



J E F F R A B H A N

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New York is a symbol of aspiration and faith, a place where writers, musicians, painters and opportunists come to realise their dreams. Each ambitious soul fuels the energy of the city. It does not make logical sense that so many people live in such a confined space, yet by the grace of God it works.

If you come to New York and begin to work at a certain level within the music business, you will meet Jeff Rabhan. With a career spanning more than 20 years in the business, he has worked across all aspects, from management and major labels, to marketing and print media. He has worked with a plethora of artists including Kelly Clarkson, Michelle Branch, Jermaine Dupri, Jennifer Lopez, Enrique Iglesias, Snoop Doggy Dog and DMX.

In some cases it can take several lifetimes to arrive at the point of best fit. In what feels to be the second act of his career, Jeff Rabhan is an educator and the Chair of the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music at New York University. Jeff is a strong personality; he freely speaks his opinions, and is a trusted and respected confidant to his peers. He is passionate about nurturing the future minds of the music business, the New York community, and what needs to be done to support modern music culture.

Let's talk about the music community in New York. I've been looking to understand the reallocation of music services between New York and L.A.

Jeff: Well, you know what's interesting, it's always been very cyclical. New York is hot for a decade, and then L.A. gets hot, and then New York again. That's how it's always been for the last 40 years. Because real estate is so expensive in New York, what happened first was, all the studios started moving out to L.A.

There is a great chapter in David Byrne's book about the New York creative scene and its correlation with rent prices. He argues that higher rent equates to less artists in the community.

Jeff: Exactly. So, first the studios go, then the producers, then the writers, then the artists, and the managers. It sets off this domino effect, and I think part of the problem is this - there are a lot of bands in New York, but a lot of them are not very good. There is not enough nurturing of good creative talent. New York, being one of the biggest cities in the world, should be producing more great music than it is. We need more venues, but it's hard to get permits to open venues in certain areas. We should look to the example of how they've supported the renaissance of film in New York. They set up tax breaks, made it possible to shoot in the city and a lot of film projects returned. We need to bring music projects back to the city!

What sort of initiatives do you believe would help the New York community make progress in the short term?

Jeff: Well, A few things come to mind - we could find ways to mark and celebrate the historic sites here. The Blue Plaque Trust in London is a great example of how that could work. We could give tax breaks for studios and for people wanting to record music here. We need to open venues! I think, culturally, the city could be more supportive of concerts. It is very difficult to produce festivals and concerts in New York. There are a lot of really simple things that we could do to better support music here. We just need to make those decisions.

Bringing the local community together would be the first step. Commitment to the goal, from the people who are actually part of the scene.

Jeff: I'll give you a great example. In the 50s and 60s, The Brill Building was very famous. From top to bottom, there were songwriters, producers, and artists. It was a one-stop shop to make records, and the city made it easier for buildings like that to exist. There is a trend right now for that model in L.A. Production companies sign a lot of writers and they have the studios. Labels are giving artists to these companies and saying - make me a record. They are saving money on A&R costs and flying the artists around the world. When it can be in-house, the

records can be made quicker, and with a creative team behind them, as opposed to one A&R guy who is shuffling five or six projects. Major labels are outsourcing a lot of records now, and I think, there is no reason why we can't support that in New York.

It's a similar model to that from your time at The Firm. Why did you end up leaving there?

Jeff: Well, I was a partner there for five years and I wanted to take a shot at doing my own thing. It was a big, big company and we made some acquisitions. At one point we had over 150 employees. I wanted to do something a little bit smaller. So I went out and raised some money and opened an office in Nashville, and an office in L.A. I set up a label and it went through Universal. I enjoyed it and I did that for about three years, but I was travelling and I was on the road a lot. You know, it was an interesting time in the business, because that was when things were changing dramatically. It was 2007 and people were sitting around and talking about the good old days. I was thinking - I am not even 40 and people are talking about this! I wanted to be working on the other side, instead of trying to preserve the old business, I wanted to be a part of changing the business. When the opportunity came to run this program, which is the premier music business program in the country, I want to be part of it, part of something that is creating value for the future.

Ultimately, I'm inspired to work with kids who are excited about music and who are interested in being part of innovation and entrepreneurship. I enjoy watching new ventures being born, as opposed to working with people who are holding on to an old way of doing business.

What is the most significant shift in perspective that you notice with your students?

Jeff: They don't see the business as having gatekeepers anymore! By this I mean that you don't have to be signed by a label to release music, and you don't need to have an agent before you can tour. These are kids who grew up in a 'direct to fan' environment and they are very entrepreneurial. They are not waiting to be discovered or sending out resumes, they are just doing it. There are people who are very talented, and they don't break through because they are waiting for validation from a major label or from a manager. These kids do it themselves. They build their fan base and they are booking their own shows. It is a dramatic shift.

