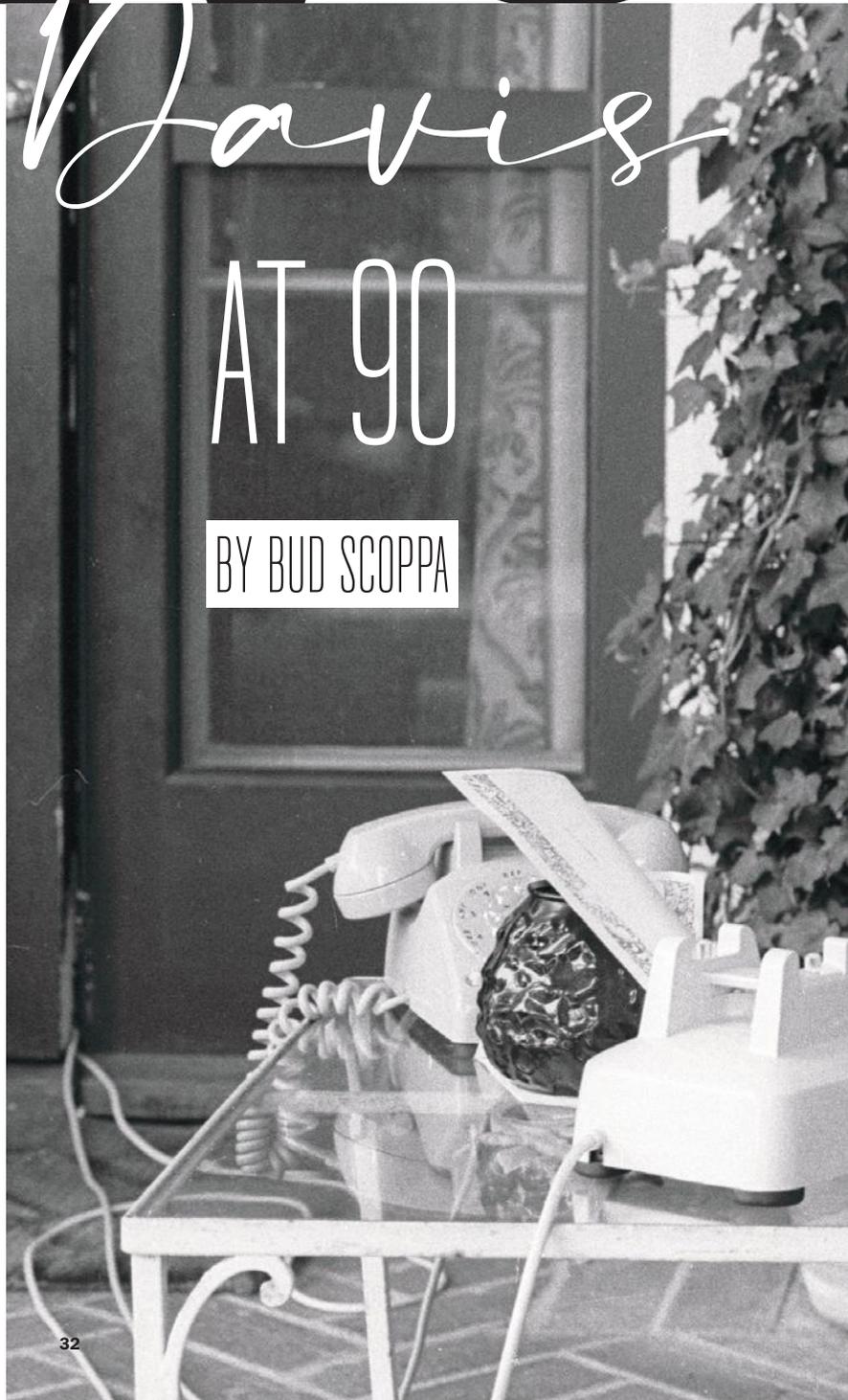


Clive

Javis

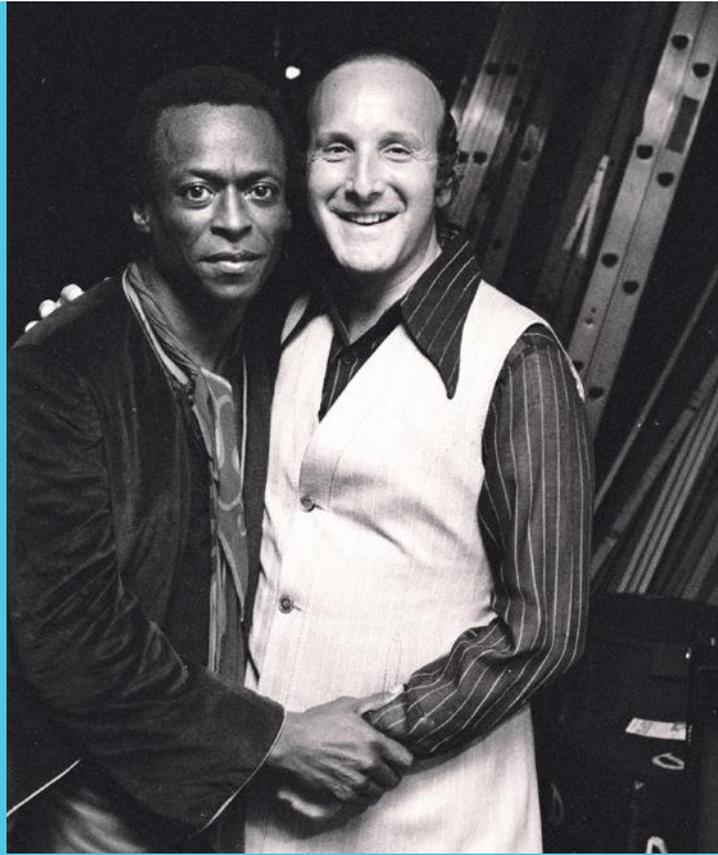
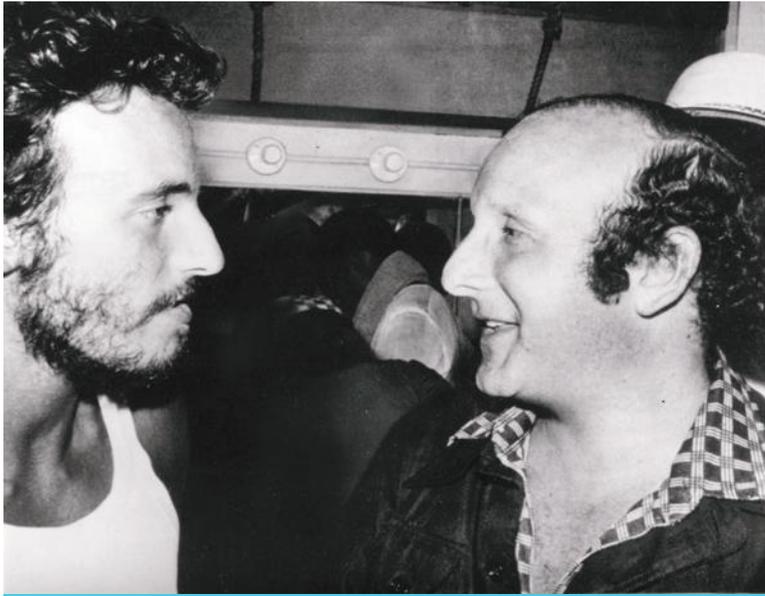
AT 90

BY BUD SCOPPA



The Lion in Winter





*Clockwise from top left:
With Bruce Springsteen,
Miles Davis, Whitney
Houston and Ray Davies*

When Clive Davis hired me as Arista's West Coast A&R director in 1978, he was 46 and four years into the second chapter of his singular career. I soon found that he was neither an intimidating bully, like my first label

bosses at Mercury, nor a laid-back, smooth operator, like A&M's Jerry Moss and Gil Friesen. Instead, Clive was a perfectionist who was laser-focused on the singer and the song, doing A&R in the classic sense of the term, fully confident that his expertise was unmatched and consumed with winning.

