

IRVING

# AZOFF

## TAKING IT TO THE LIMIT, EVERY TIME

When his buddies think of Irving Azoff, they picture him holding court at **Craig's**, or even more vividly, in mid-round at his beloved **Riviera Country**

**Club**, talking on the phone, tossing it onto the grass to hit a shot and then picking it up again to resume the conversation. That's Irving in a nutshell, at the top of his game.

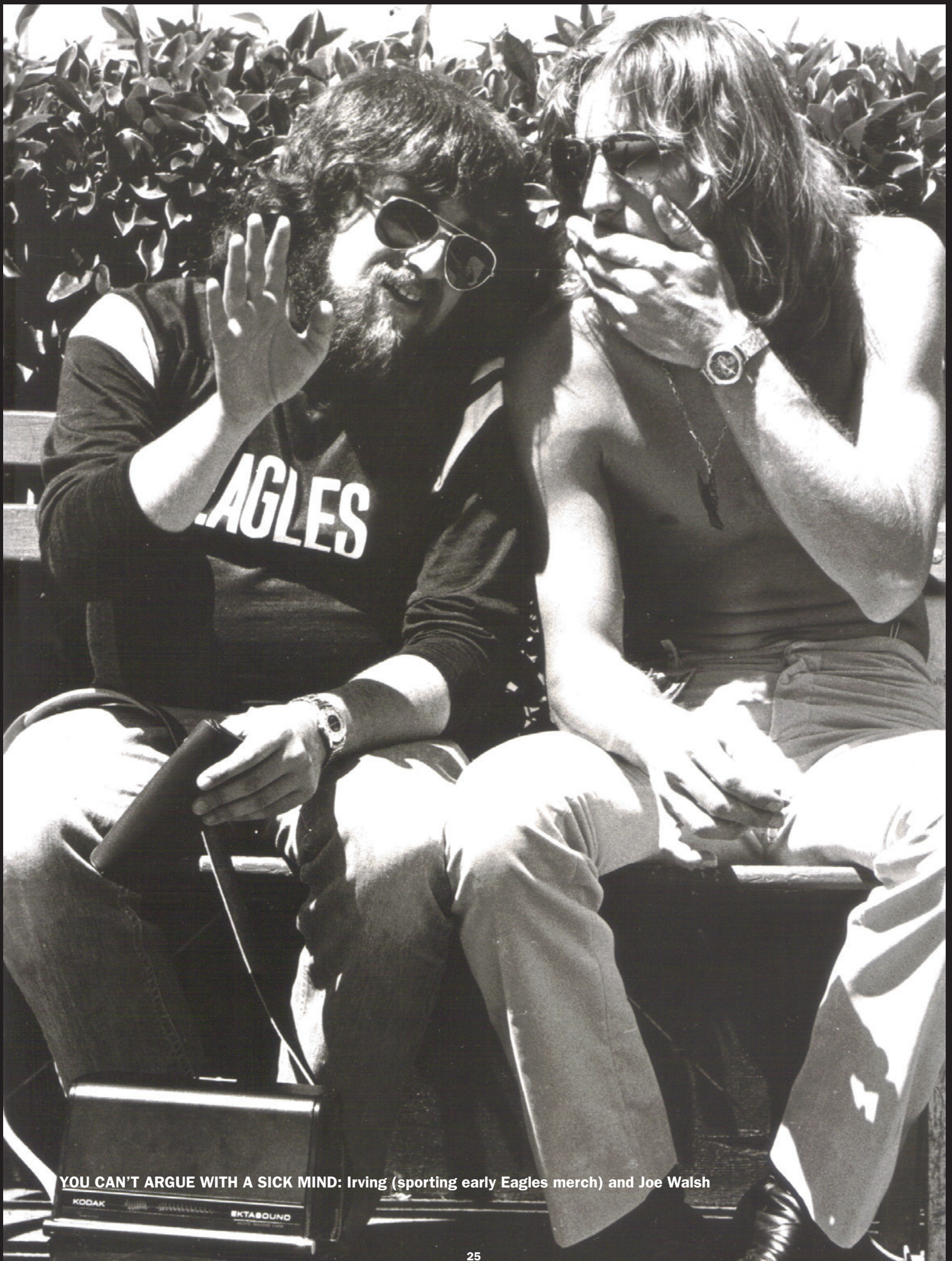
We first crossed paths with Irving in the early '70s, not long after he came to L.A., fresh out of college and hoping to make his mark—and his fortune—in the music biz, like countless others of his generation. To say that he succeeded on both counts would be a gross understatement. He's been a major success with a Midas touch since the mid-'70s, when his **Front Line Management** flagship clients the **Eagles** scored a massive breakthrough, followed by runs as a label head at **MCA** and his own **Giant**, his run at **Ticketmaster**,

which led to the formation of **Live Nation Entertainment**, and his multiple entrepreneurial undertakings in recent years. No other still-active music-biz figure can match this high-wire act.

