

BRUCE RESNIKOFF CATALOG KING

Interview by Jorge Hernandez





Bruce Resnikoff, who grew up in Philadelphia in the late '60s and '70s, did not dream of becoming a fireman or an astronaut or a pro ball player like many boys

his age; no, young Bruce longed to be... a lawyer.

An improbable turn as a T-shirt bootlegger ignited his passion for the music business and financed an education that did indeed include law school.

He later served in business affairs at **MCA Records**, ultimately pivoting to licensing and eventually down the path to creating what is now **Universal Music Enterprises (UMe)**, where he serves as president and CEO.

Through several tumultuous decades, Resnikoff has proven a transformative figure in the marketing of catalog and the expansion of its commercial possibilities.

Was music a big part of your family's life?

My dad had a huge record collection; he'd listen to **Sinatra, Glenn Miller, Mitch Miller** and great guitar players like **Carlos Montoya**. It might not always have been the music that appealed to *me*, but it was a big part of my childhood.

What was the first music that grabbed you?

My first two concerts, which were within months of each other sometime in late 1973 or early '74, were **The Beach Boys** and **Yes** at the **Spectrum**. The concerts were a huge part of my formative years. You'd sleep on the steps of the Spectrum the night before tickets for the concert went on sale and wait until the box office opened in the morning. We ended up forming a community of people brought together by these shows.

As you were finishing high school, what did your career plans look like?

My entire life I wanted to be a lawyer. I wanted to go to college at the **University of Pennsylvania**, and I wanted to go to law school, and that's what I did. However, once I was a lawyer, I hated it.

What gave you your first glimpse into the music business?

Around my senior year of high school, I went to a **Rolling Stones** concert and bought a T-shirt from one of those guys holding up the bootleg shirts. I asked, "How much do you get paid to do this?" He said, "Well, I have people who work for me. Do you want to sell T-shirts?" The next thing you know, I'm going to a **Bachman-Turner Overdrive** concert to sell T-shirts. I was happy, and this ties into my music experience because I bought tickets from scalpers and went to every show I worked.

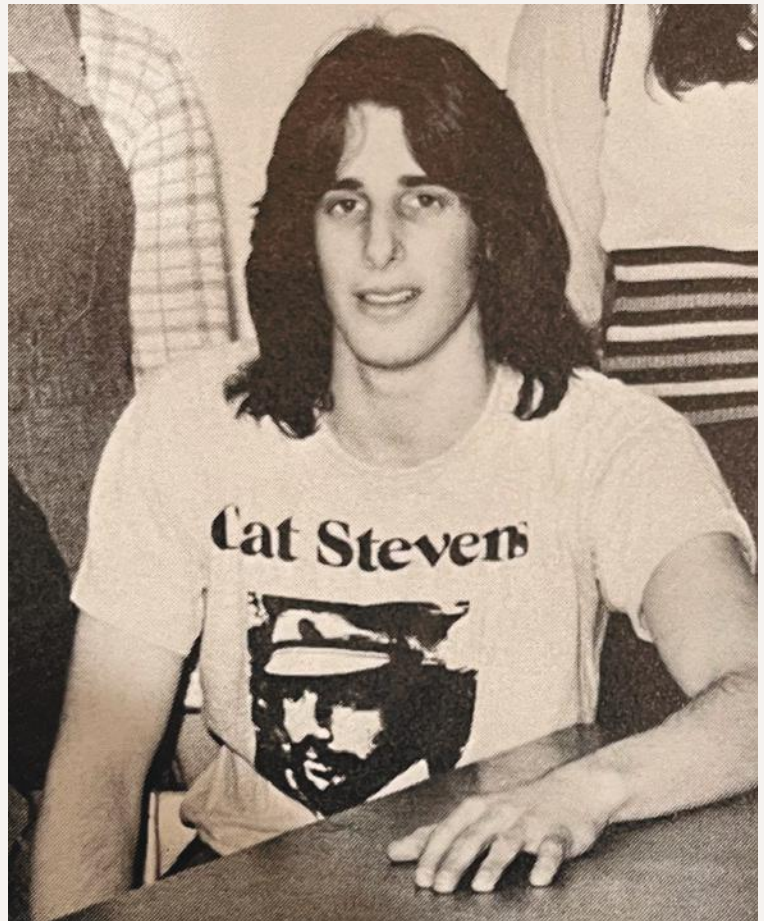
You're lucky to be alive!

