



# JENNA

# ADLER

## *Breaking* CEILINGS

*Interview by* PHIL GALLO

Jenna Adler, CAA's first homegrown music agent, started in 1990 as an assistant to Kevin Gasser and learned the ins and outs of the business from

Rob Light before heading out on her own. A rock 'n' roll fan, she was big on the acts that populated KROQ's playlists, and her first signing, Warner Records' punk-metal band Deftones, fit both her taste and her sense of commercial potential.

Many of the acts she signed and/or worked with in her early days are still on her roster, a source of pride for a woman who didn't fit the image of the typical rock agent three decades ago. "I just went after artists that

I liked to listen to when I came home," she points out in her disarmingly straightforward manner. "I still work with Deftones, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and Garbage."

In recent years, Adler helped guide another long-time client—Green Day—on the band's worldwide Hella Mega Tour with Fall Out Boy and Weezer, orchestrated Jennifer Lopez's record-breaking Las Vegas residency and It's My Party 2019 tour, and has been on the teams behind Doja Cat, Charli XCX, and Chloe x Halle, among many others. She also played a pivotal role in bringing Beyoncé and her Parkwood Entertainment to CAA.

A first-generation Korean American, Adler grew up in L.A.'s Koreatown before the family moved to Northridge in the San Fernando Valley, where she fell in love with punk and new wave.

"I really liked rock and indie rock—the whole alternative business when a KROQ band was a type," she recalls. "From working on Kevin Gasser's desk, I was able to meet a number of these managers and take advantage of my time with him. When he left, I was able to start working with a number of artists that he was working on."

"I've had some really great luck, and everyone needs luck in this business."

But Adler has a lot more than luck going for her. In a recent conversation, she took us through myriad topics including her approach to touring, the growing acceptance of Asian culture and, quite succinctly, why she's been involved in Black Lives Matter. "To be part of the change and to effect change is to also lead by example," she says.





Top to bottom:  
Adler with  
Sylvia Rhone  
at the 2019  
Spirit of Life  
Breakfast;  
with Aaron  
Rosenberg

**Take us through your transition from assistant to agent.**

It's funny, because all you want as an assistant is to be promoted. But being on Rob's desk, I was on every big tour; I was talking to every high-end executive and manager under the sun. Then, when you get promoted, it's "Oh, now I have to create my own business." That was a real eye-opener for me. The great thing about CAA is really the culture and that, as much as you need to grow your own business, you get a lot of mentorship internally. And without the mentors that I had—and still have—I feel like I wouldn't be where I am today.

**How different was it, though, establishing yourself in a world that was largely white and male-dominated?**

My parents immigrated here, I knew nobody in the business and English was my second language at home. I really had to persevere and stay determined and hungry, which I still am.

If you are a female in the music business, the word groupie always feeds into people's heads. That's actually really hurtful, because nobody wants to take you seriously. So as a young agent, you think that you need to have an edge and you need to be somewhat harder than you want to be in terms of the way you act in business. It took me a minute to say, "No, that's not who I am." I can fight with the best of them and argue with the best of them, but I don't need to come off like that.

I continued to evolve, and yeah, it was really hard. Slowly, you just become more secure in your skillset. I would just set goals and really ask for help in terms of making introductions to different artists teams.

I think I was the first female agent promoted inside the walls of our music department. Not a lot of women probably wanted to get into this field—it was just so male-dominated—and over the years, we've seen it level out. But we have so much more work to do.

**You often credit Rob Light with putting you in a position to succeed.**

Rob is great mentor of mine— his demeanor, his professionalism and his enthusiasm for a lot of different types of music. He really helped me personally and professionally to grow and gave me the opportunity to shine. He didn't need to do that, but I think that's just the way our company's built. Just because you're white doesn't mean that you can't represent diversity.

**Thirty years later, how are you involved in bringing about change in the music business?**

I've gotten to a point in my career where I can really fight to help pay it forward, whether it's through mentorship, open dialogue or having faith.

Whether you're male or female, Black, Asian or Hispanic, all I want to do at this point is impart some of what I've gone through and, and say, "It's never going away 100%, but we *want* it to go away and that's our goal." I'm really proud of being able to have that dialogue from where I sit in this company; we've made strides.



PHOTO: AMY SUSSMAN/GETTY IMAGES

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**How does the culture at CAA affect the artists you bring in and, for the matter, the types of employees?**

We all feel more comfortable when we work with like-minded people—if you’re a Latin artist, you want somebody who can actually understand the culture and the language and the business around it. It doesn’t mean that you can’t have a diverse group of people representing you, but you want people who really gravitate toward [the artist’s style]. It’s really important for art-oriented companies to build out that way.

