

A Life in Music

An Interview with Clive Davis, Chief Creative Officer, Sony Music

EDITORS' NOTE As the record industry's most innovative, outspoken, and influential executive, Clive Davis has had a profound effect on the world of music, acting as both its champion and its critic, and as perhaps its most visible and respected spokesman. Davis' contributions to music are, to a large extent, responsible for bringing the industry to where it is in the new millennium.



Clive Davis

In the first phase of his career, Davis was General Counsel of Columbia Records and was appointed Vice President and General Manager in 1966. In 1967, he was named President of the company. The Monterey Pop Festival in June 1967 confirmed what Davis had been feeling about rock: the new music was a powerful force, the artistic expression of an emerging culture. He personally signed Janis Joplin's *Big Brother and the Holding Company* to Columbia. After that, he was directly responsible for the signing of many more landmark artists in the rock field, among them Blood, Sweat & Tears, Chicago, Santana, Boz Scaggs, Loggins & Messina, Laura Nyro, Billy Joel, Bruce Springsteen, Aerosmith, and Earth, Wind & Fire. In addition to bringing this fresh, brand new talent to Columbia, he signed such artists as Neil Diamond, Pink Floyd, Herbie Hancock, and The Isley Brothers.

While building the rock roster, Davis was also strengthening the label's catalog in all fields of recorded music, achieving historic success in the areas of R&B, country, jazz, and pop music. He played a key role in the careers of Simon & Garfunkel, Sly & The Family Stone, Bob Dylan, Barbra Streisand, and Andy Williams. Davis figured prominently in shaping career turning points for Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock, and he signed Weather Report. Under his aegis, the company made a strong entry into R&B. Davis' deal with Gamble & Huff brought to the company the famed Philadelphia International label, which had an enormous string of hits and set the course for black music in the '70s.

Davis left Columbia Records in May 1973 and, after writing the book, *Clive: Inside The Record Business*, a national best-seller in both hard cover and paperback, he founded with Columbia Pictures, Arista Records in the fall of 1974. The Arista Records hot streak began immediately. Only three months after the company opened its doors, Barry Manilow's smash hit

"Mandy," found by and named by Davis, went straight to #1.

Under Davis' leadership, Arista launched the careers of Whitney Houston, Barry Manilow, Patti Smith, Kenny G, Sarah McLachlan, Monica, and Dido. The label also attracted such important artists as Aretha Franklin, The Grateful Dead, The Kinks, Lou Reed, Eurythmics, Dionne Warwick, Daryl Hall & John Oates, and Carly Simon.

Just two years after the formation of Arista, Davis held his first Pre-Grammy Gala. Initially, an intimate invite-only celebration of music held the evening prior to the Grammy Awards, the Pre-Grammy Gala quickly became the hottest ticket of the year, rivaling Swifty Lazar's infamous Oscar parties for elegance, prestige, and star power. A glittering event, which celebrates its 48th anniversary in 2024, Davis' Pre-Grammy Gala consistently draws the biggest and most powerful names in music, film, television, sports, politics and corporate America. It is renowned historically for unique musical performances and one-night-only duets, all personally selected and curated by Davis himself. The Pre-Grammy Gala will be the subject of *The Greatest Party Ever*, a feature documentary being produced by the mega-hot Jesse Collins.

Arista's Nashville division, started in 1988, quickly became the talk of the industry with the discovery of a stellar lineup of stars led by Alan Jackson, Brooks & Dunn, Diamond Rio, Pam Tillis, and Brad Paisley. With over 150 major industry awards, Arista Nashville set the pace for country music.

Analogous to his agreement with Gamble & Huff in the '70s, Davis made his agreement with L.A. Reid and Babyface to form LaFace Records in October 1989. During this time, LaFace built an outstanding roster of hitmaking artists including TLC, Toni Braxton, Usher, OutKast, and Pink.

In 1994, Davis and producer/entrepreneur Sean "Puffy" Combs entered into a 50/50 joint venture that resulted in the creation of Bad Boy Records with an artist roster that grew to include Notorious B.I.G., Faith Evans, Mase, 112, and, of course, Puffy Combs. Along with LaFace Records, Bad Boy became the most successful Hip-Hop and Rap label of the '90s, with a shelf full of Grammy, Soul Train, and other industry awards. Bad Boy amassed sales of more than 12 million albums in its first three years, including five RIAA platinum and multi-platinum titles and ten RIAA gold.