Just 11 years earlier, in 1967, the Brooklyn-born Phi Beta Kappa with a Harvard Law degree was still getting accustomed to his new job as president of CBS-Columbia Records when he experienced a transformative epiphany while attending the Monterey Pop Festival. His signings of Monterey breakout bands **Big Brother and the Holding Company** featuring **Janis Joplin** and **The Electric Flag** featuring **Mike Bloomfield** and **Buddy Miles** on the heels of inking emerging Scottish troubadour **Donovan** thrust previously staid Columbia into the thick of the rock revolution. So did his championing of roster acts **Bob Dylan**, **Simon & Garfunkel** and **Leonard Cohen**.

Broadway buff Davis, legendary talent scout **John Hammond**—who'd signed Dylan and Cohen—and visionary staff producer/A&R exec **Tom Wilson**, an African American who had signed S&G and produced their era-defining "The Sound of Silence" as well as Dylan's epochal "Like a Rolling Stone"—formed an unlikely but potent creative triumvirate. Together, they transformed Columbia from **Mitch Miller's** shlock factory into a cutting-edge rock and soul powerhouse, enabling Clive to more than hold his own as he battled **Warner/Reprise's Mo Ostin** and **Atlantic's Ahmet Ertegun** for the hottest acts. His signings included **Sly and the Family Stone**, **Blood, Sweat & Tears**, **Santana**, **Chicago**, **Laura Nyro**, **Loggins and Messina**, **Aerosmith**, **Pink Floyd**, **Billy Joel** and, in tandem with Hammond, **Bruce Springsteen**. The prez also forged the deal that brought in **Kenny Gamble** and **Leon Huff's** hit machine, **Philadelphia International**.

From 1967 through the early '70s, Clive was the most visible label head in the business—a rock star in his own right. That made his sudden fall from grace in 1973 following allegations from CBS Records that he'd used company funds to cover the expense of eldest son **Fred's** bar mitzvah into headline news. But Clive reacted to that body blow like a veteran quarterback who takes a potentially disastrous sack, shakes off the cobwebs and coolly throws a touchdown pass. He wrote his first book, 1975's *Clive: Inside*



JOE SMITH MO OSTIN BERRY GORDY, JR.
MARTELL FOUNDATION - LE BISTRO LUNCHEON 2/11/80

“The key word is ‘resilience,’ because you do have to, in effect, keep proving yourself. That’s the job, that’s the term, that’s the rule, that’s the requirement of the work ethic.”

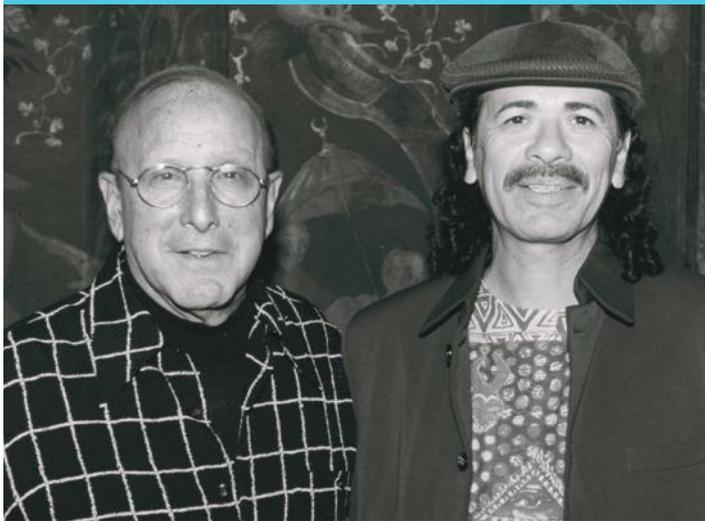
the Record Business, while simultaneously transitioning from advising **Bell Records**, the intermittently successful label of **Columbia Pictures** (unrelated to CBS), to remaking it as **Arista**, named after his high school honor society, and hitting #1 with the label's first single, **Barry Manilow's** "Mandy."

