

Mo Ostin

By Stan Cornyn



LET ME PRETEND YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF MO Ostin, or, as he was first called in *Billboard*, Moe Austin. That mention was in 1960, when Mo was in his twenties, freshly married to a store clerk cutie named Evelyn, and had lucked into an indecent job: working for Norman Granz at Verve Records. We should be interested in this man. He's been granted the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, even though his fathers-in-art, Granz and Sinatra, dismissed R&R with naughty words. We need to understand how this man became the record world's most outstanding label runner. In short: *Why Mo?*

Mo Ostin, at this stage, can best be evaluated by the condition of his body parts. His eyes had glasses to keep them in line. His hands – well, he wasn't cut out to be a dentist. His ears, on the other hand, were not the kind that A&R types claim, the kind that are supposed to have a Seventh Sense about commercial hooks. Rather than catch catchy songs, Mo's ears listened to people who knew more than he did.

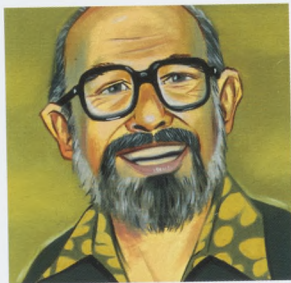
Looking Deep Into the Ears of Mo Ostin

Mo Ostin never fixed up a single or repaired one's hook. He never could make an E-flat diminished on the keyboard. He never claimed to know how a song might catch more fire. He attended very few recording sessions, and when he did, he never leaned over the engineer's shoulders to suggest a thing. He never partied

till four. He didn't dance, or even hop. He didn't know better than his employees. He was unlike record execs who came before.

To execs who'd been around, those were lousy habits. Jerry Wexler, for instance, looked back and said, "Mo invented himself. Considering the paucity of what he brought to the table, he confected what was possibly the most tasteful and commercial record label of its day." Jerry's sum-up of Mo's assets: "An overriding intelligence, an unflappable cool and patience forever."

With these advantages, but no E-flat, Mo Ostin ran the best record company of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and some of the 1990s. Warner Bros. Records became more than a cash cow – a cash herd is more like it. But Lifetime Achievement – that's not to be measured in millions, is it? It's to be measured . . . how?



Looking Deeper Into the Brain of Mo Ostin

One day in the adorable 1980s, Mo came in to my office and asked if I'd look over a press release that Corporate had ordered. It was about who Mo was and what he'd done. Two pages. After a brief paragraph one, two began with "During his career at Warner Bros. Records, Ostin has signed . . ." and then, stretching out for the rest of the page and marching in a line onto page two, the rest of this press release was just a list of names. Let me recapture: Ry Cooder, the Fugs, Arlo Guthrie, Jimi Hendrix, the Kinks, the Jim Kweskin Jug Band, Miriam Makeba, Joni Mitchell, Van Morrison, the Mothers of Invention, Randy Newman, Jack

After a stint at Verve Records, Mo Ostin moved to Reprise, which led him to Warner Bros. Records and the number one spot.





Mo takes a trip with the Quiet Beatle, George Harrison (who he signed as a solo artist), on the Warner Communications Learjet, nicknamed the Wicky Bird.

Nitche, Van Dyke Parks, Pentangle, Tiny Tim, Neil Young... I looked up at Mo and said, "Mo, this is just a list." And he looked back and answered, "Yeah, but what a list." Which continued... the Allman Brothers, the B-52's, the Band, the Beach Boys, George Benson, Bootsy's Rubber Band, Captain Beefheart, Devo, Dire Straits, Funkadelic, George Harrison, Jethro Tull, Chaka Khan, Curtis Mayfield, Gram Parsons, the Ramones, Leon Redbone, the Sex Pistols, Paul Simon, T. Rex, Talking Heads... And thus the beat went on and on-er, paragraphs getting longer, into the 1980s, which I won't even try to recapture, from Aerosmith to ZZ Top.