I see more and more artists and potential employees asking very specific questions. “What does being female look like in your company?” “How is the racial mix going to help me in my comfort level?” Those questions, which were once thought to be taboo, are now just open dialogue, which is great.

**One band you’ve long been associated with is Green Day.**

We all work in teams, and I helped Rob with Green Day. My relationship with their manager at the time was incredibly strong.

**They’ve taken a lot of chances over the years—the three albums together, the NHL sponsorship, the *American Idiot* stage show and then this huge stadium tour in the U.S. and Europe. What was your role in all that?**

I’ve been really blessed to be part of it for as long as I have been. They march to their own drumbeat, and that takes a lot of drive and commitment. *American Idiot* was a game-changer. Taking that concept and that record and creating a Broadway musical hadn’t been done since *Tommy*, if I recall correctly. We had a hand in that; we put it all together, made the introductions and they

*Left to right: CAA’s Mitch Rose, Adler, artists Evan Ross and Ashlee Simpson and writer-producer Justin Tranter; with YouTube’s Vivien Lewit*





PHOTO: AMY SUSSMAN/GETTY IMAGES

Top to bottom:  
Adler with  
Virgin's Jacqueline  
Saturn; with  
ABC's Monica  
Escobedo



were off to the races We stepped aside, and they did what they do creatively.

My core is booking, and booking tours is our bread and butter. At the same time, especially in today's age, you have to step outside the comfort zone, explore and be curious about all the different platforms. I've been lucky that the artists that I work with play on all the platforms, and it's really fun for me because I get to learn so many things that are not tour-related. That's what really keeps it fresh and fun for me—I feel like every year you have to evolve.

**How much did not having touring for two years accelerate that evolution?**

We all had to think outside the box. I keep saying this and I keep going back to it, because it's not lost on me that I'm lucky, I'm grateful for all of these opportunities that revealed themselves during the pandemic. When the world shut down, I just happened to have artists like Jennifer Lopez, Chloe x Halle, Doja Cat, Green Day, where I was so busy because I was in the middle of all these branding and endorsement deals. I also feel like, because of where we sit in an all-service company, it was really just tapping into all the different departments and divisions to bridge the gap until touring came back.

**What was the approach to booking tours after the shutdown?**

It had to be strategic in order to give our tours the best possibility of a win. It's looking at all the different elements—the record release, different projects and how we bundle it so there's a lot of support leading into the tour, not just the normal tour marketing per se.

It's also about packaging correctly artists you would normally not package together. What we do is really just advise them that “This might not be your favorite artist, but consumers are still looking for a value for their dollar.” By doing that, you can get a second bite of the apple. Go out once on a support run where you're protected, then try to go back out and do the headline run in 2023.

I'm fully looking at '24, and I just don't see it slowing down right now. The acts that were doing great prior to the shutdown continue to do so, and the artists that were struggling are still struggling. More than ever, you have to be mindful of the consumer, because there's only so many dollars to go around. I think one of the strongest tours is **The Weeknd** and Doja Cat. You're giving a consumer value—you're seeing two headliners.

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**The Weeknd took a chance by canceling an arena tour and booking stadiums. How do you view stadium tours at this point?**

If it makes sense and you've got the package, go for it. But there's something to be said about taking the right steps and not rushing it. Yes, when you walk into a stadium and you see a sold-out show with 40,000 people screaming and unbelievable energy, it's great. But there's nothing worse than the flip side—walking into a half-empty stadium or a venue that the artist is not quite ready for.

**Does the same thinking apply to festivals?**

A lot of these pitches that we hear, or a lot of these meetings that we take with potential artists, we always hear, "The shop down the street says they have the most artists on every festival." Our question back to them is, "OK, but how many of them are headliners?" More than half the acts on the bill are on the bottom half of the poster; it's a bit of a fallacy that getting on the poster is good marketing. Some people in this industry think that just being on a festival at one o'clock in the afternoon is great. In most cases, it hasn't really worked. I think a lot of artists, as they evolve in their careers, understand that more and more.