How long is the program?

Jeff: Four years.

What happens after four years? Is there an internship? How do you help the students manage the transition into the job market?

Jeff: They go through the program, and everybody does an internship. A lot of kids get hired from the internship. And in order to graduate, they are required to launch a music business venture. They do a business plan and they present their idea to a panel of experts. Some of the kids get hired out of the room, and some get funding out of the room. It's a pretty interesting process, I mean, couple that model with the fact that our faculty is made up of working professionals from the business.

On the topic of paid employment versus nonpaying internships, how do you think things are changing? I've been reading about the class action against Fox in New York.

Jeff: The culture of the internship is changing a little bit. Some bigger companies now are paying interns because there had been all sorts of issues relating to human resources and taxes and complaints about kids not getting what they were promised. An increasing number of companies are doing two things: 1. They are starting to pay kids, not much, but they are starting to pay them. 2. The old sort of internship, where you file papers and get coffee, is over. Kids are actually getting work opportunities, and there are more in the small upstart companies. I would say that the internships are becoming semi-permanent, meaning that kids are getting internships for consecutive summers and then they often turn into jobs. It's becoming more of a real farm system.

Did you do an internship?

Jeff: I did! My junior and senior years at college, I worked for an artist manager. He ultimately helped me get my first job, which was at Rolling Stone magazine.

Tell me about some key lessons that you've learned over these years?

Jeff: [pauses] Always remember that it's a *job*. Even though you may be friends with the artists, always remember that you are working. It just so happens that you are working in the music business, but you have to remember not to cross that line. Always be professional because at the end of the day you are representing the artist, and ultimately yourself. I think a lot of times people get caught up. Remember that you are *not* the artist, you are *representing* the artist.

We seem to be living in a culture where those lines are getting blurred.

Jeff: Oh, you know what, here's a great piece of advice -

I had an opportunity, many years ago, to be a judge on a popular TV show. And one of my mentors said to me - if you are serious about being an artist manager, you should never go on TV. That was 10 years ago. We live in a culture now where everybody wants to be famous and it's a problem! One of the reasons why the music industry was not prepared for what happened was because a lot of executives, managers, and a lot of the big players began to think that they were the stars. They lost sight of who the talent was and they were not prepared, from a business standpoint, to tackle the Internet revolution. They were worried about their own press and their own money. I think a lot of people in the business want to be famous, and that is a dangerous game.

What do you think drove this culture?

Jeff: Reality television! Everybody believes that bad press is good press. And it's not. There is a big difference between being famous and being a star. One of the things that is hurting our business now is that, we have a lot of famous people, but we don't have a lot of stars. Many artists who could be stars are not being nurtured and developed with good people, because everybody is looking for the quick buck. The traditional music industry is full of desperate people who are desperate to make money. They are desperate to be famous and they will do anything. This means that the quality of the product is not what it should be, and so we have a lot of revolving doors; someone is popular for a minute and then they are gone. There aren't many careers, and if you really look at it, those popular people in the business are over 40. They are the people who have choices and are really in control of their careers. Not the ones who are tied to their gimmick.

It takes time to develop an audience and to build the trust and commitment in that relationship.

Jeff: Exactly. If you don't solidify that fan base and grow with your fans, then people will move on.

It takes time and patience and money. When media is moving so fast and when people are after that fast sale, there can also be a cheapening of culture.

Jeff: It's visible desperation and that stinks from a mile away. Labels don't have the money and the time to spend three, four or five years on an act. I mean, look at Bruce Springsteen, he didn't have a hit until his third record. Nobody gets three records now. You might get three singles today. If the first single doesn't work, they will drop you or want you to become somebody else. So, I think people are searching for the gimmick to try to make some sort of impact. The danger here is big, because if you are founded on a gimmick, it is inevitable that people will move on. I think what's interesting is that, now more than ever, independent labels are being impactful. There are bands out there that are making a living from making music. I believe that if you follow the art, the money comes. There is a flip side to that. Let me give you an example - We have bands with careers but we don't have rock stars. Think about *Fun* or *Death Cab For Cutie* or *The National*, if any of these bands were just walking down the street, would you know it was them?

Except for Nate Ruess, no, I don't know what any of them look like.

Jeff: Most people would not. What has traditionally made the music industry, is the fantasy of it and the ability to suspend disbelief. For us to look up on the stage and see greatness. It's a truth. Whether it's an artist or a friend or an executive; when you are in the presence of greatness, you feel it. When somebody has that energy and that sensibility, you feel it. We need to find and nurture those people, because they are our future. Find that person and nurture them, not the person with the 'get rich quick' scheme. We should be creating things that will tell stories and make history. As an industry, I think that we are not making history right now, we are making present.

