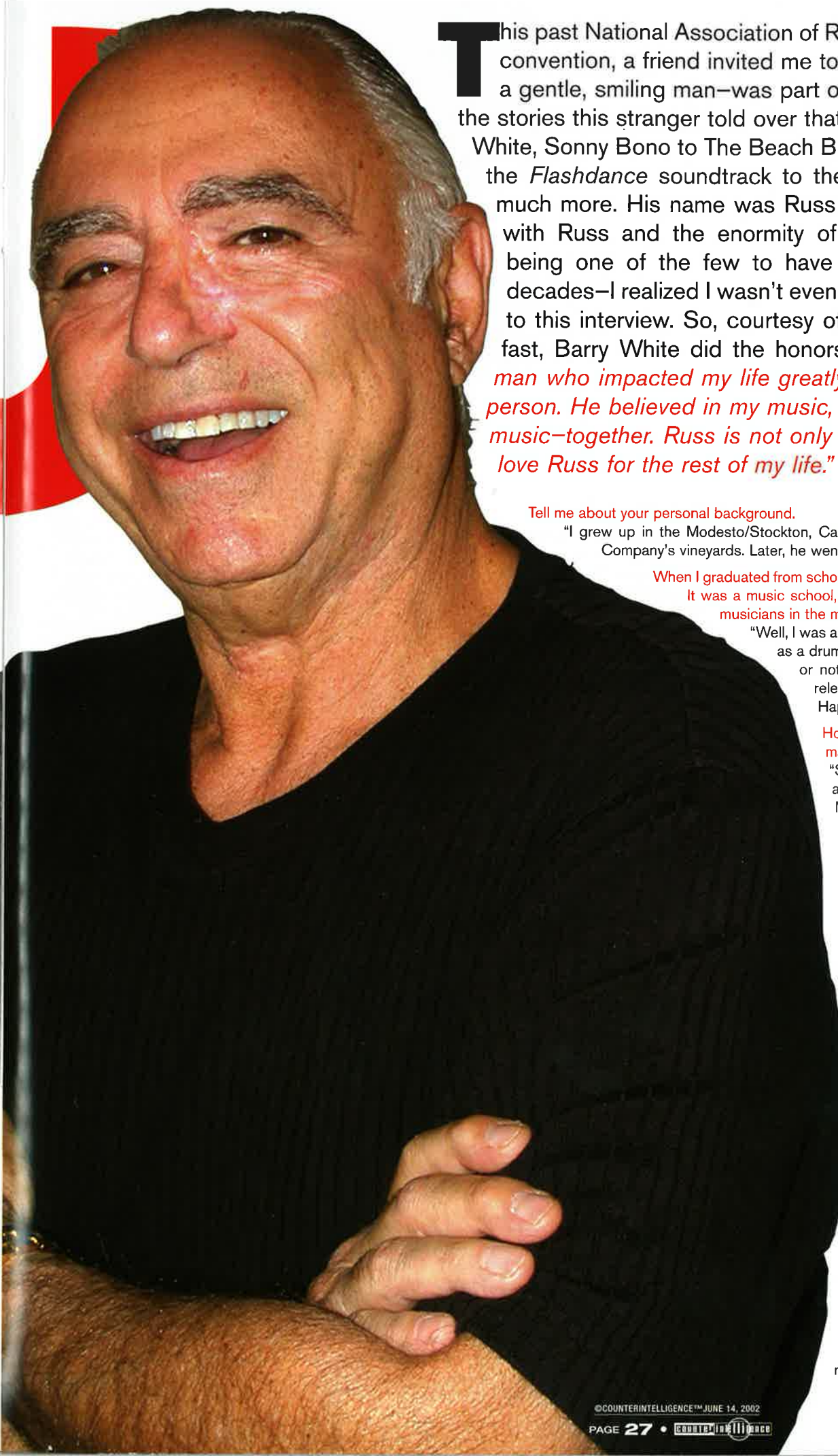


YOU OWN AT LEAST ONE OF HIS RECORDS

An Interview With Music Legend Russ Regan
By George Saadi





This past National Association of Recording Merchandisers (NARM) convention, a friend invited me to dinner. An unknown gentleman—a gentle, smiling man—was part of the group. I was enthralled with the stories this stranger told over that dinner—from Elton John to Barry White, Sonny Bono to The Beach Boys, Neil Bogart to Neil Diamond, the *Flashdance* soundtrack to the *Spinal Tap* soundtrack and so much more. His name was Russ Regan. After getting acquainted with Russ and the enormity of his accomplishments—including being one of the few to have No. 1 records in four different decades—I realized I wasn't even worthy of writing the introduction to this interview. So, courtesy of Regan's cell phone over breakfast, Barry White did the honors: *"Russ Regan is a remarkable man who impacted my life greatly. He's a very honorable and fair person. He believed in my music, and we made music—successful music—together. Russ is not only an executive, he's a friend. I will love Russ for the rest of my life."*

Tell me about your personal background.

"I grew up in the Modesto/Stockton, California area. My dad was head of the Gallo Wine Company's vineyards. Later, he went into the restaurant business."

When I graduated from school, Bruce Lundvall gave the commencement speech.

It was a music school, and the theme of Bruce's speech was, "We need musicians in the music business." It seems to me that's what you are.

"Well, I was a drummer, if you want to call that music! I started out as a drummer, then later became a recording artist, believe it or not, on Capitol Records. I was signed in 1959 and released a single I wrote and produced called, 'The Happy Reindeer.' It was a Christmas hit."

How did you go from being an artist to a business man?

"Sonny Bono and I became very good friends. We actually made a record together in 1961 called 'Hey Mrs. Jones' by The Checkmates. Sonny, on top of everything else, happened to be a very, very good promotion man. So, in '61, because our record didn't make it and I was despondent at the time, he said, 'Why don't you go into promotion? You'd be a great promotion man.' I answered, 'Let me think about that.' Lo and behold, at the same time, there was