

FROM THE DESK OF

FOUNDER, RECORDS LLC

Barry Weiss

In his first interview as a "major-label refugee," the former Jive boss on his deal with SONGS, data-driven A&R and Adele

BY SHIRLEY HALPERIN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY JAI LENNARD



"I never feel like I'm beyond learning. You always have to evolve," says Weiss, photographed Dec. 21, 2015 at his office in New York.

BARRY WEISS' ROOTS IN THE music business run deep. His father, **Hy Weiss**, was among the industry's more colorful early players, producing and releasing hit records in the 1950s and 1960s and eventually selling his Old Town label to Atlantic in 1970. Son Barry also saw a music company grow firsthand, joining Zomba Publishing founder **Clive Calder** in launching Jive Records in 1982 at the age of 23. Some 15 years into Weiss' tenure there, the BMG-backed label would have off-the-charts success with such acts as **Britney Spears**, **Justin Timberlake** and **Chris Brown**, even breaking the album sales record with 'N Sync's *No Strings Attached* in 2000 — a feat that held until **Adele's 25** in 2015.

In 2004, BMG merged with Sony, and seven years later, Weiss exited the Sony system and moved to Universal, where he oversaw East Coast operations for Island and Def Jam. But three years after taking the job, he left a free agent or, as he says, "a major-label refugee." Newly independent, the 56-year-old married father of two grown sons (the younger, **Michael**, works for Spears' manager **Adam Leber** at Maverick) decided to launch RECORDS, a joint venture with New York-based SONGS Publishing (**Lorde**, **The Weeknd**) announced in February 2015 that has scored hits with **Nelly's** "The Fix" and **ILoveMemphis'** "Hit the Quan," which reached No. 15 on the Billboard Hot 100.

A small but nimble operation of six full-time staffers with the distribution might of Sony RED, RECORDS has no job titles ("David Geffen-style — politics pollute the creative process," says Weiss) and considers itself still "in beta." He adds: "I'm in the game and feel optimistic, but I won't be gratified until we have real critical mass with a great artist roster."

In figuring out the next steps after exiting Universal, what was your thinking?

That I wanted to get back to the music and the artists. I realized that this is my passion, but it's also my hobby — I don't play golf, and how much can you exercise? I love this, for better or for worse. I took a lot of meetings and was thinking about how to re-enter in a somewhat unconventional manner so I'm not just another record guy.

What did you see in SONGS?

Matt Pincus and **Ron Perry**. Matt is super smart and strategic, and Ron is a great creative guy — they're young, fresh and doing things differently. Also, SONGS is the closest thing I've seen to what Zomba was, but they didn't have a recorded-music component, like Jive did. Still, there is a very active publishing company with strong A&R there that really adds value.

The music industry is more data-driven than ever before. How does that affect the way you do business?

Data is being used for A&R purposes — both pre-emptively, in terms of what to sign, and as a postmortem evaluation of a project — but it doesn't change the fact that you have to apply gut instincts and ears in the process. Data should be part of your analysis.

How is RECORDS' approach to A&R different from that of the majors?

There's oversigning and overmarketing at the major-label level, and it's hard to focus on that amount [of acts]. I don't know how much can really fit in the pipeline. It's an inventory approach, and we're trying to avoid that here. Our goal is quality over quantity: Work fewer records with longer-term tenacity.

Adele's 25 broke the record previously held by 'N Sync while you were running Jive. Did you see that coming?

Absolutely not. It's a miracle, an otherworldly scenario. She is touching people who haven't bought music in probably 10 years. It's like **Barbra Streisand** reinvented overnight on steroids. I wish we could say a rising tide lifts all boats, but I don't know where it goes from here.

Did your dad pass down pointers that you still apply?

Lots. Don't have the ego, let the artist be front and center; a hit record is like a tennis ball in water — you can't keep it down; stay close to the music and the artist.

Anything you miss about the majors?

The infrastructure — [how] you pressed a button and everything moved. But I never had a problem doing heavy lifting or rolling up my sleeves. I could be macro or micro. I'm finding this cathartic, challenging and energizing at the same time. ●

1 Dan Charnas' hip-hop history *The Big Payback* adorns a table in Weiss' office. Weiss credits "many years of experience in rap music and dealmaking" for signing **ILoveMemphis**. **2** A gift to commemorate the 25th anniversary of **A Tribe Called Quest's** debut album, *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*. **3** RECORDS' work-in-progress offices are shared with SONGS, which received these gold plaques from the Canadian performing-rights organization **SOCAN**.



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