

Clarence Avant
toasts his
breakthrough
success at the
signing of Jimmy
Smith to Verve
Records, 1962.



CLARENCE AVANT

THE BLACK GODFATHER'S LENGTHY AND MULTIFACETED
CAREER IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY IS ALL-ENCOMPASSING.

BY PARKE PUTERBAUGH

Clarence Avant is one of the most revered and influential figures in the music business, but there's no simple answer to the question, *What does he do?*

Hall of Famer Bill Withers, whom Avant discovered and signed, explained: "What he's done is a very unusual story. He puts people together, and they do what they do. How do you put together a life from knowing people? I've never seen him with a tool."

Pro football legend Jim Brown launched his post-NFL acting career with Avant's assistance. He recalled, "I kept hearing about this guy Clarence Avant, but no one seemed to know what his actual official title was."

There's always been a degree of mystery surrounding the man, largely because he's operated behind the scenes as a dealmaker, negotiator, expeditor, orchestrator, fixer, and networking linchpin. Avant's accomplishments and clout go far beyond positions and titles. He didn't make things. *He made things happen.*

So deeply was he entrenched in the boardrooms and backrooms of American popular culture and politics that he acquired the nickname "the Black Godfather." "Clarence Avant is known as the Black Godfather because literally, as a Black man, he was able to do things that were Godfather-like – from the music industry, the sports industry, activism to politics," said Pharrell Williams, who wrote "Letter to My Godfather" for the acclaimed 2019 Netflix documentary about Avant. Its title? *The Black Godfather.*

When one starts to grasp Avant's seemingly all-encompassing reach during the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first – not just in the entertainment industry but also in the spheres of politics, sports, and civil rights – the real question shifts from *What does he do?* to *What hasn't he done?* You might also wonder *Who doesn't he know?* And finally, *How did he do it all?*

Avant's own answer to the last question speaks volumes about a lifetime's worth of drive and determination. "I don't let nothing get in my way about anything that I want to do," he proclaimed with unflappable cool in the documentary.

Quincy Jones made this sage, succinct observation in an issue of *Billboard* devoted to Avant: "Everybody has been by Clarence's desk, if they're smart." That includes a galaxy of musicians and producers – like Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, Sean Combs, Snoop Dogg, and L.A. Reid and Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds – in whose careers he played everything from formal managerial to casual advisory roles. From 1987 to 1989, Avant promoted Michael Jackson's groundbreaking Bad tour – his first without his brothers.

In addition to his many musical connections, Avant has rubbed elbows with some of the highest-ranking politicians of modern times, including presidents Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama and Vice President Kamala Harris. He helped Andrew Young in his successful 1972 bid for Congress as a Black Democrat from Georgia. Among the sports world luminaries he befriended and worked with are Jim Brown, Muhammad Ali, and Hank Aaron. As David Geffen stated in *The Black Godfather*, "If you wanted to get a job in Hollywood, in the record business, or with the studios, Clarence was the guy you went to. And Clarence was the guy who saw you were taken care of and weren't shortchanged."

"The guy's a rock in every way," said former president Bill Clinton. "His advice, per word, is worth more than anyone I ever dealt with."

Clarence Avant was born in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1931, and raised in the nearby community of Climax. The oldest of eight children, he attended segregated schools until he moved to Summit, New Jersey, to



AVANT HAS BEEN TAKING STANDS ON BEHALF OF RIGHTEOUS CAUSES EVERY DAY OF HIS LIFE.



live with an aunt. While managing Teddy Powell's Lounge, a Newark nightclub, he met Little Willie John and became the R&B singer's manager. In the course of those duties, he encountered Joe Glaser, who recognized his talent and became his mentor. The hard-boiled entertainment-industry vet, who founded the American Booking Corporation and managed Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday, took Avant under his wing and schooled him in industry realpolitik. He also gave Avant clients to manage, including Argentinian pianist Lalo Schiffrin, who composed the *Mission: Impossible* theme and more than a hundred film soundtracks, and jazz-blues organist Jimmy Smith, whose many instrumentals included a bona fide chart hit – rare in the jazz world – titled “Walk on the Wild Side.”

