



BERMAN

Interscope's Wizard Behind the Curtain



THEY'RE NOT BIG ON JOB TITLES AT INTERSCOPE, THOUGH for what it's worth, Steve Berman is officially Vice Chairman, meaning he's second in command to Chairman/CEO **John Janick**. But Berman's perch in the label's official pecking order doesn't begin to describe his value to the company, which is having a top-of-the-heap renaissance under Janick, hitting an all-time high in market-

INTERSCOPE

“OUR GOAL IS ALWAYS TO MATCH UP THE RIGHT ARTIST, THE RIGHT BRAND AND THE RIGHT SONG, AND TIME IT TO PENETRATE THE MARKETPLACE FROM ALL ANGLES, TOGETHER.”

share in 2020 with a 10+. Berman’s been there since the beginning, pulling the levers and pushing the buttons from behind the scenes, playing a central role in keeping the Interscope machine firing on all cylinders.

“Steve has been at this company for 22 years, and he’s fantastic,” Janick said in 2013, his second year at Interscope. “I didn’t know him at all before I came in. Now, when I sit with him, I see that Steve has some of the best relationships with people throughout the business, and he’s one of the strongest people I know in his position. He’s been a great partner in everything that we’re doing together, and we’re lucky to have him at the company.”

The feeling is mutual. “In terms of the culture of the company, what John fights for every day on the creative side, which filters down through the whole company, is the importance of the artists that we work with, giving them the freedom and the support to create,” Berman noted to *HITS* in a 2017 joint interview with Janick. “What is their voice, and how are they going to articulate that message?”

“There was a great creative energy around the music and really getting that part right at the company,” Berman said of Janick’s ascent to the top spot. “John also understood where the marketing was moving, that there were places in other parts of the company that needed to be looked at as the transition was really beginning. Our goal is to be the best in the business in every area, and we took it on. No one was immune from it, no one could hide, and it was really clear: ‘Are you going to adapt to what’s going to change in the business? Are you going to follow this direction?’”

“Steve’s amazing,” Janick told *MBW* in 2017. “As soon as it was announced that I was taking the Interscope job, I spoke to Berman, and he said the nicest, most helpful things. Having lived in New York for eight years, I was a little jaded. Like, ‘Why the fuck is this guy being so nice? Something’s wrong!’ He’s hugely talented at what he does, one of the best in the business relationship-wise and marketing-wise. He adds so much value to what Interscope is and the fabric of the company.”

Interscope’s fabric is a tight weave of company veterans like President of Promotion **Brenda Romano**, who has spent a quarter century at IGA, and EVP **Joie Manda**,



Berman with Kendrick, Janick and Dennis Dennehy

who has been an A&R game-changer since his arrival in 2013. “Brenda and I have been in the trenches together for decades, and she’s the best in the business as far as I’m concerned.” Berman told us. “Joie has an unparalleled grasp of music and culture—he’s like a chess master, always three or four moves ahead.”

A third-generation music exec, Berman is the grandson of indie legend **Si Waronker**, co-founder of **Liberty Records**, and his first gig, as a teen, was working in the mailroom at **Warner Bros. Records**, where his uncle **Lenny Waronker** was President. After attending **UCLA** and **Cal State Northridge**, the L.A. native made a brief return to WB before joining **WEA Distribution’s** marketing department in 1988.

Three years later, Berman landed at the label he’s called home ever since. He started the gig six months after Interscope’s launch.

“The story is,” he recalled in a 2017 *HITS* interview, “I was working at WEA, and Interscope wanted someone in marketing and sales who understood the WEA

“ [INTERSCOPE ’ S] STRUCTURE - OR LACK THEREOF - ENABLED JIMMY TO FOCUS ON BECOMING ARGUABLY THE GREATEST MARKETER EVER. WE WERE NIMBLE. AND THAT DNA IS STILL HERE IN THE COMPANY TODAY. ”

From Top: With Dr. Dre. Berman makes acting debut in several comedic skits in The Eminem Show. Twitter selfie with Eminem. With Lady Gaga at an Interscope after-party at the Peppermint Club.

system, because they were distributed through Atlantic. I already knew Tom Whalley from when I worked in the mailroom at Warner Bros. But most importantly, my wife, Frances—who was my fiancée at the time—was working in management with Ron Laffitte, and they recommended me for the job. So I went over and interviewed. I walked in and it was Ted [Field] in one corner, Jimmy [Iovine] sitting on top of the couch—not how normal people sit on the couch—John McClain, Tom, Michael Papale, Marc Benesch and David Cohen, all in the room. And I said to them that day, ‘I want to start working now. I don’t care what you pay me—this is where I want to be.’”

When asked what job he was hired for, Berman quipped, “Same job I have today. No, it was marketing and sales. But the record business was a much different place in ’91; their vision was that I would be there to support the promotion effort.