I am, for many reasons. There were lots of incidents that shock me in retrospect. It was a rough business, and I had some not-so-

pleasant run-ins with both roadies and the Philadelphia police. Overall, it was a great experience, but I'm glad I made it out. As a joke, the first thing I did when I became a lawyer was send my former partner a cease-and-desist letter.

Talk to me about making the transition from merchandising to a full-time job in the traditional music business.

By the time I finished law school at **UCLA**, I'd decided I wanted to work in music. My first day on the job as a lawyer, I arrived



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ready to start in the firm's entertainment department but got assigned to the real-estate department. So literally on my first day I launched a job search. Then, in September 1983, an attorney and mentor named **Roxanne Lippel** mentioned that **MCA Records** was looking for a lawyer. She said, "Call this guy." It was **Zach Horowitz**, who would change my life.

I interviewed with Zach on a Tuesday and he offered me the job on a Friday. Right after I got the offer, I went to the partners at the law firm and said, "Great

Resnikoff,
1974

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news—I’m leaving!”

I was a lawyer in the business-affairs department of the Irving Azoff-helmed MCA Records from 1983 to 1985. I’d never seen anybody in my life like Irving. I learned a lot of the basics of the business talking with and listening to Zach.

How did you make the leap from being a young lawyer in business affairs to the head of a new division, one that ultimately became UMe?

In 1985 the company asked if I’d start a special-markets division to monetize our recordings through ancillary means. Nobody was focusing on things like “How do we monetize through licensing and other areas beyond selling records and CDs?” I initially said no, but then they offered me a raise that at the time was life-changing. It gave me a sense of opportunity and a sense that they felt this was an important area.

In those early days, what did licensing deals look like?

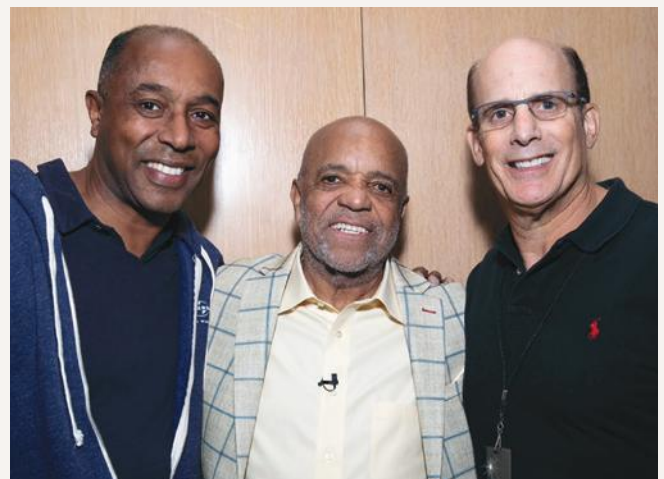
A lot of them were small, \$1,000. I don’t think we even did a million dollars in total business the first year. But it grew from there, and we found different ways to make money. Later on, under Doug Morris, that led to the formation of a compilation label called Hip-O Records, which I started.

Looking back, did you have an “Aha!” moment that turned out to be prescient?

One of my “aha” moments was when I saw the boom in the telemarketing direct-response area. I’m not talking about K-tel, which aired commercials and then sold records at retail; I’m talking about putting the artists *in* the commercials and selling records purely through direct response. It showed me there were a lot of untapped ways to market music if you were willing to be creative and take chances.

Was there anything early on that exemplified that?

Yes, though what put Hip-O on the map was not a compilation but a Pat Boone heavy-metal record [1997’s *In a Metal Mood: No More Mr. Nice Guy*]. This is one of those moments where I learned the value of marketing. We hired 50 guys from a motorcycle club to escort Pat—whom we dressed completely in leather—down Sunset Boulevard on Harleys to Tower Records.



Top: With B.B. King and friends; middle: with Elton John and Sir Lucian Grainge; bottom: with Jeff Harleston and Berry Gordy



“IN MANY RESPECTS, STREAMING HELPED SAVE THE CATALOG BUSINESS.”

Clockwise from top left: With Chuck Berry, 1986; with his brother, Paul Resnikoff, Meat Loaf and Richard O’Brien, who co-wrote The Rocky Horror Picture Show, early '90s; with The Go-Go's

We got so much coverage out of that event, including Leno. The record even entered the charts.

