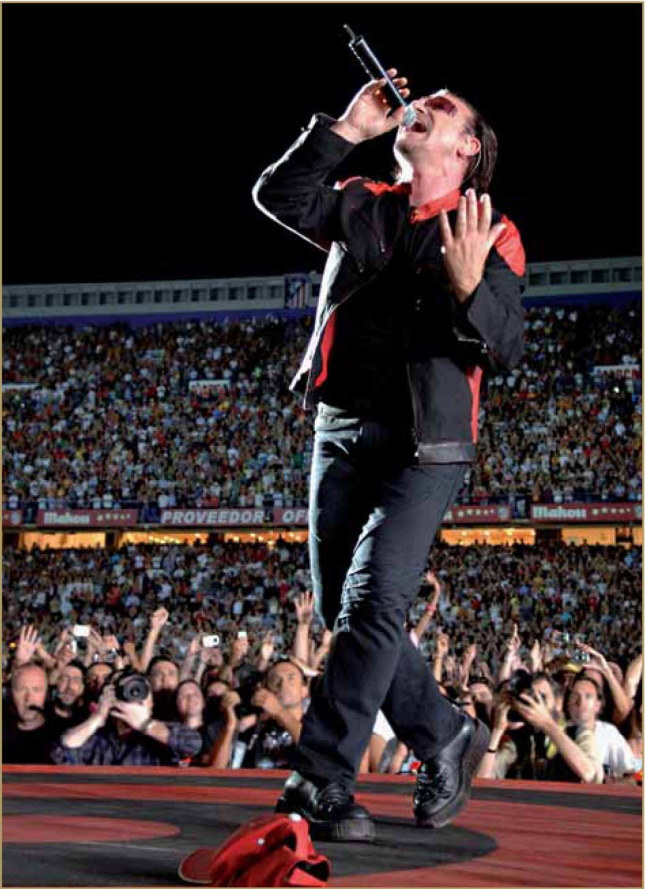
With acts including Iggy Pop, Bob Dylan, David Bowie and Lou Reed, the 30,000-capacity site was based in Escalérre in Lerida province, just 100 miles from Sala's birthplace. Unfortunately, the romantic notion of staging the festival in the Pyrenees proved a logistical headache.

"Even with an average of 25,000 per day on the three editions, we were still losing money," he says. "We were five hours away from Barcelona's airport, so artists were having to take two days to play it and because we had to move everything from Barcelona, the production costs were enormous. With the competition from other festivals and the artists fees going up every year it became unsustainable.

"We lost a lot of money on it," he says. "After that, 1999 to 2001 were very tough years. I realised what it was like to be short of money and I think it was good for me. Until then, I'd always assumed that if you



Neo with Ed Biekneil, Dire Straits tour, October 1992



U2 at Estadio Vicente Calderón, Madrid, 11 August 2005

Andrew Zweck – Sensible Events

I've worked with Neo Sala for many years as promoter of my artists Mark Knopfler and Depeche Mode. Neo has always been a breath of fresh air in the Spanish market; I think his strength is his creative and innovative approach to marketing. He's always got ideas on how to position and present the artist. He doesn't sit on his laurels and is always willing to take risks and try new things.

Somehow I'm surprised he's been around 25 years because he still seems to represent the cutting edge and be a contemporary promoter – or maybe that's just his clothes and haircut, but he's kept that image up!

Bertis Downs – REM

Neo puts everything into his shows – his energy, his intelligence, his enthusiasm – and we've basically done all of our shows in Spain with him. We've done bullrings, arenas and stadiums all over Spain and he has very creative ideas in terms of where the band should play, like Gijón and Granada. We've played a lot of provincial places that a lot of American bands never get to.

It's hard to believe a guy that young could have been doing it that long. All I can say is that he must have started early, but it goes fast when you're having fun. We're currently in Helsinki for an outdoor show and it's raining but in three weeks we'll be in Spain. So as I'm sitting here in soggy Finland, I'm very much looking forward to being in the Bullring in Mercia with Neo Sala again.

