



Left to right:
With Ringo Starr and
George Harrison 1978;
Neil and Barbra,
Grammys 1980; with
Pierre Cossette; with
David Wild and LL Cool
J; with Bono; with Paul
McCartney and Bruce
Springsteen



I N T E R V I E W B Y P H I L G A L L O

The 62nd Annual Grammy Awards will wrap a 40-year relationship between the Recording Academy and executive producer Ken Ehrlich that has seen the show grow into the premier music telecast.

He arrived in L.A. in the 1970s after considerable success with PBS' *Soundstage* out of Chicago's WTTW, with classic episodes that included a blues summit with Muddy Waters, Johnny Winter, Willie Dixon and others, and a New Orleans episode featuring the talents of Professor

Longhair, The Meters and Dr. John. The Cleveland native subsequently produced specials with artists including Ringo Starr and The Bee Gees, which caught the attention of Pierre Cossette, the Grammy telecast's executive producer.

"I went to the 1976 Grammy Awards," Ehrlich recalls. "I don't remember much other than Paul Simon winning for *Still Crazy After All These Years*. My wife was pregnant with our daughter, and we sat in the bleachers at the Palladium. I sat under the cameras in the back, and I thought, 'Will I ever

ken

ehrllich

THE AUTEUR OF MUSIC TV LOOKS BACK



PART ONE

get to do this? It's what I was born to do.' It took Pierre three years to come around."

Ehrlich credits the continuing success of the Grammys to the continuity of his core staff, citing the long-term contributions of supervising producer **Eric Cook**, talent producer **Chantel Sausedo**, writer **David Wild**, line producer **Ron Basile**, lead stage manager **Garry Hood**, lighting and scenic designers **Bob Dickinson** and **Brian Stonestreet**, producer **Jesse Collins** and the screens team of **Drew Findley** and **Raj Kapoor**. All have spent 10 to 25 years on the show.

"With the annual pressure of a show like this coming down like falling rocks at times," says Ehrlich, "it's a blessing to be able to count on a team like these folks, whose ability to understand shorthand and respond in the moment is like no other."

Before anyone gets sentimental about Ken's final stanza, we sat down with Ehrlich at one of his favorite Encino sushi joints to talk about the entirety of his career, the highlights, the in-fighting and what his guiding principles have been in booking "Music's Biggest Night." (Not that we have any idea what principles are.)



Top to bottom: Down Beat's John McDonough, legendary execs John Hammond, Goddard Lieberson and Jerry Wexler with Ken Caillat, Soundstage, 1975; with his favorite artist ever, B.B. King, Cinemax, 1988; with The Bee Gees, Peter Frampton and Kris Kristofferson, 1978

Now that the eligibility period has ended, what are your thoughts about the type of show you want to stage in 2020? What's impressing you?

There are a tremendous number of fresh faces who didn't just put out good records, they're really artists; they're really professional. Last time, we had **Kacey Musgraves**, **Brandi Carlile** and **H.E.R.**, and I think it's similar this year—[artists] capable of delivering really great performances in front of an audience of 22 million people. That's the key for me. I'm less concerned about how great a record they made and more concerned about what they're going to do [to entertain] a 15-year-old fan, a 26-year-old who might know the artist or a 45-year-old sitting there saying, "I don't even know who some of these people are, but I want to find out. I'll give you a chance—show me what you got."

You don't book anyone until the nominations come out, but you certainly start conversations early on. What does that list look like now?

I started talking earlier than usual this year, because the nominations are two weeks earlier than usual [on 11/20], and there are some pretty obvious ones. I lose all leverage if I go ahead too far in advance. **Tyler, The Creator**, **Lizzo**, **Billie Eilish**, **Rosalía**—I don't have ideas for them yet, but something might come out of the nominations.

With streaming creating more and younger stars from the world of hip-hop, how has that affected the way you book the show?

I've spent my life trying to connect the dots between generations. I never looked at it as a gimmick; it always seriously came from my heart. I was worried, to be honest with you, that there would come a time when I couldn't do that anymore, because the music changed so dramatically that a through line wouldn't work. I think it's starting to be connected again. There's a whole level of artists now where the kids are as interested in what that artist believes in as they are in the music. That's kind of a healthy return.