another guy named George Mottola, who had written 'Goodnight My Love,' who said, 'Russ, you'd be a great promotion man.' So I said, 'Well George, why don't you get me a job?' So of all people, he got me a job with Cleveland, Ohio's Buckeye Record Distributors, which had just opened up in Los Angeles. In the morning I packed records, in the afternoon I went to radio stations."

Where did you go from there?

"Well, I was working 18 hours a day and became a hot guy, for some reason. I had a passion that I still thank God I have for this wonderful business. Motown came to Buckeye in '61...our first record was 'Please Mr. Postman,' and we never looked back. I was fortunate enough to work with Berry Gordy; in those days, he was like a mentor to me. I was instrumental in breaking two Motown acts out here on the West Coast, The Supremes with 'Let Me Go The Right Way' and Marvin Gaye with 'That Stubborn Kinda Fellow.' I was handling West Coast promotion for Motown. Berry Gordy is one of the greatest record men who ever lived on this planet."

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Tell me about Scepter Records.

"In '63, I left Buckeye and went to work at Record Merchandise, which was a legendary distributor out here in California. I worked with Scepter Records. We had a great run there, too. We broke a lot of records, including 'Louie Louie'."

"'Louie Louie' broke in Boston. A Seattle group breaking in Boston, and we picked up the record. Before we could get it out, Paul Revere & The Raiders covered it on Columbia. In those days, I was so strong that I actually beat Columbia in my own backyard. I made the 'Louie Louie' record by The Kingsmen a hit here in Los Angeles. Paul Revere did okay with it, but The Kingsmen had a No.1 record. It's still a classic."

What was the next stop?

"Loma Records. Joe Smith brought me to Loma Records. At that time, I had one-third of the playlist on KHJ—actually more than a third—I think I had 11 hits on KHJ's top 30. Joe called me one day and said, 'I've got to get you off the street and bring you over here.' So I went over there and actually wound up taking a pay cut to become General Manager! I made less money, but I knew that I eventually had to learn how to be an executive and get into A&R and all of that. Joe Smith was a very good mentor to me too, along the way."

