



The Man With the Platinum Ears

After more than four decades, music
maestro Clive Davis still hears the hits

BY JASON HOLLANDER / GAL '07

Women tucked daisies into their hair. Men frolicked in kaftans. Both wore beads around their necks and nothing on their feet. For three days in June of 1967, the Monterey International Pop Festival was a coming-out party for the hippie culture that would soon transform the country. Set inside a converted livestock pen, nearly 100,000 flower children grooved to dozens of acts, including a few that most had never heard before—a Texas girl named Joplin, a guy from Seattle named Hendrix, and a British band called the Who.

Standing amidst this oasis of peace, love, and hallucination was the perfectly sober, 35-year-old, brand-new president of Columbia Records. Smartly dressed in khaki pants and a tennis sweater, he'd come just to observe. Columbia wasn't big on rock music; it was known for folk acts and Broadway cast recordings. Yet almost instantly, the *New Yorker* was transfixed—he'd never experienced anything like this back in Greenwich Village, let alone Brooklyn. "Socially, those people could not have been more welcoming, kind, communal, pure, innocent, and warm," recalls Clive J. Davis, now chief creative officer of Sony BMG. "Musically, on the other hand, there was a revolution right in front of us. It was vibrating. It was heavier and harder. It was electrifying."

Davis (WSC '53, HON '11) immediately signed Big Brother and the Holding Company, and lead singer Janis Joplin was so excited that she famously proposed they should "consummate" the contract (he graciously declined). More acts followed, and Columbia quickly transformed into one of rock's heavyweight labels. Monterey was like a gateway drug for Davis, now 79, leading to decades and decades of other musical highs. As head of Columbia—and then Arista, J Records, and BMG U.S.—he would nurture the careers of Carlos Santana, the Grateful Dead, Billy Joel, Aretha Franklin, Bruce Springsteen, Herbie Hancock, Rod Stewart, Prince, Aerosmith, Whitney Houston, Pink Floyd,

Sarah McLachlan, Luther Vandross, Patti Smith, Usher, and Alicia Keys, just to name a few.

The heralded "magic ears"—with which Davis has produced or executive-produced nearly 60 albums—bridge wildly distinct genres, and have weathered the industry's recent and rocky digital metamorphosis. Staying visible all the while has helped him stay current. His annual pre-Grammy Awards party remains a hotter ticket than the Grammys itself. And Davis has been a fixture on the ratings juggernaut *American Idol* since its inception. Of his four Grammy Awards, two have come for mentoring *Idol* winners—he produced 2008's Best R&B Album, the self-titled *Jennifer Hudson*, and 2005's Best Pop Vocal Album, *Breakaway*, by Kelly Clarkson. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2000, and the theater at the Grammy Museum in downtown Los Angeles was renamed the Clive Davis Theater in 2011.

It's a lot of success for a guy who plays no instrument, has no musical training, and whose exposure was originally limited to the crooners on WNEW's *Make Believe Ballroom*. In fact, after graduating from Harvard Law School in 1956, Davis was for years content to work behind the scenes at a big Midtown firm, which happened to count CBS as one of its clients. "I was drafting contracts, doing tax and estate planning, nonlitigation work,"

he explains. "I never thought I would be doing anything else." One day, a former colleague hired away by CBS was looking to bring in an expert in contracts. Turned out Davis was the man for the job. And suddenly, at 28, he was sitting in a slick new office as assistant counsel for CBS's subsidiary Columbia Records, where he soon helped represent them in a crucial record-club monopoly case filed by the Federal Trade Commission. This gave him vast exposure to the industry's inner workings and brought him into the good graces of Columbia President Goddard Lieberson, whom Davis would succeed in 1967 after another heir to the title unexpectedly relocated to San Diego.

The journey from studious lawyer to music rainmaker was so full of twists that Davis still smiles when remembering the opportunities that unfolded early in his career. But he's just as quick to clarify that he has never relied on serendipity. "I stand far more for preparedness and mastery of one's craft, and not leaving things to luck," he says. That's one of the reasons he helped create the Clive Davis Department of Recorded Music at NYU—where he serves as chief adviser—in 2003. The department, which was recently elevated to an institute after a second \$5 million gift by Davis, is one of the first to offer students training to become creative music entrepreneurs (and, maybe, the next Clive).

Investing in young talent inevitably

hits a personal note for Davis, who is an active member of the Tisch Dean's Council. He was just a freshman on scholarship at NYU when both of his parents died from natural causes within six months of each other. Despite the physical and emotional toll of this loss, the Crown Heights na-

tive kept his focus—even after moving in with his newly married sister in Bayside, Queens, and doubling his commute time to school. Dropping out “was never an option,” he says. “Never crossed my mind.” His parents—his dad was an electrician and salesman—hadn't gone to college, and

Davis knew that education, and eventually the pursuit of law, would be “the vehicle to allow me to rise above my station.” Back then, the notion of becoming a music deity would have sounded as bizarre as the thunderous guitar chords he first heard that summer in Monterey. But rise he did.

