

Irving Azoff,
manning the
phones, 1978



IRVING AZOFF

**HIS MANAGERIAL APPROACH IS
DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE - HONOR THE ARTIST,
PROTECT THE MUSIC.**

By CAMERON CROWE

I met him in 1973. He was instantly memorable. Irving Azoff was a lit firecracker with a bowl-cut hairstyle, a mischievous smile, a restless sense of fun, and a mind reeling with the most entertaining ways imaginable to subvert authority. He was then the fledgling manager of Joe Walsh, but was already infamous in the musical community as the guy who would do anything – with glee – to protect and champion his artists.

Decades later, not much has changed, except ... everything. He's built a slew of musical empires, ushered many an artist to their creative peaks, built a robust family operation, spearheaded powerful legislation to protect the artistic community, and even inched into the restaurant business. But nothing makes Irving Azoff more delighted than representing an unforgettable song, or proudly standing stage-side for one of his artist's shows. His fan-like enthusiasm is infectious: Just ask longtime clients like Stevie Nicks, Gwen Stefani, John Mayer, Van Halen, Jimmy Buffett, or his flagship band, the

Eagles. Something about Irving makes an artist or executive do their best work.

In the early days of his management career, artists would grab a cup of coffee, take a seat in his office and just ... watch him perform bombastic feats on his instrument of choice, the phone. Feuds would erupt and disappear, alliances would form and blow apart, and at the end of any given day, one of his artists would feel a little closer to conquering the world, or at least writing another great song. Irving Azoff is an artist, as much as any of his clients. His approach is deceptively simple – honor the artist, protect the music.

Born in Danville, Illinois, the son of a pharmacist father and a doting bookkeeper mother, Irving was headed for a career in medicine. ("Because my parents said so.") On a hot August afternoon in 1966, he caught a concert by the Yardbirds at the Indiana Beach Ballroom. The show was dazzling, one of Jimmy Page's very first appearances on an American stage. By nightfall, all plans for doctorhood had gloriously evaporated. Azoff began booking acts at the

University of Illinois, and soon dropped out to focus fully on the friends he'd made, REO Speedwagon and singer-songwriter Dan Fogelberg. By 17, young Irving was juggling calls, jousting with unions, and making alliances that would last a lifetime.

When the James Gang played one of Irving's bookings at a former boat warehouse in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, Azoff found a kindred spirit in guitarist Joe Walsh. Walsh had a twinkle in his eye, and an intriguing penchant for chaos. "There was a tree growing in the center of the stage," Azoff recalled. "I told Walsh that Pete Townshend had been there the week before, and jumped off it. Walsh proceeded to do the same and almost broke his fuckin' leg. He limped over to me and said, 'Anything Pete Townshend can do, I can do!'"

They would not forget each other.

Azoff pulled up stakes and moved to Los Angeles, where he joined Jerry Heller's vaunted booking agency, and brought with him REO and Fogelberg. Fogelberg and Azoff became roommates in a place in the Valley - "you entered from the alley" - and set about chasing bigger dreams. Azoff was making a big splash with his trademark enthusiasm and joyful mischief. He also reconnected with Walsh, who'd begun a solo endeavor with a new band, Barnstorm. Walsh had come to town to play the Whisky a Go Go, with disappointing results. He asked young Azoff to manage him. It was a hallelujah moment: "I thought, this is great, I don't have to be an agent anymore!" He had studied other managers, lions of the era like Bill Graham and Albert Grossman, and before long, drew the attention of David Geffen and partner Elliot Roberts. They invited Irving into GR Management, the prestigious company representing Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, Joni Mitchell, and a new band called the Eagles. The Eagles were then touring to prop up an under-performing second album, *Desperado*. Irving brought Walsh and Fogelberg into the GR fold, and also did jack-of-all-trades touring work for the company.

One day Geffen was busy on another call, and Irving was handed a phone with Eagles guitarist Glenn Frey on the line. Frey was melting down. He was stranded out on the road, stood up at the airport, and waiting impatiently for a limousine. To the young guitarist, it was a metaphor for a career that needed jump-starting. Geffen called out to Irving, "Just tell him to find a hippie or a cab to drive him to the hotel!"