What then?

"I went to Warner Bros. for a year. While I was there, I was fortunate to find a song for Frank Sinatra, called 'That's Life.' I took it to Mo Ostin after I heard it. He loved the song very much and got to Frank for me."

Did it come in as a demo?

"It did; Kelly Gordon wrote it. A singer named O.C. Smith had recorded it, but with him, it was only a hit in Houston of all places, can you imagine that? Kelly said, 'Be my guest, take it to Frank Sinatra.'"

How did you wind up at Uni Records?

"At Loma, which was a great experience, I learned how to be an executive, but I also knew that if I stayed there, I had a lot of heavyweights in front of me. I mean, Joe Smith, Mo Ostin, Jimmy Bowen, Lenny Waronker, all of them. So I realized I had to go somewhere else, and that's what I did. I wound up going to MCA, Uni Records. The first record I bought was 'Incense And Peppermints' from the Strawberry Alarm Clock for \$2,500. That sucker was a big hit."

Is this where both Neil Diamond and Elton John came into your life?

"Absolutely. After we had The Strawberry Alarm Clock, I traded that record for 'Baby Now That I've Found You' by The Foundations, which led me to 'Build Me Up Buttercup,' which became a No.1 hit. All of a sudden, we became a hot little label. Then, the gentleman who'd signed Neil Diamond to Bang Records passed away. Neil had a key man clause in his contract, so he was a free agent and we went after him and were fortunate enough to get him. I actually didn't start Neil out, but feel I was instrumental in taking him to the next level, if you will. Great guy, great friend, signed him in 1968."

How did Elton John come about at MCA?

"I used to have breakfast at the Continental Riot House every morning, the Hyatt on Sunset. We called it The Riot because all the touring groups would stay there and destroy the place. One day, Lenny Hodes, who worked for Dick James, sees me eating and says, 'Oh

man, Russ, I've got a package for you.' He goes and gets this package, a manila envelope full of tapes and stuff, and a vinyl LP. I said, 'Fine, I'll take it.' He said, 'I want you to know this artist has been turned down by five labels. Larry Uttal just gave him a release and five companies turned him down.' Larry is a legendary record guy; Elton had one release on his label before he signed to us. His label eventually became Arista.

So, I took the package. About five o'clock that day, things got quiet at the office, so I started listening to it. I heard 'Lady Samantha,' 'Skyline Pigeon'—actually, it was *The Empty Sky* vinyl album that hadn't come out in America yet. Plus other tapes, 'The Border Song,' and stuff like that. I thought, 'Wow, this guy is pretty damn good.' I called Lenny up about 6:30 and asked what the deal was with this Elton John project. He asked, 'Do you like him?' I said, 'Yeah, I like him.' He said, 'Russ, you could sign him for nothing. We don't want an advance. U.S. and Canada only, but no advance.' I said, 'We've got a deal!' To make a long story short, I signed Elton John for no advance, but before I could put out *Empty Sky*, here comes the *Elton John* album that I didn't even know about. It was about a month later, out of the blue. They'd been working on it, but hadn't told me anything. It was a new record that was going to come out.

