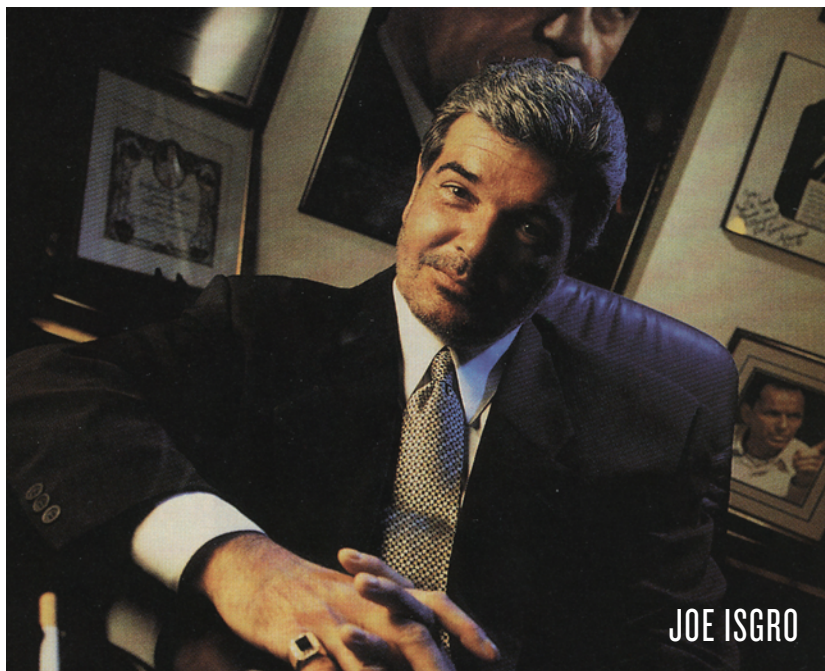


# THE ALWAYS-AGGRESSIVE JOE ISGRO RESPONDED TO THE CRISIS BY FILING AN ANTITRUST SUIT AGAINST ALL OF THE MAJOR LABELS, CBS EXCEPTED.



JOE ISGRO

Functioning as middlemen between MCA and small New Jersey record distributor **Out of the Past**, Pisello and Levy had arranged to sell more than 4 million MCA cutouts to its owner, **John LaMonte**, a convicted counterfeiter. Claiming that Levy and Pisello had removed the top titles and left him 4 million units of junk, LaMonte refused to pay the pair, which meant they in turn couldn't pay MCA. That's when Levy associate and reputed New Jersey mafia figure **Gaetano "Corky" Vastola** crushed the side of LaMonte's face. LaMonte then agreed to cooperate with federal agents, who already had Vastola and Levy under electronic surveillance. Indictments were handed down to Pisello, Levy, Vastola, **Howard Fisher**, Levy's controller at Roulette, and **Dominick "Baldy Dom" Canterino**, reportedly one of the most powerful members of the **Genovese** crime family.

In April 1988, Pisello was convicted of evading taxes on more than \$300,000 in income he'd pocketed from his MCA business dealings and sentenced to four years in prison. Levy, Fisher and Canterino were found guilty of conspiring to take over LaMonte's business. Levy was sentenced to 10 years in prison and fined \$200,000. He died in May 1990 before serving any time.

Interestingly, no MCA executive was ever charged or indicted for any crime. **Dan Moldea's** *Dark Victory: Ronald Reagan, MCA, and the Mob*, **Dannen's** *Hit Men* and **Knoedelseder's** *Stiffed: A True Story of MCA, the Music Business, and the Mafia* make compelling cases that **Lew Wasserman's** MCA successfully pressured the government to give MCA a free pass in the Pisello, Levy/Vastola and Canterino cases. But did MCA, directly or indirectly, point the government in the direction of independent promotion—particularly Isgro and his reputed organized crime associates—in order to shift focus away from Pisello, Levy and MCA itself? That thought inevitably crossed some people's minds.

Regardless, the Sal Pisello and Morris Levy show ended quietly, leaving Isgro alone at center stage. Isgro repeatedly told Lavinthal that he knew for sure that MCA had attempted to move the media's spotlight to the indie sector to try and give the federal strike force on organized crime another target besides themselves. And in the end, that's exactly what happened, just eight months later.

## 1986: The Helmsley Meetings and the Inaugural Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Dinner

On Thursday, January 23, 1986, the day of the first **Rock and Roll Hall of Fame** induction dinner, indies Joe Isgro and Fred Disipio called a major independent promotion summit in the presidential suite of New York's Helmsley Palace Hotel. Along with Isgro and Disipio, the top indies in the room were **Ralph Tashjian, Ron Kyle, Jerry Brenner, Jerry Meyers** and Lavinthal. Some big indies were not invited, most notably the powerful **Gary Bird**, who had never been a fan of collaborating or cooperating with his counterparts.

According to an **NBC News** report that aired on February 24, **Gambino** family boss **John Gotti** and several of his associates attended a separate meeting with Isgro and Disipio in the same Helmsley presidential suite later on January 23. Though footage of Gotti shot through the hotel lobby window added credibility to the report, NBC's documentation of those meetings with mobsters was sketchy at best and appeared to be a tenuous attempt by investigative reporter **Brian Ross** to make a compelling story of organized crime's infiltration of the music industry. "That meeting never happened," Isgro said in an April 1996 *HITS* interview.

According to Lavinthal, the purpose of the daytime indie summit was to carve up the country's radio stations. Business was booming, and big-time money was being thrown around by the labels. Isgro, Disipio and the other indies were attempting to establish clear territories and continue an uneasy alliance of extremely aggressive businessmen. The attendees also intended to jack up the prices the labels were paying per radio station add, something Lavinthal opposed at the time. "Mo Ostin, who hates paying us, is going to have a fit if he sees that he's paying any of us more than he's paying **Fleetwood Mac**," he recalls arguing during the confab.

By 1986, the independent promotion business was costing the major labels well over \$100 million annually. Label executives needing Top 40 airplay to keep their jobs gladly threw money at any indie whose station would add their records.