



**DURING HIS 24-YEAR REIGN AS THE WILDLY SUCCESSFUL CHIEF OF INTERSCOPE RECORDS, HE WAS VIEWED BY HIS PEERS AS THE MOST SUCCESSFUL LABEL HEAD IN THE BIZ.**

# JIMMY IOVINE

## MOVING THE NEEDLE ON THE CULTURE

**N**ot many current music-biz figures get feature films made about them, but then, **Jimmy Iovine** is hardly your garden-variety mogul. Part Zelig, part visionary, the colorful, raspy-voiced producer-turned-label head-turned-streaming crusader has consistently found himself in the middle of some of the biggest industry stories of the last four decades-plus—and sometimes it appears that this hyper-driven force of nature has willed his narrative into existence. He’s also parlayed his knowledge and savvy into ventures that have made him the third billionaire in the history of the music biz.

“Jimmy happens to you like a virus,” according to no less an authority than **Bono**. The **U2** frontman has also described his onetime producer and label head as “a heat-seeking missile,” while Iovine’s longtime partner **Dr. Dre** has noted, “Jimmy has this term: ‘I smell blood.’ When he says that, I





**SAY "CHEESE":** *With friend and mentor Doug Morris; Jon Bon Jovi and Vanessa Williams*

know he's on to something." Part of what makes Jimmy run is metabolic, it seems. "I am blessed with the energy of a chimpanzee," he offers. Maybe it's all that tea he drinks.

As an upstart engineer/producer, Iovine was deeply involved in the creation of landmark albums from **John Lennon**, **Bruce Springsteen**, **Patti Smith**, **Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers**, **Stevie Nicks** and **U2**, for starters.

During his 24-year reign as the wildly successful chief of **Interscope Records**, he was viewed by his peers as the most successful label head in the biz. Most recently, Iovine was a game-changer at **Apple**, helping to usher in a new age of prosperity—including Dre's and his own via the \$3 billion sale of **Beats** to the tech giant. All in all, not a bad track record for a perennially boyish inveterate hustler from Brooklyn.

Four years later, with **Apple Music** now challenging long-dominant streamery **Spotify**, Iovine is plotting his next move—his fifth chapter, if you're counting—and it seems like practically everybody in the music and tech sectors is trying to read the tea leaves to determine where he'll land.

"My nickname was Moochie," Iovine revealed in a 2014 interview with *GQ*. "My father was incredible, a longshoreman; my mother was a secretary. Very 'go to work' people. That's how I saw things. I loved music, and I wanted to do something different." He snagged an entry-level gig in the business at 19, sweeping floors in New York's **Record Plant** and keeping his eyes peeled for an opportunity.

It came, magically enough, in 1973, when Jimmy wormed his way into a John Lennon session and made himself useful, whereupon the **Smart Beatle** ordered, "Stay in the chair." Two years later, he'd become sufficiently adept and wily to be entrusted with chief engineering duties on the *Born to Run* project by Springsteen and producer/manager **Jon Landau**. Through the 1970s and '80s, Iovine's profile and bank account grew as his stack of hit albums accumulated: Smith's *Easter*, Petty's *Damn the Torpedoes*, **Dire Straits'** *Making Movies*, Nicks' *Bella Donna*, **Simple Minds'** *Once Upon a Time*, U2's *Rattle and Hum*.

Iovine has said more than once that he cared just as much about the music his artist clients were making as they did themselves. "When I was in there with them," he recalled



# IOVINE'S LONGTIME PARTNER DR. DRE HAS NOTED, "JIMMY HAS THIS TERM: 'I SMELL BLOOD.' WHEN HE SAYS THAT, I KNOW HE'S ON TO SOMETHING."

in the *GQ* piece, "there was nothing else I gave a shit about in life. Nothing. Not even myself." As time went on, his perfectionism caused him to become increasingly demanding. "Jimmy set a standard in commitment I still look for," Petty told *Rolling Stone's* David Fricke in 2012. "He would throw himself on a grenade to get the track. He also had this saying, when we finished a take and asked how it was, he'd go, 'You're a million miles away.' Jimmy wouldn't give you anything until you really gave him something."

When not in the studio, Jimmy—with his ever-present baseball cap and fidgety demeanor—made the rounds of the major labels, trade-talking with Arista's Clive Davis at the latter's Beverly Hills Hotel bungalow, swapping anecdotes with Doug Morris at Atlantic HQ in NYC and shooting the shit with Irving Azoff in MCA's Universal City high-rise.

Those experiences with his artists and executive mentors—whom the ever-inquisitive Iovine pressed for insights, which they readily supplied—progressively fueled his ambition. "I'm a sponge," he said in *GQ*. "I can't learn in school, but I can learn from somebody who I think is cool and great. I have a gift: I'm very lucky to be able to spot when a person is special. I'm good at casting my life, you know?"

**A**t 38, Iovine knew it was time to make his next move. "Producing is too small a hole," Iovine explained to Fricke. "What I felt in my 20s, I stopped hearing in my 30s. I didn't feel a thing. I felt it again when I started working with Dre and Trent Reznor. But they wouldn't have asked me to produce their albums. They didn't need to sound like Tom Petty."

