

TODD MOSCOWITZ

STREET-LEVEL

Connecticut-bred, NYC-based Todd Moscovitz is the very model of a modern music entrepreneur. He acquired his bona fides in the trenches of Def Jam and Rush Management; his passion for hip-hop and ground-level understanding of the biz served him in good stead at Asylum and Violator, and he eventually ascended to Co-President/CEO of Warner Bros. Records before co-developing 300 Entertainment. His own Alamo label, which started at UMG and moved to Sony in 2021, has scored big successes with Rod Wave, Lil Durk, blackbear, Smokepurpp and more. He also continues to manage rapper Gucci Mane.

ENTREPRENEUR

INTERVIEW BY TODD HENSLEY



PHOTO: JOHNNY NUNEZ/WIREIMAGE



Mosco with Doug Davis and Chris Lighty

What was it like growing up, Mosco?

I grew up in Sherman, Connecticut, a town of around 1,500 people. It was pretty much like a **John Hughes** movie; it was the mid- to late '80s and there wasn't that much to do. I was at a boarding school. I had the friends I grew up with, who were like something out of a *Brat Pack* movie, and this new group of friends, who were mostly kids from New York City boarding in this small town in Connecticut. It was a weird mix of cultures. And it wasn't like there were computers or the Internet, so you listened to music. With my old friends, I listened to bands like **The Cure**, **New Order**, **The Smiths** and **The Sugarcubes**. The kids at school were all **Deadheads**.

What was the first record that really blew your skirt up?

I grew up listening mostly to what my parents listened to—**Fleetwood Mac**, **James Taylor**, **Carole King**, **John Denver**—

classic '70s stuff. But in high school, it was this very '80s/new wave thing.

I heard **N.W.A** for the first time when I went to college. The city kids there were all super into hip-hop, much earlier than I was. I heard **N.W.A** and **D-Nice** around the same time, and that's when I started getting into hip-hop. I think **D-Nice's** album was the first rap album I bought.

You went to NYU to become a lawyer. Where'd that come from?

My grandparents. I didn't know what I wanted to do, and my grandparents hammered it into my head that I was either going to medical school or law school. And that was it—no discussion. It was a foregone conclusion that if I could get in, I was going.

What do you remember most about law school?

When I got to law school, I immediately started interning at **Def**

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Jam. I had a friend who had a relationship with them and was like, “My best friend from college really wants to work in music; can I introduce you?” I met them and literally started interning the next day. So most of what I remember from law school was actually working at Def Jam. I think I spent more time there than I did going to class. It became like a full-time job.

This was 1991. Def Jam was still pretty small. It was **Rush Management** and Def Jam together in two offices, one on Elizabeth Street, which was really the downstairs of **Rick Rubin**’s apartment, and the other on Broadway. I worked in the Rush space. It was small, not even 30 people. For three years I got to sit on couches and listen to what was going on. Anything that was a contract, they were, like, “He’s in law school; he’ll read it.” And that was how I learned everything. They handed me every contract, every correspondence. I started reading them and picking up on stuff.

Hip-hop was becoming hugely popular but wasn’t all the way mainstream. There had been breakouts like **LL Cool J** and **The Beasties**. But for mainstream pop culture, it was just starting to penetrate. And like I said, Def Jam still had that smallish feel where the artists were in the office every day hanging out. It felt normal to be sitting in a room with **Q-Tip** or **Big Daddy Kane** or **Nice & Smooth**. It was a turning point, where it went from being an important but underground cultural thing to a much more mainstream thing, a much bigger business, a much bigger part of the record business... And I was a fly on the wall.

As it became more of a business, how did that affect the culture?

It matured. The people who worked at the company were incredibly young. At the time I had long, long hair and a peace-sign earring. One of the really interesting things was seeing how a company could operate when people weren’t restricted by preconceived notions of how things should be done. That led to brilliant, disruptive approaches to everything from A&R to marketing to promotion. I learned from that how I wanted to build my companies in the future.

What changed was, as the artists became bigger and more mainstream, more known, they grew up. The executives grew up. They learned that the more hours you put in, the more you learn and the better you get at what you’re doing. Over time it became a mature business, to the point where everybody in the industry was looking at Def Jam, like, “Wow, we need to do it like them—we need to replicate what they’re doing.” It went from being an upstart to being the industry leader.

When did you start to make the transition from being the lawyer/business-affairs guy to what you’ve ultimately become?

