

LIONEL RIDENOUR

THE CROWN *of the* ANCHOR

I N T E R V I E W B Y

JORGE HERNANDEZ

A

street-team originator who has worked with some of the most iconic execs and artists in the music world, veteran promo man Lionel Ridenour has been a trailblazer in R&B and hip-hop promotion. In 2013 he founded **Anchor Promotions**, the only Black-owned label services/promotion company in the country, of which he serves as CEO. Ridenour and his Anchor staff have played a crucial role in successes by both major and independent labels looking to attain a competitive edge in Black-music formats over the past decade.



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Top: Ridenour with The Notorious B.I.G. and execs Doug Daniels and Jean Riggins; bottom: with Lil Dicky

You're a lifelong promo man; was there anything in your youth that gave you a glimpse of what was to come?

I grew up in Ohio. As a kid, I was good at getting into request lines and scoring tickets. I figured out that the contests were not so random. The radio was always playing, and in the '70s my parents had tons of vinyl. My mom listened to a wide range of music, and my father was definitely more of a straight-ahead R&B fan. **The Beatles, Sam Cooke, Isaac Hayes**—there was always a good mix of music coming from them.

Speaking of my late parents, I have to give them a lot of thanks. They were educators, each with a PhD. A lot of that stuff that I did with my mother, whether it was flashcards, math or the more abstract lessons, all of it ended up helping me in a weird way with things like **Mediabase**. Those early lessons were useful in teaching me how to crunch the numbers and being able to see the different signals that are going on with a record.

Once you started discovering music for yourself, what caught your ear?

There was a record called "I Gotcha" by a guy named **Joe Tex**. I was in kindergarten, and I can remember really liking it. Then there was [**Carl Douglas**'] "Kung Fu Fighting." That thing would come on and I would lose my fucking mind! Early **Jackson 5** stuff was always good too. Those songs would come on and I'd be really happy. Even though I didn't play any instruments, music was always present in my life growing up.

How did you make your way into the music business?

In 1984 I was in the food brokerage business. Pitching and selling to grocery executives gave me a sense of how to deal with people and how to make pitches that worked. I really thought my career was going to be in that business, but then my friend **Doug Young** had a record called "Sex Appeal" by an artist named **Giorgio**. Doug came to me and said, "Hey, man, I need your help. We just want to go out and get this thing bubbling in the clubs." Along with a third partner named **Jeff House**, we went to clubs all over Southern California—Black clubs, white clubs. Sundays on Crenshaw Boulevard, we'd go everywhere with this thing. We didn't know that people got paid to put records on the radio and that this was actually a job. We would just show up to the station and say, "Okay, we're at record day. We got our one little record here. Will you play it?" Lo and behold, **Power 106** and **KJLH** played it, and we built a groundswell in L.A.

How were you able to capitalize on that initial taste of success?

At the time we didn't really know what we were doing, so we had a guy named **Jonathan Clark** who helped guide us. Through him we were able to get a deal at **Motown** for **Giorgio**. I remember going up to their office and in the parking lot I saw, **Mercedes, Mercedes, BMW, Mercedes, Mercedes, Cadillac**. I sat there thinking, "You're telling me for the bullshit we're

running around and doing, these people are getting paid like this?" From there It was an easy decision. I knew what I was gonna do.

What was your first official gig?

Before I got my first gig, Jeff, Jonathan and I started our own label called **Main Frame**. We had a record by **Dino**, "Summer Girls." We absolutely blew that record up and ended up signing **Dino** to **4th & B'way Records/Island**. At this point, word on the street had gotten very big in L.A. about what we were doing. We hooked back up with **Doug Young** and he set up a meeting with **Step Johnson**, who was the head of the Urban department at **Capitol Records**. We were hired as the very first major-label in-house street team, and our first project was a recently signed **MC Hammer**.

What were those early days like?

The street team thing we'd been doing in L.A. we were now doing all over the country. Monday and Tuesday we're in L.A. doing our thing and then also mailing our 12-inch records out to the hotel in whatever region or city where we're going to later in the week. I would meet up with a regional rep, hit his market and see his club DJs. It gave me a chance, as a young guy, to meet a lot of programmers and compile a list of contacts.

During your Capitol days you also had a side hustle going with Steve Rifkind. What were you doing with him?

Steve took the work we did on the streets and gave it a name. He was able to monetize the concept of street teams. While we worked for Steve, we also looked at sales reports and called stores to see what was selling and what they needed. I was learning the sales side at the same time I'm promoting records.

How did you transition to radio promotion?

After I'd been working at Capitol for a couple of years, Step came to me and said, "The street-team thing has been great, but if you want to go further, you have to do radio. There's a West Coast position that's open. You don't have to move—you can learn here." I jumped in and became the West Coast Regional. I did that for about a year

and a half, and then **Hiriam Hicks** presented me with an opportunity.