As the '90s approached, Jimmy surveyed the landscape. Initially, he strongly considered joining Azoff at his start-up label Giant, but he wound up getting a better deal from entrepreneur Ted Field, and they co-founded Interscope in 1990. At first, the partners



**BILLIONAIRES' CLUB**



jointly ran the nascent label, but it wasn't long before it became apparent that Iovine was the engine driving the company, and Field receded into the background.

In the early days of Interscope, Jimmy's OCD-like relentlessness became apparent to us as he called every morning at 7am for weeks on end as part of a determined

effort to snag **Daniel Glass** as his head of promotion. Getting nowhere, Jimmy came up with a backup plan he could live with, hiring former **Columbia** promo domo **Marc Benesch**, who went on to head the department for nearly a decade. Benesch had come to Interscope from Boston, where he'd been working for

**Dick Scott**, manager of **New Kids on the Block**, and he brought **Marky Mark**, the brother of New Kid **Donnie Wahlberg**, to the label with him, while Benesch's attorney, **Peter Lopez**, brought **Gerardo**, giving the startup label its first two hits.

Those two acts won't go down in music-biz history, but their left-field hit singles put the fledgling label on the map. Gerardo's "Rico Suave" hit #7 in April 1991, and **Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch's** "Good Vibrations" topped the charts later that year. But Marky—aka **Mark Wahlberg**—would enjoy a significantly more long-lasting career in film.

Meanwhile, Jimmy applied his knack at spotting talent on the hoof to his hirings, as he took untested youngsters **Steve Berman** and **Brenda Romano** under his wing and grew them into highly capable execs. Indeed, they functioned throughout Iovine's tenure as his left- and right-hand lieutenants.

**T**hings picked up considerably when Iovine signed and befriended Dre, whose first solo album, *The Chronic*, changed the face of the burgeoning hip-hop genre. It also changed Iovine's musical priorities. "I knew hip-hop was going around, but I had no idea what it was," he admitted. Following this awakening, the floodgates opened with the signings and breakthroughs of **Snoop**, **Tupac** and **Eminem**—the first two, as well as Dre, through a deal with **Suge Knight's** gangsta rap label **Death Row**—transforming Iovine's image within the business from that of rock producer to rap mogul. "He can see around corners," Morris marveled. "It was Jimmy who really believed that rap was going to go mainstream, and it did exactly what he thought."

As a label head, he was the antithesis of a corporate suit, viewing the Interscope staff and roster as his extended family. On Sundays in the early '90s, he hosted a touch football game in the backyard of his Malibu estate, which exemplified the close-knit, distinctly non-corporate vibe of the extended Interscope



**SCOPING IT OUT:** Doug digs what Jimmy's cooking up with Sheryl Crow, Bono and Gwen Stefani; Ted Field, Gerardo and Sylvia Rhone



family. On any given Sunday, the pickup teams might include Dre, Suge and Snoop, staffers **John McClain**, **Beau Hill**, **David Cohen**, **Step Johnson**, and **Michael Papale**, along with friends and associates like Lopez, **Jordan Schur** and **Jeff Kwatinetz**, while Jimmy's mom, a frequent visitor, cooked her Italian specialties for dinner.

It wasn't all idyllic, however. The Death Row connection brought with it a horde of thugs, and it seemed like everyone was packing heat, so much so that Iovine had no choice but to hire bodyguards, just in case. The pervasive sense of danger during those times comes across in alarming detail in the second half of *The Defiant Ones*, the four-part HBO documentary chronicling Iovine and Dre's stories, which picked up five 2018 Emmy nominations.

For its first five years of existence, Interscope was part of **Warner Music Group**, but that arrangement came under fire when activist **C. Delores Tucker** and former federal drug czar **William Bennett** began a series of headline-grabbing attacks on gangsta rap lyric content. As a result, **Michael Fuchs**, WMG's clueless overseer, desperate to wash his hands of the whole business, happily handed over the company to Iovine's friend and mentor, **Doug Morris**, who'd been handed the reins of **Universal Music** by **Edgar Bronfman Jr.** after being fired by the very same Fuchs. The delicious irony is that Fuchs had virtually given away what would become the dominant label of the next 20 years, as Interscope continued to win big not just with its hip-hop superstars but also true originals like **Nine Inch Nails**, **No Doubt**, **Bush**, **Primus**, **Helmet**, **Black Eyed Peas**, **Weezer** and **Lady Gaga**.

In his role as label head, Iovine was just as demanding of his artists as he'd been during his producer days. "There's this thing: 'Jimmy Jail,' we call it," **Gwen Stefani** revealed in *Rolling Stone*. "You're writing a record, and it's always 'You're not done. One more song.' It's intimidating. But you want to be part of his history. He brings that out of you."

