



DON KIRSHNER

R O B E R T K . O E R M A N N

HIS DISCOVERIES CREATED A SLEW OF CLASSICS

Few people have stamped the music of their era as indelibly as impresario Don Kirshner. As a music publisher, he discovered some of the greatest rock & roll songwriters in history. The creator of *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert*, he gave national television exposure to a generation of rock greats. He was one of the first independent record producers. And long before "cross marketing" and "multiple platforms" were buzzwords, this visionary understood the value of coordinating management, publishing, and production, as well as promoting music via film and television.

A nurturer of talent, Kirshner influenced the songwriting of Carole King, Gerry Goffin, Neil Sedaka, Barry Mann, Cynthia Weil, Neil Diamond, Tommy Boyce, Bobby Hart, Bobby Darin, and David Gates. He launched the hitmaking careers of such diverse artists as Tony Orlando, the Monkees, and Kansas, as well as King

and Sedaka. "He knew what it took to make a hit record," says Rich Podolsky, Kirshner's biographer. "It's why *Time* magazine called him 'the Man with the Golden Ear.'"

The son of a tailor, Don Kirshner was born in 1934 in New York City. From an early age, he had an unerring knack for spotting talent. His first discovery was a student at the Bronx High School of Science, Bobby Darin. They began writing songs together in 1955. Darin and Kirshner were both self-confident hustlers, and throughout 1956-57, they placed their songs with such artists as LaVern Baker, the Coasters, Bobby Short, and Connie Francis. In versions by both Marlene Paula and Little Lambsie Penn, their "I Want to Spend Christmas with Elvis" was reviewed by *Billboard*. The team's most prominent song was "Wear My Ring": Recorded by Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps, it rose to Number Thirteen on the charts as the B side of "Lotta Lovin'" in 1957.



After Darin's singing career took off in 1958, Kirshner formed a song publishing company with Al Nevins, a respected guitarist and the producer of the pop group the Three Suns, whose many hits included 1947's "Peg o' My Heart." Born in 1915, Nevins had a heart condition that caused him to retire from performing. He also had an infusion of cash, after the Platters transformed his 1944 composition, "Twilight Time," into a chart-topping, electrifying teen anthem in early 1958.

Combining their first names, the two formed Aldon Music at 1650 Broadway, near the famed Brill Building. Nevins was the company's formal face for the music

THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN EAR



FROM TOP Don Kirshner (right) with first songwriting partner Bobby Darin; hanging with the Brill Building crowd: Jack Keller, Artie Levine, Lou Adler, Al Nevins, Sheila Kirshner, Don Kirshner, Emil La Viola, Morris Levy, Howard Greenfield (back row, from left), Barry Mann, Cynthia Weil, Gerry Goffin, Carole King, and Neil Sedaka (front row, from left).

industry. The streetwise Kirshner related to the writers. A week after Aldon opened, fledgling songwriters Neil Sedaka, 18, and Howard Greenfield, 21, came in to audition with ten tunes. "Don Kirshner became very excited," Sedaka recalled in his 1982 autobiography, *Laughter in the Rain*. "He saw potential and made no effort to hide his enthusiasm. Nevins, a man with a very cool, suave, European personality, was more reserved."

Aldon signed the two young writers, and inked an artist-management contract with Sedaka as well. Kirshner, still friendly with Connie Francis, took Sedaka



Kirshner with the hitmaking Archies—Betty, Archie, Reggie, Veronica, and Jughead (from left)

and Greenfield to her New Jersey home. She chose their song “Stupid Cupid” for her next single, and Aldon had its first hit.

By the end of 1958, Nevins had arranged an artist contract for Sedaka with RCA, and the youngster was on the charts with “The Diary.” The next year, new signee Barry Mann, 19, garnered a 1959 Aldon hit when the Diamonds recorded his “She Say (Oom Dooby Doom).” Sedaka and Greenfield created two Top Ten successes: “Frankie” for Connie Francis and “Oh! Carol” for Sedaka. The latter was inspired by 17-year-old Carol Klein (soon to be Carole King), then collaborating with Paul Simon, also 17. Billed as the Cousins, the duo cut the demo for the Passions’ 1959 doo-wop classic “Just to Be With You.” King, paired with her husband, Gerry Goffin, signed with Aldon the following year, and Simon became an Aldon demo singer.