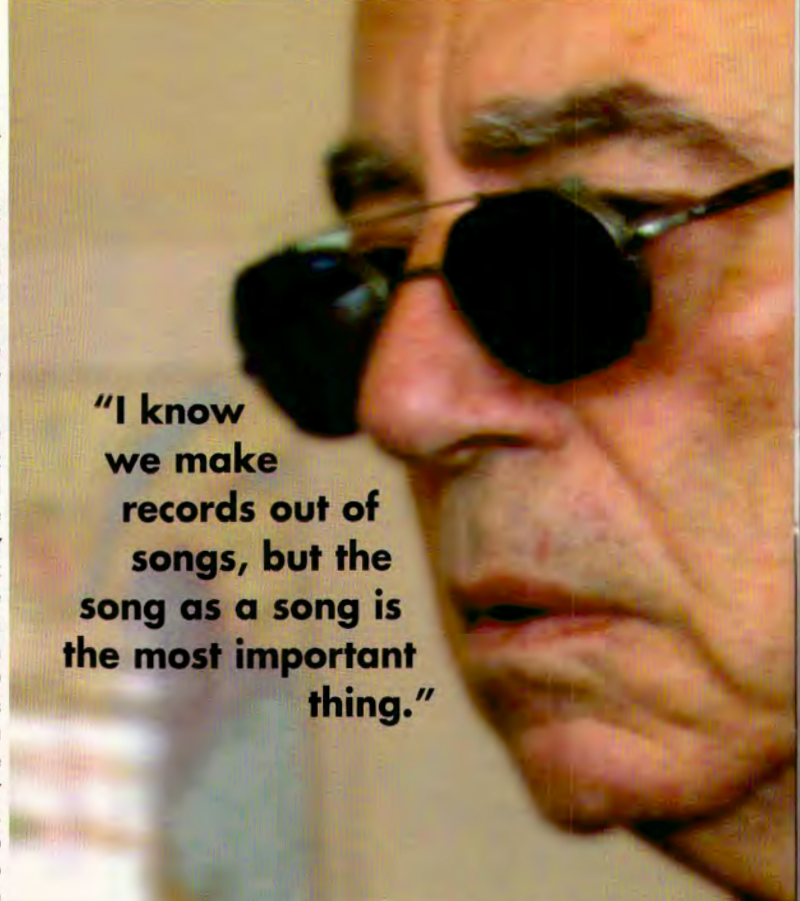
"When I listened to the *Elton John* album, it was like when I listened to the Meatloaf *Bat Out Of Hell* album for the first time—I said, 'Oh my God, this is incredible! What great, great music!' The whole production was great; Paul Buckmaster's arrangements, Gus Dudgeon producing, it was a great package. So, I stopped work—we had about 30 employees—I called them all in and we listened to it. Everybody gave a standing ovation. We knew it was going to be something big.

"'Your Song,' 'Take Me To The Pilot,' all that. At that moment in time, I knew that Elton John was going to be a superstar, because this was a whole other dimension that I'd never heard before. I couldn't believe these two young guys, Bernie Taupin and Elton John, were making this kind of music. I got lucky, very lucky. Then, of course, we brought him to America and he broke here before he broke in Europe."

Tell me the story.

"There was some doubt. He did great at The Troubadour, August 25, 1970. It was one of the greatest nights in rock & roll history. But we went to San Francisco from there and he did okay. Then, MCA was doing some kind of new artist presentation in New York, and we went to that. It was at the Playboy Club, of all places. They were putting Elton on last. They'd invited a lot of people there, but by the time Elton John went on—which was about 3:00 pm—a lot of people had gone back to work, they were gone. Of course, Elton was pissed off, rightly so. It didn't go over that well.

"We were due in Philadelphia the next day to appear at the Electric Factory, that was the final leg of our little trip. While in Philadelphia, I got a call from one of the people at the MCA tower, who berated me for spending all this money on a new album that hadn't been selling much, and informed me that they were calling my new superstar 'Regan's folly' at the tower. I went bonkers because of that and went and told Elton what had happened. Elton looked



"I know we make records out of songs, but the song as a song is the most important thing."

back at me and said, 'Russ, tonight we're going to burn this city of Philadelphia down.' He had a song called 'Burn Down The Mission,' which he performed that night in front of about 2,000 kids. The place went crazy. He was onstage for that one song about half an hour."

Did he flip the switch and become the "wild performer" that night?

"Sort of. Elton has always been a great performer, but that night he just all of a sudden took it to the next level. He was explosive. The club erupted like crazy, I was elated. I couldn't sleep and stayed up all night. About 10:30 the next morning, I got a phone call from the branch manager in Philadelphia, who told me, 'I hate to wake you, but I just had an order for 5,000 Elton John albums, and just thought you'd like to know.' I said, 'You can wake me up for that anytime.' I went back to sleep. About noon, he calls and wakes me up again, saying, 'You're not going to believe it, but I had to come in for another 5,000. I may have to come in for another, too.' At that point, it was around 12:30–9:30am Los Angeles time, so I called the MCA tower in Universal City and got the guy who had berated me about it. I used quite a bit of profanity and told him to check his sales. Elton John—Regan's folly—was coming home. Anyway, I had the last laugh."