Conversation with Clive...

NYU Alumni Magazine recently sat down with Davis in his corner office at the top of the Sony BMG building in Manhattan, where he reflected on his more than 40 years in the music business.

With no training, how did you develop this ability to pick hits?

I have no idea. Honestly. My musical ear—to the extent that I don't read music—I have no idea where it comes from. For me it's been the discovery of a gift I've had great rewards from, as well as tremendous fun.

In those early years, did you ever doubt yourself?

I like to doubt. Worry and fear of failure, I think, are very healthy for the hard-to-grasp concept of: What song is going to be a hit? I've always said, “I get paid a lot of money to worry.” A lot comes from being willing, able, and ready to hone your craft with the expectation of failure, and how you're going to overcome it.

You booked a very young, inhibited Bruce Springsteen on a huge stage in Los Angeles to encourage him to move around more. Did you foresee him developing as a performer to the extent that he did?

With any artist that I discovered, it's always a revelation when they go from the young person in front of you to a household name all over the world. I never knew Bruce would have

a hit record; I saw him as an emotionally affecting future poet laureate. He's so different [now] than he was when he auditioned, which was stationary and unanimated. The idea of asking him to make use of a big stage was just common sense. I didn't know that he'd become the best live rock 'n' roll performer that I've probably ever seen.

Often you're surprised with the true greats with how they develop on their own. Alicia [Keys] learned that when she started she was too much at the piano. She learned the need to get up. To headline at Madison Square Garden, you couldn't sit all night. You had to show you could take command of the stage.

How do you manage so many artists with such different needs?

Basically you're an executive and you do whatever has to be done. What has to be done in the discovery of a Patti Smith is to let her be. You let the Patti Smiths, the Alicia Keys, the Bruce Springsteens of the world be, because you're signing them for their creativity and uniqueness. You just present a very friendly environment so that they can create.

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When you're dealing with artists who need great material, who don't write, I've honed my talent enough that I could participate as their creative partner. I could do that for Aretha Franklin. The last five years of her Atlantic contract she had no hits, and so she left them. And the fact that we were able to have hits [in 1985] with "Freeway of Love" and "Who's Zooming Who"...I'm very proud of that.

Are you frustrated with those who question your abilities because of your age?

It's always a surprise to me when I think of my age, because I don't feel my age. When I deal with artists like Swizz Beatz, Alicia Keys, younger artists...the years peel away because of the commonality of loving what we do, and the music, and supplementing each other's knowledge. It's exhilarating.

The only time it frustrated me was when there was an attempt to say, "Move on to a corporate, overseeing position" at a time when my successes were both so gratifying and so obvious. The fact that over the last few years I found [the song] "Bleeding Love" [2007] for Leona Lewis and we sold 8.5 million albums, all the years with *American Idol*, working with Rod Stewart on the *Great American Songbook* series, coming up with concepts for Barry Manilow so he could return to No. 1 [in 2006]...I still get great pleasure from it.

Working in hip-hop is a long way from working with Barry Manilow. What was it like creating the hip-hop label LaFace back in 1989?

I've always tried to supplement what I could do with the greater expertise of others. Knowing that R&B music was changing and that hip-hop was arriving, I turned to LaFace records to develop TLC and Outkast, Usher and Pink. But then I knew that there

was a purer form of hip-hop and rap. And I met [in 1994] with Puffy [Sean Combs] and was impressed tremendously by him. His attraction to me was that he did not just want hip-hop and rap stratified into a corner; he wanted to change Top 40. And we were the most successful exponents of Top 40 hits. So I bet on him, and [Antonio] L.A. Reid, and Babyface [Kenneth Edmonds].

Did you ever feel out of place in that arena?

I never changed myself. I'm still mystified because the [hip-hop] environment was different then, and yet I never hired a bodyguard. When I think back, it was probably misguided, God knows, with all the deaths and shootings. But I never walked into a club with a bodyguard, and I was always treated with great respect.

To me it was about the music, and how to take these records that Puffy was delivering and change the face of Top 40. And when we did, it was very, very gratifying. Because the principle was the same even though the environment was different.

Can you imagine a time when you'll stop making music?

I enjoy doing it if the report cards are good and if my health is good. I'll not be detoured by others.... To this day I stay prepared—by listening to as much as I can, and by educating myself as best as I can. But when the report cards aren't good, I wouldn't want to do this anymore.

There's always a certain amount of fun when you realize: Okay, I am a senior citizen and I'm still doing it. It's fun...showing how long an artist's career can last, reinvigorating great artists...you get a tremendous pleasure that they're not dismissed because of their age. It also applies to myself. I feel a tremendous amount of pleasure showing how long an executive's career can last. ■



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