"But Mo," I protested. To which Mo answered, "What's more important than this list?" So, two strikes against me, I just spell-checked, though I remember to this day how poorly it summed up Mo and why. But even tonight, if you asked him, "Why this Lifetime Achievement thing, Mo?" he'd

Listening to people is what Mo did with his ears

probably still make a list of the acts, point not to himself, not even to his signing pen. *That's not good enough, Mo.*

Mo's Bio Tells More Important Stuff

You can't do Mo with a list. It's kind of the Roger Maris approach, just stats to be marveled at, but only until Sammy Sosa swings in. And Mo is about more than quantity.

Mo first learned from Norman Granz, back in Verve's Philharmonic Jazz days, when Mo did numbers but saw how Norman did artists and sessions. "Let the artists do what they do. They make music. We don't." It might have been Granz's rule, and it sure became Mo's. It worked there; it worked running Reprise for

Sinatra (had to, I'll bet). But when Reprise was bought up for WBR and Mo came to Burbank with a roster of Dennis Day types (Trini Lopez being the hippest), it was survival. Mo survived by making sense, signing side-of-the-roaders (couldn't afford a Steve or an Eydie) and stunning the rest of us with side-of-the-ditchers, like the Fugs, Tiny Tim, Zappa, the Kinks, Hendrix, *what is this stuff, Mo?* Mo's ears could not hear those artists as hits. Ears? Mo's ears heard people who could hear. He collected them: Lenny, Andy, Teddy... men and women Mo turned into his own ears.

Mo sought the dedicated nonusual artist, and he stuck with the ones he signed - when other execs proudly quoted the phrase, "We'll just throw these up and see which one sticks to the wall."

And to do the shortest possible bio here, Mo and his early colleague Joe Smith built Warner/Reprise into the labels to be on; then Mo went on to run the shebang wholly, soon making WEA the number one distributor (the first year it sold records), then Warners into America's number one label.

Listening to people is what Mo did with his ears. Better than anybody before or now at it. Making sound business judgments.

Mostly, those good judgments involved people he hired to run the company. Seymour Stein recalls being "totally overwhelmed," when he first toured WBR. "Lenny, Teddy, Michael, Kraz, Wexler, Rosenblatt, Cornyn, Thyret, Regehr, Carl Scott, Wickham, Ruffino, Lou Dennis, Merlis, Liz Rosenberg, Derek Taylor and the craziest CFO I've ever met, Murray Gitlin. Mo



Mo meets the Rat Pack: Dean Martin, Ostin, Sammy Davis Jr., Frank Sinatra

must have some Hapsburg blood in him: How else could he have held this crazy quilt of top-level thinkers, producers, marketing and artist-development mavens and A&R people both loosely and firmly together? I knew immediately, after ten years in the wilderness, that my label, Sire, had found a home."

But What Mo Really Has Been Is Unique

This Ode to Mo, and Why Mo, is because Mo – and no one else has done this – changed what record company presidents can be, changed how we should measure them. Not by numbers of Grammys. In a book I wrote, I summed up Mo as quickly as I could – one sentence. Something like "Mo was brilliant, so brilliant he never told any of us how to do our job." I thought that was an original perception. *At first.*

To bolster my theory about Why Mo, I called some others – a couple dozen or so of Mo's longer-term colleagues – looking for their wise smacks about Mo. The conclusion: Mo has more virtues than an Eagle Scout, and my perception about his uniqueness was shared almost universally. □



Paul Simon was one of the great artists brought to Warner Bros. by Mo Ostin.

Mo, You Listening?

Hear Your Colleagues Answer Our Question, "Why Mo?"