There are artists that you really want to spend an evening with talking not just about music. Talk about politics, talk about the world, talk about the family. And I think that there seems to be somewhat of a return to that by fans and artists alike. I'm not sure it ever really went away, but it got buried for a while.

It shows the rarity of a person like Lady Gaga who can do a David Bowie tribute one year and convincingly perform a song from the 1940s on another show.

You want to feel that in some small way it's a continuation of what went before. That certainly has worked for us and in the tribute shows we've done. We've had no problem finding really interesting artists who sometimes reinterpret, and other times want to be very true to the originals. A great artist like **Whitney Houston**—she knew that it didn't start with her and it's not going to end with her. Great artists are conduits who respect the past and want to make the connection to the future.



Over time, who do you consider to be among the best at delivering great television?

People who understand “the moment.” Gaga, certainly. Prince was as good as any. Beyoncé. Bruno Mars, Adele, Kendrick Lamar, Justin Timberlake—they all deserve the title “entertainer.”

The tough task, I would imagine, is getting a hot, young artist on board with your vision for the show. Obviously, every case is different, but how do you present your side to artists, managers and labels?

In the beginning, even though they were my biggest allies, it was often the labels who were the hardest. They would say, “This is the single we’re working.” And if it’s from the nominated album, that’s OK. But there are times when I’ll listen to the single and I’ll say, “That won’t work—it’s a series of hooks. I need a song: an A, a B and a bridge and this and that.” That’s what my audience wants. Yeah, it’s a lot of young ears, but there are a lot of older ears that want to hear “Another Day in Paradise.” We want to hear a song, a melody—something that Elton John might have written.

Speaking of Elton and connecting past and present, one of your most famous “Grammy Moments” was the pairing of Elton and Eminem on “Stan.” How did that one come about?

Eminem had resisted doing the Grammys until Doug Morris and I asked Elton if he would consider performing with him. Up until that point, Marshall had been thought to be homophobic based on some lyrics in his songs. Not only did Elton spark to the idea, but he called Eminem and told him he supported the idea. It was a stunning moment [at the 2001 ceremony].

These pairings have been your bread and butter, but their roots are in *Soundstage*. Can you take us back to the genesis of that idea?

I was doing the PBS show and had no money—I think we did the show for \$30,000 an episode. Even in those days, I realized that rarely could I do a show with one act for an hour, so I tried to find two acts that had some compatibility. It was Donovan and John Sebastian, Tom Waits and Mose Allison.

There were no commercials in public television, so I tried to divide the show into two 25-minute sets and, for want of a better idea, we created a middle spot where we put the two acts together to bridge the middle of the hour. That worked best with Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock, both of whom had worked with Miles Davis but had never

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met. They wound up touring together after that show. There was one with Dion and Phil Everly, and I said, “I want you guys to write a song together and I’m gonna roll the camera, and if it’s any good, that’ll be my middle spot.” I think Dion had this song he was working on called “The Queen of ’59,” and they’re sitting there, kind of pretending to write the lyrics together, and then the payoff—they perform it together.

I’m not saying I invented the idea of collaboration. When I was 12 or 13, there were great shows on television where Julie Andrews and Carol Burnett collaborated. There were a lot of those kinds of specials.

You leave Chicago and move to L.A. Pierre eventually hires you and you wind up doing your first pairing on your first Grammy telecast.

Marty Pasetta produced and directed the show until 1978, and then Pierre did the 1979 show with Bob Henry, a very nice man who was an old-line producer who did *Flip Wilson*. I had actually done a *Billboard Awards* show for NBC in ’78 hosted by The Bee Gees and Kris Kristofferson, and the numbers were pretty good. I don’t know the whole story, but Pierre called and asked me if I would do it with the new director, Walter Miller. So 1980 was the first year, and I had a million ideas about what to do and not necessarily how to do it—but I got thrown in the barrel and it was sink or swim.

And you got Neil Diamond and Barbra Streisand to perform “You Don’t Bring Me Flowers” for the first time ever.

