

Seymour Stein

By Tony Fletcher

The question to be asked about Seymour Stein is not “How has he influenced your taste in music,” but “How often, or how profoundly, has he influenced your taste in music?” Through thirty-eight years at the helm of Sire Records, acquiring so much genuine talent we could fill these pages just by listing the artists he signed, he has proved time and again that the words *music* and *business* can coexist in harmony – even if, as those who have enjoyed his mealtime renditions of bygone hit records can testify, such harmony is not *always* perfectly pitched.

Stein is of that breed – and we are many – who did not choose his life in music as much as it chose him. An account of his early days reads like a history lesson in postwar American popular music. Growing up in the Italian/Jewish neighborhood of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, in the early 1950s, he realized instinctively that he was “not in any way athletic” but that he was a born collector. Initially, this meant buying and swapping (nonsports) trading cards, bottle caps, and postage stamps. The switch to records came via his older sister, Ann, who played the hit songs of the day, loudly, in a small apartment.

Of course, this was all before rock & roll, but unlike those who feign disdain for Tin Pan Alley pop, Stein maintains only fond memories of Guy Mitchell, Patti Page, Perry Como, and Kay Starr. We’re talking, after all, of a man for whom “the song is everything.” Still, as with so many of his generation, he freely admits that when he discovered rhythm & blues – through Lloyd Price’s “Lawdy Miss Clawdy,” the Dominoes’ “Sixty Minute Man,” Chuck Berry’s “Maybellene,” and Fats Domino’s “Going to the River” – “it was like a home run to me.” At the same time, the young Stein was in-

stinctively drawn to doo-wop – a music he often heard performed on the Brooklyn streets and in the city’s echo-chambered subway stations. By the time he hit his teens, Stein was spending every penny he could beg, borrow, or haggle on records.

“Round my neighborhood, the record store was actually a sporting-goods store,” he recalls, with the attention to detail that all great historians have, “where round the back with all the basketballs and catching mitts – which were alien to me – was a record department. When I wanted real R&B, I had to go to downtown Brooklyn, or take the subway train all the way to Harlem.” There, on 125th Street, he stood outside Rainbow Records and the Record Shack and listened in wonderment.

Stein also traversed New York City for live music. At the predominantly black club Town Hill on Brooklyn’s Eastern Parkway, the underage Stein saw Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. At the Apollo in Harlem, he witnessed the Paragons and the Jesters. And once Alan Freed started promoting his rock & roll jubilees at the Brooklyn Fox and Paramount theaters over the Christmas and Easter holidays, Stein’s mother would pack her son off with salami sandwiches – knowing that lunch money would only be spent on more records – and he would sit through the day’s performances by Ray Charles, the Everly Brothers, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, and Buddy Holly.

At thirteen, having found his calling in life but unsure how to follow it, Stein ventured to the *Billboard* offices in midtown Manhattan, where he asked for – and was granted – access to the archives. He spent every day after school copying the charts the way some sports fans note batting averages. *Billboard*’s editor Paul Ackerman quickly took Stein under his wing, bringing him onto the magazine’s influential reviews



► Seymour Stein, record collector and cofounder of Sire Records, while being interviewed by ‘Rolling Stone,’ circa 1977



Handwritten notes on a notepad, including the name "Robert Choquet" and some illegible scribbles.

CORVETTES
SALUTE
"NEW THE WA OF MUS"
"THE REL"
HEY JOE (VERSION)
PISS FACTORY

(IM)STRIP THE SA
PATT SMITH

THE PALMY BROTHERS

HEADS
SHAND



◀ Top: Stein never signed Mae West, but at least he got to dine with her, 1975. Bottom: Stein and former wife, Linda, with Elton John and the Ramones, backstage in London, 1977. ▼ Stein with Warner Bros. Records' Michael Hill and the Replacements' Paul Westerberg (with cigarette) and Tommy Stinson (in hat).



team and hooking him up with King Records' founder, Syd Nathan. In turn, Nathan invited fifteen-year-old Stein to spend a summer in Cincinnati with his family, and Ackerman brokered a meeting with Stein's father to discuss the opportunity.

Seymour remembers the occasion well. Nervously accepting a Cuban cigar from Nathan, his father asked what the entrepreneur saw in the teenager. Nathan's reply? "He's got shellac in his veins." But Nathan also knew there wasn't much else Seymour could do. "If he doesn't come with me and learn the music business," Syd told Stein senior, "I hope you've got the money to buy him a newspaper route." Seymour spent the summer in Cincinnati.

After high school came three years at *Billboard*, setting up and compiling the Hot 100 with Tom Noonan, and a little more than a year in Cincinnati with King. There in the Midwest, Stein learned the machinations of an independent record label and, when drawn back to New York by homesickness, rapidly applied that knowledge at a new label launched by industry veteran George Goldner in partnership with Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. Operating out of the Brill Building, 1619 Broadway, Red Bird Records debuted in 1964 with "Chapel of Love" by the Dixie Cups. The song went to Number One. Several months later, that song's authors, Ellie Greenwich and Jeff Barry, hooked up with Greenwich's old schoolmate Roger "Shadow" Morton and his girl group from Queens, the Shangri-Las. Their "Leader of the Pack" also went to Number One. At only twenty-two, Stein was helping to helm the most successful independent label in the nation.

Ultimately, there were too many strong characters at Red Bird for one independent label to contain, and in 1966, "as instantly as it exploded," says Stein, "it imploded." But in the corridors and elevators of the Brill Building, Stein had befriended the producer Richard Gottehrer; together they decided to



start a production company, naming it Sire from a convoluted combination of their first names. Syd Nathan gave them his midtown office on the cheap, and ever the entrepreneur, Stein quickly rented half of it out again.