"In the early Seventies, most record companies gave up their A&R departments, to which Mo's comment was 'Bullshit. We aren't a record company, we're a music company.'" *Lou Dennis*

"He has outrageous common sense and a fairness he applies to all situations." *Henry Droz*

"His straightforward and honest personality and his gift of befriending artists and business associates..." *Almet Ertegun*

"He has that rare sense that can balance creativity and business." *Vic Faraci*

"Most of all, Mo is very believable. Most people would follow him anywhere. And they did." *Murray Gitlin*

"Mo excelled at setting up a good game where every staffer at the label – his daytime family – was supported and encouraged to excel. And he could detect bullshit in an instant." *Jac Holzman*

"When you are around Mo, you observe the way he works, the way he leads, the way he deals with artists, and then you do the best you can to mimic." *Bob Hurwitz*

"What makes Mo Ostin a great music executive is his ability to always remember rule number one: Let the artist be an artist." *Quincy Jones*

"It's his commitment to the creative community. It's his DNA." *Chuck Kaye*

"Mo, with your style, work ethic and genuine care for the people

of WBR, you (and wonderful Evelyn) made my job a source of pleasure and pride." *Jeannie Lumley*

"Creative control extended to the staff as well. You could let your imagination run wild, and if you had an idea you thought might help the company sell more records or have more fun, you were encouraged to, as Elvis sang, 'follow that dream.'" *Bob Merlis*

"I loved working for Mo! I looked forward to going to work almost every day!" *Hale Milgrim*

"Music is where he lives, where he thrives and where he continues to give so generously of himself to countless artists and executives. If music is our home, then Mo is the landlord, because he knows better than anyone that music is the rhythm of our lives." *Doug Morris*

"The great thing about Mo, and about Lenny, was the respect they had for their artists. They trusted us enough to allow us the freedom to make the records we wanted to make." *Randy Newman*

"When I think of Mo Ostin, I think of the incredible days when the great music men nurtured and cared for their artists. When every day was a joy, and Mo made it all happen. He was my hero." *Stevie Nicks*

"Not only Mo but Evelyn: The two of them were the perfect match." *Claude Nobs*

"Mo has the gift of the Magi. He is a wise man from the East (actually from the Bronx). I am not wise, and I am not from the East. But the most valuable thing I've learned from knowing Mo all these years is the true meaning of the word mensch." *Jim Ed Norman*

"I was twenty-six when Mo appointed me CEO of Warner/Reprise in the U.K. Mo signed the papers, threw the keys to me and said, 'Go run a record company. I'll see you later.' Mo trusted and supported this twenty-six-year-old with the task." *Ian Ralfini*

"Mo and I both retired from Warners. I retired to tennis and golf. Mo retired to run record companies, which he does as formidably as anyone in the business has ever seen. Pity, he could have been a dynamic miniature golfer." *Phil Rose*

"Artists loved him and wanted to hang with him, longing to have some of his 'Mo-ish' fabulosity rub off on them. Madonna, who hardly cared about anyone's opinion, would always say to me, 'Well, what did Mo think?' These were the times when the artist was king, but Mo was revered by them all." *LizBeth Rosenberg*

"I was his employee, his partner, his competitor, back to being his partner, and through it all, he was always my friend." *Eddie Rosenblatt*

"He let us do our thing, and his only rule was that he wanted us to always respect our artists and

their music. (Be sure to add something about Evelyn. It really is her award.)" *Carl Scott*

"The charitable, loving and gracious way he and his secret weapon, Evelyn, share their lives with the world is the true mark of greatness." *Russ Thyret*

"When you work for Mo, you actually work with Mo. It truly is a partnership. His patience is remarkable and affects all of us who work with him, because he allows us the freedom to make mistakes and be creative." *Lenny Waronker*

"Mo Ostin created a style of management that revolutionized the record business and transformed it into an industry. What made him uniquely successful was an alloy of the following elements: his respect for artistry, his modesty, his curiosity, his tolerance, his faith in his subordinates, his gambler's instinct, his distinctive elocution, his sharp business brain and his total absence of swagger." *Andy Wickham*

Now I get the last word: Mo, wake up. It's not all those signings. Nor is it all those Number Ones. What you did is unprecedented in this business. You found us, you gassed us up, you united us, you fathered us. You're more than what came before. You forever changed the definition of chief executive. You are Vince Lombardi, the guy Without Whom. That's Why, Mo.