During his near-half-century career, the perspicacious Azoff has been an agent, personal manager, major-label CEO, label owner, concert promoter and movie producer (with production credits including *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Urban Cowboy*), typically wearing several hats simultaneously. These days, Irving has his fingers in so many pies it's hard to keep count, but among them are multifaceted sports and entertainment operation **Oak View Group**, the progressive **PRO Global Music Rights**, the “premium experience” company **LaneOne** and **Full Stop Management** in partnership with his son **Jeffrey**, who's become a major player in a relatively short time.

In October 2018, all of the abovementioned entities became part of **The Azoff Company**, as Irving acquired **Madison Square Garden's** 50% interest in **Azoff MSG Entertainment** for \$125 million.

“I am extremely proud that my part-



YOU CAN'T ARGUE WITH A SICK MIND: Irving (sporting early Eagles merch) and Joe Walsh





**THE DEALIN' DALTON GANG:** *Looking cool with the Eagles and Bill Graham*

ner, **Jim Dolan**, and I built an innovative company which always put the artists' and songwriters' interests first," Azoff said in announcing the acquisition. "The Azoff Company will build on this foundation of positive disruption and artist advocacy: we will continue to challenge antiquated parts of the entertainment business on behalf of artists and fans. The Azoff Co. is proud to renew our commitment to the **Forum** and MSG's transformative vision for the best possible, live entertainment experience."

The Azoff empire also includes Irving's daughter, **Allison Statter**, the co-head of **Blended Strategy Group**, who has done branding for the old man and has made him a grandfather three times over.

**Larry Solters**, another member of the extended family, has been at Irving's side for more than four decades, serving as his media guru and confidant—or, as Solters put it long ago, he's the "vice-

president-in-charge-of-whatever-Irving-tells-me-to-do."

Close friend and trusted associate **Howard Kaufman**, who helped launch **Front Line** in 1974, was a huge part of Irving's life until his death in 2017. Very bright and a great numbers guy, Kaufman had the reputation of being able to put more money in an artist's pocket from touring than any other manager. Irving relied on Howard's expertise, and the two maintained the closest of bonds until Kaufman's death in 2017.

But back in 1970, Irving was just a bright, ambitious, highly opinionated wiseass from the hinterlands who even then displayed a rarefied gift of gab. He paired that talent with a related one that turned out to be equally important—he listened. And unlike so many of his peers, he never failed to return a phone call—or these days an email—a discipline that has become an

integral part of the Azoff legend.

It was his innate social skillset that enabled Irving to quickly lodge himself smack-dab in the middle of the action, where he has remained ever since, calling the shots and directing the scene—and doing so in the most entertaining way imaginable. What's more, if there's anyone legitimately worthy of authoring a book titled *The Art of the Deal*, it's Irving. In terms of dealmaking, it's fair to say no one can touch him.

Irving has compared his behavior to that of a real-life **Dennis the Menace**, while taking on the nicknames "Swirv" and "poison dwarf" for his oft-notorious hijinks, infamously including sending a birthday present containing a live snake to a rival. And that's not all, folks. During the '70s, Irving and longtime client **Joe Walsh** teamed up on a running practical joke. They'd enter an executive's office for a meeting, whereupon Walsh would pull a



chainsaw out of his guitar case and they'd zip the legs off the office chairs, while Irving would sprinkle lighter fluid on the desk and set it on fire.

In his definitive chronicle of the period, *Mansion on the Hill*, author **Fred Goodman** described Irving as "a screaming record industry Napoleon right out of central casting." The Eagles' **Don Henley** made a similar point far more affectionately when, during his induction speech at the 1998 **Rock and Roll Hall of Fame**, he famously said of his longtime manager, "He may be Satan, but he's *our* Satan."

Irving gives as good as he gets. During the 2015 **City of Hope** event honoring **Lucian Grainge**, the little rascal zapped his fellow attendees with surgical precision, warning the crowd that **Eddy Cue** "will try to sell you his record collection," revealing that **Scott Borchetta** was "outside washing Taylor Swift's car," quipping that **Neil Portnow** will "always be **Clive Calder's** bagman to me" and alleging that **Joel Katz** "still wants to be **Allen Grubman**."