“Everyone had different backgrounds in music and different strengths. There was never a formula, so we were able to see the opportunities as times changed before almost everyone else did, how the business was going to transform and how to reach people differently.”

“We were nimble,” he added. “And that DNA is still here in the company today.”

It didn’t take long for the startup—formed as a joint venture with Atlantic, as Iovine and Doug Morris got into business together—to rack up the hits. The first wave in 1991-92 included Gerardo, 2PAC, Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch, Nine Inch Nails, No Doubt, 4 Non Blondes and Dr. Dre, providing Berman with ample opportunity to hone his marketing skills and build his Rolodex in live-game, full-contact action. He did his work behind the scenes, his name popping up occasionally in trade stories, variously preceded by “head” or “director” of sales and/or marketing. “Interscope is one of those fun(ny) places where employees don’t have titles,” *Billboard* retail columnist Ed Christman once noted in apparent frustration.

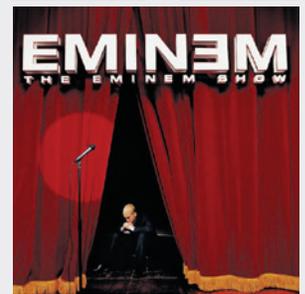
A politically fueled controversy about rap lyrics caused Time Warner to sell its 50% stake in Interscope in 1995 like a hot potato. UMG, which snapped up the label, couldn’t believe its good fortune, as the hits kept on coming from a meticulously groomed roster that included Snoop Doggy Dogg, Marilyn Manson, Bush, BLACKstreet, The Wallflowers, Limp Bizkit, Smash Mouth, Mya, Eve, Enrique Iglesias and Ruff Ryders, as

Interscope—with its potent combo of expert A&R, promotion and marketing—became the #1 label in the biz.

Following the creation of Interscope Geffen A&M in 1999, the company broke Mary J. Blige, 50 Cent, Gwen Stefani, Black Eyed Peas, The Pussycat Dolls and The All-American Rejects, among other high-profile acts, while picking up superstar rock band U2. Through all the changes, Berman continued to do his thing with great effectiveness but little fanfare.

His cloak of virtual anonymity was unceremoniously ripped away by Eminem, whose second album, 2000’s *The Marshall Mathers LP*, included “Steve Berman (skit)” on which the exec gave a convincing performance in his recorded debut. In the sketch, Eminem is summoned into Berman’s office, where he innocently asks, “How’s orders lookin’ for the first week?”

“It would be better if you gave me nothing at all,” Berman snarls, beginning a soliloquy punctuated by Em’s comedically timed stammering. “This album is less than nothing. I can’t sell this fucking record. Do you know what’s happening to me out there? Violet Brown told me to go fuck myself! Tower Records told me to shove this record up my ass! Do you know what it feels like to be told to have a record shoved up your ass? I’m gonna lose my fucking job over this. Do you know why Dre’s record was so successful? He’s rapping about big-screen TVs, blunts, 40s and bitches. You’re rapping about homosexuals and Vicodin. I can’t sell this shit! Either change the record or it’s not coming out! Now get the fuck out of my office!”



While Berman’s performance failed to receive the **Grammy** nomination it clearly deserved—due to the lack of a suitable category—his rise to stardom had begun. Reprising his churlish persona, he performed on three more tracks, each titled “Steve Berman (skit)”: in 2001 on *D12’s Devil’s Night*; in 2002 on *The Eminem Show*, which climaxes with Em shooting him in the arm; and in 2009 with *Relapse*, on which Berman—who claims to have lost the use of said arm—gives Em a hard time for “taking a vacation for nine years” and throws him out of his office. These recurring appearances spurred debates in chat rooms about whether this “Steve Berman” character was a real person or the product of Eminem’s imagination.

Dr. Dre brought a new wrinkle to that mystery by tapping Berman to play a sleazy record exec in the opening of his “Fuck Wit Dre Day (Uncensored)” video in 2009, though his role was uncredited.

With all that buildup, it’s hard to say what fans would’ve made of Berman’s mug adorning L.A. bus benches in 2017 in a parody of a real-estate ad campaign. The ruse was created by Interscope’s art department in celebration of his 25th anniversary at the company.

Berman offered an overview of his marketing philosophy in a 2003 *AdAge* interview. “Our goal,” he explained, “is always to match up the right artist, the right brand and the right song, and time it to penetrate the marketplace from all angles, together.”

He offered further words of wisdom to the *Bible* in 2007, pointing out that, “When you’re building the artist’s story, you have to start feeding the content as early as possible so that people start understanding and learning about that artist... In the traditional model, radio remains the most important tool that we deal with, but there are so many ways that people get exposed to music in the new world that we’re living in. On certain acts, we’ll want that music out there as early as possible... We



Back row: Berman with Archie Davis and Janick. Front row: Jeremy “Migo” Ellis, Slim Jimmy and Swae Lee of Rae Sremmurd.