By the time I showed up, Manilow, who'd been an also-ran at Bell, was Arista's flagship artist and the king of MOR. But while Barry was cranking out the pop hits, Clive was also maintaining the cachet of hipness that had made his Columbia reign so historic, signing **Patti Smith**, **Lou Reed**, **The Kinks**, and **The Grateful Dead** (who scored their only Top 40 hit in 1987 with "Touch of Grey"), while forming fruitful creative relationships with Patti and **Ray Davies**. He also helped transform ex-**Raspberries** frontman **Eric Carmen** into a successful pop balladeer.

During my nearly five years working at

Arista, Clive averaged one week a month in L.A., where he held court not in the West Coast office—he never set foot in the place, as I recall—but out of a bungalow at the **Beverly Hills Hotel**. There he met with artists and executives—I witnessed him chat with a feisty, fast-talking **Jimmy Iovine** one memorable afternoon—auditioned singer/songwriters at the piano in the ballroom and listened to music on a stereo brought over from the office for his visits.

As I told fellow Arista A&R alumnus **Mitchell Schneider** in an interview for his label history, *Looking for the Magic*, "Whenever he'd come to L.A., I would go over to the bungalow armed with a big stack of cassettes. He had this stereo, and it was always ridiculously loud, and I just stacked my cassettes on the coffee table and then he would spend the next hour or two playing me stuff, and I could never get my cassettes into the stereo."



“I have a very healthy respect for failure, so I didn’t come up with the theory that because I signed Joplin or Santana, etc., that the next artist would succeed. You’ve got to prove it each time. And so that at each stage of the game, you’ve just got to keep the bar up there, at every level of work. You cannot take it for granted.”

Clockwise from top left: With Janis Joplin, Aretha Franklin and Carlos Santana

That was a bit of an exaggeration. Clive signed several of my recommendations, all bands emerging from the bustling L.A. club scene, most notably Black rock 'n' rollers **The BusBoys**, but none of them clicked. My savior was **Arista Songs** head **Billy Meshel**, who in 1980 handed me **Air Supply's** Australian single “Lost in Love” and urged me to put it in the overnight bag to New York. It was the furthest thing from my taste, but it was right up Clive’s alley, and he A&R’d the hell out of the hit album of the same name, which yielded three Top 5 singles.

That same year, believing he could make lightning strike twice, Clive orchestrated **Aretha Franklin's** post-**Atlantic** comeback, duplicating the feat he’d pulled off the previous year with **Dionne Warwick**. Throughout that busy period, we continued to check out bands in clubs, soundstages and rehearsal rooms. One of them—**Tommy Tutone**—was so freaked out by his imperious presence as he sat alone before them in a cavernous space that the musicians seemed nearly paralyzed. Not long afterward, they

were signed by Columbia and scored a #4 hit with “867-5309/Jenny.” If only they hadn’t blown the Clive audition... Another night, my car broke down as we drove to an audition deep in the wilds of Burbank; I’ll never forget shaking in my boots while watching him calmly leaf through magazines in a funky convenience store while we waited for my wife to pick us up.

On my visits to Arista HQ at 9 W. 57th, I discovered that, no matter how late he’d been up the night before, Clive was behind his desk at 9am, impeccably turned out in suit and tie, bright-eyed and ready for action.

Just a few months after I was canned, A&R exec **Jerry Griffith** introduced Clive to young singer **Whitney Houston**, who would become Arista’s biggest-selling artist and one of the biggest acts in music history, selling north of 200 million records worldwide.