As for his tendency to stretch the truth at times, Irving confessed to **Cameron Crowe** in a 1978 *Rolling Stone* profile, "Sure I lie. But it's more like...tinting. I've inherited a lot of [deals made by] dummies. When that happens, you gotta make it right. It's all just negotiating theatrics."

**A**zoff grew up in Danville, a small town in downstate Illinois near the Indiana border, and attended the **University of Illinois** in nearby Champaign. He started early, booking acts into both **Danville High School** and **U of I**. Azoff's first management client was Champaign-based **REO Speedwagon**; his second was Peoria native and fellow **U of I** student **Dan Fogelberg**. In 1972, Azoff headed to L.A. with Fogelberg by his side; the two shared an apartment. Soon thereafter, he was joined by REO's tour manager, **John Baruck**, who remains part of Azoff's inner circle to this day. "It was fun times," Irving said of their initiation into West Coast culture. "There's something



**SNAPSHOTS:** *With Shelli*

to be said for not growing up in L.A. or New York and experiencing the business in the heartland," he pointed out in 2017. "You learn in different ways what does and doesn't work."

The early '70s were a golden age for Los Angeles, which was then—and is once again—a mecca for talented artists as well as for those who aspired to work behind the scenes, where—following a stint as a booker at **Jerry Heller's Heller-Fischel Agency**, **David Geffen** offered Azoff a gig at **Geffen-Roberts Management**, with responsibilities including booking the **Roxy**. It was there that he began his longstanding relationship with the Eagles.

"When I first came to Los Angeles, the center of the business was on Santa Monica Boulevard," Irving recalled during a November 2014 lunch at the iconic **Riviera Country Club**, the home away from home for this determined duffer. "It centered on the **Troubadour** bar and **Dan Tana's** next door. It was 1973. I met **Albert Grossman** on the sidewalk in front of the Troubadour. I was like a young kid





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hangin' around the fringes, but I'd be in the Troubadour bar, and there would be David Geffen and Albert Grossman—all these guys yelling at each other and fighting, which was just the normal thing.

“The scene in Hollywood in those days was the Forum, the Troubadour, the Greek, the Whisky to some extent, and then very soon thereafter, the Roxy. And it was really fucking healthy. If you watch the Eagles documentary, people were moving here on both the business and the musician side from all over the country to taste the American Dream. It became the melting pot for American music. It

was exciting, and the music was varied, everything from Elton John coming from London to Joni Mitchell to Cheech & Chong to the Eagles to Linda Rondstadt. It wasn't any particular sound.”

With the Eagles as his flagship act, Irving split from Geffen-Roberts in 1974 and started his own management company, naming it Front Line. “Geffen told the Eagles they could leave, but I don't think they anticipated I would take 'em,” Azoff recalled. “They were pissed.” Not long afterward, the Eagles became absolutely ginormous, averaging a million albums a month for a two-year stretch

behind the chart-toppers *One of These Nights* (released June 1975) through *Hotel California* (December 1976). His loaded client roster also included Fogelberg, REO, Joe Walsh, Steely Dan, Jimmy Buffett and Boz Scaggs.

He shrewdly orchestrated the insertion of Walsh into the Eagles lineup before the recording of the mega-smash *Hotel California* in a win-win for all involved. And in a bold move, Irving sued Geffen and Warners in an attempt to get control of the Eagles' extremely lucrative publishing rights; in 1979, after two years of battling, Warners caved, as

**BUNNY BUDDIES:** With Steven Baker, Henley, Russ Thyret, Lee Phillips and David Altschul





Goodman put it, settling out of court, making Henley, **Glenn Frey** and Irving even more filthy-rich. Management was very, very good to young Mr. Azoff.

“It was such a fucking seat-of-your-pants, invent-the-rules-as-you-go business,” he told Goodman. “And David invented a lot of the rules. For anyone with any sort of gift of gab and business sense, it was easy to beat. Then the manager thing became real entrepreneurial; it was the next step for idiots who wanted to own and operate our own businesses. Being a manager was the way to go.” After a comedic pause, Irving delivered his payoff. “Management is a terrible business,” he said. “Who wants an artist to take 85% of his money?”

Eagles collaborator **J.D. Souther** put his own amusing spin on Irving’s quip when he observed to Goodman, “Irving’s 15% of everybody turned out to be more than everyone’s 85% of themselves.”

