

RADAR

< BACK TO RADAR REVIEWS

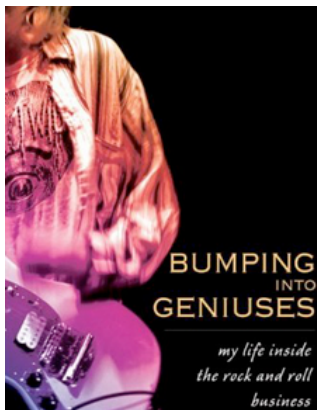
◀ BACK NEXT ▶

BOOK REVIEW

BUMPING INTO GENIUSES - DANNY GOLDBERG

Danny Goldberg is one of those names that anyone remotely in the sphere of the music industry knows. He got his sea legs in the biz as Led Zeppelin's publicist and was, for an exceptional stretch in the '90s, the head man at three different major labels—Atlantic, Warner Bros., and Mercury. Oh, and he also managed a little group called Nirvana.

During college I worked as a marketing rep for Atlantic when Goldberg ran the label. As mountains of free CDs and promo materials arrived at my house every week I wondered how so many crappy bands get signed, and why a few of them received a giant label push while other bands I considered to be far better were ignored. I imagined Goldberg sitting in his corner office, sweeping views of Rockefeller Center at his back, as he conferred with executives deciding the fate of all these artists. Did he know more about music than anyone else? Did he somehow intuit who could, or should, be a star? Or was he just a guy throwing albums against a wall waiting to see which ones would stick?



When Goldberg's new book *Bumping Into Geniuses* landed on my desk a couple of weeks ago, I tore into it, hoping his "life inside the rock and roll business" might finally offer a peek behind the executive's door. Turns out, it's as lamely unscientific as you expect!

There are a great many juicy "I was there" insider anecdotes in the book. We hear about yet more wild antics of John "Bonzo" Bonham, Zeppelin's notorious drummer. We witness Kurt Cobain's ambivalence toward stardom, yet also his keen sense of how to market himself, and more revealing, his desire to do so. **Stevie Nicks** comes across as a bit of a new-age flake, Springsteen a mensch, and Jackson Brown a rock God to be feared and reviled—lots of go-figures.

There are a great many juicy "I was there" insider anecdotes in the book. We hear about yet more wild antics of John "Bonzo" Bonham, Zeppelin's notorious drummer. We witness Kurt Cobain's ambivalence toward stardom, yet also his keen sense of how to market himself, and more revealing, his desire to do so. **Stevie Nicks** comes across as a bit of a new-age flake, Springsteen a mensch, and Jackson Brown a rock God to be feared and reviled—lots of go-figures.

But the unique element that only someone like Goldberg could have offered—a light on the inner workings of the machine—is largely absent. In a book of nearly 300 pages, he spends just 15 on the era of his remarkable reign at the three major labels. He settles for a summation: "[T]here were lots of great things about running big record companies—the money, the perks, the way almost anyone in the world would take your call, [and] the demystification of the decision making at the top." Um, thanks, but I surmised all that myself before reading your book. I, and probably anyone interested in reading a rock executive's memoir, want to know the details *behind* that list. How much money were you paid? What crazy perks did you get? What rock star or politician or Hollywood exec who had blown you off years earlier took your call once you held the powerful titles? And, most interesting, at least to me, how were decisions that affected not only musicians, but their fans, and even the culture at large, made at the top? Demystify it for us.

Perhaps so few of the above details are given because Goldberg himself wasn't so sure how those decisions were made. Often, he candidly and admirably gives credit to various A&R people and other executives, or sometimes plain luck, for hit albums like the Stone Temple Pilots' breakthrough that took off during his tenures at the helm.

Perhaps the most telling section appears at the end of a chapter on Warren Zevon, who was on Artemis, the small label Goldberg started after being ousted from Mercury. Goldberg had a clear affection for Zevon, which only

intensified when Zevon, while recording for Artemis, was stricken with cancer. Despite a Herculean effort, and emotional ties, Goldberg admits that he and the label "failed to get [Zevon's album] *Life'll Kill Ya* the audience it deserved." Without the machine, Goldberg is unable to break a record he cared so deeply about.