The only proven writer the company signed in those early years was Jack Keller, who, at 19, had cowritten a 1957 Top Ten hit for the Chordettes, “Just Between You and Me.” In 1960, he gave Aldon its first Number One records, “Everybody’s Somebody’s Fool” and “My Heart Has a Mind of Its Own,” both sung by Francis; Keller’s cowriter was Greenfield, a collaboration Kirshner suggested while

Sedaka was touring behind such hits as “Calendar Girl.”

“We were kids with dreams,” recalled Jack Keller. “By 1958, I was writing the new thing, rock & roll. Don Kirshner was the one who realized what was in the future. He hired all of us. Everybody was a teenager, writing for teens. He called every writer at night at 10:30 to say, ‘Goodnight,’ and ‘What did you write today?’”

“Don Kirshner didn’t just buy their songs like other publishers, he helped teach them how to write them,” observes Podolsky. “Kirshner found these kids, believed in their talent, and paid them \$50 a week when no one else would give them the time of day. He was available to them all day, all night, 24/7. He was always patient and always listened. He also taught them to work with each other and help each other.”

Barry Mann stayed on a winning streak with “Footsteps” by Steve Lawrence in 1960, then “I Love How You Love Me” by the Paris Sisters and “Who Put the Bomp,” which he recorded himself, in 1961. That same year, Mann married his new collaborator, Cynthia Weil. The two had their first hit together with “Bless You,” by 16-year-old Tony Orlando, produced by Nevins and Kirshner (as were Mann and Sedaka).

In 1961, Goffin and King broke through with a pair

of Number Ones, "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" and "Take Good Care of My Baby." Meanwhile, Sedaka and Greenfield continued to create hits for both Francis (her movie theme, "Where the Boys Are") and Sedaka ("Little Devil" and "Happy Birthday, Sweet Sixteen").

"At Aldon Music we wrote every day for at least five hours," Sedaka recalled. "Each team had its own cubicle

containing a piano . . . We then played our songs for each other in Don Kirshner's big executive office. We lived and breathed music." Cynthia Weil added, "It was a sibling rivalry, with Kirshner as our father figure. And we all wanted to please him."

In 1962-63, Kirshner's discoveries created a slew of classics. Mann and Weil delivered "Uptown," "On Broadway," "Only in America," and "Blame It on the Bossa Nova." Sedaka and Greenfield wrote "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do." Goffin and King created "Up on the Roof," "Go Away Little Girl," "The Loco-Motion," "Hey Girl," and "One Fine Day." On assignment for Bobby Vee, Goffin and King also penned "It Might as Well Rain Until September." Kirshner liked King's demo so much that he released it on his Dimension Records imprint (it reached Number Three on the U.K. charts). Dimension also issued big hits by the Cookies and Little Eva.

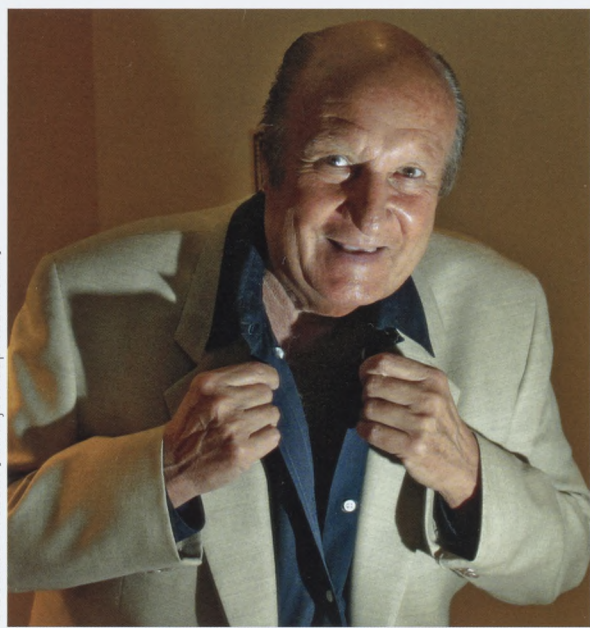
Kirshner and Nevins sold Aldon to Screen Gems in 1963 for more than \$2 million. Nevins' health continued to fail and he died in January 1965. Kirshner became the head of Screen Gems' music division, and his writers went with him. He remained their motivator, psychiatrist, lawyer, parent, and friend; bailed them out when they needed financial help; aided them during medical emergencies; and inspired them to create ever-better songs. Then he placed those songs with top stars, such as Gene Pitney, Brenda Lee, Frank Sinatra, the Animals, Herman's Hermits, the Byrds, Dusty Springfield, the Shirelles, and Aretha Franklin.

