



ROPPPO

THE TEAM BUILDER

INTERVIEW BY JORGE HERNANDEZ

Republic Records Co-President Jim Roppo, now in his 35th year in the business, has as complete an understanding of the components of the biz as anyone we know. Whether it's management, distribution, retail, sales, marketing, visual content, artist development or emerging technologies, there isn't one area Jim hasn't touched—which has made him indispensable to Republic's rise to ever greater heights.

By the time he finished high school, Roppo was already a citizen of the world. Growing up in disparate international locales—including Germany and the jungles of Central America—he learned to speak four languages and developed decidedly eclectic and global taste in music. Traversing all this geographical and cultural territory no doubt helped prepare the ground for his extraordinary career versatility.



Roppo with Post Malone and Republic's Marleny Reyes

Where did you grow up and what kind of music was played in your home?

I was born in Pennsylvania and grew up with my father, who worked for the government. We lived in California for a few years, then moved to Panama. We lived, quite literally, in the jungle from the time I was eight or nine until I was 13. From there we moved to Texas and then to Nuremberg, Germany, where I graduated from high school. My father and stepmother had a strong affection for music, and there was a substantial record collection in our home, ranging from *The Beatles* and *The Rolling Stones* to soft rock like *America*, the *Eagles* and *Bread*.

What was the first music that really grabbed you personally?

The first music I remember buying for myself was *KISS*. My next-door neighbor in Panama turned me on to them, and I fell in love with the *Alive II* album. I would look at that gate-fold jacket with those kids at the concert, and I wanted to be part of that world so badly.

Another musical influence in my life was my tennis coach; when I was 16, he turned me on to a lot of stuff that wasn't like my

parents' music. One artist who became a big influence was *Bob Marley*. I remember the *Uprising* album, with that stunning cover art of Bob kind of coming out of the earth with his dreads—really powerful imagery. I've always been moved by socially conscious and progressive lyrics wrapped in infectious rhythms. *John Lennon* was my other great musical hero.

You earned a B.A. in international relations at Claremont McKenna College; did you ever imagine you'd end up pursuing a career in music?

I speak Spanish, German and Italian, so I initially envisioned myself going into the foreign service. My junior year, I interned in Washington, D.C., for a congressman from Indiana. Sometimes when you intern, you learn what you want to do, and other times you learn what you absolutely *don't* want to do. As a young, naïve college student, I thought I might be able to change the world. From my internship experience, I was disabused of that point of view forevermore. I finished my degree, but I knew I wasn't going to move forward in that career direction.

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When I really started to examine what I wanted to do with my life, the thing I kept coming back to was music.

How did you break into the business?

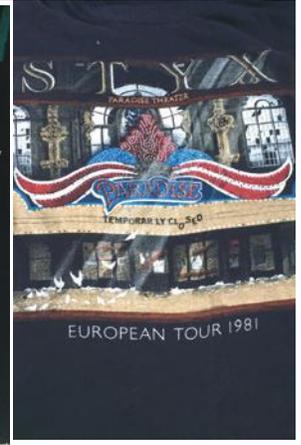
During college I was on the student council, programming concerts, and I took over a three-hour weekly reggae and world-music show called *Dread Riddims* that was broadcast on our campus radio station, KSPC. I invited a lot of artists to come and do interviews and fell in love with one of those acts, L.A.-based reggae group **Boom Shaka**. I ended up working as their informal manager, booking agent, roadie, sound engineer, cook, driver, babysitter—you name it.

I graduated from Claremont in the spring of '88, and my first job was in Hollywood at the historic **Aron's Records**, where I made minimum wage as the reggae and world-music buyer. I continued managing Boom Shaka for a few years. At some point I realized I knew nothing about the music business whatsoever and to be an effective manager, I needed to properly get into it. So I took a job at **Music+** and **City One Stop**, which were affiliated. Music+ was a 90-store retail chain in California and **Angie Diehl**, the head of marketing, gave me my first job in marketing and advertising. City One Stop was one of the premier California wholesalers, headed by the legendary **Sam Ginsburg**. After they were consolidated into **Blockbuster Music**, a dear friend of mine, **Bob Carlton**, hired me to work for **Precision Sound**, which was a California-based indie distributor.