Goldberg's great talent appears not to have been running record labels but dealing with people. Both genuinely humble and softly manipulative, Goldberg is a master of relationships. And there seems to be no separation between his personal life and his professional ambitions. For every artist, executive, and peripheral character he befriends, represents, or comes into contact with, he has an agenda on how to leverage them into furthering his career or the success of whatever acts he was working for at the time. That a benefit concert he helps produce advances a charitable cause he favors and furthers his business connections with the stars that take part in it is a natural symbiosis for him. Yet this approach to relationships, an automatic intertwining of the personal and the professional, was not always brazen or calculated. It appeared to be, simply, automatic. That his wife just happens to be an entertainment lawyer is perhaps an unfair but funny illustration of this. Unsurprisingly, Goldberg appeared most at ease when good commercial decisions happily coincided with good personal or artistic decisions. And he managed to often glide his life toward this end.

When the book reaches the section on Artemis, he mentions how he was then more interested and "in the mood" to work closer with artists, rather than operating from the remove of the executive suite. Perhaps it's true that at that point in his career he relished being able to work more closely with artists again. But, at the same time, it's hard to believe that a man who spent his whole adult life networking and maneuvering himself seeking greater power within the music business didn't also have more regret, embarrassment, even depression, over having lost the prestige and power he had worked for so long to obtain. Here's some more admirable candor: As a manager in 1982 trying to land arena rock band Styx as a client Goldberg recalls, "I cannot deny that my interest was largely fueled by images of the millions of dollars I could make." (Full disclosure: he later discovers to his surprise that he in fact really digs Styx.)

One summer during college I interned in the A&R department of a major label. One of the young scouts there was known as a hotshot, a rising star. I thought this was strange because he hadn't signed any successful bands. But I was young and assumed I just didn't know any better. Over the years I followed his career ascent, as he bounced from label to label, moving to higher and higher positions at each one. Yet, during all that time he never signed a hit band. To my knowledge, he never even signed a moderately successful act. Goldberg's book finally makes sense of the phenomenon of this A&R "wunderkind," as he was once called in a trade magazine: Aside from a single digit number of legends, the majority of record executives were successful, more than anything, at selling themselves within the industry, rather than knowing how to spot and sell a hit album. As Geffen president Ed Rosenblatt remarked in 1992 when asked what he was doing to promote the then atmospheric rise of Nirvana's *Nevermind*: "Get out of the way."

By David Zweig 09/18/08 2:05 PM

Related: Book Review, Books, Bumping Into Geniuses, Danny Goldberg

[Print](#) | [Email](#) | [Recommend It \(2\)](#) | [Share It](#)



LIKE THIS ARTICLE?
CLICK HERE TO BUZZ IT UP ON YAHOO!

◀ Back

MORE RADAR REVIEWS

Next ▶

Noah and the Whale ▶

◀ RADAR REVIEWS: *The Duchess*

Dead, solid perfect, David. You just nailed Goldberg and about 89% of the A&R people I worked with in the record business.

At Atlantic the people who signed the real hit acts were the label heads Ahmet and Nesuhi Ertegun and Jerry Wexler, along with house producers like Tommy Dowd, Arif Mardin, Joel Dorn, Jimmy Douglass and a few others. But that label was the exception to the rule.

Posted by: [sailor](#) on September 18, 2008 2:26 PM

@sailor -

Agreed, but don't forget Mo Ostin and Lenny Waronker from Warner Bros.... these are the

folks that nutured and fought for the likes of Neil Young and R.E.M. - they were real "music" guys...not just businessmen. I'll be looking forward to their books !

Posted by: [girlyalias99](#) on September 18, 2008 3:18 PM

Dear David,

Firstly, thanks very much for the timely review. I'm still a PR guy at heart and appreciate that you spelled my name right and that of the name of my book. I also appreciate some of what you wrote about it and would like to offer the following as a commentary on some of your criticisms.

Originally I didn't even include the 15 pages about my time at major labels but my editor said it would be weird to leave it out altogether. The reason I down-played those jobs is that I wanted to write a book about working closely with artists and once I got big jobs I was removed from artists and just had ceremonial 15 minute meetings with them. Also I found when I tried to write about those jobs it was boring. I don't want to read about a financial meeting, I want to read about guitar players. Finally the process of getting and keeping those jobs involved a lot of macho posturing that I indulged in as much as anyone but it's not a side of my personality I'm anxious to re-live. Not now anyway. But the main thing is that rock stars are a lot more interesting to read and write about than executives are.

Reasonable people of good will and good taste may disagree about what is crappy and what is great. Sometimes artists made great demos or were great live and for one reason or another made disappointing records which the label was contractually obligated to release. Sometimes they had bad advice; sometimes they developed personal problems such as drug problems; sometimes they just couldn't step up. Sometimes they made artistically great records that just didn't sell even when they got airplay or good reviews or when the artist toured.