Berman with Sir Lucian Grainge, Joie Manda, Ella Mai and John Janick

will hold a record longer now to build up the marketing and the excitement around an artist, to hopefully have as high a debut as possible.”

By the beginning of the 2010s, Berman had built a reputation as the most effective and innovative marketing exec in the biz. “In 2011, IGA claimed 7.9% of album and track-equivalent album sales, according to *Nielsen SoundScan*,” noted *Billboard* in their 2012 Power 100 rundown. “The label’s roster...was bolstered by the recent signings of **Madonna** and **Van Halen**, in which Berman played a key role. He now has the gargantuan task of shepherding those high-profile new projects through the media and retail pipeline. Berman has been at the forefront of finding creative means to package and promote releases in an ever-changing retail environment. He recently orchestrated one of the biggest album launches in the past few years with **Lady Gaga’s Born This Way**, which found its way into 25k nontraditional locations from **Starbucks** to **CVS**. The album was also offered as a download through a Gaga-branded ‘Farmville’ promotion in conjunction with social game developer **Zynga**. An idea-generator who’s known for his sense of humor and flawless execution of plans, Berman’s power is palpable.”

In 2014, Berman made the time to pay it forward, as he began his tenure as co-instructor of the UCLA course “The Music Business Now” alongside **Jeff Jampol**, **Tom Sturges**, **Aaron Saxe** and *HITS* Editor in Chief **Lenny Beer**.

The Bermans are committed activists. Frances and daughters **Lucie** and **Liliana** founded **1 Vote Closer**, an interactive site that provides fundamental voting resources, including breaking things down to key issues, informed by feedback from voters and congressional representatives, and provides a platform for users to make and share their own videos voicing their concerns and convictions.

A longtime philanthropist, Frances has supported a wide range of charities and causes over the years, including **L.A. Family Housing**, **Cedars-Sinai’s cancer-research programs**, **Planned Parenthood**, **the Crossroads School’s Equity & Justice Institute**, and a music endowment at her

Giving Back



Philanthropist Frances Berman (who supports a wide range of charities including the above) with John Janick, Nicole Wyskoarko, Steve and Benny Blanco enjoying themselves at Coachella 2019.

alma mater, the University of Texas in Austin.

Frances and Steve are also active in **Beit T'Shuvah**, a nonprofit, non-sectarian addiction treatment center and synagogue community in Culver City founded by Rabbi Mark Borovitz.

A

s the decade progressed, Interscope acts started showing up in a plethora of car commercials, thanks to deals Berman made with various auto manufacturers. In one high-profile look, **Chrysler-Fiat** put Interscope music in all five of its spots during the 2014 **American Music Awards**, which added up to \$100 million in media support for Interscope releases, along with an additional seven figures in placement revenue.

His hookup with **Target** for the 2015 **Grammys** was widely praised, including by us. “The industry is abuzz over the innovative setup for **Imagine Dragons’ Smoke + Mirrors**... masterfully orchestrated by IGA Vice Chairman and marketing guru Steve Berman,” read the *HITS* feature. “The centerpiece of the rollout was the audacious four-minute live performance of ‘Shots’ that served as Target’s biggest look during the Grammys telecast. By dropping the artfully filmed piece into the middle of Music’s Biggest Night, Berman and Target did the impossible—transforming a commercial into a bona fide Grammy Moment.

“The partnership, which required a massive outlay of

cash from the numero uno physical retailer for the four minutes of airtime, also involves a Target-exclusive deluxe edition of the album containing four additional tracks.”

A year later, **Zedd & Maren Morris’ “The Middle”** was showcased in an extended spot that many viewers assumed was part of the Grammy telecast.

Concurrently, Berman brought Interscope acts into featured spots with **ABC Sports/ESPN’s** college-football programming—topped off by **Kendrick Lamar** and **Imagine Dragons’** halftime performances at the 2018 and ’19 **CFP Championship** games—and **TNT’s NBA All-Star Game**. The biggest coup was scoring Super Bowl halftime-performance slots for Gaga in 2017 and **Maroon 5** two years later.

He also continued to exploit Interscope’s longstanding relationship with **Apple**—which had begun in the first decade of the 2000s with high-profile campaigns featuring U2’s “Vertigo” and Feist’s “1234”—as songs from Gaga, Dragons, Gomez and Eilish were used in commercials.

Movie-wise, Berman expertly connected the dots between 2016’s *La La Land*, 2018’s *Black Panther* and the same year’s Gaga-driven *A Star Is Born* and their respective chart-topping soundtrack albums.

All in a day’s work for this whip-smart, witty and disarming smooth talker, who could sell a used **Prius** to **Elon Musk**. As it turns out, of course, Berman has spent the last three decades selling stuff that people actually want. Long may he pitch. ■