Where did your career take you from there?

"From Uni, I went to 20th Century Fox. We signed Barry White, the Alan Parsons Project, that kind of stuff when I was there."

What happened next with you?

"I took a little detour after 20th Century. I thought, maybe I should go into my own record company. Neil Bogart, who was doing great at Casablanca at the time, came to me in 1977 and asked me to do a joint venture with him; we formed Parachute Records together. But I learned at that point that parachutes go down, they didn't go up! After 14 months, we dissolved our partnership.

"We made some great records with great artists, but we just didn't quite have it together. And, at that point, my personal life and my marriage were falling apart. So, I left and took a year off. I got divorced and had a terrible catharsis and took it easy for a while. I'd been working since I was nine years old and thought I was due for a little vacation."

"The word *personal* isn't part of the record business anymore."

"Elton John (left) and Neil Diamond (right) express their affection for Russ Regan (center) at Marlon Brand's house, circa 1971.



How did you come back into the business?

"I did a couple numbers with K.C. and The Sunshine Band in 1978. I was sort of searching for myself again and wanted to get back on track. I'd done some work with music publishers until 1980. One day, I was going to the Polo Lounge [at the Beverly Hills Hotel] for a breakfast meeting, but the person I was meeting with didn't show up. Coincidentally, I ran into Neil Diamond, so we had breakfast. Neil asked what I was doing, I filled him in. He said, 'This is crazy, you need to get back into something big.' He knew the new president of PolyGram, and said, 'I'm going to get you a job,' and he did. I became Vice-President West Coast General Manager.

"I'll never forget what he did for me. So I went to work for PolyGram, in charge of movies and soundtracks also. We did *Flashdance* and *Karate Kid*, among many others."

So, we're in the mid-'80s now. You wound up back at Motown, didn't you?

"In 1986, Berry Gordy called. We were very good friends. He wanted me to come back and help run his company. I told him I'd jumped around enough. I didn't want to jump ship anymore and wanted to finish my career at PolyGram. But Berry is a hard man to say 'no' to, and he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. So, I went to work at Motown. When the company was sold a few years later, I was back on the street. Clive Davis hired me for a bit for Arista, which was a great year of my life. I think he's probably the greatest record man ever. I wound up going to Quality Records from there."

What are you doing currently?

Now, for the first time in my life, I'm like a hired gun, a consultant. I love it. I'm working with different things, including the On-Command Corporation, delivering music and soon, music videos into 250,000 hotel rooms."

In a business where one is lucky to lay claim to being involved in the career of one superstar, it's amazing that you've been involved in so many that have gone on to worldwide success. I read there was even a Beach Boys connection.

"A friend of mine calls me up one day in 1961 and says, 'I want to play something for you on the telephone.' So he plays this record, it was called 'Surfin'.' I said it sounded like a Jan & Dean ripoff. He said it was a new group called The Pendletons, but he didn't like the name and wanted to change it to The Surfers. I told him he couldn't use that name because there was another group on World Pacific called The Surfers. So he asked me to give them a name. I said, 'Call them

The Hang Tens.' He didn't like that. So I offered, 'How about The Woodys.' He didn't like that either. Finally, I said, 'How about The Beach Boys?' He said, 'That's it!' So he called them The Beach Boys. The whole thing took about a minute. After that, for the first six years of their career, Brian Wilson never put out a record without playing it for me first, right up to 'Good Vibrations.'"

You've had involvement in some pretty big films: *Flashdance*, *Spinal Tap*, *The Poseiden Adventure* and *Endless Love*, to name a few. Four songs you were involved with in films won Academy Awards. What exactly do you do for them?