We will probably look back in 5 years time and question the kind of people who are widely admired in this current culture.

Jeff: No one will remember them! I mean that. Even the best and the most successful artists are using music as a way of doing other things. Look at Jay Z and his Samsung deal. He uses that to platform other things that he's doing. Look at Kanye. He's one of the most successful artists of our time and that last record was 28-minutes long. He put a 28-minute record out, because he needed music to open the door and talk about his fashion line. Music has become the key that just opens the door. It's not the apartment anymore. It's the business card to get into the meeting, and that's how many artists are using music.

How do you view the role of the media?

Jeff: So here's the thing. First of all, the publishing business has been decimated by the Internet. Magazines are all going downhill for the most part, and truthfully, press never really sold records. It's been a big awareness point, but the problem we have now is, there are a gazillion blogs and everyone is on social media. You can post anything at any time. So I'm asking - who has actual credibility? Who has real information and who doesn't? It's just a sea of fuzziness out there in the media. Everybody is carrying the same story and I think, the media has lost its ability to find the story outside of the headline. It is hurtful to our business.

I think that a broad spectrum of media are dumbing down the audience by focusing on stories that have a shocking headline, and can be packaged into something that is easy for people to consume, and quickly.

Jeff: The focus is - how can we sell advertising? How can we sell subscription? Whenever people are desperate, they do whatever they can, and often times that includes cheapening yourself. I think the media is definitely doing that. I think they have gone for the candy instead of the healthy meal, which is to do something meaningful with the platform. Instead, it's just an opportunity to get as many eye balls as possible. There are a gazillion blogs out there that each has seven people are opposed to one that has 7 million people.

It's harder to pick the salad option, when the burger is right there in front of you.

Jeff: I think when people are thirsty; they are going to drink anything. It's like, sticking with this comparison, when you're really, really thirsty and there is a sugar filled Coca-Cola sitting in front of you, but there is cold water four blocks away, you're going to drink the soda.

In New York you can drink a big gulp. No one needs to drink that much of anything really.

Jeff: Unfortunately Michelle I think we are living in that culture right now. The Coca-Cola culture.

The Coca-Cola culture is also a youth culture. Thinking about your 20-year-old self now, what advice would you give yourself back then?

Jeff: I would give this advice to anybody at any age. Three really important words: Be here now. Don't always be looking for the next thing. Be patient enough to appreciate the present. So many of us are very anxious to be successful, which means we can get caught out looking ahead, instead of looking at our feet. We may end up getting the success we want, but we miss out on appreciating the experiences. I definitely know that I missed out on enjoying some of the really incredible moments because I was already thinking about the next one.

How would you describe that shift in your values?

Jeff: I wanted to feel like I was contributing, and not just taking. With where I'm at now, I feel like a real contributor. I forgot who told me this but, always remember to say - 'Thank you' or 'I appreciate you'. You hear about people fighting for credit on a record, and people don't want to give that credit. It doesn't cost anything to give somebody credit for their work. Perhaps it's ego driven, but for the right reasons, I wanted to do work with people who appreciated what I was doing for them.

That makes sense. Were there certain experiences that led you to that new perspective?

Jeff: You know what, the truth is that getting your ass kicked is what makes humility possible, and if you haven't had your ass kicked, then you are going to skate through life feeling superman, and it's not real, it's *just not real*. If you haven't had your ass kicked and you can't be vulnerable, then you can't have compassion. This industry will kick your ass! Most people learn by making big mistakes or by being taken advantage of, and I'm trying to change that through education.

If you were to think back on your last week, what do you think is an important detail for good business behaviour?

Jeff: The most valuable asset that anybody has is time, and so when you give it away, it really is a gift. You are giving somebody your time, your mind and your energy. Always appreciate someone's time and let him or her know that. At the end of the day, your time is really all that you have to offer.

Can you give me an example?

Jeff: People often ask, in relation to the music industry, 'how do I make myself memorable?' You have to figure out the right way to approach people and be respectful of them. Nobody wants to read a long three-page email - 'Ever since I was four, I've always wanted to be a singer'. I hit delete every single time.

I think it's a good touch to send things by mail. A handwritten note perhaps.

Jeff: Exactly. If someone helps you out, go and buy them a candy bar and drop it off at their office, with a note saying 'I appreciate your time'. Those things really do make a difference. It's so simple. As things get faster, we can forget the details. Be of your word, if you say you're going to do something, then do it. Be mindful. All we really have is our word and our time.

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