As Podolsky writes in his 2012 biography, *Don Kirshner: The Man with the Golden Ear*, "He coaxed

'KIRSHNER [WAS] OUR FATHER FIGURE'



and guided them to write over two hundred hits in five short years, many of which are standards today." In 1964, Sedaka and Greenfield gave their mentor "It Hurts to Be in Love." Goffin and King delivered "I'm Into Something Good." Mann and Weil hit their stride with "We Gotta



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OPPOSITE PAGE With Gerry Goffin and Carole King; with the Monkees: Michael Nesmith, Davy Jones, Micky Dolenz, and Peter Tork (from left), 1966. **THIS PAGE** The Man with the Golden Ear, in 2004.

Get Out of This Place," "I'm Gonna Be Strong," and their monumental "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'." Created for the Righteous Brothers in 1964, the latter has since been recorded by more than 160 artists, and is radio's most played song in history.

Kirshner had wisely hired Lou Adler as Aldon's West Coast representative, for by now the music business had shifted from New York to Los Angeles. Greenfield moved west in 1966, followed by Keller, Sedaka, Mann and Weil, and King and Goffin (the latter of whom divorced in 1968). Toni Wine, David Gates, Tommy Boyce, Bobby Hart, Russ Titelman, John Stewart, and others joined the company.

"A Groovy Kind of Love," "(You're My) Soul and Inspiration," "Kicks," "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman," and more poured from the publisher in 1965–67. The film and television arm of Columbia–Screen Gems provided still more revenue-generating opportunities. Keller was soon put to work penning theme music for such TV series as *Gidget*, *Hazel*, *Bewitched*, *The Monkees*, and *Here Come the Brides*, as well as several movies.

As music supervisor for the Monkees, Kirshner engaged his writers to create the act's string of hits, including "Last Train to Clarksville," "Pleasant Valley Sunday," "Daydream Believer," and "Valleri." He persuaded Neil Diamond

to give him the publishing rights to "I'm a Believer" and "A Little Bit Me, A Little Bit You," which also became Monkees hits. But when the prefab group chafed at Kirshner's musical control, Screen Gems took the band's side, resulting in Kirshner's split with the company.

Kirshner bounced back with the studio-only, TV-cartoon group the Archies. "I want a band that won't talk back," he famously quipped. The 1968–69 Archies hits "Bang-Shang-A-Long," "Jingle Jangle," and the multi-million-selling "Sugar, Sugar" put Kirshner Records on the map. All were written by Jeff Barry and Andy Kim for the new publishing venture, Don Kirshner Music.

Kirshner Records next signed singing actors James Darren and Lisa Hartman, Labelle's Sarah Dash, rocker Didi Stewart, soul balladeer Adam Wade, comeback-bound Sedaka, and the million-selling prog-rock band Kansas, among others. Kirshner-published Kansas hits of the 1970s included "Carry On Wayward Son" and "Dust in the Wind."

By then, Kirshner was into the next and most visible chapter of his colorful life. In 1972, he became the executive producer for ABC-TV's *In Concert* series. The following year, he became host and producer of *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert*. During its 1973–81 run, the show provided a national television platform for more than 450 major talents, including the Eagles, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, David Bowie, Michael Jackson, Elton John, Linda Ronstadt, Bruce Springsteen, Tina Turner, and Rod Stewart. Kirshner also championed comedians, giving early exposure to Steve Martin, Jay Leno, and Billy Crystal, among others. Kirshner was the unlikely MC, with his wooden stage presence, wide-collared leisure suits, and monotonic, Bronx-inflected delivery. Paul Shaffer regularly parodied him on *Saturday Night Live*, which Kirshner loved. In 1977, Kirshner was the music supervisor for the CBS TV series *A Year at the Top*, which starred Shaffer.

Between the *Shindig!/Hullabaloo* era and the rise of MTV, *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert* was the major showcase for rock on national television. The program featured live performances, not lip synching.

In later years, Don Kirshner was active in Rockrena, an online enterprise connecting music-industry professionals with undiscovered rock talent. He died of heart failure in Florida at age 76 on January 17, 2011.

The music Don Kirshner molded is eternal. "On Broadway," "Go Away Little Girl," "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'," "Hey Girl," "One Fine Day," "The Loco-Motion," "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do," "Daydream Believer," "I Love How You Love Me," "My Heart Has a Mind of Its Own," "Up on the Roof," and "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" have all been revived as hits. Throughout his life, Kirshner believed he had published new American classics. This song legacy is proof that he did.