No one ran companies based solely or even mostly on their own aesthetic. A label boss could choose to give someone a shot or not --but 90% of the resources had to be reactive and not proactive if you wanted to keep your job. Juliana Hatfield writes in her book that she thinks I would have put out her second Atlantic album even though my successor at Atlantic didn't. She is right. I would have. But it wasn't a commercial no-brainer--it was a judgement call. Such crossroads were rare.

The way that marketing priorities were set was by trying to figure out what would sell. Before a record came out the opinions of the senior execs mattered but new artists were treated very similarly in terms of initial expenditure, which was limited . (Artists with a sales base would have marketing plans based on previous sales of course) Afterwards it was easy to gauge in relationship to airplay. For example none of my critical friends liked Collective Soul but whenever the song "Shine" got played, sales went crazy. I loved Eugenius, in part because they were one of Kurt Cobain's favorites, but no matter what kind of airplay or exposure their album got , sales were minimum. So the reality of running a label had a lot to do with watching carefully for public reaction and responding to it. There was a skill involved in giving a record a few more weeks or months (both Hootie and Jewel took awhile before they exploded) but the expertise involved was not that of being a music critic but an expert on audiences.

Some great artists just weren't or aren't destined for big commercial success and some which seem mediocre to have some sort of commercial talent which is as real to their fans as Dylan's is to me.

Yep it sucked to be fired and I have been fired lots of times. But I have never felt I accomplished anything by moping around about being fired and I was not lying when I said I loved Artemis and the ability it gave me to work intimately with artists like Zevon and Earle. I think you give the major labels too much credit for what happened in the business . They were thermometers measuring the heat of various artists and albums not , in most cases, thermostats that by themselves lowered and raised the temperature. There was and is a skill set involved in running labels. Some people do it much more tastefully and more successfully than others (sometimes but not always the same people). I was better than many but not as good as some. I was, for example, no Chris Blackwell .

The companies I ran made money, developed executives who went on to do greater things and gave some great artists a wider audience. But I think that overall, record companies were less important than you think and artists and managers more important. As a result, you exaggerate both my sense of triumph when I was running labels my sense of loss when I left. Right now, I swear to God I'm as excited about Tom Morello's new album or about seeing Steve Earle and Allison Moorer at Judson Church tonight as I ever was about anything I've ever done professionally.

Sincerely Yours,

Danny Goldberg

Posted by: [Gold Village Entertainment](#) on September 23, 2008 9:53 AM

I gotta say, reading Danny's response reminds me why he has been so successful. This is obviously an intelligent and thoughtful person. I know Danny, very slightly. An artist I represented was signed to an early label he owned. I fought with him and we didn't exactly bond. But to try to tag him as another jerk off record executive, well thats just plain wrong. This is a guy who has worked throughout his life for music artists, and for social justice (do the research). And I have no doubt he is first and foremost in it for the music.

Reavis Daniel Moore,
co-founder, www.EarthDance.org
chairman, www.YouLicense.com

Posted by: [Serve Music](#) on October 15, 2008 10:22 AM

Reavis,

I never questioned Goldberg's intelligence or thoughtfulness. Nor did I question that he has fought for social justice. What I did point out was that he was a master at combining his personal and professional lives, that he managed to leverage people for his gain or the gain of the artists he was working for at a certain time. This included working his connections back and forth between his charitable work and professional and personal life. I didn't make a value judgment on that one way or the other; in fact, I marveled at his ability to do it. Being a "people person" like that is a skill, and one that supports my thesis about Goldberg and many other successful record execs.

In regards to his commitment to "the music", I don't doubt that Goldberg loves music and rockstars. But being a successful music-business-man, as he implicitly and explicitly indicates in his book, often required him to act in the best commercial interest, not necessarily the best "music" interest. (As one would expect an executive to do.) In his comment Goldberg says as much when he writes,: "So the reality of running a label had a lot to do with watching carefully for public reaction and responding to it."

Posted by: **David Zweig** on October 20, 2008 3:09 PM

[FRESH INTELLIGENCE](#) [FEATURES](#) [REVIEWS](#) [PHOTOS](#) [MAGAZINE](#) [VIDEO](#) [FAME-O-METER](#) [RA](#)

[HOME](#) [RSS](#) [CONTACT](#) [STAFF](#) [TERMS AND CONDITIONS](#) [ADVERTISE](#) [PRIVACY POLICY](#)