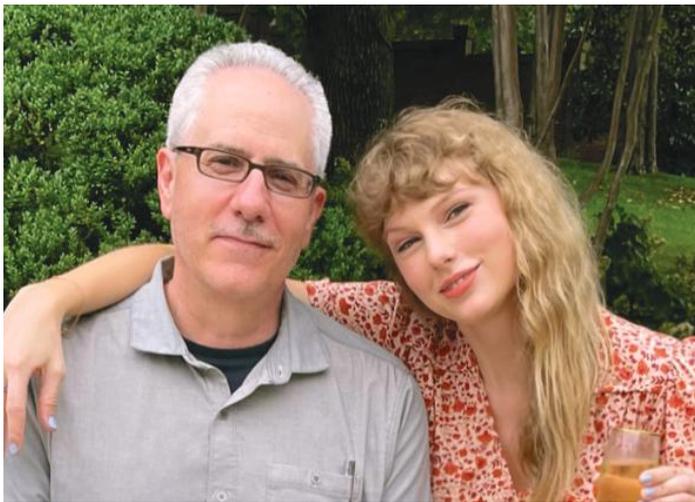
I sat on Bob's couch with a laptop and learned the independent-music-distribution business by listening to his phone calls and talking to him all day in his office. Shortly after I started, Precision was purchased by **Ryko** and **Rounder** and became part of what was known as **REP**, one of the first national independent distributors. I was offered a job in Minneapolis as the head of marketing for REP and worked for **Rob Simonds**, one of the co-founders of **Rykodisc**.

California to Minnesota sounds like a big move.

I thought I'd lost my marbles moving there—I'd never lived anywhere that cold before. I worked at REP for about four years. Eventually, there was a company "divorce," and in 1997 Ryko pursued a fulfillment deal with **PolyGram Group Distribution**. The experience of helping usher in that sort



Top to bottom:
Monte Lipman,
Avery Lipman,
Pop Smoke, Steven
Victor and Roppo;
with Mariah Carey



Top to bottom: Rocco and his wife, Robin; with Taylor Swift; with Nicki Minaj

of “pick, pack and ship” fulfillment deal for the distributed labels we represented allowed me to meet a lot of folks at PGD. Ryko ultimately moved its distribution operation from Minneapolis to Massachusetts. Rather than move, I accepted an offer from **Van Fletcher**, who hired me as the **Best Buy** national account executive for PGD, which was one of the top sales positions in the country.

18 months later, **Edgar Bronfman**, **Seagram** and **Universal** bought PolyGram and consolidated it into what became **Universal Music Group**. In January of 1999, the **Island Def Jam Music Group** was formed, and I transitioned from my national account executive role to the IDJ sales regional based in Minneapolis. I took over the whole Midwest territory, including **Best Buy**, **Target**, **Musicland**, **Borders** and **Handelman**—my territory represented about half of all U.S. sales.

In August I celebrated my 25th anniversary with PolyGram/UMG.

When did you make the jump from Minneapolis to New York?

I stayed in Minneapolis as a regional for a few years. In 2005 I was promoted to VP of sales and moved to IDJ headquarters in New York. I worked for **Mitch Imber**, a very seasoned sales executive from PGD and one of the great mentors of my career. Not long after, Mitch moved into the GM role, and I was promoted to SVP of sales by **L.A. Reid** and **Steve Bartels**.

What are some of the moments that stand out to you from your years at IDJ?

I fortunately had a tremendous amount of success in those years, 1999-2012. I worked with **Jay-Z** from near the beginning of his career as an artist and in his capacity as an executive. I worked with **Rihanna** from the day she was signed and helped develop her into a superstar. I was also involved with **Kanye West**, **The Killers** and **Fall Out Boy** from the very beginning. I worked with **Mariah Carey** and helped deliver her 18th #1 Hot 100 song, which was historic at the time. I also helped **Bon Jovi** achieve its first #1 debut album, and I worked with **Justin Bieber** to help him become one of the biggest artists in the world.

So the last big move of your career was from IDJ to Republic. How did that come about?