Irving Azoff sorted out the problem in grand style, and in a flash. Soon Azoff was joining the Eagles on the road, to help soothe their growing feelings of neglect. "There was something about Irving," Frey explained a few years later. "We started telling him all our problems, with our records, our producer ... and how we were getting the royal screw job." They decided to leave the bigger stable and hire the hungry young guy from Illinois to manage them. Frey, who was fond of wearing a self-made T-shirt that read "Song Power," walked in the room one day and threw Irving a new T-shirt he'd made. It read "Phone Power." A union was born. "He was our age, and at the same kind of crossroads," said Frey. "We fused."

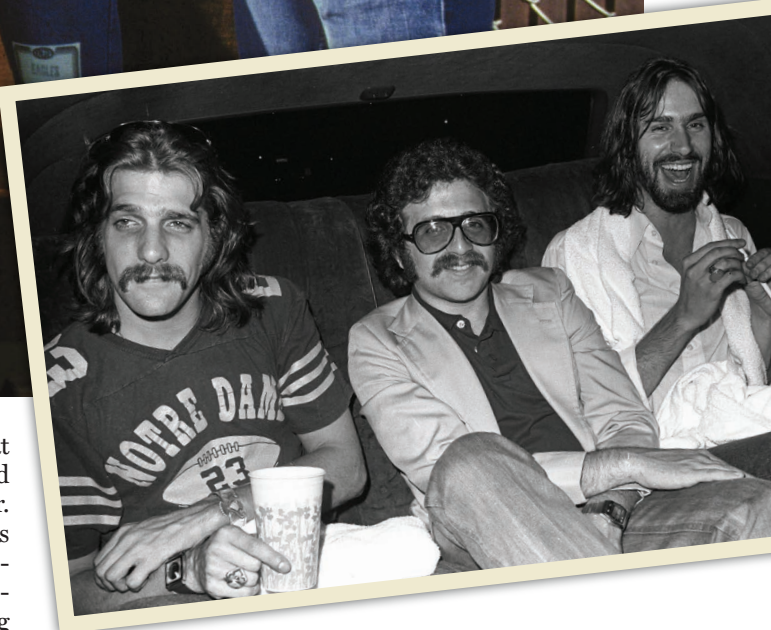
Azoff took over the management of the Eagles, leaving GR for his own new company. (Pause for years-long feud with Geffen, later mended.) On the back of that personal connection came everything. The Eagles and Irving Azoff were a match for the ages. With the Eagles, Irving found a band, particu-



Azoff (fifth from left) with promoter Bill Graham (third from left) and the Eagles - Don Felder, Randy Meisner, Joe Walsh, Don Henley, and Glenn Frey (from left) - backstage at the Oakland Coliseum, 1977. INSET: Frey, Azoff, and Dan Fogelberg (from left) on their way to dinner, 1977.

larly Frey and Henley, who viewed the rock business as something more than a lesson in victimhood. It was a long way from the thing Keith Richards once bemoaned upon losing much of his early publishing money to bad deals: "Price of an education in the music business, baby."

Azoff and the Eagles flipped the narrative on that. The Eagles had no desire to be a cautionary tale; they wanted to compete with the biggest of the big boys, and they wanted to win. Big Shorty, as Frey nicknamed him, kicked down every door to get them there. It didn't take long. By the time of the Eagles' third album, *On the Border*, their fortunes were tied together. Writing about the band for *Rolling Stone*, I remember Irving bringing me into the Record Plant in L.A. where the band was recording that make-or-break third album, *On the Border*. Azoff stood with hands in pockets, beaming as Henley, Frey, and bassist Randy Meisner huddled in a small vocal booth just off the control room. The song was "Ol' 55," and suddenly



the room filled with the signature vocal blend that would launch the next four decades. Azoff beamed like a proud school-kid. Phone power met song power.

