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King Kong project Universal Studios Tour's most costly by Linda Deckard

The opening of the \$6.5million King Kong attraction at Universal Studios Tour here in June will help "establish new plateaus," according to Steve Lew, president of the tour, which is owned and operated by MCA Inc.

"King Kong will do what Jaws did in the mid-Seventies, which was to make us a major outdoor attraction," said Lew. Interviewed at his office here, Lew is bullish on 1986, coming off a record 1985. "We're more dependent on the world economy, the price of oil and the price of airline fares than most theme parks. We are definitely excited about the rest of the year."

The King Kong project, which will occupy a 160 by 160-foot stage and will be part of the tram-ride portion of the tour, represents the largest single-attraction investment yet for MCA. "Conan," a stage show opened in 1983, represented the next highest investment at \$5 million.

Kong is touted as "the world's largest computerized creature" at 30 feet tall. The King Kong adventure will involve a ride through a devastated New York street, complete with news media broadcasts and screaming victims, climaxed by Kong's sudden appearance three feet from the tram. Guests will have the illusion King Kong is tilting the tram, but they'll be able to escape. The goal of the two-and-a-half minute show is to lure local attendance, particularly repeat visits from those who haven't been to the tour for a year or more.

Of the cost, Lew attributed "two-thirds to the creature and the show and one-third to construction of the sound stage, including demolition." The location had been used to store fleet vehicles. With 420 acres, Universal has room to grow.

Talents involved in creation of King Kong include Peter Alexander, producer of the attraction and director of show and special effects for MCA Recreation Services since 1981; Barry Upson, vice president of planning and development for MCA Recreation; Henry Bumstead, production designer; Bob Gurr, chief engineer and co-founder and vice president of Sequoia Creative, the company which built the 30-foot ape; Larry Lester, project manager / planning and development, MCA Recreation; and Bob Ward, co-show designer with Alexander.

To support the investment in King Kong, set to open in June with the peak season at the year-round park, MCA broke a national advertising campaign March 18, taking ads in USA Today, Daily Variety, The New York Times, Orlando (Fla.) Sentinel, Chicago Tribune and The Hollywood Reporter, Lew said. The attraction staged an elaborate press party that same day, introducing the return of the ape with helicopters, police, paramedics and various other actors and devices available at a movie studio lot.

The studio lot location is the key. The theme is paramount, Lew said. "We have faith in the product and intend to be here many, many years. We believe in the tour and in Southern California as a destination." Asked if MCA also believes in Florida as a destination, referring to MCA's proposed \$290 million Orlando studio tour, Lew smiled, looked at his watch, and replied that "as of 3:35p.m Thursday the 22nd of March, there is no Florida attraction announcement." (Walt Disney Productions, however, has announced definite plans for a studio tour in Florida, detailed in this issue.)

"We are bullish on what we have to offer here," Lew continued. King Kong will be supported with merchandise and a new photo booth, opened March 23, which allows patrons the chance to have a picture taken of themselves in the hand of King Kong for \$3 a picture.

New additions this year will also include a Sound Trax recording studio, on which construction will begin April 21. It should be open by Memorial Day. That franchise joins Bloodgood's Old Time Photo concession, which has been at Universal for 12 years, and Lee Harvin, caricatures, as outside contractors. Universal is also expanding it's food operation to involve contractors, namely Jim Garrahy's Fudge and Famous Amos Cookies. In these instances, "the key word is 'selectivity,'" Lew added.

Universal Studios Tour has been emphasizing special events as well lately. Beginning April 5 for nine days, the lions from the Universal movie "Out of Africa" were to be at the tour's entertainment center. Lew particularly likes those "natural tie-ins."

Toy promotions, worked with Hasbro and Mattel to name two, have been successful events for Universal, as have concerts (Zapp and Ready for the World) and Joyce Becker's Soap Opera Festival, scheduled again for May. In the sponsor category, Encyclopedia Britannica is to sponsor an information center, to open May 1, he said.

Once King Kong is open, the tour will close the Jaws and Red Seas attractions for "modification. It will be a major surprise," Lew promised. "We will also have a major change on Set 2, or special effects Eastman Kodak stage." A "Miami Vice" segment will be added on Set 2, demonstrating special effects and post-production techniques, he explained. That will open Memorial Day.

King Kong is the major breakthrough, however. The project had been in research and development for two or three years. "It was a matter of timing. The timing is right." The price of admission to the Universal Studios Tour is now \$13.95 for adults (80 percent of tickets sold) and \$9.95 for children ages three to 11.

A separate project undertaken by MCA is to build 17 movie theaters, with seating for 5,600, adjacent to the tour. A parking garage for 17,000 to 18,000 will be added also. "That's the only way we could accommodate the additional traffic." The Universal hilltop properties already include the tour, amphitheater, hotels, restaurants and the studio.

There are no dark clouds Lew can see. "Well, we are concerned about Expo '86," he admitted, referring to the World Exposition to open May 2 in Vancouver, B.C. However, MCA has countered concern with involvement.

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