Irving wed **Shelli Azoff** in 1978; while they were dating, she’d become the assistant to agent **Howard Rose** at his **Howard Rose Agency**. Just before the nuptials, Frey wondered, “What wedding present do you get for the guy who’s already *taken*

everything he wanted?” Irving and Shelli have been one of Hollywood’s most colorful high-profile power couples ever since.

Irving has also remained joined at the hip to Henley, who has served as his unofficial but essential A&R ears for decades, as well as his chief confidant. “I’m always awed,” Henley noted to Cameron Crowe, “because he’s screaming at some guy twice his size and never gets his face crushed for it. I think it helps that people are shocked at this short, deceptively *cute*-looking guy who goes to the top floor of a building and just *explodes* on some guy for his incompetence.”

Front Line was the biggest, most successful management company in the business, as Irving retained his longstanding clients while adding **Chicago** and **Styx** to



**BIG SHOTS:** [Top-bottom] With Mo Ostin, his phones and Lucian Grainge





**CHEESEBURGERS IN PARADISE:** *With Myron Roth, Jimmy Buffett, Howard Kaufman and Richard Palmese*

the core roster of the Eagles, Steely, Walsh, REO, Fogelberg, Buffett and Scaggs. Indeed, it was so successful that Irving kept on keepin' on even after the Eagles "went on hiatus" in 1980. But the loss of his beloved band was likely a factor in his decision to take the corporate plunge and attempt to bring the so-called Music Cemetery of America back to life, which he proceeded to do. At the outset, Azoff sold a piece of Frontline to MCA and entrusted his acts to Howard Kaufman, who would play a huge role in Irving's management business throughout its existence, including running Front Line in his absence.

Under Azoff's watch, working with an executive team that included **Richard Palmese** and **Zach Horowitz**, MCA notched hits with acts including **Tom Petty**, **Glenn Frey**, **New Edition**, **Tiffany**, **Ready for the World**, **The Fixx**, **Jody Watley**, **Fine Young Cannibals**, **Eric B. & Rakim** and **Heavy D & the Boyz**. This was the colorful era of "cutouts," **Sal "the Baker" Pisello** and **William Knoedelseder's** investigative reporting of shady dealings and dirty laundry for the *L.A. Times*, later documented in Knoedelseder's book *Stiffed* and Fred

**Dannen's** tome *Hit Men*. After six years of running a major label, Irving had had enough of corporate politics, so he bought back MCA's Front Line stake at a radically reduced rate, a slick move that he would repeat time and again during the ensuing decades.

Following his resignation from MCA, Azoff launched **Giant Records** in 1990—selling a piece of Front Line to parent company **Warner Music Group**—and installing legendary music-biz character **Charlie Minor** as the startup label's president. The back story, according to **Thomas R. King's** book *The Operator* (2001), goes like this: Geffen wanted Azoff out at MCA to clear the way for MCA to buy **Geffen Records**. Geffen convinced WMG's **Mo Ostin** to offer Azoff a "dream" label deal, which Irving agreed to. There were apparently no hard feelings on Irving's part toward his friendly rival mogul. Giant pattered along for much of the 1990s while he also attended to his longtime clients, until he decided to return to management fulltime at the dawn of the millennium, buying back WMG's piece of Front Line for pennies on the dollar, while also finding the time to launch the advo-

cacy group **Recording Artists Coalition** (RAC for short) with Henley in 2000.

The revived Front Line became bigger than ever, as Irving expanded his client roster while rolling up smaller management firms. These acquisitions provided him with the jet fuel to power him into his next deal, when, in 2008, Azoff sold his management company yet again, this time to Ticketmaster, after which he took the top post at TM. Two years later, he and **Michael Rapino** pulled off an even bigger merger, when, following months of scrutiny, the DOJ approved the pairing of TM with Rapino's Live Nation, forming Live Nation Entertainment and taking the role of Executive Chairman. In 2012, he topped *Billboard's* Power 100. But he abruptly resigned his post on New Year's Eve of 2012, explaining that he'd been itching to get out of the public sector. He announced the formation of Azoff MSG the following September.