Fast-forward to 2000, when BMG’s **Michael Dornemann** and his lackey **Strauss Zelnick** attempted to force Clive, who was then 66, into an age-stipulated retirement after a 16-year run at the label. But Clive managed to outflank the Germans, who eventually caved, giving him his own label, **J Records**, before naming him chairman/CEO of the **RCA Music Group** and subsequently chair and CEO of **BMG North America**. When **Bertelsmann** sold BMG to **Sony Music** in 2008, Clive was back where he started, a fitting grace note to his singular career. Now, at 90, he’s taking a well-earned victory lap.

Hey, Clive. It’s been a while.

Hey. So, Bud, what were the exact years that you were at Arista?

I was there from 1978 to ’83—just short of getting vested.

Oh, come on, you’re doing very nicely.

Yeah, I’m good, thanks. But I’ve gotta admit, it’s strange to be interviewing you after all these years. I doubt that you’ll remember this, but in late 1969, when I was just starting out as a writer, I interviewed you for *Rock* magazine. The topic was the end of the ’60s and what might be in store for music and the music business during the 1970s. Little did we know.

Little did we know, exactly.

So let’s begin my second interview with you. What does it feel like, hitting 90? I’m hoping to reach that milestone myself one day.

I wish it for you, but for me it seems like it’s happening to another person—I can’t honestly wrap my head around it. So I decided, other than during my birthday celebration, to ignore it as much as life allowed me to ignore it. I continue getting tremendous pleasure out of the projects I’m working on, the Whitney Houston biopic, the **Paramount+** series [*Clive Davis: Most Iconic Performances*], which is streaming all over the world with the four episodes that they put together from last year’s virtual pre-Grammy gala, with **Oprah**, **H.E.R.**, **Bruce Springsteen**, **Paul Simon**, **Barry Gibb**, **Rod Stewart** and all those artists that reached out. But there were at least 15 more artists than what

Paramount+ within their timeframe was able to present. Each artist interview was actually about 40 minutes, and the number of iconic performances is much greater. So these are all edited, even the fourth episode of interviews. But the response has been phenomenal; **Paramount+** took a huge billboard in Times Square.

Let me turn the tables on you and ask you a question that you asked Paul Simon. You said, “Looking back at your career, are you satisfied that you’ve fulfilled all your dreams, or is there any dream that has not yet been fulfilled?” Can you answer that?

My whole career has been so... unexpectedly fulfilling. When I say that, I mean I never thought I would be getting into music in my life, as I’m sure you know. I never knew that I might have an ear



Clive assesses Whitney Houston's plaque buildup.



Clockwise from top left: With Barbra Streisand, Joni Mitchell, Jennifer Hudson and Ahmet Ertegun

for talent or songs; it never occurred to me growing up. I didn't realize I had ears for talent until I went to Monterey Pop, and the revelations kept appearing after that. I signed Joplin, Blood, Sweat & Tears, Chicago, Santana, Earth, Wind & Fire—you know the list—and when they made it, it was so unexpectedly gratifying and fulfilling as all of it occurred. And I view my documentary as one of the aspects of it. But the key word is “resilience,” because you do have to, in effect, keep proving yourself. That's the job, that's the term, that's the rule, that's the requirement of the work ethic.

And I've always said I have a very healthy respect for failure, so I didn't come up with the theory that because I signed Joplin or Santana, etc., that the next artist would succeed. You've got to prove it each time. And

so that at each stage of the game, like right now when I'm co-producing the Whitney Houston biopic, you've just got to keep the bar up there, at every level of work. Look at all these films about great artists or what have you. There's no question that the movie on Aretha could have been better, notwithstanding the fabulous performance that **Jennifer Hudson** gives in it, but the same is true of *The Genius* Disney series on Aretha. So you cannot take it for granted.

And that holds true to the virtual pre-Grammy gala that I did without knowing that Paramount+ would love it, would buy it and it would benefit MusiCares, which is what it's turned out to do. And so, as long as life allows me to do this, the same criteria apply—you've got to prepare. I'm still listening to any record, any artist that reaches the Top 20 so that you know how many of your colleagues at some point “go over the hill.” So, trying to avoid that, whether it's choosing the right artists to perform at next year's pre-Grammy gala or, as in the past, just knowing the difference between a hit record and a unique, special new artist like H.E.R. And my interview with H.E.R. was so gratifying, because she's so bright, intelligent, musical.