When I became a manager. After three or four years, I went to **Violator** to work with **Chris Lighty** and **Loud Records**, and that wasn’t a business-affairs role; I was EVP. That was when I left the other stuff behind and just started signing artists and managing things. I was managing **Three 6 Mafia**, a bunch of producers, **7 Aurelius**, who’d produced all the **Murder Inc.** stuff, the **Ashanti**, **Ja Rule** and **J.Lo** records. He’d had, like, seven worldwide #1s, so he was riding a huge wave. On the Loud side, I was handling a lot of the marketing and promotion. At that point, I’d been around it for 10 years and had absorbed way more than I’d ever realized.

You left Violator to join Asylum around 2004, which was a complete reboot and a rebranding, and you got to do it your way.

It was experimental; I was figuring out what my way *was*. I’d been working with **Three 6 Mafia** and was becoming more and more aware of all these regional scenes in hip-hop that seemed really overlooked. There were these amazing entrepreneurs in all these different cities. **Three 6** was not only important as a group; they had their label, **Hypnotize Minds**, representing in Memphis. I met **James Prince** through **7 Aurelius**. James had **Rap-a-Lot**, which was this incredible independent label in Houston—**Geto Boys**, **Scarface**, **Pimp C** and **Bun B**....

This was the beginning of what people today look at as



With Smokepurpp; with Givenchy’s Matthew Williams and Gucci Mane

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research. I just started looking around and seeing, “Huh, this is working in this city. These artists are selling tickets here. This artist has a record playing only on the station down there, but it’s also selling in the stores down there...” Somewhere along the way, I thought, I should start a company that caters to entrepreneurs building great brands who need resources or help in other areas to grow and the artists who are big in their city but haven’t necessarily gotten the attention they should on a national or international level.

I built an infrastructure with a fluid system in terms of the deals, because when you’re dealing with entrepreneurs, you

must be flexible; you have to work around them, as opposed to asking them to work around *you*. We had marketing, promotion and international. At the time we said, “Independent but not underground.” The point was that it was the best of both worlds—it gave people the flexibility of remaining independent and retaining creative control but also the muscle of a major.

I realized we could actually compete with the majors with a small, super-focused staff that specialized in doing this. Because it was a startup, there wasn’t a lot of pressure on us; nobody had any expectation that we would be successful or do much of anything at all. The lack of pressure gave us the

freedom to experiment and gave me, personally, room to see if I could make a business of it. No one was saying, “Here are the numbers you have to deliver.” The bar was very low. But 12 months later, we’d put out something like 10 albums, and five of them had entered in the Top 10. We were a tiny company with low overhead, a low-risk operation—and we figured it out; we built a business that catered to entrepreneurs and artists who were being ignored by the industry.

From an independent/low-overhead/no-rules/no-expectations entrepreneurial operation—to Warner?

At the time, Warner wasn’t really doing a lot of hip-hop. When we set up Asylum, we were in the center; we’d do some artists with Warner, some with *Atlantic* and some independently. Warner needed the repertoire on the hip-hop side, and we needed more muscle and more resources. It evolved naturally. Tom [Whalley] and I started working on a couple of artists together, and after a while it just made sense to bring the whole thing over.



Mosco with his onetime Def Jam and Rush Management colleague, Russell Simmons



With Rod Wave

But at Warner there were rules. It was a big ship with a small rudder, with people there for their entire careers who were going to be resistant to change.

It was challenging, but we had a lot of support from the company. There was a need for what we were doing. But it was definitely a huge change. I went from dealing with regional acts to working with Neil Young, Cher, Josh Groban, Linkin Park, Michael Bublé... It was incredibly fulfilling for me on a personal level to be able to do that. And over time people were really open to new ideas and trying things.

This was also at a time when the business was struggling. We were all going through a transformative period. We were fortunate in a sense that nobody really had the answers—we all had strong opinions about it, but when you boil it down, we were all just trying to figure it out.

As much as I enjoyed it, Warners was a much different experience, particularly in terms of the scope and how much time you end up spending on administrative things: waking up early and

dealing with international for a few hours, then getting into dealing with hundreds of employees and artists. The thing I missed was having a company of a size and scale where I could talk to all my employees every day and all the artists on a regular basis.

When I left Warner, I had a much clearer idea of what I really wanted to do; I wanted to have a company that's a brand, a boutique operation catering to the culture, to entrepreneurs, of a size where I can touch everybody and everything on a daily basis.

When did you meet Gucci Mane?