Meanwhile, Azoff was also honing a rapier business style on behalf of his beloved Joe Walsh. Walsh's penchant for hooliganism had only blossomed. One memorable instance involved a contentious label meeting with Azoff, Walsh, and Joe Smith. The meeting took a meaningful turn when Walsh opened his Anvil guitar case and produced a chain saw. He revved it up and began sawing the legs off Smith's table. Issues were soon settled, and all in the artist's favor. ("Just theatrics," shrugs Azoff, with an Eddie Haskell grin.) The lore of Irving grew, as did his company, Front Line Management. Others would attempt the same kind of loyalty to their clients, but few matched the showmanship of Azoff. He had three mottos at the time: 1) Everybody pays now, and pays later; 2) Getting even isn't good enough; and the most important one, 3) Always make the decision that is best for the artist.

It might hurt in the short term, but will matter most in the long term.

Frey put it simply. "When you start splitting everything up six or more ways in a band," he said, "you start looking for the extra dollar. And searching for the extra dollar, Irving found fortunes. Of course, we want to make more money and know where it goes. Why be naive about it? Why die like Stephen Foster, in the Bowery, slitting his wrists, penniless after writing all those wonderful standards."

Irving Azoff made the thrust and parry of protecting his clients ... a blast. For a time, the urban myths

piled up. There were wrecked cars, hotel games, nicknames galore, and an avalanche of great shows and albums. In many a gathering of musicians or road managers of the era, Irving stories were a surefire way to kill a couple hours. "If a forty-thousand-dollar-a-year promotion guy and his incompetence is standing in the way of [one of my artists] getting what it deserves," Azoff explained with rare understatement, "he'll hear about it."

Fleetwood Mac had begun recording *Rumours* when Stevie Nicks met Irving through her friend Don Henley. "I was being paid in cash at the time," she recalled, "and wasn't a full member of the band. I was making four hundred dollars a week, which was still pretty good. It wasn't much earlier that I'd been waitressing to pay the bills. I met Irving, and hired him. My mom and dad were so happy. When Irving is your manager, you feel safe. Sometimes too safe because you know he can pull you out of any jam, keep you doing the right thing. And he's the reason I have money to this day."

Even more valuable to her are the memories from their years of friendship. "Some people like the girl onstage," she explains, "and some like the girl with the blue roller in her bangs, wearing something ridiculous around the house. The people who like both of those girls are few and very far between. He loved the roller girl, and that's the real me, and because of that we have a great relationship and always have. His nickname for me is 'Budgie.' I'm not sure why, but every time we talk it begins with ... 'Budgie!'"

Azoff's second act began with a Big Move that rocked the business. Azoff brokered the entrance of a new Eagles guitarist, his old friend Joe Walsh. The band leaned into a tougher sound, and *Hotel California* (1976) came next. The record business tripled in size. Like the Eagles, groups like Fleetwood Mac, Boston, and Peter Dinklage also began to sell in the mega-millions. Azoff had blown up the managerial structure of the sixties, making his bands partners in the guidance and the profits. No longer was the artist at the mercy of bookkeeping and backroom moves that would leave them penniless.

Azoff took on heavyweight acts, but in signature style, and always found time for the small things that mattered most. Family members. Birthdays. Phone calls returned the same day. As for the big stuff, Azoff was rarely afraid of the scorched-earth approach. "If you show me a manager who's never gotten into a [business] fight," said Azoff, "I'll show you someone who's badly represented their artist. If you are a fan of the music, then you better have respect for the people with the creative talent, because without them none of us would be here."

In 1980, on the heels of enormous success and an exhausting nine-year sprint to the top, the Eagles hung up their jerseys and headed for solo careers. Front Line Management grew larger, representing a host of new clients like Steely Dan and Stevie Nicks, but Azoff's heart was never far from his trademark band. Years passed and many an Eagles reunion offer was rejected by Henley and Frey. Azoff never pressured them back into action, but many wondered: Was it a break, or a break-up?

