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## A Considerable Town

# The Ego Has Landed

by PAUL ROGERS

Steve Mozena, a 45-year-old academic publisher and hobby singer from Carson, is convinced that music-biz megamogul Clive Davis holds the keys to a late-blooming recording career. Mozena, who named his daughter Arista (the record label Davis founded in 1975), wrote to Davis a year ago to gauge the chances of a 40-something crashing the Top 40.

"He wrote me a nice note back," Mozena enthuses, clutching the very letter. "He said that for recording it was too late but suggested that I should check out acting."

Nevertheless, when Mozena heard that Davis was giving a Learning Annex seminar on *How To Succeed in the Music Industry* at downtown L.A.'s Orpheum Theater, there was no question that Mozena would be here. And he has only one regret about Davis' appearance — the orchestra pit separating the speaker from his fans. "Generally you can actually touch the speaker and get a little more interaction . . . but I'll just do a follow-up letter."

The Learning Annex, founded in 1980 and now offering over 8,000 courses annually — everything from *How To Grow Hair in 12 Weeks* to *How To Cash in on Costa Rican Real Estate* — represents the commercial zenith of America's seminar subculture. According to a show of hands in the 90-percent-full Orpheum — the French Renaissance-style former movie palace on Broadway that holds 2,000 people — around half the Davis seminar attendees are "Learning Annex virgins." It's Davis' reputation — as both a kingmaker and a man of *integrity* in a business thick with scum — that attracted these first-timers. A demo bin is provided, into which hopefuls toss their CDs and tapes with a prayer.

Lined up outside the Orpheum, Davis devotees are a diverse bunch — from young teens to senior citizens, besuited business types to overdressed divas-in-training. There are the walking clichés: trying-too-hard songbirds dressed like retired strippers; "managers" in slick cornrows and came-from-the-'90s Kangol hats accosting every passing hottie; "serious musician" bards with the Joni Mitchell commune look; and the clones — Missy Elliott seated at the front of the auditorium, Usher on the balcony.

Following a documentary dripping with Davis praise, the man himself appears. With his mix 'n' match outfit (dark blazer, too-short gray pants, red-and-white striped shirt), comb-over, and perma-squint behind tinted specs, the Brooklyn-born Davis, 71, has the demeanor of a used-car salesman.

His unscripted monologue is essentially anecdote-rich self-stroking, detailing his rise from a Columbia Records contract lawyer in the '60s to CBS Records president, to Arista founder, to being handed "instant major label" J Records in 2000, and then becoming CEO of RCA Music in 2003 (with no mention of his 1973 firing from CBS for accounting irregularities). Along the way, Davis launched everyone from Janis Joplin and Bruce Springsteen to Whitney Houston and Alicia Keys. But there's little insight into *how* he did this, or how tonight's attendees could gain access to industry gatekeepers like him.

No one seems to care, especially when Davis begins playing original demos, as submitted by songwriters, back-to-back with the finished ultrahits they became: Barry Gibb's rough of "Heartbreaker" — all dated organ and crushed-gonad warble and "the best demo I have ever received" — next to the career-salvaging Dionne Warwick version; and early versions of "The Game of Love," eventually a multimillion seller for Carlos Santana and Michelle Branch, sung by Macy Gray and Tina Turner.

During the playbacks, Davis sporadically emits a single clap and succumbs to involuntary gyrations: more like your drunk uncle on the wedding reception dance floor than a man of true musical instinct. Still, the tunes unquestionably move him, apparently to tears at points. But at other times he flashes the fists-on-the-table will that's taken him to the top — curtly gesturing at the sound man and chiding a distracting usher.

Davis offers few inspirational bolts-from-the-blue tonight, but nearly all in attendance seem happy that they got their money's worth (tickets started at \$40).

"He must have done something right," says A.D. Hornsby, who runs his own R&B record label, Freelove Entertainment. "He's got all the top acts, and I haven't heard of anyone he's signed leaving, so he must be treating people fairly."

And that's the bottom line: The fact that Clive Davis has achieved 40-plus years of success eclipses his failure to share the mechanics of doing so.

"The idea Davis has of unlimited possibilities, and the belief system where it all starts from," deadpans German songwriter Aleks Will in his Teutonic timbre. "I'm getting his inspiration *right into my blood.*"