Throughout the '90s, Arista staked its place in music history time and time again. Specifically, superstars such as Whitney Houston, Santana, Monica, Sarah McLachlan, and Deborah Cox broke records with their long-running chart-topping positions. In fact, Arista carved its niche as the only record label in the Soundscan era (whose tracking began in May 1991) to occupy the top three spots on Billboard's Hot 100 at one time. This occurred for a five-week period in 1995, when TLC's "Waterfalls" held strong at #1, while Monica's "Don't Take It Personal" and "One More Chance" by Notorious B.I.G. alternated at the second and third position. Arista later staked its claim to the top three positions on Billboard's Hot R&B chart in February 1999 with "Heartbreak Hotel" by Whitney Houston, "Angel Of Mine" by Monica, and "Nobody's Supposed To Be Here" by Deborah Cox, which stayed at #1 for a history-making 14 weeks. All three singles were executive produced by Clive Davis.

The nine-time Grammy winning album, *Supernatural*, sold over 26 million copies worldwide, produced the #1 hits "Smooth" (which to this day is the second highest single in history) and "Maria Maria" (#1 record on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles for 12 weeks), marked the reunion of Carlos Santana and Clive Davis and the two accepted, as producers, the Grammy for Best Album of The Year.

Also, in 2000, Davis was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as the only non-performer along with other legends such as Eric Clapton, Earth, Wind & Fire, and James Taylor. Almost simultaneously, it was announced that the celebrated Arista chief would be the recipient of the Trustees Lifetime Achievement award by NARAS at the Grammy Awards.

The landmark year continued when NBC Television broadcast a two-hour primetime special saluting Arista Records and Clive Davis entitled *25 Years Of #1 Hits: Arista Records Anniversary Celebration* featuring performances by Santana, Whitney Houston, Aretha Franklin, Toni Braxton, Puff Daddy, Annie Lennox, Sarah McLachlan, Alan Jackson, Barry Manilow, Brooks & Dunn, Kenny G, Patti Smith, Monica, and many others. This once-in-a-lifetime concert special benefited AmFAR, City Of Hope, and T.J. Martell Foundation.

In August 2000, Davis began a new phase in his career, announcing the formation of J Records. The label quickly became the buzz of the industry with platinum success story after success story, beginning with Alicia Keys whose debut album



Clive Davis Pre-Grammy Gala artist group portraits from People Magazine in 2009

Songs In A Minor sold over 10 million copies and swept the Grammys. Her second album, *The Diary of Alicia Keys*, debuted at #1 and has since sold over 8 million copies worldwide.

J Records emerged as a dominant music force with chart topping albums by Maroon 5 whose debut album sold over 10 million copies worldwide, Annie Lennox, Luther Vandross, and Rod Stewart, whose five *Great American Songbook* Volumes returned him to the top of the charts selling over 18 million copies worldwide, with all five volumes being co-produced by Davis.

Davis' passion for music, though, is matched by a passion for helping his fellow man. The recipient of many humanitarian honors from organizations such as the T.J. Martell Foundation, the Anti-Defamation League, and the American Cancer Society, Davis began his tireless efforts in the battle against AIDS in 1985. One of the foremost leaders in the battle against the disease, Davis has spearheaded the donation of millions of dollars to AIDS charities over the past 15 years. In early 1990, it was Davis who stepped in to save the faltering *Rock In A Hard Place* AIDS benefit show. With the resources of 15 years of star Arista talent, Davis decided to turn the company's 15th anniversary concert into a benefit. Featuring a stellar lineup of stars from the worlds of music, television and film, *That's What Friends Are For: Arista's 15th Anniversary Concert Benefit* took place in March 1990 at New York's Radio City Music Hall. The event raised another \$2 million to fight AIDS.

In 1995, Davis was once again named Humanitarian of the Year by the T.J. Martell Foundation, the first ever to receive this honor twice. And in 1998, Clive Davis was bestowed a Humanitarian Award from the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR), the nation's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to the support of HIV/AIDS research. In celebration, an affair which also recognized the

humanitarian efforts of Barbara Walters and Tom Hanks, took place where a dazzling array of Arista superstars including Whitney Houston and Sean "Puffy" Combs performed in honor of their friend and label head.