What was the path from Hip-O to UMe?

In 1998, when Universal bought PolyGram, Doug Morris and Zach Horowitz came to me and said, “We have such a big catalog. We need someone focused on it the way a label manages its roster.” So I was asked to run this new entity where we managed the catalog with a frontline mentality. Over the years, UMe essentially created the model that has since become standard in the industry.

Tell me something about marketing catalog that might surprise our readers?

I’m not sure people realize that what we do is much more complicated than marketing a frontline artist because you don’t have the usual tools. A lot of things I do with artists don’t involve a new release. You typically don’t have a radio single and you don’t always have a tour. For instance, when we celebrated Bob Marley’s 75th birthday, we did an entire year of the biggest business we’d ever done with Marley—without a new record.

What I think surprises people is how important the engagement of the artist’s camp is. I’ve found that the better the rela-



tionship with the artist and their camp, the better our marketing is when we work their product. Artists’ instincts are incredibly important. For example, I’ve been a fan of Elton John since the early '70s and I’ve worked with him for more than 20 years. I listen to him because he, David Furnish and their team understand who he is and what he needs much better than me or anybody on my team. The *Diamonds* record concept came from Elton John and his camp. The album has been on the charts since the day it was released and will be forever.

Another thing that might surprise people is that not only is the commerce function still an important part of what we do, but so is the A&R department. I have a complete

A&R department, a complete marketing department. We have people who are just dedicated to TikTok. Anything you'd see at a forward-thinking label, you'll see with us.

In terms of the evolution of the catalog business and UMe, what kinds of changes have you seen?

The biggest change was when **Lucian Grainge** came into the company and added the most important elements in my world: free rein and the ability to take chances. The catalog business was historically a risk-free business. The margins were great. It turns out, though, that if you think creatively and do take some risks, you can go even bigger. I ended up working for somebody who freed me completely to do nontraditional deals and think big. He really showed me how to win.

Clockwise from left: With The Rolling Stones and wife, Claudia; with Ringo Starr, Barbara Bach and Sir Lucian Grainge; with Paul McCartney

Having worked across the entire spectrum of UMG's roster, you must have had some amazing interactions with artists over the years.

I met both **Mick Jagger** and **Ringo Starr** for the first time on the same day. I ended up going to a film studio in Hollywood where Mick Jagger had an office and spending two hours with him talking about additional unreleased material for an anniversary release of *Exile on Main Street*. Around the same time, I got a call from **Bruce Grakal**, Ringo Starr's lawyer, who said, "Ringo has a new album and he's interested in letting you hear it. Could you come to his house?" I said, "Could I come to his house? YES!"

Then there are the two stories I love most from my career in the industry. The first is the time I played air hockey with **Stevie Wonder**. During a meeting with Stevie, I noticed there's an air hockey table in the



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Can you give me an example of how that approach has paid off?

Pitch Perfect. Universal was shopping the film but couldn't get anybody to take the soundtrack. Talk about fate; I'm at a movie with my teen daughter and a trailer comes on for *Pitch Perfect*. My daughter says, "Dad, that's going to be huge." The next day, we made the deal for a very small amount. It sold 2 million records and was so big we had to get **Republic** to handle radio for it because we had such a big hit with "Cups."

studio. I ask, "Who plays air hockey?" Someone replies, "Stevie does, and he never loses." I ask Stevie, "You play air hockey?" He says, "Let's play." We start, and Stevie puts his entire forearm on the table completely covering the goal. I say, "That's not fair—you're putting your arm in front of the goal." He says, "Well, that's not fair—you can see!" He scores three goals on me. Boom! Boom! Boom! At some point I realize that every time the puck flies off the table, Stevie listens and tries to find it. I take a



puck and drop it on the ground. He leans over to get it and I shoot one in. Now it's 3 to 1. He says to me, "That only works once." He scores three more goals and the game is over.

Incredible. What's the second story?

When Chuck Berry did *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll*, we got him a star on Hollywood Boulevard. We paid for the star and the only condition was that he had to appear at the star ceremony. Universal Pictures had flown him in for the premiere of the movie. Even though he was already here, he charged me \$5,000 to appear at his own star ceremony—and he wanted cash. We didn't have ACH in the '80s, so I say, "I can get you a check." He says, "You'll give me a check, then we'll go to the bank and if the check clears, I'll show up at the star ceremony." I get a check and we go to the bank to cash it. He shows up and is great, but not until the check cleared!