Along with a number of other areas, sales was consolidated into a shared-service function for the East Coast across IDJ, **Republic**, **Verve** and other labels. In 2011 I started

working with **Monte and Avery Lipman** in this shared-services area. I really didn't know them. Monte invited me to join an artist signing, and I guess he was impressed with what I had to say because he called me after that meeting and said, "What would you think about running marketing and sales for Republic?" I said, "Excuse me? Ah, yeah, that would be amazing!" I was eager to grow in my career beyond being "the sales guy." So in January 2012, I joined Republic as head of marketing—which included video, digital marketing, touring and events—and sales, which was later renamed "commerce."

Which releases during your tenure at Republic stand out the most?

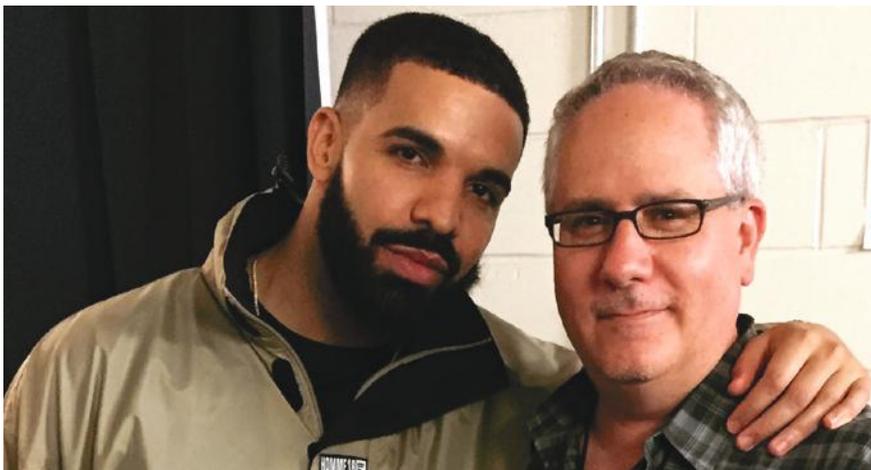
One of the earliest recent signings I participated in was **Ariana Grande**, an incredible

artist-development story. I was also involved from the beginning with **The Weeknd**; more than 10 years ago, we took a trip to meet with **Abel** and his team and saw him perform at the **Mod Club** in Toronto for about 300 people. To see him grow from there to the **Super Bowl** halftime show, **MetLife Stadium** and the biggest song in the world has been amazing.

We have **Drake**, the first artist to amass over 1 billion streams in a week, and **Taylor Swift**, with multiple #1 song and album debuts simultaneously. I've been working with **Eddie Vedder** for over 10 years, since his first solo project, *Ukulele Songs*. I led the U.S. campaign for **Florence + The Machine's** career-high #1 album debut, *How Big, How Blue, How Beautiful*. Another highlight for me is that in May 2014, Republic announced the signing of

Clockwise from top left: With Avery and Monte; with Kim Petras; with Ariana Grande; with Drake

"We're the most competitive bunch of people on the planet; we want to win at everything. We're incredibly ambitious, determined and motivated. There isn't anything where we don't want to be #1. If you're built that way, you thrive here. Republic isn't just a business or a company; it's a lifestyle."





Top: Co-President Wendy Goldstein, Anthony Ramos and Roppo; with Joy Oladokun

John Mellencamp to a lifetime recording contract, a one-of-a-kind partnership.

Of course, there's also **Post Malone**, who had huge breakthroughs with "Congratulations" and "Rockstar."

We have a number of artists we've been working on for several years, including **Kim Petras, Conan Gray, Noah Kahan, Coi Leray, Joy Oladokun, Yung Gravy, Stephen Sanchez, Lauren Spencer Smith** and so many more, because that's what it takes to develop artists into superstars. I know we're in an era where it seems like every day there's a new artist breaking from TikTok, but to have a career, it's generally a three- or four-year process, if not longer.

Especially given that Republic hasn't been around that long relative to the other majors, to what do you attribute its success?

We are one of the youngest majors, and I'd like to point out that we're the only one still run by its founders. The company was founded and is led by two incredible entrepreneur brothers who started it at their kitchen table with \$400 and a vision and a drive to achieve greatness. They've really put together the repertoire and

the staff and given the rope to the team to build this into the great company it's become.

Monte Lipman was once quoted as saying, "The majority of people who work with us have something to prove." Can you elaborate on how that informs the culture of Republic Records?