In 2006, when Dre told Jimmy he was thinking of starting a sneaker line, Iovine spontaneously uttered the now-famous



**MADE IN THE SHADY:** Doug and Jimmy with budding superstar Eminem

**"I HAVE A GIFT: I'M VERY LUCKY TO BE ABLE TO SPOT WHEN A PERSON IS SPECIAL. I'M GOOD AT CASTING MY LIFE, YOU KNOW?"**



**BEAUTIFUL DAY:** Jimmy, Bono and The Edge join Steve Jobs to hawk U2-branded iPod

**"YOU'VE GOTTA BE OF SERVICE TO PEOPLE—YOU CAN'T JUST BE A SERVICE."**





FARM CLUBBING



ADDING THE AMPERSAND: With John McClain, Doug, Herb Alpert and Lani Hall

retort, “Screw sneakers. Let’s do speakers.” That notion led to the founding of **Beats by Dr. Dre**, which revolutionized the headphone business. But it wouldn’t have happened if Doug Morris hadn’t crusaded on Iovine’s behalf to allow him to pursue outside business opportunities, leading to a clause to that effect in his employment contract.

The industry consensus was that when Iovine was focused, he could sign just about any act he wanted, that none of his rivals had much of a chance. Iovine’s star turn as chief mentor on *American Idol* from 2011-13, which made him a pop-culture icon, served to further increase his appeal to the acts he had his eye on.

When an artist came to his office or his house for a meeting, the impression Iovine made was nothing less than overwhelming, albeit in a totally unpretentious way. The first thing his guests would invariably notice was all the photos lining the walls showing Iovine with Lennon, Springsteen, Bono and other legends. When the phone would ring, it might be Bruce calling to discuss the logistics of joining **Obama** for lunch at the estate of **Larry Ellison** or **David Geffen**—or jumping on **Paul Allen**’s private jet to watch the **Seahawks** in the playoffs from Allen’s owner’s suite. For the coup de gras, Gwen, Gaga, Dre or Eminem might walk through the door to seal the deal. In short, Jimmy had all the marbles, and he knew how to spin them.

There’s good reason Iovine was the highest-paid music exec for the last 10 years of the Interscope run. He never made a big deal about it because he didn’t want to give off that sort of vibe, but those numbers were whoppers. In retrospect, of course, they look like pocket change compared to his Beats score.

But a distracted Iovine is not the A-game Iovine, as he demonstrated during his final years at Interscope. At the time, he was becoming increasingly distracted by his Beats project and, for a time, his *American Idol* mentoring duties. So, at **Lucian Grainge**’s urging, Iovine plucked young indie entrepreneur turned major-label all-star **John Janick** from **Atlantic**, anointed him as his heir apparent and empowered him





**BEATS GOES ON:** Eddy Cue welcomes Jimmy and Dre to Cupertino.

to handle IGA's day-to-day responsibilities. As a result, IGA had one of its most profitable years in 2013, regaining much of the marketshare it had lost during the previous few years, and the company has been a consistently strong performer during the ensuing half decade.

What's more, Iovine's frustrations at running a label were beginning to take the joy out of the job. "My only regret about Interscope is I can't fix the image of a record company," he said ruefully in the *Rolling Stone* Q&A. "No matter what I do, if somebody's record stiffs, they are trained to blame the building. Even your greatest friends, when they want more money, their lawyer wants more money—they point at the building. And you're the building. I'm not saying I did everything right or wrong. But I could never fix that. It's too ingrained—the idea that the industry steals from people."

By then, Iovine was being pulled toward his next radical career shift. "When I met Steve Jobs and Eddy Cue at Apple, I didn't know how to make a headphone," he acknowledged to

*Esquire* in 2017. "I learned how to navigate that business by hanging out with Eddy. I was trying to help Apple as much as possible, and I was getting all this knowledge in return."

**A**fter Jimmy and Dre expanded their electronics business to include the user-friendly, human-curated Beats streaming service, Apple swooped in and bought the entire company in its biggest acquisition to date. The partners then played key roles in the development of the Beats-derived Apple streaming service, working closely with Cue and his team. Right after launch, Iovine told us, "My whole thing was, 'Get us into Apple and we can build something extraordinary.'... You've gotta be of service to people—you can't just be a service... We've got a big platform.... and people are gonna use it—they're not gonna know exactly *why* they like it more, but I think they're gonna like it more."

Three years after Apple Music's launch,

the premium-only service boasts more than 50 million subscribers worldwide, and it aims to surpass Spotify's paid tier in the U.S. by the end of 2018. So it looks like Eddy Cue's \$3 billion bet has paid off big time. Indeed, Beats Electronics by itself has thrown off enough revenue since the acquisition to more than cover the cost of the deal. Jimmy has said that he'll continue to do whatever he can on Apple and Cue's behalf following his departure in August, but it looks like chapter four in his storybook career deserves to end with "Mission accomplished."

As for his next move, Iovine will likely bring the same perspective to the decision that brought him to Apple in 2014. As he said at the time, "Life is a balance of fear and overcoming it. You can use fear as a tailwind or a headwind. I'm most proud that I thought of Beats at [age] 55. Dre and I wanted to move the needle on the culture. That's *everything* to me. 'We caused it.' I'd say it's more important than money, but you wouldn't believe me."•