In one of his biggest moves with Azoff MSG, Azoff gave L.A. an important new arena in the lavishly refurbished, music-specific Forum, which has since approached the exalted status of the company's New York citadel, Madison Square

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**FORUM CLUB:** With Jim Dolan, Joe Walsh, Glenn Frey and Timothy B. Schmit

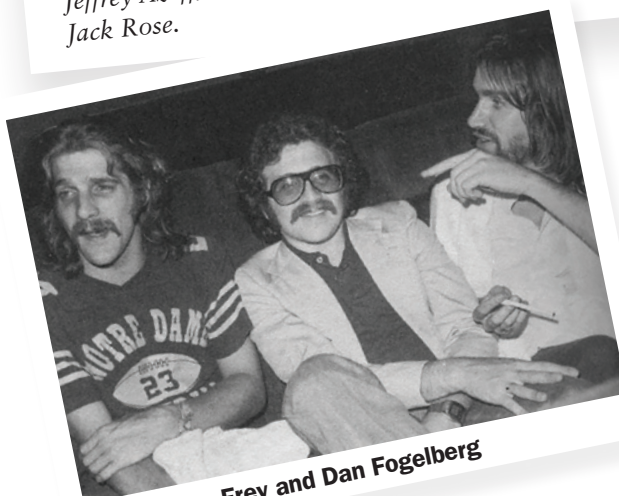
Garden, thanks in part to Shelli Azoff, who was in charge of remodeling the arena and making it artist-friendly. The Eagles, Steely Dan and **Journey**—all of which he took with him when he left Live Nation—remain high-grossing live acts. Azoff is also in the comedy business after doing a deal with **Levity**, the biggest and most innovative operation in the sector, while taking on **Chelsea Handler** for management.

Azoff launched Global Music Rights in 2014 with the aim of dramatically improving songwriting and performance-royalty terms for the acts he represented. More recently, the Oak View Group created the **Arena Alliance**, which is now nearing 30 venues, and purchased live-industry trade **Pollstar**.



**SHOWBIZ KIDS:** On a golf holiday in Scotland with duffer contemporaries Mitch Rose, Rob Light and Colin Hodgson; offspring Jeffrey Azoff, Cameron Azoff and Logan Light; and course guide Jack Rose.

Azoff was devastated by the death of Frey in January 2016. “Glenn Frey was a huge business, music, and golf influence on me,” he told us. “It’s like losing a brother. It will never be the same. He was beloved by so many—and I don’t mean just industry people. He did so much, and he was a regular guy.” When asked about the key to the partnership of Glenn and Don, who seemed like such opposites yet comple-



With Glenn Frey and Dan Fogelberg





**TURNING ON THE CHARM:** *With Michael Rapino, Clarence Avant and Marty Bandier, Christina Aguilera*

mented each other so beautifully, Irving responded, “Mutual respect and knowing that they each brought something different to the table”

Soon thereafter, Irving became the first manager to be chosen to receive the President’s Merit Award at Clive Davis’ pre-Grammy gala. Many assumed he’d turn it down, but he showed up, explaining, “It’s important that artists and managers be recognized by the Recording

Academy. I am just a representative of those communities.” When we asked him how he planned to get through what promised to be a long evening, Irving replied, “Arrive late. Leave early. Be Irving, as usual.”

Irving being Irving long ago elevated him to the highest rung of music-biz royalty, from which height (sorry) he continues to perform at the top of his game, eliciting hosannas from heavy-

weight peers including Lucian Grainge, who’s described him as “more, more and more, a winner,” and Grubman, who hails him as “one of the giants of the modern music business.”

Fellow mega-attorney Joel Katz, meanwhile, has “constantly marveled at his ‘chameleon-like’ ability to change himself to fit the precise needs of any situation—be it artistic, executive, or political—to find the perfect solution and to move the enterprise, whatever it is, constantly forward.”

In a 2014 interview with *HITS*, Katz went into greater detail, describing his friend of four decades as “dynamic, strategic and extremely smart... He’s very special, and when you really get to know him, he’s a very good-hearted person. Irving Azoff is a total winner, and he will always be a total winner. And he will build his business like he has always done. He has taken the management business to a new level. His definition of what a management company could be has now been successfully emulated by several others, but Irving created that definition.”

The combined roster of Full Stop, which Azoff the Elder joined in March 2017, includes the Eagles, Steely Dan, Jimmy Buffett, Journey, Henley, Joe Walsh, Van Halen, Lindsey Buckingham, Bon Jovi, Harry Styles, Christina Aguilera, Gwen Stefani, Chelsea Handler, HAIM, Sara Bareilles, John Mayer/Dead & Company, Mark Ronson and Meghan Trainor, with Maroon 5 and Travis Scott the most recent additions to the client roster.

“Young blood is important in our business, and I wanted to work with taller people,” Irving explained.

Not many people manage to get the last word when going head to head with Irving, but thanks to their shared DNA, son Jeffrey can hold his own against his old man. “I’m just trying to rebuild all the bridges he burned,” Azoff the Younger explains. •