


JACK SUSSMAN

HEARS
OF
THE
EYE

INTERVIEW BY
PHIL GALLO





LONG BEFORE HE WAS CBS' GRAMMYS GUIDING FORCE—AND THAT OF ALL THE TIFFANY NETWORK'S SPECIALS—JACK SUSSMAN WAS A NEWS GUY. DEEP IN HIS HEART, HE STILL IS.

“I think anybody who comes out of the live-news business can do anything if they’re creative,” he says. “I tend to look for people to work with who have a little bit of that in their DNA. Doing live television on a daily basis brings you the kind of experience you don’t get from spending a year developing an idea, a month shooting it and another year editing it. When you know that the red light goes on at 11 o’clock every night or 7 o’clock every morning and you gotta deliver an hour or two of programming with a beginning, middle and end, it toughens you up. It makes you the kind of producer that not everybody can grow into.”

CBS put Sussman in charge of its specials back in 1998. He was promoted to EVP of specials, music and live events in March 2006 and in 2020 took over all alternative programming in addition to specials.

Sussman is the guy who works with artists, managers and labels to put music on CBS, whether that’s prime-time series and movies or his bread and butter, awards shows and specials like the **Grammys** and *Kennedy Center Honors*. Among the multitude of specials he’s overseen for the network are 2021’s *Adele One Night Only*, 2017’s *Bruno Mars: 24K Magic Live at the Apollo* and Grammy tributes to **The Beatles**, **Stevie Wonder**, **Elton John** and **The Bee Gees**. He was also involved in **Prince’s** legendary 2007 halftime performance at **Super Bowl XLI**, which *Rolling Stone* has deemed the best ever.

A **Tar Heel** forced to pass up the **NCAA Final Four** to oversee 2022’s rescheduled Grammys, Sussman takes pride in not only

his past successes but the team he's assembled. "Between the specials, the music and the alternative programming, I think I have the best team in television," he says. "I've got great people far smarter, quicker and hipper than I am who help me do what we do every day."

Sussman took us back to when *he* was the quick and hip one and a different set of smart guys showed him the ropes.

You're coming up on 25 years in music and television. How did you get started?

I started at a really interesting moment. Before I came to CBS, I was at MTV—VH1 and MTV in Latin America—where I had the opportunity to get my feet wet. It was an amazing learning experience to pump out programming, create relation-

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ships and develop music ideas that could succeed on television on a very limited budget. It was really getting into the trenches and learning the business.

In 1998 I was fortunate to move west and get mentored by a group of people who really started this business on television: **Walter Miller, Don Mischer, Dick Clark and Gil Cates**, the icons who created this genre of variety television. I got to be the kid playing in the sandbox with them. For me, to be in a director's truck with Walter Miller, who was larger than life, I learned a lot. Sometimes it was easy and sometimes I got smacked in the head, but I learned.

That evolved into working with creators like **Ken Ehrlich**, who joined that group a little later. I had the great fortune of working 20-plus years on the Grammys and

many other big event specials with Ken. Now I'm making this kind of television in a new way with people and companies like **Ben Winston** and **Fulwell 73**, with **Raj Kapoor** and **Jesse Collins** on the Grammys, **Glen Weiss** on the Tonys, people who are driving this business. I bring a lot of experience to this evolving world of event television and trust them to bring their own experience and creative sensibilities to it.

Prior to MTV you were at CNN and NBC News. How did that set you up for producing entertainment television?

I have a face for radio, so I was behind the camera. At CNN, I was a producer and live director; at NBC, I was more of a coordinator. I wrote, produced and directed live television at CNN one hour a day, five days a week for five years. That gave me an amazing foundation for getting stuff done when the clock's ticking. And it took me around the world; I produced and directed television for CNN all over the U.S. but also spent time in the Middle East, for instance, working in Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon... When you're in your 20s living that life, it's wonderful. When you get

a little older, you sit back and go, "Do I really want to live like this the rest of my life?" It was in that moment that I decided I'd rather grow the live-entertainment side of my brain.

What connects what you did at CNN to where you are today?

A lot of the people I worked with back then were babies just like me but are now running companies. We created relationships that to this day are still strong. An example: When I was at CNN, in the beginning I was a totally inexperienced baby producer/director producing a one-hour show every night. I met a young publicist at **Rogers & Cowan, Fran Curtis**, who was just getting started. Fran and I made a deal that I'd build shows around the clients she was trying to get expo-



PHOTO: TIMOTHY KURATEK/CBS

sure for if she'd give me one of Rogers & Cowan's A-list artists every once in a while. Now she's running Rogers & Cowan in New York and I'm doing what I'm doing, and we've had this amazing symbiotic relationship for 30 years.