Leon Ramakers – Mojo Concerts

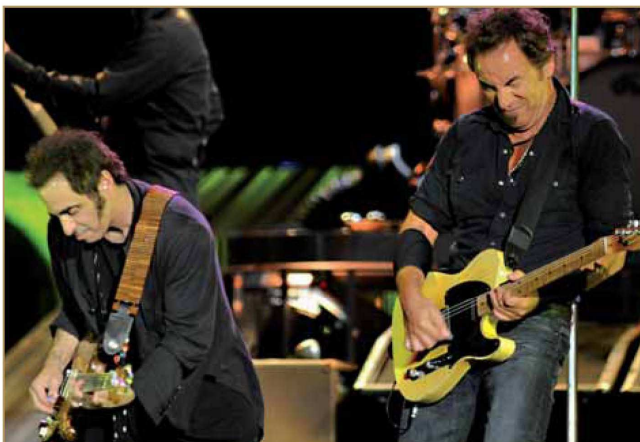
It was nice to see Neo coming over to the early editions of Lowlands Festival, just to learn from our experience. I like people that don't pretend to know everything.

Sandra Rotondo – Planet Events

I met Neo years ago. It was before I was in the live music business, working as marketing director at BMG Spain.

At that time promoters were demanding all kinds of support from record companies, but Neo's and BMG's objectives usually matched more than others. Back then I thought he was a cool guy and a smart business-person.

When Planet first came into the music scene nine years ago, Neo was very helpful to us. We've done a few projects with Neo and it's always been a fantastic collaboration. He's a great guy and great company.



Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band at Estadio de Anoeta, San Sebastián, 15 July 2008

promoted concerts you would make money. I found out how bad it could get."

In 2001, with the company reserves empty, Sala accepted investment of close to a seven digit Euro figure. In return for the cash injection, he swapped out 20% of the company shareholding, but the relationship is amicable to this day, and he is left to run Doctor Music without interference.

"The festivals were an important experience and everyone says that they were the best organised ever, and I learnt a lot from it," he says. "Money isn't everything."

"We live in a society with a lot of stress. Not everybody has the money they want, not everybody can stand their bosses and music helps life to move more easily"

Sala is backing this statement with actions, having recently returned to the festival business. It's arguable that other promoters – especially having incinerated rather than burnt their fingers previously – would follow a conservative template. Sala, however, has set up Doctor Loft 05:00 (co-promoted this year with Sinnamon) which starts at 5am and plays for 26 hours straight.

The 15,000-capacity festival was held in Pla d'en Bec in Castelló d'Empúries, Costa Brava, two hours north of Barcelona. Featuring REM, Iggy & The Stooges, The Editors and The Gossip, the inaugural edition

in July this year pulled 9,000 people.

"It was a very adventurous concept and we didn't attract all the people we wanted, but I think we learnt a few things about how to make it work next year," Sala says.

And aside from the return of Doctor 05:00 in 2009 (renamed and staged as an exclusive Doctor Music promotion), there's very little slated on the company business plan for the next few years. In typically southern Mediterranean fashion, Sala is unperturbed about the future.

"A few years ago we decided that the best business plan in this business is not to have a business plan," he says. "In reality, we're a carrier of services for the artist. We can maximise the ticket sales, but if U2 don't tour, they don't tour. There's nothing we can do about it."

As one of the last remaining top flight independent promoters in Europe, Sala is realistic about the eventual necessity of aligning with a corporate in years to come, but he's currently in no rush. If there is a wish though, it's to continue opening up new markets for international acts in Spain, "and to keep having fun," he laughs.

"The bottom line is that people want music," he says. "We live in a society with a lot of stress. Not everybody has the money they want, not everybody can stand their bosses and music helps life to move more easily."

Lucky then, that the Doctor's prescriptions have proved such a sweet pill for the last 25 years. And neither does his medicine cabinet look likely to run short any time soon.

□ GREG PARMLEY

Congratulations on your 25th Anniversary Doctor Music.

From your friends.



Keep on rockin' for another 25 years!