In those days **Hiriam** was managing **New Edition** while also starting a venture at **Arista**. He wanted a person in the building. He knew that **Clive** was looking for a national. **Hiriam** set up a meeting and I met **Roy Lott** and **Clive** at his bungalow. **Clive** starts pulling out the music. I'm sitting there listening to *The Bodyguard* soundtrack, **Kenny G** and **TLC**. I'm thinking, "This is probably the most amazing thing I've ever been a part of in my life." I was blown away.



Top: With Commission's **Doug Neumann**, artist **Derez De'Shon** and Commission's **Anthony Martini**; bottom: with veteran consultant **Jesus Garber** and biz icon **Clarence Avant**

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With Bebe Winans

And better than that, they were interested in me: They offered me a national promotion position and on January 1, 1993, I left L.A. and went to New York to start working for Arista Records.

Now that you bring up Clive, you regularly cite two executives who had a monumental influence on you. Clive is one, and the other is Clarence Avant. What were your biggest takeaways from both?

With Clive it was a couple of things. One, the overall love and passion for the music—he was music first. His bet was always on great artists and great songs, never the fad. The other thing about him was his overall due diligence. We would get Mediabase reports on Monday, and I'd get a note from him, "Hey, we're down five spins in Lafayette." At first and in the moment, I'd think, "Five spins? In Lafayette?" But now going back and looking at it while leading my own team, I understand why you want to make sure that a small negative doesn't turn into a bigger problem.

The other thing that was magical about that time was I not only had Clive as a boss, but I also had L.A. Reid and Babyface with LaFace Records. I had Sean Combs with Bad Boy, Dallas Austin with Rowdy, and then throw in those Jermaine Dupri tracks coming in all the time. The collection of executive talent at Arista at this time was legendary. These guys had a vision. They knew what they wanted to do and just being able to be a part of TLC from their first album, and Usher, Toni Braxton, OutKast, Biggie, Faith, Mase,

Craig Mack and 112, all from day one; that was something special. Oh yeah, there was also this singer named Whitney Houston who was in the mix too. I mean, really!

And Clarence Avant? What was his impact on you?

Having someone who looks like you, knowing that he fought the fights that made it possible for so many of us to have the successes we've had, while also being able to bestow wisdom upon all of us, that's what I love about Clarence. Also, Clarence doesn't give a fuck. You can absolutely print that. He would stand up to injustice. He would make sure that if your Pop counterpart was getting x dollars more, I could call him and say, "Clarence, how come I'm not getting paid?" He would make that call and help bring the Black executives up to parity. He is an overall great deal-maker. One thing he would tell me is, "Kid, it's all about the numbers." No matter what, it could be your deal, or the numbers as it relates to your spins, in the final analysis it all breaks down in this business to the numbers.

When do you leave Arista?

In 2003 Big Jon Platt had a vision to make Virgin a player in the Urban space. Up until that point, Virgin didn't really have a presence in Urban music. The team Jon put together consisted of Jermaine Dupri as the President of Black music and me as the EVP of urban promotion. Jermaine really brought the music to Virgin and realized Big Jon's vision for the label. I left in 2007, and I kind of cycled out. I had to figure out what I was going to do and how I was going to do it.

Tommy Marshall offered me an opportunity at a small label called Malaco, which was based in, of all places, Jackson, Mississippi.

Tommy Couch Sr. and Tommy Couch, Jr. at Malaco had a vision for what they're trying to do in modernizing their operation. The first thing I did was sign BeBe & CeCe Winans and the late, great Heavy D to the label. We were setting up what ADA and companies like The Orchard have now, distribution with label services. We had a huge single with Jermaine Dupri's artist Dondria and with Johntá Austin, who was also through So So Def/Malaco.

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Top: With Magic Johnson, Clive Davis, Monica and Diane Warren; bottom: with L.A. Reid and Kena Ridenour

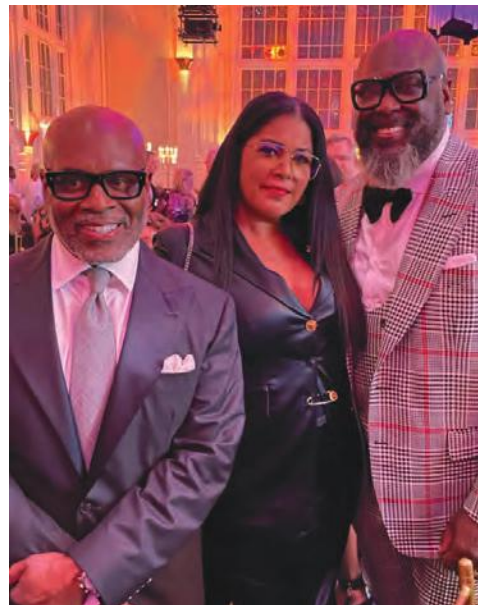


I ended up meeting Mel and Turk from Trill Entertainment when I was trying to get them to do a distribution deal at Malaco. It's funny because I went to go and hire them, and they ended up hiring me. At that point I left Malaco and moved to Atlanta. Trill starts having some real success, things start happening, and then I met Girvan "Fly" Henry. He's the mastermind behind Think It's a Game Records. He saw what I was doing for the Trill guys and asked me to come on. This is all happening around 2013.