What can you tell me about your experience at VH1?

I was head of programming and production for VH1 for five years when the channel was devoted to adult music. That's where I met and started my relationship with people like Celine Dion and Gloria Estefan. The relationships I developed with labels and management teams eventually grew into the work I later brought to CBS.

But we always had a chip on our shoulder—we felt like the little brother to MTV. We were fighting for recognition. So we created our version of the Video Music Awards because, back then, that was the coolest thing in the world. We created VH1 Honors, where we honored artists

Top: Sussman with Trevor Noah at the 60th Grammy Awards, 2018; bottom: with Taylor Swift and Ken Ehrlich



who were doing great work in their communities. It was Stevie Wonder for the work he did at the Duke Ellington School of Music in D.C., Melissa Etheridge for the work she did with AIDS patients and Garth Brooks for the work he was doing with Feed the Children. We brought in other artists to honor them—Garth was honored by James Taylor, for example, and they did a duet together.

We knew we had an audience, and we wanted to do great event programming. That led to several other programs that wound up becoming successful on VH1.

The experience of creating VH1 Honors must have been helpful when you went to CBS.

When I got to CBS, the network had a history of doing big variety events, but single-artist music specials had disappeared from television. And we had an idea: Could we put an artist on television for an hour and create an event?

The first one we took a risk on was Celine Dion. That was a partnership of

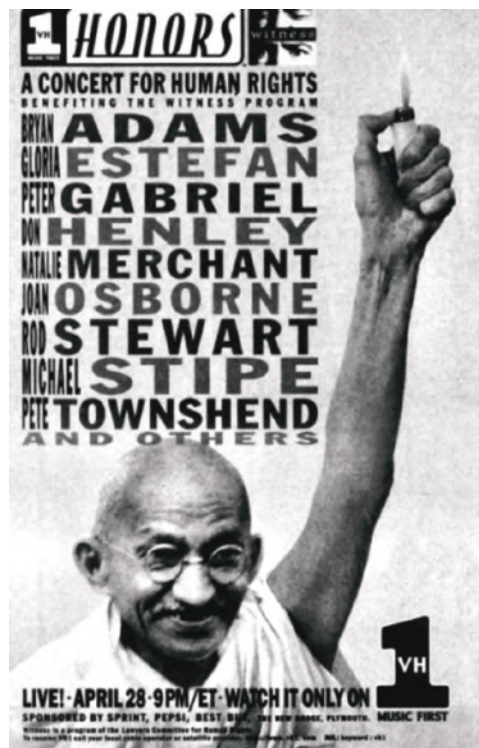




PHOTO: FRANCIS SPECKER-CBS

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the network, **Sony Music** and Celine’s husband and manager, **René Angélil**, whom I’d known since my VH1 days. Rene and I had a conversation; he asked how much we could afford to pay, and I threw a number at him. He said yes, we shook hands and we had a deal. No lawyers, no business affairs, no label involvement, no agency involvement. And we went on to have a hugely successful relationship with the people involved that continues to this day.

Then we did one with **Shania Twain**. Then a second Celine and a second Shania. And coming off my first Grammy Awards, there was this young guy who got on the stage that nobody in the U.S. had heard of: **Ricky Martin**. He burned the roof off the **Shrine Auditorium**. I remember the conversation in the Grammy TV committee when he was nominated, and we discussed the idea of putting him on television. I’d actually known Ricky and his team from my days at MTV Latin America. Some people were like, “I don’t know.” But Ken believed in him, and [Sony Music chief] **Tommy Mottola** was pushing it hard, so we took a risk with Ricky. Then Ken had the idea of doing an hour with him. Over Thanksgiving 1999, we had a three-day run of Celine, Shania and Ricky, and it was hugely successful.

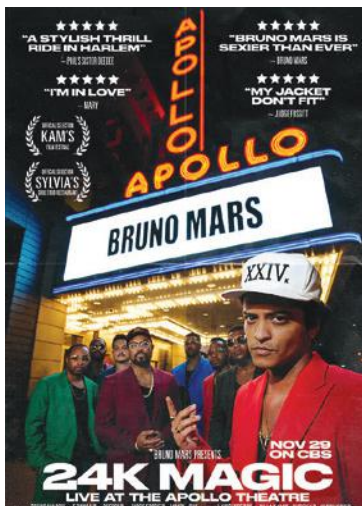


PHOTO: MICHELE CROWE-CBS

What does it take to do a network show like that in the streaming era?