In 2002, Mary Schmidt Campbell, dean of the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, and Clive Davis, announced a \$5 million gift by Davis to the School for the creation of a new Department of Recorded Music. The Clive Davis Department of Recorded Music is the first of its kind to offer a four-year, degree-granting undergraduate program that recognizes the creative producer as an artist in his own right and musical recording itself as a creative medium. That same year, Davis was saluted by the New York Landmarks Conservatory as a "Living Landmark" along with Barbara Cook, Peter Martins, and Mike Wallace, and he also received the coveted NARAS Heroes Award. The Heroes Award honors outstanding individuals whose creative talents and accomplishments cross all musical boundaries and who are integral to the vitality of the music community.

In June 2003, the National Academy of Popular Music/Songwriters Hall of Fame, the organization dedicated to recognizing the work and lives of those composers and lyricists who create popular music around the world, made Davis the recipient of its 2003 Hitmaker Award, awarded the previous year to Garth Brooks.

In 2008, Davis was appointed Chief Creative Officer for all of Sony Music Entertainment, a change in operational responsibility, but an expansion of the artists he would now creatively be responsible for.

In 2010, NARAS announced that it will name the prestigious state of the art theater inside the Grammy Museum the "Clive Davis Theater."

In 2011, New York University awarded an Honorary PhD of Fine Arts to Clive Davis. Also in

2011, Davis made an additional gift of \$5 million, expanding the Department of Recorded Music into an Institute. The additional support and elevation in status will continue to make it possible to recruit additional stellar working professionals as faculty, establish a generous scholarship fund, and support programs to recruit the best and the brightest young talent from around the world, thus securing the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music recognition as a global leader in producing talent for the music industry.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Davis was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of New York University, where he received his BA magna cum laude, and he graduated with honors from Harvard Law School.

Where did your passion for the music industry develop?

If you told me when I was in college or in law school, or even during the first five years after law school, that my career would be influenced by and inspired by music, I would not have believed it. I had no inkling and no thought about a career in music. You need some lucky breaks in life, and along with a few challenges, I must say that I have had my share of lucky breaks. The first law firm that I worked at dissolved because their major client was bought by another company, and I had to look for a new law firm to join. I had shunned the bigger law firms even though I qualified for the *Law Review* at Harvard, and joined Rosenman, Colin, Kaye, Petschek, and Freund, and one of their clients was Columbia Records. An alumnus of the firm had become Chief Lawyer for Columbia Records, and he was going to assume a new role as the Head of International for Columbia Records. He reached out to our law firm and asked who was doing non-litigation work which was me. I was making \$11,000 and I knew at the time that my future opportunities with the law firm were limited because I did not have any moneyed contacts – my parents died when I was 18, I had \$4,000 to my name, my friends were as they say, "ordinary people," so I would most likely spend my career as a servant lawyer.

I had very young children, a boy and a girl, and the job offer was for \$25,000 and included a guarantee that I would become chief counsel within a year, which was a major attraction. These factors led to my decision to join Columbia Records. It may not have seemed that the record business would be a good fit for someone who wore khaki pants and tweed sports coats and came from Ivy League schools, but it was not well known that I had grown up on the streets of Brooklyn, went to public schools, received a scholarship in order to attend NYU – I grew up in a melting pot.

What have been the keys to your leadership and success in the music industry?

I think it is a combination of factors. I found with that lucky break to join Columbia Records that I had a natural gift that I never knew I possessed – I had a natural gift for understanding contemporary pop music. Although I could not read music or play an instrument, when I heard songs I just naturally knew if it had the ingredients



Clive Davis Pre-Grammy Gala artist group portraits from The Hollywood Reporter/Billboard in 2020

to be a hit song or a hit record. Another factor was that I trusted my instinct which led me to sign Janis Joplin, Chicago, Santana, Aerosmith, Earth, Wind & Fire, and many others. I just instinctively knew what to look for and feel for and what to project as to artists that would have long careers. The artists that I have worked with have all had decades long careers. I also have a work ethic that continues to this day when I do not really need to work, but the reality is that I do not know how to do anything else.

The best advice I was ever given in my life was from my mother. When I was 12 years old, I was a great student and loved reading books. She told me that while she loved the fact that I was succeeding academically in the basic subjects in school, I needed to get out and know people. You need to develop people strength and common sense and learn about the ideas and attitudes of people, which only comes from getting out and being with people. The advice was that while it is great to be a scholar, you don't want to be an ivory tower. You also need to be a people person. That has been extremely valuable throughout my career.

What are your views on the state of the music industry today?