Success for Sire came in fits and starts. They brought in a young Steven Tyler and his band Chain Reaction; they partnered with the U.K.'s Blue Horizon Records and shared in Fleetwood Mac's and Chicken Shack's success. Flying between London and New York, snapping up European artists before the American majors could figure them out, Sire built a roster that included the Climax Blues Band, Renaissance, and Barclay James Harvest and landed its first platinum record in the early 1970s with the instrumental Dutch band Focus.

But running an indie in that era was a difficult business at the best of times. Sometimes it was a choice between paying royalties and paying the rent. "I'm not proud of it," says Stein, "but at least I survived." Come 1974, an exhausted Gottehrer went back to production. (He reappeared with a band called Blondie.) Stein was alone at Sire. And his story was about to begin.

How profoundly has Seymour Stein influenced your taste in music? Let me give you *my* story. I was only twelve in 1976, but I'd been adopted as a harmless mascot by older boys on the south London soccer terraces. We all claimed to love the hard-rock music of the era. But with the occasional exception, we were just faking our enthusiasm, hoping and waiting for something more meaningful to enter our urban English lives, which were marked by strikes, terrorist bombs, racial conflict, hooliganism, and the prospect of instant unemployment at the end of our tedious school days.

We didn't anticipate that something to arrive from New York, but those older kids I hung with latched onto the Ramones' fourteen-song, twenty-eight-minute first album — released on


**King Records founder
 Syd Nathan once said of
 Seymour Stein, "He's
 got shellac in his veins"**




▲ The Steins in London for the Ramones/Flamin' Groovies show, 1976

Sire, of course—like their lives depended onto it. They were also savvy enough to catch the Ramones' first London show at the Roundhouse (opening for the Flamin' Groovies) that summer—July 4, 1976, by no coincidence America's two hundredth birthday—after which they traded in their flared jeans for straight-legged ones. Out went songs about topographical oceans; in came songs about sniffin' glue. Within weeks, my older friends were talking about the Sex Pistols and the Clash, whose members had also attended that Ramones show. Music was changing, irrevocably. I couldn't see any of these bands because I was too young, but thanks to the late, great John Peel on late-night Radio 1, I could hear them. Peel received hate mail for playing the Ramones. That makes sense: Seymour Stein got hate mail for signing them. Sometimes you have to go with your instincts and wait for the world to catch up.

"He stood by us through thick and thin," says the Ramones' original drummer, Tommy Erdelyi, "and believe me, there was a lot of thin. Seymour Stein was very important to the whole seventies New York scene, and Sire Records set the pace that influenced the musical culture of the past quarter century."

That's no overstatement. Stein also fell for and courted the Ramones' artsy opposites Talking Heads, ensuring that by 1977, Sire had New York's two most important acts on its roster. (It also had a new distribution deal with Warner Bros.) Because of Stein's ties with the British music industry, he was able to break these bands in the U.K. long before they were accepted in America; similarly, he was able—indeed, *determined*—to sign British new-wave acts. I recall seeing the Rezillos and the Undertones at London's Marquee Club in October 1978. Both groups—one Scottish, the other Irish—had been launched on regional independent labels and championed by John Peel. Both were now on Sire Records and having hits.

Aided by its cachet as the label artists aspired to sign with, Sire built a roster that was consistently America's strongest—and always hippest—of the eighties and nineties. It included the Replacements, Wilco, Ministry, and Ice-T; Canadians k.d. lang (whom Stein signed after the two spent an evening singing coun-



▲ Stein with k.d. lang, whom he signed to Sire Records, circa 1999

try songs and a day at the rodeo together) and the Barenaked Ladies; Australians the Saints; and copious British bands, several of whom—the Pretenders, Depeche Mode, Echo and the Bunnymen, the Smiths, Erasure, the Cure, and Soft Cell, among them—enjoyed both critical *and* commercial success.

Stein moved fast to sign them all. "I had no money. So if I didn't get to them fast and interest grew, I couldn't even talk to them," he says. Then again, as he readily admits, "I'm compulsive." He would jump on a plane whenever a British indie label boss assured him of a new signing's merit—or even if he didn't. When Stein read in *NME* that Depeche Mode was about to play its first real show—in England, that night—he booked a flight on the Concorde and came home with a contract.

In an industry that counts success in seven-figure sales, Stein's biggest claim to fame is signing Madonna. He credits Mark Kamins, who brought demos he'd produced for his new girlfriend straight to Stein, who then invited Madonna in to negotiate a deal—in his hospital room, where he was recovering from a heart ailment. The same urgency that had seen him running down the street the moment he heard "Don't Be Cruel"—because he had to have the record *now*—led him to secure one of the biggest acts in music history.

The 1990s found Stein bouncing around the Warner Music Group's many corporate shuffles, for a while taking on the presidency of Elektra/Sire. The new century finds him back doing what he loves most—finding and signing the finest in new music. Sire's current roster includes England's Subways and Futureheads, Detroit's Von Bondies and Fags, Canada's Hot Hot Heat, Finland's HIM, and the Veronicas, from Australia. Now in his sixties, Stein will still jump on a plane to see an act on a friend's recommendation. He'll still break from a meeting to make the all-important introduction to a manager. And he'll still break into a doo-wop chorus at the drop of a wineglass.

And that's why we love him. Because while Seymour Stein long ago ceased having to sing for his supper, the fact that he will sing for *yours* is the mark of a man who still, all these years later, has shellac—the very stuff of hit records—in his veins. ●