



Interview with RON ALEXENBURG at AEGIS Records

Q: Let's start at the beginning, how did you get into the business in the first place?

A: I always loved music. When I was a kid growing up on the south side of Chicago my parents were in the bowling alley business. I used to wait every Saturday for the route man to come and change the records in the jukebox... When I graduated high school I was thinking about going to law school. I was interviewed at the University of Chicago and they asked me some questions ...about things like rape. I told them that if convicted those people should be destroyed... I guess he got the feeling I wouldn't be a very non-biased lawyer... So with three of my friends we put army, navy, air-force, and marines in a hat and we picked... I picked the marines. I enlisted and went through a few months of that but wasn't able to continue because of my vision. So I got in my car and drove down music row in Chicago. After a series of unsuccessful interviews, Lenny Garmisa of Garmisa Distributors interviewed me and said that the only job they had open was as a counter boy, so I took it at \$84.50 a week.

Q: What were some of the labels Garmisa distributed and what exactly did you do?

A: Lenny distributed Mercury, Philips, United Artists, ABC Paramount, and others. The first couple of weeks I worked the counter. Then I became a salesman for a few months. About five months into it I was ordering records on the telephone everyday from manufacturers. At one point a record came in by Manfred Mann called "Do Wa Diddy" and I got on the phone to United Artists to talk to the head of sales. Anyway, the secretary had a very pleasant voice and we started talking regularly... When I went to New York the only person I knew was this secretary... To make a long story short, seven months later I proposed to her and she's been my wife for 24 years.

Q: How did you get into record promotion?

A: The head of United Artists in New York would give me records and said, "If you get this played in Chicago, I'll send you a plane ticket to see your fiance."

Q: As a promotion man in Chicago, were you still working for Garmisa?

A: Oh yes, the entire time.

Q: When did that change?

A: In 1965 I got a call from CBS Records. They wanted to start a label called Date Records and needed a regional promotion director. Little did I know when I accepted the job that the region consisted of eighteen states.

Q: How long did the Date Records gig last?

A: I traveled the eighteen states for about three years when in 1968 they offered me the job as head of promotion for Date and CBS Associated labels in New York.

Q: What was the next career move after that?

A: Tom Noonan, who headed Date, was promoted to Director of National Promotion for Columbia Records and hired me as his assistant. Then in 1969 Tom left to go to Motown and I became head of promotion at Columbia. I stayed in that job until the beginning of 1973. Then Clive Davis asked me if I'd like to become head of Epic Records. At the time I think I was the youngest Vice President at CBS and Columbia Records was the hottest label in the business... I wasn't sure I wanted to leave... but I took it as a challenge.

Q: So did you go in as President?

A: No, there was only one President and that was Clive. I was Vice President of Marketing... Then they gave me the responsibility for A&R and at that point I became Sr.Vice President and General Manager.

Q: What was it like back then?

A: It was sensational. There were a lot of young people under the aegis, if you will, of a great leader in Clive Davis and a phenomenal head of CBS Int'l., Walter Yetnikoff. I remember we had an artist named Johnny Nash that Walter said we were doing a lousy job on. So we all got together to prove him wrong and then came "I Can See Clearly Now" and "Stir It Up." We made a bet for his suede couch, which he still owes me. Anyway, the years just flew by. I worked for CBS for sixteen years and it was the greatest time anyone could ever have.

Q: Take me from there, what was next?

A: In 1978 I was made an offer that doesn't come along too often and I left CBS to start Infinity Records.

Q: What happened there... why didn't Infinity work?

A: Infinity did work. Infinity did eleven and a half million dollars in it's first year. Our first record, "Everyone's A Winner" by Hot Chocolate came out and sold a million records. Actually, our first record went to #1 and our last record, "Pina Colada" by Rupert Holmes also went to #1... And then there was an act that nobody wanted called Spiro Gyra that did 800,000 sales with their first album...

Q: Again though, what happened... why didn't Infinity survive?

A: Well I don't want to go into the long details of signing the Pope... I thought that was a pretty good deal... You see what people don't really know is that they offered me the presidency of MCA Records, and all I had to do was move to California. At that time I had just moved my parents from Chicago to New York and my wife was pregnant with our third child. I just couldn't make that commitment... Yes I did make some mistakes... I had more people on staff than I had artists. We went six months almost without a release... It was at a time when MCA was going through their problems... We had a large overhead maintaining two staffs; MCA had its staff and we had ours and we had a staff that could have supported 100 artists instead of 25... Basically what had happened was that MCA did not want to support two labels. They wanted one label and they wanted it based in Los Angeles. Plus, we had gone through the initial allocation of funds, so they ended the label... That was a bitter pill to swallow. In fact the promotion staff continued to work even after they were no longer getting paid just to make sure that last record made it to number one... The whole staff was fantastic.

Q: What about Handshake...how did that come about?

A: I got a phone call from the attorney Paul Marshall who said he was at MIDEM with Peter and Trudy Meisel. He wanted to know if I'd be willing to come to London to meet with them because they were interested in starting an American record company... Paul put the deal together and we called it Handshake because we shook hands and seven months later, contracts were signed.

Q: Don't stop there.

A: Well when Arista was not doing as well as it is now, Bertlesman bought the company and couldn't devote a lot of time to Handshake. Peter and Trudy wanted to sell their publishing company...

Q: Weren't they splitting up at that time?

A: Yes, but I didn't know that. They handled themselves like such professionals... We had a P&D deal with CBS... but it ended when Monte Luftner decided to put all his energies into the Arista situation.

Q: What year was this?

A: About 1985... I wanted to take a break then and take inventory on what had happened and why. For a couple years actually, I went around to the major customers of the business thanking them for all they had done for me over the years. The people at Gavin asked me to help them out with their conference... I went into management, but not full scale... did some consulting. But I was frustrated. I wanted to get back into the record business also I wanted a partner who could guide me as well... I happened to be playing golf at the Woodmere Country club in September and called Cy Leslie to talk. We spent the day together until about 12 o'clock that night when Cy asked me what I wanted to do. I said I wanted to go back into the record business with a front line record company with strong distribution...having spent sixteen years at CBS I felt that was comfortable, and fortunately we put a deal together. We looked around and signed our first artist Marcus Lewis, who was brought to me by Henry Allen. That was our first record and we got lucky.

Q: So you've got one artist signed now. I presume you are looking to sign others. Does it matter what kind of music?

A: No, I don't categorize music. Anyone that sends me a tape I listen to. I really look for original material...

Q: Does CBS have any say in what you put out?

A: Yes, they have a first refusal deal.

Q: What about the publishing... Have you made any deals yet? Have you even named the companies?

A: No, not yet. It's easier to name children than it is to name a company... Actually Cy came up with the name for the label. He said, "Aegis, under the aegis. Do you know what it means?" I said, "Sure, guidance, protection." I also knew it was the missile that blew up the Iranian plane.



Joe Cohen, Ron Alexenburg, Cy Leslie