Azoff branched into film and television production with *FM* (1978) and *Urban Cowboy* (1980). With each passing year, he'd become ever more the architect of the Big Move. It was one of the special cards

in his deck, and he drew it to benefit innumerable artists from any kind of artistic purgatory. I was able to witness the Big Move firsthand, when I turned in the manuscript for *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) to Universal Pictures. A week went by with no word as to whether the studio was interested in picking up its option. "Watch this," Irving announced one afternoon, and invited me to observe and listen as he picked up a phone and went over the head of the studio president to the chairman of MCA. "Pass," he joyfully instructed the biggest studio bigwig. "Please pass. Pass on *Fast Times* so I can buy it and make it a hit! In fact, let me write you a check right now for it. I'll send it right over. Pass pass pass!"

The studio immediately picked up its option. Azoff produced the film with Art Linson, and the movie took off, complete with a soundtrack curated with his artists. Stevie Nicks, Jackson Browne, the Go-Go's, Jimmy Buffett, Joe Walsh, and Don Henley all contributed original music. And I had a career in filmmaking. And Irving Azoff had another story to tell – here's what I did while the Eagles were taking a break.

It was also time for some new empire building. Azoff took on the presidency of MCA Records, acquiring the Motown roster and bringing new life to the label. With hits from Bobby Brown, Fine Young Cannibals, and Tom Petty's breakthrough *Full Moon Fever* in 1989, he moved on to scale further heights with a new label, Giant, distributed through Warner Bros. Another slew of hits followed, along with a key recording, *Common Thread: The Songs of the Eagles* in 1993. With proceeds going to Don Henley's Walden Woods Project, the album, which won CMA album of the year, awakened everybody to a simple fact. The Eagles' influence on music had redoubled and tripled in their time apart. The tribute album stoked the fires of a reunion in the gentlest of ways. When Travis Tritt reunited the group for his video of "Take It Easy," it began to feel organic again. The Eagles reunited the next year, and Azoff was right there, offstage, beaming as always, as *Hell Freezes Over* ushered in the Eagles' biggest years. By the end of the decade, the band was back on the road, and the flagship recording *Eagles Greatest Hits*, at 30 million copies, became the biggest selling record of all time.

At a time when many a manager might be shuffling off into the sunset, Azoff continued his efforts in all aspects of the entertainment sphere. By 2002, Azoff and Henley had formed the Recording Artists Coalition to fight for artists' rights, extending his career-long fight for artists to keep a firm grip on their creative property. His legendary scraps on behalf of musicians' rights had brought industry-wide gains. Ticketmaster acquired Front Line Management and named Azoff head of the combined Ticketmaster Entertainment. This led to the formation of Live Nation, and another round of boundary-pushing moves.

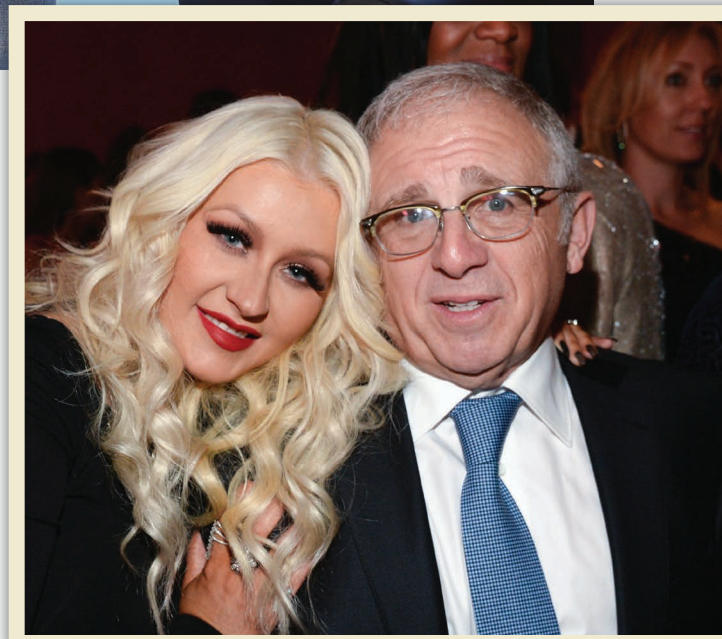
In the winter of 2012, Azoff resigned that lofty post out of an "itching desire to get out of the public sector." Translation – he missed the ground floor of working with musicians. The next fall he announced Azoff MSG Entertainment, a company that saw wife Shelli Azoff painstakingly refurbishing the luster and legend of the Los Angeles Forum. She shaped the new era of L.A.'s most storied venue, from the rigorous new audio experience to the doorknobs and the carpet and the spices on the food at the Forum Club. (Or as Don