The way it happened was that I had an attorney named Jeff Ingber who worked for David Braun, who represented Bob Dylan and Neil Diamond. I had a friend in Chicago named Peter Marino, who produced the Roy Leonard radio show, and he took the two versions [of



“You Don’t Bring Me Flowers”] and put them together. He said, “You always try and put these people together, and they’ve never done the song together. You ought to try and get *these* people.” Neil agreed to do it, and he called Barbra, and Barbra said yes.

I’ll never forget the night we rehearsed the number with both of them at the **Shrine Auditorium**. It was the last rehearsal of the night before the Grammys and we were running late, and I had my natural jitters that either one or both of them were going to leave. I walked into the green room, and my first sight was Neil sleeping on the couch, and when I looked past him, Barbra was pacing. To their credit, they waited, we rehearsed them and I told them there would be no introduction, just the two of them appearing onstage after a commercial. It was an electric moment, one that other producers have tried to duplicate for years—this year Gaga and **Bradley Cooper** on the Oscars, and just recently **Shawn Mendes** and **Camila Cabello** on the VMAs, and I have to say, they did it well.

For most of the 1980s, the Recording Academy, then called NARAS, did not have a President/CEO. Who represented the Academy in terms of what went on TV?

The Academy always had a TV committee. They were mostly people at least in their 40s and 50s, and they all had day jobs. So the TV committee thought it was their job to book the show— we might have differed on that point— but it was collegial.

There were always the country guys on the committee, a classical guy, there was a jazz guy, an R&B guy. There were two gospel representatives, traditional and black, and it was always a challenge to try and keep them both happy, because I really loved gospel music, and we did it a lot in those days. What often made it work was when pop invaded gospel and I was able to check off as gospel **Joe Cocker** and **The Crusaders** doing “I’m So Glad I’m Standing Here Today.” Great song, and it had been on a gospel album. And so I began to express my point of view more as the years went by, ’til **Mike [Greene]** got there.

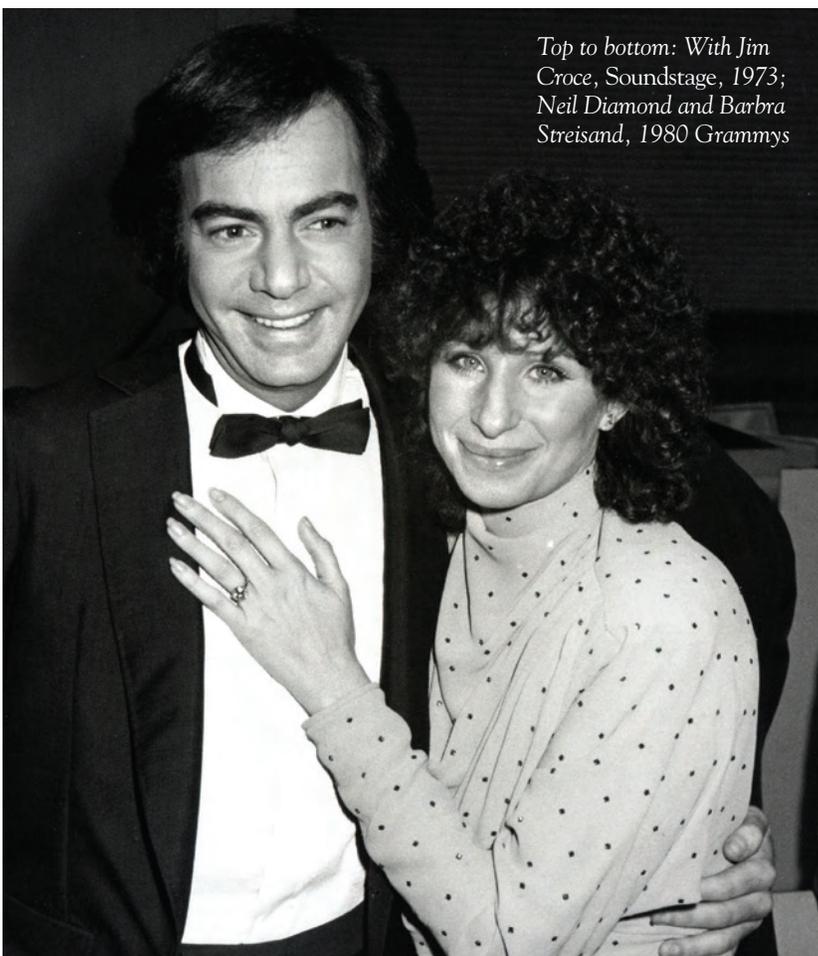
What effect did Greene have?