Ha! Another question: Back in the aughts, 360 deals came into vogue at a time when music revenue was taking a real hit. Since you weren't earning ancillary revenues like touring and merch, how did you survive?

I focused on where the business was going. I started restructuring and bringing people in who understood the digital business. And we began to change our mindset—we used to just sell records; now we manage our artists as franchises.

What opportunities did the Internet provide that didn't exist in an analog world?

What the Internet has allowed us to do is market moments for artists who don't necessarily have a release or tour schedule. We can now see something happening on social media and proactively build a plan to go wide.

How has streaming specifically impacted your bottom line?

In many respects, streaming helped save the catalog business. Our biggest challenge is reaching new audiences, and in the traditional world, even in the downloading world, convincing young people to try things was a challenge because it involved a transaction. With streaming, I can get so many more people to experience music.

The biggest *challenge* of the digital age is marketing. When we were in the traditional model of Tower Records, you had 25,000

Clockwise from top: With family and Blake Griffin (Clippers); with Steven Tyler; presenting Tom Petty with RIAA Diamond Award; with The Oak Ridge Boys, mid-'80s; with Pete Townshend; with Alice Cooper

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PLAYED AIR HOCKEY WITH STEVIE WONDER. WE START, AND STEVIE PUTS HIS ENTIRE FOREARM ON THE TABLE COMPLETELY COVERING THE GOAL. I SAY, ‘THAT’S NOT FAIR—YOU’RE PUTTING YOUR ARM IN FRONT OF THE GOAL.’ HE SAYS, ‘WELL, THAT’S NOT FAIR—YOU CAN SEE!’ HE SCORES THREE GOALS ON ME. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!”

records and you just had to get yours to the front. Now, I have to compete with billions of different things on the Internet. That’s where the marketing comes in.

During the pandemic lockdown, was your business affected from an operational standpoint, and is there anything that’s changed fundamentally as a result of these last two and a half years?

I have 150 to 160 people in my group. When we were in the office, I could never have attended meetings with all of those people. During the lockdown, I was constantly in meetings with people I hadn’t met with before, because the need for us to talk and share things became even more important.

I also started doing something I’d never done: meeting with my direct team every morning for half an hour. Then, each of *them* started the day by meeting with their own teams for half an hour. I’d never had so many people integrated into knowing everything that was going on. While we lost the personal touch of walking in and out of the office, everybody learned the business better.

Also since the pandemic, we’ve entered a hybrid world. It’s easy to all be together in the office or all be remote, but we’re now living in a world where that balance is changing. During the pandemic people have adjusted their priorities and are focusing on better life-work balance.

You mentioned Zach, Irving and Doug, and obviously Lucian has been pivotal to the latter half of your career. Who else at UMG has had an impact on you?

I see or speak to Michele Anthony several times a day. She’s a true mentor to me. She’s probably my biggest supporter in the company in terms of getting all the tools I need.

Tell me something about your team.

I have the best senior managers and team in the business, and that includes any label in the world. I love hiring people from outside the traditional record business, because they think differently.

What excites you most about what you see on the horizon?

I’m excited most by technology. I see the metaverse and NFTs as an opportunity to do things directly with artists and keep their legacies alive forever. And we’re getting much more active in managing estates. Just because an artist is gone doesn’t mean they’re not a brand that needs to be represented and marketed correctly.

What challenges do you anticipate in the consumption of music?

Again, it’s critically important that we expand into the Metaverse and other new technologies. It’s not a substitute for the live business or any other aspect of the industry; it’s a complement to it. We must continue to embrace this new world. It’s my job to figure out how to monetize it. ■

Top: With Island co-head Imran Majid, Republic President/COO Avery Lipman, UMPG boss Jody Gerson and Republic CEO Monte Lipman; bottom: Sailor Music’s Janice G. Miller, UMG EVP Michele Anthony, rock hitmaker Steve Miller and Resnikoff are seen amid a lively discussion of “Jet Airliner” and frequent-flyer miles.



PHOTO: LESTER COHEN-GETTY IMAGES-CIT