"I consider myself a song man. I'm a music man. I think that's why I've lasted as long as I have, because without the music, you've got nothing. I know we make records out of these songs, but the song as a song is the most important thing. My contribution is approval on the songs that go into those movies. A lot of directors trust my instincts; I advise them. And, I've been lucky enough to guess right."

How did an A&R, creative executive wind up winning an award from a retail organization, the NARM Record Executive Of The Year, in 1974?

"In those days, I was very active in contacting all the major retailers, all the one-stops, all the rackjobbers. When you were president of a company, you wore many hats. I used to call Russ Solomon at Tower because I wanted to know what was going on with my acts. There was no such thing as SoundScan in those days. I was very active, even with radio. Though I had great promotion guys, I'd get on the phone with program directors, including Gerry Cagle then, so I was very active in that area. I think that, because my artists had sold so many records, NARM recognized me. I was actually co-honoree that year, with Lou Adler."

In your opinion, what role does retail play in artist development?

"Today, retail plays a more active role. Stores are very instrumental in breaking acts, I think, because they've given the artist much more visibility than in the old days. Listening posts and end caps help. I know these are ancillary income opportunities, and even with them, many stores have been bought out or gone bankrupt, so retail's not been a bed of roses. But if a record company is smart, it will take advantage of these. The brick-and-mortar business is very valuable."

How has the music business changed?

"It's become Wall Street. In the old days, if you were a radio owner and you owned the max of seven stations, you were considered a conglomerate. Most of the retail chains are owned by publicly traded com-

panies. The music business has become big business; it's not as personal as it used to be, but I don't think anything is. The word *personal* isn't part of the record business anymore. That's where the independent stores are most valuable. They'll take the chance."

Maybe it's not just the business—maybe great new music is getting harder to find lately.

"I don't want to be one of those icons that complains about how good it was. It's not as good as it used to be only because, in many instances, instead of creating new music, we're using old music to base it upon. How do you make something new with old samples? It's limiting. I think that slowed us down a bit. But, I'm hoping there are some adventurous people who want to say, 'Guess what? We'll use some new kinds of beats. We don't need old hits, we don't need samples.' We need people that are willing to try new things, artists who don't want to play it safe."

What do you think of new media's impact on music?

"I believe in new media, if it's handled properly. The most disturbing thing to me is new technology, not new media. The technology that's creating pirates out of our kids. In the old days, it was bad enough with the bootleggers. Now you've got pirates in dormitories and they haven't got a clue that they're stealing. They think music is free. We need something new and exciting. The one thing that's missing right now is excitement. People need to be excited and passionate. What's the problem here? Is it because it's big business? There's a lot of pressure on the music business right now."

How does it feel to be one of the few people who could say the music they've touched has sold over one billion records?

"It feels good. My artists have created a lot of happiness out there. I'm a guy that likes giving back. I've been a part of the audience at many concerts and seen people just go crazy over one of the acts I've worked with—it makes you feel good. It's a wonderful thing."

You once said that the key to any major success is to have continuity. What does that mean?

**"Russ, tonight we're going to burn this city of Philadelphia down."
—Elton John**

"I'm a sports fan. I see baseball franchises whose managers have turned over too much. They don't do too well. Look at the continuity Warner Bros. had with the Mo Ostin/Lenny Waronker regime for years. Look at the turmoil that's at EMI and BMG. I think continuity is very valuable in the entertainment game, because now look at Sony—they've got continuity there. How many years have Donnie Ienner and Thomas Mottola been there? That's what I'm talking about. Though in my personal life I haven't had that much continuity, whatever I've had has been good. Also, as an artist, continuity is important because this is a very fickle business. You have to stay on top of your game."

What's the future of the business?

"It's always been and will always be new artists, new blood."

What's your future?

"My career's been a roller coaster ride of fun and heartaches. When you're riding high, there's nothing better. The lows make you appreciate the highs. I'm hoping to find one more great superstar before I hang up my rock & roll shoes."