Mike got there and we had a few years where it was a lot of headbutting, and he basically said to the committee, “Don’t worry about him. I’ll take care of him.” There were times when I couldn’t beat him. He was a force. But we found our footing.

One of the biggest changes came in 1983, when the awards turned 25 and you were given a longer show. What was the impact?

When I started doing the show in 1980, certainly before I had any control, there were probably 15-16 awards, with eight or nine performances at the most. And it was a two-hour show. We went to three hours for the 25th. We still did a number of awards, but I had a lot more time for performances. That was the beginning of the shift in the award/performance ratio, and also in the radical upgrading of the production values on the show.

One of the major things that came in under my aegis, though I won’t take credit for it, was when we went to two stages. When the show was done on a single stage, it took 12 or 15 minutes to change sets. It was **Bob Keene**, the designer at that time, who said, “You guys might increase the number of the performances if you split the stage in half.” It hadn’t been done on any other awards show. And of course, when we took the show to **Staples**—again, the



Top to bottom: With **Jim Croce**, Soundstage, 1973; **Neil Diamond** and **Barbra Streisand**, 1980 Grammys

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first time an awards show had been done in an arena—the stage got even bigger, and it was much easier to accommodate big performances on both stages. And then we added a satellite stage out in the house.

Greene became President/CEO in 1988. How did having a president affect the show?

Mike and I had a very complicated relationship. It was very much a need-based relationship, but we both also saw what the potential of the show was. We realized we needed to be radically different from other shows.

At some point during his tenure [which ended in 2002], the show opened up so that it was no longer limited to songs and albums that had been nominated.

The rules changed while Mike was there, which was good. We had always seen ourselves as the document of record of popular music in a particular year, and also the proper venue to recognize both what had gone before and what was coming. And to this day, that's what's separated the Grammys from the other music awards shows.

At the time, though, you had to decide whether you would book or pass on an act that was appearing on another major TV show or awards show, correct?

It used to be a turf war, but it's not so much anymore, because the AMAs, which used to be on three weeks ahead of us, moved to the fourth quarter. Normally, we will know or have a pretty good idea of what we want an artist to do. Most managers or label people will call me ahead of time to say, "This is what my artist wants to do," or "We're doing Dick Clark's Rockin' New Year's Eve." You're not going to do the same song on the Grammys.

Let me give you a good old example. When the AMAs were three weeks before us, Whitney Houston was going to have her first big TV look with "How Will I Know." I wanted the ballad "Saving All My Love for You." Her manager Gene Harvey said, "I just want you to know that we're gonna do the AMAs and we're not going to do the Grammys." I said, "OK, do the AMAs." Whitney had an incredible year and was breaking." I asked, "What's she going to do on the AMAs?" He said, "How Will I Know," and I said, "That's perfect, because I want the ballad." She was great on the [1986] AMAs and then came on the Grammys and did "Saving All My Love," and that was a career-maker.

Anything more recent?

I went to see H.E.R. last year, and she did "Hard Place" for me, but it wasn't finished. I said, "OK, that's fine, but I want that song, and because it's not finished, I want to develop it with you." She had two really collaborative creative producers working with her, and we turned what had been an unfinished song into a virtuoso performance that once again was a career-maker.

It's interesting that H.E.R.'s performance was a "Grammy Moment," much like The Civil Wars, despite not being paired with another artist.

The first thing I would say is not all "moments" are combinations. They're staging ideas—like P!nk in the air, Ricky Martin in full production, Adele solo onstage, Aretha doing "Nessun Dorma," Mary J. Blige doing "No More Drama." And many more than that. ■

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Top to bottom:
Prince and Beyoncé,
2004 Grammys;
H.E.R., 2019 Grammys