Stan Cornryn

WONG LIVE CHAIRMAN MO





FROM THE CHILDREN OF YOUR REVOLUTION



THEY ALL HAVE ONE THING IN COMMON
FRANK SINATRA | JIMI HENDRIX EXPERIENCE | NEIL YOUNG | PRINCE
QUINCY JONES | JONI MITCHELL | SEX PISTOLS | PAUL SIMON
MADONNA | FLEETWOOD MAC | THE KINKS | GEORGE HARRISON | MILES
DAVIS | ELLA FITZGERALD | NELLY FURTADO | CURTIS MAYFIELD | REM
SAMMY DAVIS, JR. | ZZ TOP | JOHN LENNON | JAMES TAYLOR | CAPTAIN
BEEFHEART | CHRIS ROCK | THE ISLEY BROTHERS | FRANK ZAPPA & THE
MOTHERS OF INVENTION | DEEP PURPLE | ROXY MUSIC | PETER, PAUL
& MARY | HANK WILLIAMS, JR. | ELLIOTT SMITH | T.REX | RAY CHARLES
GRAM PARSONS | PAPA ROACH | BLACK SABBATH | BOB MARLEY & THE
WAILERS | JOHN FOGERTY | FLOETRY | GRATEFUL DEAD | BONNIE RAITT
THE WHO | DWIGHT YOAKAM | JANE'S ADDICTION | GORDON LIGHTFOOT
ELVIS COSTELLO | RICKIE LEE JONES | PENTANGLE | ROD STEWART
RUFUS WAINWRIGHT | LITTLE FEAT | THE RAMONES | THE STAPLE
SINGERS | JIMMY EAT WORLD | EMMYLOU HARRIS | DEVO | FUNKADELIC
BILL COSBY | GREEN DAY | TINY TIM | STEVE MARTIN | SEAL | HARPER'S
BIZARRE | GEORGE BENSON | ALL AMERICAN REJECTS | KEITH JARRETT
PRETENDERS | VAN HALEN | NEW ORDER | JOHN SEBASTIAN | THE
BEACH BOYS | EELS | TOM PETTY & THE HEARTBREAKERS | TRAVIS TRITT
THE FUGS | ALICE COOPER | THE B-52'S | U2 | ALLEN TOUSSAINT
VAN MORRISON | AFI | THE SMITHS | ELTON JOHN | CHRIS ISAAK
TRAVELING WILBURYS | VAN DYKE PARKS | GUNS N' ROSES | PETER
GABRIEL | BEAU BRUMMELS | CHAKA KHAN | DEAN MARTIN | ENYA
DUKE ELLINGTON | LIFEHOUSE | TODD RUNDGREN | RANDY NEWMAN
ERIC CLAPTON | AMERICA | ICE-T | DON HENLEY | ADAM SANDLER
JETHRO TULL | Q-TIP | ASHFORD & SIMPSON | ARLO GUTHRIE | LOS
LOBOS | STEELY DAN | TALKING HEADS | CHICAGO | ALIEN ANT FARM
COUNT BASIE | K.D. LANG | SIR MIX-A-LOT | RANDY TRAVIS | POWERMAN
5000 | BIZ MARRIE | RY COODER | FAITH NO MORE | RED HOT CHILI
PEPPERS | DOBBIE BROTHERS | BIG DADDY KANE | RICHARD PRYOR
THE ALLMAN BROTHERS BAND | JIMMY FALLON | DONALD FAGEN
DEPECHE MODE | THE BLACK CROWES | TOBY KEITH | DIRE STRAITS

AND HIS NAME IS **MO**
CONGRATULATIONS FROM ALL AT DREAMWORKS RECORDS