Avant moved to Los Angeles, where he became one of the first Black homeowners in Beverly Hills. Through Glaser, he came to understand where real wealth and power lay in the music business. He became a tough negotiator, learning to aim high and often winning.

“If you don't ask, you don't get,” Avant said. “It's all about numbers. Nothing else.”

He learned the value of music publishing and copyrights, and he still tends his Avant Garde and Interior Music catalogs. He also passed along the lessons he'd learned to rising African American entertainers, producers, and executives – and to sports figures and politicians, too.

Just as W.E.B. DuBois promoted the development of a leadership class of African American professionals in the early 1900s, Clarence Avant worked toward similar ends within the entertainment industry in the later twentieth century. He encouraged African Americans to apply for executive positions with music, TV, and film companies and lobbied not only for their hiring but also for fair treatment and just compensation. “Clarence was the bridge from a time when there was no opportunity to a time where doors began to open,” noted former president Barack Obama. “My job, as far as I'm concerned, is to move us forward – period,” said Avant.

On the music side, Avant founded three labels: Venture (with Motown's Mickey Stephenson), Sussex, and Tabu. Venture was short-lived, but Sussex scored big with Motown guitarist Dennis Coffey's funky “Scorpio” and tamer pop fare like Gallery's 1972 smash, “Nice to Be With You.” Avant's crowning achievement was signing Bill Withers, the brilliant singer-songwriter who'd been turned down by virtually every other label. Withers' classics “Ain't No Sunshine,” “Lean on Me,” and “Use Me” appeared on Sussex, as did the gold album *Still Bill*.

“What's the odds of two guys from Slab Fork, West

Virginia, and Climax, North Carolina, making a fuss in Hollywood?” cracked Withers in *The Black Godfather*.

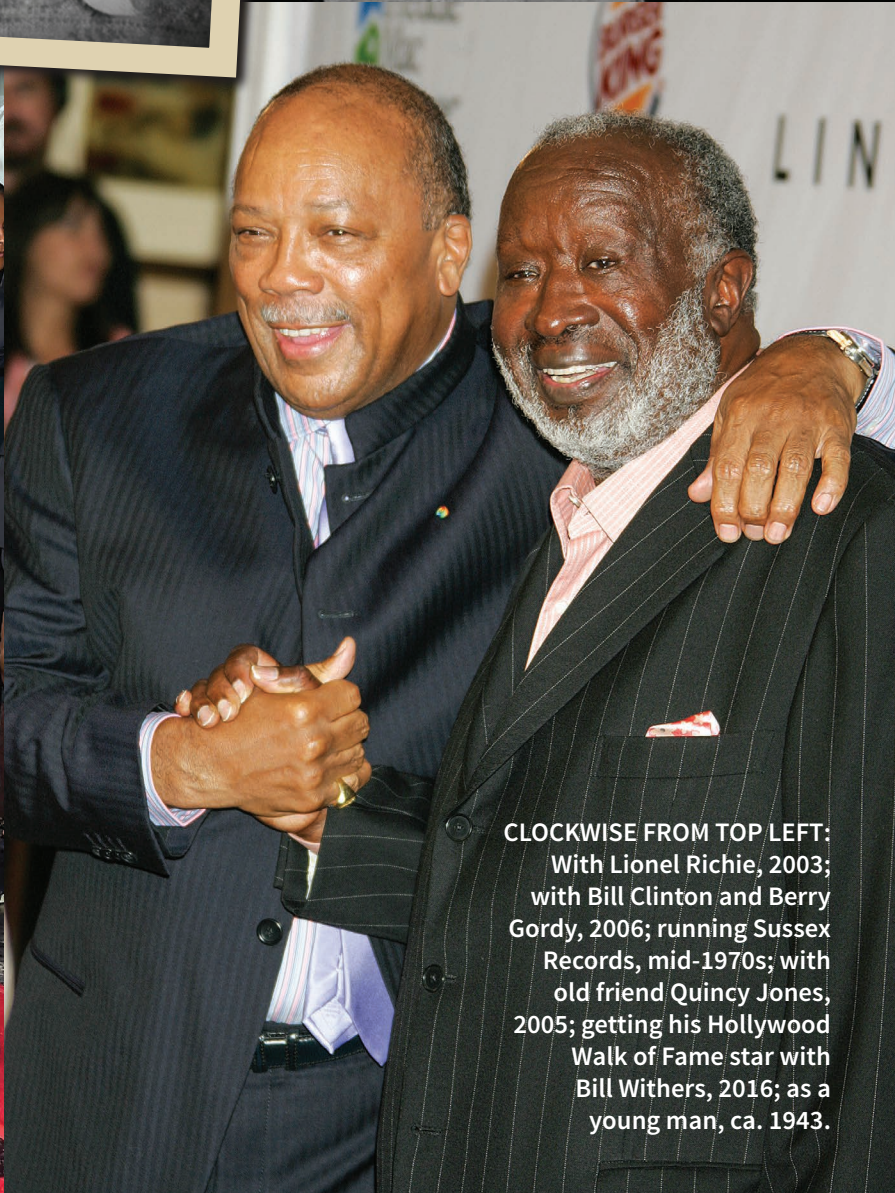
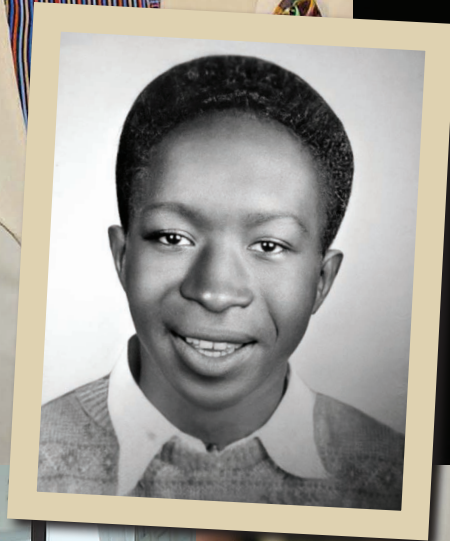
Another artist Avant signed to Sussex was Sixto Rodriguez, a soulful songwriter born to Mexican immigrants in Detroit. He recorded two albums under the name Rodriguez – *Cold Fact* (1970) and *Coming From Reality* (1971). Though neither sold well on release, they subsequently became cult favorites and even helped fuel the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. The award-winning 2012 documentary *Searching for Sugar Man* told the improbable story of Rodriguez's belated rise to fame, and Clarence Avant finally got to savor the wisdom of his vision in signing him.