What wisdom would you impart to young music biz people who are just coming up and want to emulate you?

Never let your guard down. Maintain your work ethic, and just to keep listening to music, because music forever changes. And as distinguished from either A&R people or promotion people, or in this age, **Spotify** and **Apple**, you've got to keep your ears current. And you can only do it by analyzing and listening and feeling comfortable with the newest hit records, whether it's **The Weeknd**, whether it's **Drake**, whether it's **Olivia Rodrigo**, whether it's whomever. So I've done that. I mean, I always listen to what's current in order to feel that you are “in the game.”

But I would think you'd want to balance out that listening experience by reconnecting with your all-time favorites—the sort of music you'd listen to at home.

I do that. My all-time favorite is Simon & Garfunkel, whether it's “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” whether it's “The Boxer,” whether it's the exchange I had with Paul that you watched on Paramount+, because of the depth of his writing, their harmonies, his continuing changes.



The Davis family celebrates the paterfamilias' 90th birthday.

PHOTO: BUSACCA

One of the highlights of my birthday gala was the audiovisual megamix that Mark Ronson put together of all my hits. It included “Sunshine Superman,” “Mellow Yellow,” “San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair),” “Mr Tambourine Man,” all the way up to contemporary hits. And he did a phenomenal job; it was really fresh and unique and special.

When I called Patti, I said, “Patti, I’m going to ask you to say a few words. And when you do, I’d love if you ended with one song. There’s only a guitar and a piano, so what would work best if you did it?” So she thought about it, and she said, “You know what works best with just a single instrument accompanying me?” She said, “Pissing in the River.” I said, “Patti, with all due respect, that’s lyric... I mean, it’s my birthday party.” So she laughed and said, “OK, I’ll probably pick either ‘Because the Night’ or ‘People Have the Power.’ But listen Clive, it’s your 90th birthday, if you want me to do Ethel Merman, I’ll do Ethel Merman.”

Funny. But apropos of that, one of the most important things about your career is the relationships you’ve forged with so many

“We need our Arethas, our Whitneys and our Dylans, and we need rock to be vital and expressive along with it. And, yes, music has changed, but I hope not in isolation of certain kinds of talent that have been part of what made contemporary music so special over the decades.”

people, artists and executives alike. It’s not every label head that can claim these kinds of deep, mutually loving relationships, but that’s been your calling card ever since you started running Columbia, hasn’t it?

Whether it’s Pete Gray from Arista, whether it’s L.A. Reid, Larry Jackson, etc., I can go on and on... Jann Wenner and I go back half a century. I didn’t know him, and it was shocking to me that this incredible journal, *Rolling Stone*, was chronicling this revolution in music with the best, most erudite writers. I mean I loved the magazine, and he came to me one day and he said, “Notwithstanding

all the recognition we’re getting, I have a cashflow problem. And here I see what you’re doing, and I think you’re benefiting from what *Rolling Stone* is doing, covering music the way we do.” And he said, “Can you help me with my cashflow problem?” And I looked him right in the eye. I said, “I will. You are fierce. Everything about *Rolling Stone*’s aims and what you are doing tell me it’s going to be a big success.”

So, I figured out what the cost would be if I took an ad in every issue of the paper for the next year and, and I advanced him that money as if I was going to take an ad in the paper. I was



Top: With The Grateful Dead; below: Babyface and L.A. Reid

head of Columbia Records at the time, so we're going back to the late '60s or early '70s. And I said, "Look, I'm going to turn my whole creative-services department over to you so that you don't have that need for overhead, and we'll give you the advertising, we'll give you all the space." So, that created a bond between us.

I didn't know that. How would you say the landscape of music and the business has changed since you started your career? Are there things that haven't changed?