It was 2004 or 2005. He tells the story that when we met, I said, "I have to be in business with you. I don't care what the deal is. You tell me what the deal is—we're doing it." And he was so freaked out that he literally left the meeting. We stayed in touch, but it took a full year before he got comfortable enough to have a real conversation about it. We finally did get into business, and we're still working together today.

The first seven years were bumpy, but we were able to stay in it long enough to reach that point where it gets good. Every now and then you meet somebody who's fully formed, already having hit records—that was Juice WRLD for us; you put it out and three months later, you have a #1 record. That's the exception, though, not the rule. One of my biggest things is just trying to stay in business with somebody long enough for us to get to the part where it's successful. Gucci was really my first lesson in that. There were a lot of trials and tribulations and some really tough situations, but we got through them and today it's amazing.

Let's talk about Alamo. Your staff is young.

I surround myself with young, passionate people who love the music and the culture. Many of our employees were interns. There's this constant stream of new people coming through. That's where you get real creativity from. When it's somebody's first job, they don't come to you with baggage—"This is how it's done" doesn't exist, so you get an innovative environment.

I'm now the older presence in the room with the traditional training who's seen all the record-company stuff. We don't need more of that; what we need are ideas. I'm sure there were times we could have used more experience, but I think that part becomes incumbent on me to handle, and the rest becomes incumbent on them.

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Many companies are data-driven, chasing the next big thing and getting into big deal wars. You were finding this stuff early.

I was early in the research game, but I don’t look at research as an end in itself; it’s just one more tool. It’s still about finding great artists and great songs. Hopefully, research narrows that down, but ultimately you have to make a creative call. I’d rather do it early and do it on something we’re passionate about, then figure out how to stay in business with this person as long as possible by doing deals that make sense and let you put out four, five, six projects. Because the artist is figuring out their sound, and you’re figuring out where they fit in. If you do that with talented people, you get wins over the long run. And the truth is, we only sign 10 artists a year—it’s a laser, not a shotgun.

Rod Wave is a good example. He was in Florida. There was some local buzz on him, but it wasn’t something streaming millions of times a week. It took the third or fourth project before we got to a place where it was a mainstream thing. Because there was no pressure, it was able to develop organically. He spent his first two years and his first three tapes just touring in Florida—he would do a hundred dates a year in Florida. Then, in year three, on the third or fourth project, it started getting traction and going national, and that’s when it broke.

Then came the pandemic...

It was around the time I was working on the deal [with Sony].

Change is stressful under the best of circumstances. You’re responsible for the artists and your staff; they all have families, and you want to do the right thing. It’s been like that on steroids during the pandemic. It was that much more challenging, like walking a tightrope at 1,000 feet while someone’s tossing you hand grenades and you’re juggling them.

Though having so much time let me focus in a way I probably couldn’t have under normal circumstances. It was serendipitous—I don’t know how [doing the deal] would have gone with all the normal chaos of life; it would have been hard to focus on doing everything I had to do to organize the company for a move. At the same time, there definitely wasn’t a lot of time to focus on pandemic issues; the move kept my mind occupied.

What’s your sense of the culture at Sony?

Incredible. Rob [Stringer], Julie [Swidler], Carmine [Coppola] and the whole team have been incredibly supportive. And they love winning.

As an entrepreneur, when you’re going into a new system, it’s important to protect what got you there in the first place and make sure you can continue to do it. Anything that’s come up

so far, all they say is, “We’ll make it work.” That’s an incredibly refreshing and reassuring thing to hear when you’re in a new relationship. It’s been fantastic.

Let’s go a little meta; what piece of advice do you wish someone had given Todd when he was at NYU?

Believe in yourself and just keep pushing ahead. Not giving up is such a huge part of reaching your goals. There are always obstacles that seem insurmountable. Everybody falls down along the way. You fall—get back up. Just keep going. If you can’t run, walk. You’ll get there eventually.

What causes are close to your heart?

The National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers Foundation for Criminal Justice. They’re doing great work to create equity in the criminal-justice system, which is important for all of us.

David Attenborough’s foundation in London, Fauna & Flora International, is also near and dear to me. One of our most important legacies is how we leave the planet. If we’re going to leave something to the next generation, we need to wake up now and pitch in. It has become more apparent on a daily basis how much we’re affecting the world around us. But if people don’t actually get involved, it’s just going to get worse and worse. So I’m really involved in that mission. It’s definitely a passion of mine.■



With Coach K and Gucci

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