You’ve got to pick your spots, you have to have everybody in sync to market and promote it—and you have to have the right artist. We took **Bruno Mars** to the **Apollo Theater**, **Adele** to the **Griffith Observatory**. We partnered with **MTV** and did **Tony Bennett** and **Lady Gaga**.

Your relationship with the Academy of Country Music Awards ended in 2021 and you started airing the Country Music Television Awards. How do you view CBS’ current relationship with the country-music community?

Country music is right in our wheelhouse. We had a decades-long relationship with the **Academy of Country Music** [beginning in 1998], but unfortunately, that deal couldn’t play out into the future. When I first got to CBS, we spent a number of years with the **Country Music Association Awards** [which moved to **ABC** in 2006], and now we’re

Top: Lady Gaga and Sussman at the 59th Grammy Awards rehearsals; bottom: with James Corden at the 60th Grammy Awards, 2018



PHOTO: MICHELE CROWE/CBS

Luke Bryan, Dierks Bentley and Sussman at the 52nd ACM Awards, 2017

partners with CMT. Country artists ring true to the CBS audience.

Walter Miller took me to Nashville for the first time in 1998 and basically said, “Just shut up and follow me and you won’t get in trouble.” I followed Walter around Nashville for a couple of years until I felt comfortable. I became a sponge. I think that community really appreciates what we’re doing and what we’ve done. We had great success with our first New Year’s Eve show, *Nashville’s Big Bash*, and we’re doing it again.

We were also part of the group who put

Miranda Lambert on television early on, and **Taylor Swift**. It’s really great when you can watch somebody walk into a room, sit on a barstool with a guitar and actually play the instrument and sing. And you say to yourself, “That person’s really special.” I felt that way when I saw **Maren Morris** for the first time. I was at an office in Encino and she came in to play for a group of people, and you just knew this was a really special young woman. We have a great relationship to this day.

Is there a particular type of artist that CBS is interested in presenting? Is it a recognition factor, a style?

It depends on the show. When you’re talking about the Grammys, it must be relevant and interesting to a broadcast television audience. But we’re different from our corporate partners who have very specific, narrower audiences, whether that’s **Nickelodeon** and kids or **MTV** and older kids/young adults. We’re a big tent.

The filter I’ve used over the years—regardless of whether you’re a country artist, a hip-hop artist, a rock artist, a pop artist, a Latin artist—is: Do my 20-something daughters want to watch it, will my wife want to watch it and will my mother not turn it off? If you can get through that filter, you’ll succeed on network television.

Obviously, 2021 and 2022 were dramatically different live shows, especially the Grammys. Have any lessons come out of that, things you wouldn’t have realized otherwise?

One, I don’t have to be in every room at every moment, and I can manage stuff without having to get on a plane. We did the Grammys at the **Convention Center** in L.A., and we created this big room where the artists played for each other and were each other’s audience. It was what we could do in that moment at that highest level. Ben Winston and the Fulwell team pulled it off and knocked it out of the park. Then we were able to go into a building in Las Vegas and create a live event with an audience that used some of that experiential knowledge to develop the show even further. I thought they took it to a really high level.

Every few years you get to do a Super Bowl. Do you have a favorite moment?

I have several, but in 2007 when **Prince**



was on the stage in Miami, someone was looking down on us in that stadium, because the second he started into “Purple Rain,” this horrendous rainstorm kicked in. You can’t make that sort of thing up.

Super Bowl halftime is one of those moments where hundreds of millions of people are watching, and you get to create something special with the artists, the NFL and the producers. I’ve worked with **The Who**, **Beyoncé**, **Coldplay**, **Maroon 5**—great live performers who can deliver the goods. It’s still the biggest and best platform.

How about a favorite show that might not be as obvious as the Super Bowl or the Grammys?

A Home for the Holidays is a great example of where you can do good and do well. We created this little show after [Los Angeles]

Mayor [Richard] Riordan came to our office in 1998 and pitched us this idea about creating awareness of moving children from foster care into adoption. We partnered with **Wendy’s** to create the show and used music to drive the awareness and provide entertainment while we told these great stories about families created through adoption. Now, 20-plus years later, having done the show every December, over 30,000 foster kids have found their forever families. That’s the power of music and network television coming together with social services to do good.

Social-change network television—I feel really good about that. Though I also feel good about simply giving people an hour of great entertainment, allowing them to sit back in this crazy world we’re living in right now and just be entertained. ■

Clockwise from top: Prince headlines Super Bowl XLI halftime show, Feb. 4, 2007; Neil Portnow, Sussman, Alicia Keys, Chantel Sausedo at the 61st Grammy Awards red-carpet rollout, 2019; 60th Grammy Awards, 2018

PHOTO: TIMOTHY KURATEK/CBS

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