Certainly, hip-hop is dominating the way it does. There are two kinds of artists that have been so important to contemporary music: the Bob Dylan/Bruce Springsteen kind of artists, who are poet laureates, I think, of our culture. Where is the next Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen coming from? I applaud hip-hop, I see it. There's a lot of creativity still happening, but it can't dominate in a way to totally stifle the big voice, the great voice, the Aretha voice, the Whitney voice. They were able to have historic careers, making music the whole world enjoyed; it's a great source of pride to me.

Aretha didn't come to me until, as you know, she was already the Queen of Soul. Her concern was, "I'm approaching 40; can I still have a hit? My last two or three albums on Atlantic, I was not able to have a hit. I no longer work with Jerry Wexler, who worked as my collaborator to have the hits that have given me the title the Queen of Soul." But to me, she was timeless—always will be. Always a star and always unique.

I remember that first time I rang her bell when she invited me for dinner. I had just brought Dionne Warwick back with "I'll Never Love This Way Again" and "Déjà Vu," after "Wanderers," and it was very much post-Burt Bacharach and Hal David. But when Aretha saw that Dionne



Suits and rockers: President Davis presides over a staff meeting in the conference room at Black Rock, circa late '60s.

“My all-time favorite is Simon & Garfunkel, whether it’s “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” whether it’s “The Boxer,” whether it’s the exchange I had with Paul that you watched on Paramount+, because of the depth of his writing, their harmonies, his continuing changes.”

was able to have a double-platinum album and a Grammy Award—she won both Pop Female and R&B Female with those two records—she said, “Would you work with me?” I said, “It would be the biggest honor of my career.” And it certainly turned out that way, so that she was relevant well beyond 40. I mean “I Knew You Were Waiting for Me” I think was her first pop #1. And to have that and to have “Freeway of Love” and “Jump to It” and “Sisters Are Doin’ It for Themselves”...

Anyway, we were great friends until her passing. I was her date every time she went to the Kennedy Center. So I was there with her when she showed her genius again, doing “Natural Woman” in a tribute to Carole King. So, yes, we need our Arethas and we need our Whitneys and we need our Dylans, and we need rock to be vital and expressive along with it. And, yes, music has changed, but I hope not in isolation of certain kinds of talent that have been part of what made contemporary music so special over the decades.

There’s a vast underground network of good rock bands and singer/song-writers; they’re just not on the radio or streaming. That’s an ongoing frustration for me, and I’m sure you feel the same way, considering that so many artists you worked with are now in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and/or beloved by several generations. In that context, during your conversation with Paul Simon, you said, “You have to be aware of what can be and make history.”

Well, you’ve expressed it even more articulately than I did. But what I was referring to was when I chose “Bridge Over Troubled Water” as the first single instead of the obvious choice, “Cecilia.” I said, “You’ve got to guard against continued formulaic responses.” And yet “Cecilia” was three and a half minutes, it had a killer chorus and there was no doubt that Paul had fully expected me to choose it. But I was so blown away by “Bridge Over Troubled Water” that I chose it despite its length, around five minutes, and despite it being a ballad, which was clearly a risky proposition because certain

radio chains were so important that if they were rigid and enforcing the rule that they wouldn’t play a record over three or three and a half minutes long, we would be in trouble. But I felt so strongly that this was a classic and a home run that we went for it, and Paul and Artie have never forgotten that. And every time we’re together, we joyously reminisce.

I can picture in my mind’s eye the first time you heard that song in the studio, because I’ve seen the enraptured look on your face as you sat in the dark of a control room, hearing something special for the first time. Those experiences made me realize how deeply you experience music. Most people think of you as an analytical song guy, but I don’t think a lot of them grasp the emotional connection that you make with great songs. Yeah, when I listen to a song, part of it is analytical, but part of it is clearly visceral, emotional—really getting into it and feeling it. I don’t read music; I don’t play an instrument. So it’s really about immersing your being into it. ■