We're the most competitive bunch of people on the planet; we want to win at everything. We're incredibly ambitious, determined and motivated. There isn't anything where we don't want to be #1. If you're built that way, you thrive here. Republic isn't just a business or a company; it's a lifestyle.

The box score shows that we continually break artists and are able to maximize the biggest artists in the world. Over the last 10 years we've gone from being a small company to one of the biggest major labels.

When the pandemic hit, what were your initial thoughts about what was going to happen to your business?

The week we went to work from home, we put out one of the biggest records in our history, **The Weeknd's *After Hours***; we started the pandemic with a #1 album and the #1 single "Blinding Lights." Our culture, our entrepreneurial spirit and determination, allowed us to adapt to this new paradigm—the last two years have been the most successful in our history.

Tell us about your team.

I began building the team at Republic one by one, which was a fairly long process, one that continues to this day. Some of the people I hired in the early days, like **Donna Gryn**, are still with me—she's been with me for 10 years. Donna is a world-class marketing executive who's now our EVP of global marketing strategy. There's **Kevin Lipson**, who joined me from UMG as our head of commerce and is now EVP of commerce and digital strategy. **Marleny Reyes** joined our team about eight years ago; she's EVP of marketing strategy, heading up our hip-hop and R&B team. **Alex Coslov** heads our alternative marketing group, and **Tim Hrycshyn** is our SVP of digital marketing strategy.

There are so many other great executives at Republic, including **Dave Rocco, Danielle Price, Gary Spangler, Mike Horton, Joe Carozza, Kerri Mackar, Dana Sano** and, of course, **Glenn Mendlinger**, who runs **Imperial**, and **Meg Harkins**, who recently took over our pop marketing team. And I absolutely must mention my co-president,



“In addition to all of these amazing people at Republic, one of the things I’m most excited about and proud of is our women team members. Having the opportunity to support women and continue to help them grow and develop their careers has been incredibly gratifying.”

Left to right: Roppo and Monte salute Glass Animals; plaque time with Lorde; with John Legend (top right); with Ciara

the legend **Wendy Goldstein**. It has been an absolute honor to work alongside somebody whose track record speaks for itself.

In addition to all of these amazing people, one of the things I’m most excited about and proud of is our women team members. Having the opportunity to support women and continue to help them grow and develop their careers has been incredibly gratifying. I look forward to continuing to expand our Republic family by supporting these strong female executives.

I believe we have the future leaders of the business right in our midst, and we’re creating opportunities every day to help take them to the highest levels of their careers. We recently promoted **Tyler Arnold** to president of Mercury and **Ben Adelson** to GM.

Is there anyone else who’s impacted your career?

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention **Steve Gawley**, a brilliant deal maker who bailed me out of jail when I was arrested for failing to tweet to control the crowd at a Justin Bieber in-store. Then there’s [SVP, Global Marketing & Digital Strategy] **Brian Sutnick**; between IDJ and Republic, we’ve worked together for 20 years. **Michele Anthony** has been a source of invaluable guidance and support over the last 10 years. She and I started working together on Eddie Vedder, Pearl Jam and **Black Sabbath**.

In August you announced the launch of Republic’s Kids & Family Music Division. What inspired Republic to get into this

line of business?

We saw an opportunity in the marketplace—there really wasn’t a premier kids-and-family music label in the major-label system. Earlier this year I was introduced to **Bree Bowles**, who is passionate about children’s music and an incredibly ambitious go-getter. After one meeting, we made her an offer to join Republic and lead this initiative for us.

As Monte has said, you can’t go higher than #1. So instead of trying to build the company vertically, we’re building it horizontally. This is the entrepreneurial nature of our company. What other things can we be great at? How else can we use our system and our team to build new ventures?

What excites you most about what you do and what do you see on the horizon in terms of opportunities and challenges?

In the near term, one of the challenges is going to be getting our arms around the global economy. Over the last two years, artists weren’t touring, for example, and that shifted some of the attention to streaming and other forms of consumption. We must see how that’s going to play out over the next few years as the world gets back to a kind of new normal. As far as opportunities, some of the Web3 and other emerging technologies are particularly exciting.

The reason I continue to do this is because every day I wake up excited to help bring music to the world and thus help make it a little better place. I know it sounds corny, but that’s the passion I have for music. ■