FROM TOP: With Frey in 2013; with Christina Aguilera in 2016.

Henley put it from stage center, “Welcome to Shelli’s House.”) The Azoff credo – protect the artist, protect the music – had guided them into a new decade.

Darkness arrived in 2016 with the death of Azoff’s dear friend and Eagles founder Glenn Frey. Once again, time and loyalty brought the band back together. Working with his equally lifelong buddy Don Henley, Azoff and the Eagles found their way to yet another new chapter, this time with Frey’s son Deacon and Vince Gill to fill Frey’s enormous role. It was the perfect tip of the hat to Glenn, the “Lone Arranger” of all those wonderful vocal blends. Now it was new again, complete with Glenn’s son at center stage, wearing his dad’s jersey. “I hear his voice every day,” Azoff told me recently, his voice grown quiet at the end of another busy day. “Glenn is always there, checking in with an idea, urging me to think a certain way, talking to me about something.” He took a wistful moment. “Always something ...”



*"WHEN IRVING IS YOUR MANAGER,
YOU FEEL SAFE. HE CAN PULL YOU OUT
OF ANY JAM, KEEP YOU DOING
THE RIGHT THING."*

STEVIE NICKS





ABOVE: With son Jeffrey at *Billboard's Live Music* panel, 2018. LEFT: With wife Shelli at the *Spirit of Life Awards*, 2011.

He has been a CEO, concert promoter, personal manager, movie and television producer, friend, therapist, raconteur, and lately, with Shelli, savior of some essential L.A. eateries (Apple Pan, Nate 'n Al's) ... all at the same time. He's forever working the phones, helping heritage artists, and grooming younger artists too, often gratis. Recently Azoff also founded the artist-forward Global Music Rights, a company that administers and protects the publishing rights to Pearl Jam, John Lennon, Bruce Springsteen, and many others. He also pays close attention to a new stable of artists, from Christina Aguilera, to Maroon 5, to Bon Jovi and John Mayer, guiding them through the issues in a business far greater

than the one Irving first conquered in his twenties. "The business is so multifaceted now," he said. "There are so many opportunities for new and old artists. The dream never gets old, it just gets better."

There is a family tradition too, and it's obvious in the work of Jeffrey Azoff, his son, whose fierce personal style is reminiscent of his father. Full Stop Management, housed within Azoff Music, represents Harry Styles, Nikki Minaj, Anderson .Paak, and Lizzo. Jeffrey's work guiding Styles into a boldly original solo career has gained industry-wide acclaim and attention. "When I was 21, just entering the work force," remembers the younger Azoff with a smile, "he said to me, 'you have my last name, and you have a phone. If you can't figure it out, you're not my son.'"

Azoff's industry relationships are stronger than ever. Looking at the sheer volume of his business moves and the towering successes that came from instinct and fandom, it's easy to see what brought him to this honor with the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Irving Azoff, while managing fortunes, has always understood it's really all about something more ephemeral than money. It's about the music, and the charm and joy that comes from knocking down the barriers between artists and their greatest work. He is a warrior of the soul, forever tending to that simple credo. Protect the artist, protect the music. In other words, as Glenn Frey might say, it's about songs, songs, songs ... but always with heart, heart, heart. Azoff's career is a lesson to all who aspire to a similarly long life in an often brutal business. It's easy if you love what you do. It's just that sometimes you need a chain saw too.