



David Geffen

BY ANTHONY DeCURTIS



David Geffen once asked Ahmet Ertegun about the key to being successful in the music industry. "If you're lucky, you bump into a genius," the founder of Atlantic Records and cofounder of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame explained, "and a genius will make you rich in the music business." Geffen took that advice to heart throughout his long, distinguished career, and that's one of the reasons why it's especially appropriate for him to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame this year as a recipient of the Ahmet Ertegun Award.

Good luck never hurts, of course, but as Ertegun certainly knew and most likely believed that Geffen understood, as well, bumping into geniuses isn't exclusively a matter of luck. Recognizing genius and knowing how to nurture it and help it make its impact in the world requires a kind of genius in itself. Geffen possesses that gift—the ability to move skillfully in the world of commerce in a way that allows genius to achieve its full expression as well as its greatest possible degree of success.

But, again, that gift isn't the result of magic. It is a gift that comes by dint of hard work, as Geffen learned growing up in Brooklyn, where his mother ran a small clothing business, first in a studio next door to the family's one-bedroom apartment, and then in a rented store on 13th Avenue. She eventually did well enough to buy the building, perhaps providing Geffen's first, though hardly last, lesson in the value of real estate. "My mother in her own tiny, little way was entrepreneurial," Geffen told the *New York Times Magazine* in 1985. "Everything that I've ever applied in my life, I learned hanging around

her store. She worked there all day long, and there was a kitchen in the back where we ate dinner, so I grew up learning my mother's ideas about integrity and business and negotiating. It never occurred to me I'd be anything but a businessman."

From the start, Geffen approached business with the tenacity he witnessed in his mother, but also with a creative flair appropriate to the worlds of music, theater, and film in which he would initially make his mark. In many ways, his career would thrive on the effective combination of those virtues: a retailer's insistent and necessary appreciation for every detail of a negotiation and the importance of the personal touch, coupled with a visionary's sense of the larger context in which every small decision must be made.

"I deal in dreamers/And telephone screamers," Joni Mitchell wrote about Geffen in "Free Man in Paris," summing up the contrast in what is quite possibly the only great song ever inspired by a personal manager.

Geffen's career in entertainment famously began in the mailroom at the William Morris Agency, and before long he rose to the status of agent at the company. In the sixties and early seventies, the music industry offered the greatest opportunities for young people eager to break new ground in entertainment, and that's where Geffen headed. He formed a partnership with his friend Elliot Roberts, whom he had met at William Morris, and among his early successes were Laura Nyro and Crosby, Stills and Nash.

It was David Crosby who recommended Geffen to a young singer-songwriter whom he had met on the Los Angeles music scene: Jackson Browne. "He's an agent,

"I deal in dreamers and telephone screamers," Joni Mitchell wrote about Geffen in "Free Man in Paris."



Geffen with his first client Laura Nyro, 1969



Out west: Elliot Roberts, Graham Nash, and Geffen (from left)

OPPOSITE: David Geffen in 1973



Warner Bros.' top brass in 1974: Jerry Wexler, Mo Ostin, Nesuhi Ertegun, David Geffen, Ahmet Ertegun, and Joe Smith (from left) at the Beverly Hills Hotel



Geffen confers with Stephen Stills.



Joni Mitchell and her muse

but he's one of us," Crosby told Browne. Geffen believed in Browne's music, but when he attempted to get Ahmet Ertegun to sign him to Atlantic Records, Ertegun instead suggested that Geffen form his own label and sign the singer himself. Geffen did just that, and Asylum Records was born, with Geffen once again teaming up with Elliot Roberts.

The title of the label, of course, was a brilliant pun. Asylum, on the one hand, was created to offer a safe haven for artists, one built on the promise of creative freedom. In a testament to that spirit, singer-songwriter JD Souther would later say that "Asylum was the only record label I ever really loved." But the label's name was also a sly nod to the collection of California eccentrics and willful artistic pioneers that Asylum housed — beginning with the irrepressibly outspoken man at the top.



Good times: Cher, Geffen, and Steve Rubell, 1978

As it happened, Jackson Browne turned out to be a significant first signing not only because of his outstanding talent and eventual commercial success, or because he became one of Geffen's lifelong personal friends. (To this day, Browne includes a generous thank-you to Geffen on every album he releases.) But Browne also proved to be one of Asylum's most valuable talent scouts, guiding the Eagles, as well as other important artists, to the label.

Asylum became one of the hottest companies in the music business, and Geffen's career in the music industry would evolve over the years into Elektra/Asylum, Geffen Records, the David Geffen Company (DGC), and, in partnership with Steven Spielberg and Jeffrey Katzenberg, DreamWorks SKG. Along the way, Geffen would play an important role in the careers of Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Cher, Bob Dylan, Sonic Youth, John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Guns n' Roses, and Nirvana.

Increasingly, however, music became just one among many of Geffen's creative endeavors, and eventually the entertainment industry itself had to take a place alongside other, more personal – and, in some ways, more public – concerns. As he became one of the richest men in America, Geffen amassed a peerless collection of post-World War II American art. A publicly declared gay man, he has made AIDS organizations and research one of the centerpieces of a philanthropic activism that has elevated the David Geffen Foundation to its stature as one of the leading charitable institutions in the world. During the 2008 election campaign, Geffen's endorsement of Barack Obama and fundraising on his behalf was among the pivotal moments of Obama's rise to the presidency. And, as journalism struggles to survive the massive changes that



Geffen, Liza Minnelli, Michael Jackson, and Quincy Jones, 1983

digital culture has wrought, talk persists about Geffen's interest in purchasing the *New York Times*.

Ever since a health scare (which fortunately turned out to be the result of a misdiagnosis) sidelined Geffen in the late seventies, he has frequently been known to dismiss projects that bore or frustrate him with the expression "Life is too short." Having accomplished enough for several lifetimes, he is now either contemplating his next dramatic move or settling into a period of enjoying his life free from the travails of business. It is characteristic of Geffen that only he knows for certain which path he has chosen – and characteristic of his life at the center of the cultural world that so many people have their eyes on him, wondering what he will decide. ♪



The DreamWorks triumvirate: Geffen, Jeffrey Katzenberg, and Steven Spielberg, 1995