It is far better today than it was ten years ago. Since I was fortunate to get a scholarship to go to school, when I was able to give back, I chose education. I created the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music at NYU that is the first program of its kind to provide professional business and artistic training toward a BFA in Recorded Music. The Institute has more applicants than ever before. Students who enroll have a wide range of aspirations, whether it be to become a CEO of a record label, a music producer, a performing artist, songwriter, publisher, social entrepreneur, tech innovator, or music journalist.

In the music industry, the pendulum swings and today the focus is on Hip-Hop with Kendrick Lamar, Drake, Future, Jay Z and many other great talents. But where is the next Bruce Springsteen? Where is the next Bob Dylan? Where is the next Aretha Franklin? Whitney Houston? I hope that as the pendulum continues to swing, we find

amazing artists across all genres that have long careers in the music industry.

Where did you develop your passion for philanthropy?

It developed when I realized that I could not go to NYU without a scholarship, and I could not go to Harvard Law School without a scholarship. I was so grateful to have been able to have these opportunities, which is why education has been such a focus for me. I also wanted to support the study of contemporary music – all kinds of music – because it should all be legitimized. This is what I have done at NYU Tisch, and I am very proud of the impact that the Institute has made.

How important has it been to not only have a business relationship with your clients, but also to build personal relationships?

I would put it in a different way. It was not a pure business relationship – it involved personal connections. It was not just about selling, promoting, and merchandising – it was about helping these artists achieve their dreams. An example is Patti Smith – she was a rare talent, and she had her dream of success. It was important for me to have a personal connection with Patti to understand her dream.

My family is my family, and this will always be my top priority. But my friends are my friends, and these personal connections are very meaningful. If you are fortunate enough in life to charter a yacht, it is a lot more fun to have ten other people that you like with you on that yacht rather than being there by yourself. Every artist that I have worked with can reach me at any time, and I have always placed a high value on friendship.

Last year when we celebrated my milestone birthday, whether it was Patti Smith or Barry Manilow or Dionne Warwick, Kenny G, Art Garfunkel, Alicia Keys or Earth, Wind & Fire – they all came which was very touching for me to know that I played such a meaningful role in their careers.

How do you define success?

In my life in music, I feel success when artists who signed 50 or 60 years ago are still

headlining today. I was never interested in signing a continuum of one-hit wonders or artists that had short careers. Success is seeing artists that I work with go on to receive Kennedy Center Honors. It is about staying relevant and becoming a life-long institution. I measure success by the power of songs that I believed in and seeing the way those songs still move people. When you see an artist like Barry Manilow who still today packs a stadium and everyone knows every word to every song, and the songs have such meaning to his fans – the same with Whitney – that is success.

Are you surprised to see the rise and impact of singing competitions on television?

I am happy to say that I am not surprised. When I was involved at the beginning of American Idol, the artists came out of that competition with their singing talent being discovered and a ready audience. When I think about the early years with Carrie Underwood, Jennifer Hudson, Kelly Clarkson, Fantasia, Clay Aiken, Ruben Studdard – every album of the winner of the show became multi-platinum. I am proud of believing in what Simon Fuller and Simon Cowell came up with, and being able to help provide an opportunity to these artists on the show. We had enormous success during the years that I was involved with American Idol.

Will you discuss the new documentary that you are developing?

I am making a documentary of the greatest hits from the Pre-Grammy party that I have hosted before the Grammys since 1976. This party is the hottest ticket in town, and we put together an amazing collection of artists who sing with each other – it is a unique event. The documentary will capture what has made this annual event so special and why leaders across all industries attend. This is a party where you will have the opportunity to meet people that you would otherwise not have a chance to meet. It is a priority for me to capture the essence of this annual party and how it showcases the best of music.

Are you able to take moments to reflect on your accomplishments and appreciate what you have achieved?

As I said, since so many of my discoveries have each lasted for decades, I am so proud of that. I am also proud of those artists' careers I have collaborated with to extend their professional life like Dionne, Aretha, Rod Stewart, Luther Vandross, Annie Lennox, Carly Simon, and more. I didn't discover them, but I collaborated with them to extend their careers which continued to showcase their timeless genius. But let me add that even at the height of success, since I had lost my parents as a teenager, the priority of my family has been at the forefront. We always take vacations together – my children, their spouses, and the grandchildren. I love to travel and have always found a few weeks during the year to take trips to understand the world better and to learn about different cultures. I have a very strong work ethic, but I also have a respect for personal and family relationships. When you are on the way up in your career, you need to be driven, but a message I would give to your readers is to work hard, but also take time for family, personal development, and be sure to see the world. ●