Is this the impetus that motivates you to strike out on your own?

I must give credit to Clarence for dropping the seed of that entrepreneurial spirit in me. Clarence said to me, "You've got to realize that it's your name on the card that matters, not the company." Because I'm thinking my validation must be from being with a major. If it doesn't say Arista, Columbia, RCA, whatever, then somehow, I don't have value. Clarence gave me the talk: "Yo, that ain't it. YOU'RE it!" He saw what I was doing with Malaco, Trill and Think It's a Game Records and he got me thinking, "Why not start my own shit and be a free agent? Why depend on one A&R source?"

Along with Clarence, my wife, Kena Ridenour, had a big part in all of this too. She would always say to me, "Hey, what are you doing? You need to do this, and you need to do it for yourself." I also have to give a lot of credit to Fly, because he had a lot of choices, different people he could have gone to, but he entrusted his company's radio profile to me. By doing that everything just blew up from there. Rich Homie Quan blew up, and then YFN Lucci blew up. As you know, this business is about relationships and through all of that work I met Anthony



Martini, who has Commission Records. Their first artist was Lil Dicky.

It sounds like you were having notable success right out of the gate.

Yes, we were successful pretty much right away. Because of all of that success, we started doing a lot of stuff for Warner, Geffen, and Alamo. I'm very proud of the fact that [Alamo's] Todd Moscovitz and Juliette Jones have entrusted us to be their partner when it comes to promotions. To be able to have the success that we've had with Rod Wave, Lil Durk, and now with PGF Nuk, that's all really exciting.

You came into this business at a time when there wasn't much disruption and have seen a lot of changes over the last few decades. What do you think remains constant in the business and to what do you attribute your longevity?

It's important to not be so rigid in your ways. You have to listen to what the kids



With team members Lester Pace, Antonio Tubbs and Troy Marshall

are doing. You can't be so entrenched in your thinking and approach. That's how people get killed in this business.

For example, we have to make radio understand why streaming is so important because if the gulf between streaming records and radio records gets to be too much, and radio doesn't play the streaming records, we're all done.

Remember earlier on I was telling you about how Clive would call about a small change in spins? It's still the same game. You have got to know how to read what's happening and then use that to let somebody know what's going on in their market. Part of promoting is educating. If you're just saying, "Hi buddy, play my record," that shit ain't gonna work. You have to communicate and educate them as to why they need to give these records a chance. And if streaming and digital are the measuring sticks, then it's our job to get radio on board with that.

What are some of the moments in your career that really stand out in your mind?

Certainly in my Capitol days, being a part of MC Hammer's success and *Paul's Boutique* by The Beastie Boys. Then at Arista there's *The Bodyguard* and of course the *Carlos Santana* record. That was earth-shattering, like once in a career. Also, being a part of helping to establish the black-owned companies of LaFace, Bad Boy and Rowdy Records. I do have to say Puff's first album. When it all got started, it was never about Puff being the artist. This man had to pick up the pieces after Biggie died and carry everything on his back.

I'm very proud of what we were able to do with the "Hrs & Hrs" record by **Muni Long**. To be able to take a female R&B artist and get her to #1 independently on the **Supergiant** label was really a big deal. I also have to mention Rich Homie Quan, Lucci, Lil Dicky, **Derez De'Shon, MadeinTYO, Blxst** and my work with Alamo. The ones you take from nothing to becoming household names, that's the stuff that is special.

You work with both independent labels and major labels. Besides a difference in available resources, are there any other notable differences when you're working with an independent vs a major?

Most independent labels, if they're gonna jump in, it's because when all is said and done, the price is the price. It doesn't change for anyone. The key is the communication, and we do a very good job of communicating

with our partners. I'll give you a prime example. **Red Bull Records** got into the Urban space with **Blxst**. They hired us as their promotion team. At that moment they didn't really have anyone entrenched in the Urban world, but we were able to communicate with them and not treat them any differently. That's probably the biggest thing. The same conversations that I'm having with my people at Warner, Geffen or Alamo are going to be the same conversations I have with **Red Bull, TIG** or **Commission**.

Tell me about your team.

I have one of the best teams out there. **Antonio Tubbs, Troy Marshall, Craig Martin** and **Donielle Pace**, they really do an amazing job, and we wouldn't be as successful as we are without them.

We'll leave on this note: How do you see your company evolving? What's on the horizon for Anchor Promo?

Something that you mentioned before is the playing field is becoming a little more level. You're going to see other players start popping up and not everybody is going to have the wherewithal to have full-on promotional staffs. Those are going to be the people who really have an appreciation and desire to be on the radio. Moving forward, having a footprint in the digital world is going to be a major part of what we do as well. ■