**If you take some festival bookings, then release a record, you may be dealing with radius clauses and the act has to wait months before being able to take advantage of a new release.**

That's exactly right. There are artists who don't love to tour, for whatever reason, so those festivals are great for them because they pay a lot, you can do a lot and you can string festivals together. For some at a certain level who want to keep visible, that totally makes sense. For an artist who is developing with a great trajectory, sell out your own show to your own fans and create your own narrative. Those festivals will be there when you're ready, and trust me,

they're going to come and get you and they're going to pay. At that point, you're controlling your own destiny.

There's an education process to buyers too. You really have to be strategic, to educate them. You can't pitch 15 artists and expect to get all 15 on a bill. I feel strongly about this, and I've had success picking the two or three artists I think are ready and taking some shots. It doesn't mean waiting until they can headline. It just means putting some numbers on the board, then pointing to the scoreboard and saying, "We just sold out 20 clubs, and we sold them out very quickly." That's what's exciting—the hard numbers—not, "Hey, man, I love this band." They must get that pitch a thousand times a day.

**At some point early on, you were saying 'I love that band.' What made music important to you at an early age?**

Music to me was an escape and a bit of a coping mechanism, because I grew up in a

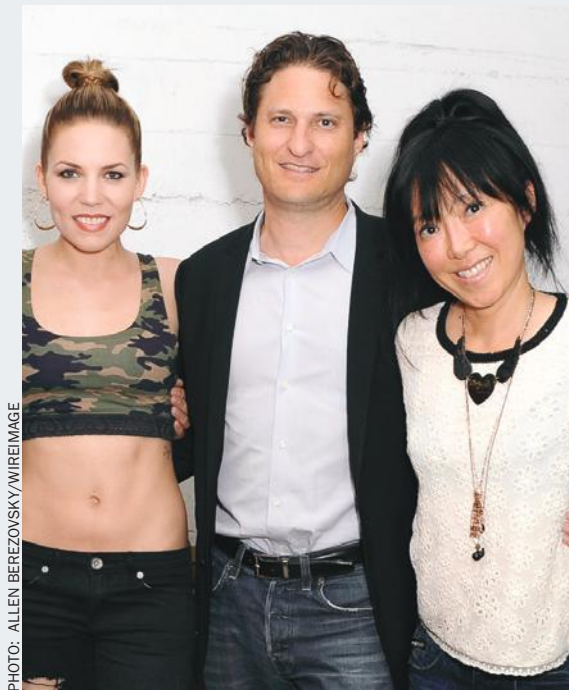
*With UMG  
EVP Michele  
Anthony,  
Capitol Music  
Group boss  
Michelle  
Jubelirer,  
UMPG ruler  
Jody Gerson  
and UMG's  
Richelle Parham  
at 2022 City of  
Hope Spirit of  
Life Gala*



PHOTO: LESTER COHEN/GETTY IMAGES



*With artist  
Skylar Grey and  
attorney Paul  
Rothenberg;  
with BB Gun  
Media's Brian  
Bumbery*



"I'M FULLY LOOKING AT '24, AND I JUST DON'T SEE IT SLOWING DOWN RIGHT NOW. THE ACTS THAT WERE DOING GREAT PRIOR TO THE SHUTDOWN CONTINUE TO DO SO, AND THE ARTISTS THAT WERE STRUGGLING ARE STILL STRUGGLING. MORE THAN EVER, YOU HAVE TO BE MINDFUL OF THE CONSUMER, BECAUSE THERE'S ONLY SO MANY DOLLARS TO GO AROUND."

community where I was the only Asian kid, and I was a victim of racism. Real music people, not the ones who just go home and listen to the radio, were much more accepting. So I gravitated toward that.

**And your parents didn't understand.**

I grew up in a very traditional Asian household—my parents were trying to still build upon their American dream. Because of that, I think my will became so much stronger. The perseverance, the will to succeed and to get out of the Valley—I just had so much drive to get to where I needed to go and where I wanted to go and where my passions were. My parents, at the time, had no idea what I was doing. They're like, "We just paid for all this education and you're an assistant making how much money?"

**How have things in your life changed?**

When I was growing up, I was always hiding my culture because I just wanted to assimilate. The traditions, the different foods like the Korean barbecue, I was always hiding it because I just wanted to be American. Now I'm walking down the aisles of **Whole Foods** and **Erewhon** and seeing the fermented-foods section and Korean barbecue at **Gelson's**, and it's, Wow, who would've ever thought we'd be here? And when you walk into my house, I've got a big sign that says "Shoes off." So, you know, it's full circle.

I'm really proud of where I come from and what I've been able to accomplish. I feel like there's so much more ahead, and it's exciting, really exciting. ■