Avant also became the first African American to own a radio station in a major market when he bought KRCD (in Inglewood, California) in 1973. He changed the call letters to KAGB and the programming mission to “the Total Black Experience in Sound.” Though neither Sussex Records nor KAGB lasted past 1976, Avant had made his mark, and his affiliations and clout only grew from there.

One of the greatest deals Avant ever made had more to do with undoing a deal. In 1973, Dick Clark planned to launch a competitor to *Soul Train*, the hit created by Don Cornelius, who also served as host and executive producer. The show's success on network TV was a source of pride to Black America. Along with civil rights leaders, Avant was upset that Clark would try to undercut Cornelius with his *Soul Unlimited* knockoff. So Avant met with ABC's chairman and president to share his objections. *Soul Unlimited* never got beyond a pilot episode, while *Soul Train* ran for thirty-five years.

After Sussex folded, Avant rebounded with Tabu Records, which had hits with the S.O.S. Band, Cherrelle, and Alexander O'Neal while launching the careers of Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis as a songwriting and production team. Tabu was acquired by PolyGram, where Avant became the first African American to sit on its board of directors. In 1993, five years after Berry Gordy Jr. sold Motown to PolyGram, Avant was appointed chairman and charged with preserving Motown's legacy. He has wryly called it the only proper job he ever had.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true.” Avant has been taking stands on behalf of righteous causes every day of his life, which might explain why he's still thriving and feisty at 90 years of age. To his many awards and honors, you can now add this one: Clarence Avant as the 2021 Ahmet Ertegun Award inductee in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
With Lionel Richie, 2003;
with Bill Clinton and Berry
Gordy, 2006; running Sussex
Records, mid-1970s; with
old friend Quincy Jones,
2005; getting his Hollywood
Walk of Fame star with
Bill Withers, 2016; as a
young man, ca. 1943.