



## Geffen, David (b. 1943)

by Nathan G. Tipton

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One of the most feared and admired, revered and reviled figures in the entertainment industry, David Geffen succeeded in transforming himself, either through sheer ingenuity or outright guile, from his humble origins in Brooklyn into one of the most important people in the arenas of corporate rock music, movies, and television.

According to Steve Kurutz, Geffen is responsible for guiding the careers of, and forming lasting (if tumultuous) friendships with, countless big-name musical acts, such as The Eagles, Jackson Browne, Nirvana, Elton John, and Cher.

Geffen's combative style, as well as his forthright honesty and compulsive competitiveness, however, have earned him many detractors and some outright enemies.

For his foes, Geffen exemplifies the greed and excess of the music industry. In their eyes he is a shark who changed the priority from music to money. For others, however, Geffen is regarded as an extraordinarily generous and caring person, one who believes in and supports passionately a diverse array of social and political causes, ranging from homeless shelters to AIDS research.

David Lawrence Geffen was born on February 21, 1943 in Brooklyn, the son of Batya and Abraham Geffen, Russian Jewish immigrants who settled in New York in 1931. Although David's older brother Mitchell (b. February 6, 1933) was long considered the family's success story, Abraham and Batya spoiled David, foregoing discipline in favor of extravagant praise, and often referred to him as "King David." Because of this lack of discipline, David struggled in school, and he barely graduated from New Utrecht (New York) High School in 1960 with a final grade average of 73.59.

Following high school, David shuttled between his home in Brooklyn and Mitchell's apartment at UCLA. Returning to New York in 1961, he bluffed his way into a mailroom job at the prestigious William Morris Agency by both implying that he was legendary record producer Phil Spector's cousin and padding his résumé with a false degree from UCLA.

At the Morris agency, Geffen set about learning everything about the entertainment industry. After ingratiating himself to agency president Nat Lefkowitz, he began charting his ascendancy. Through Lefkowitz, Geffen became one of the agencies' hottest agents, and in 1967 he got his first big break when he signed bisexual songwriter Laura Nyro and, soon afterwards, negotiated for her a lucrative music publishing deal that netted them each three million dollars plus a substantial share of future royalties.

Geffen's brash style also catapulted him into the executive ranks at Atlantic Records, for which he signed the newly formed super-group Crosby, Stills, and Nash. Geffen was soon able to bankroll his own label, Asylum Records, which was initially distributed by Atlantic Records but quickly sold by Geffen to Warner Brothers in 1971 for \$7,000,000. Geffen, however, stayed on as head of Asylum.

In 1976, citing burnout and health scares, Geffen retired from the industry; but in 1980 he returned to form Geffen Records, a subsidiary of Warner Brothers. In an attempt to make Geffen Records a viable brand, he quickly snapped up performers such as Elton John and Donna Summer, although both artists, having weathered a shift in musical direction, recorded mediocre material and soon left the label.

In the midst of this early discord at his record label, David Geffen was also maneuvering himself into the arena of movies. In 1982, by parlaying his friendship with Warner Brothers executive Steve Ross, Geffen soon produced several notable movies, including the lesbian-themed *Personal Best* and the teen classic *Risky Business*, which starred Tom Cruise in the memorable role of Joel. Over the next decade Geffen went on to produce a mixed array of films, but he leapt at the chance to work again with Cruise in the 1994 vampire film *Interview with the Vampire*.

As the 1980s progressed, however, Geffen also worked diligently to make his record label profitable. By the late 1980s he had keenly recognized, and subsequently signed, big revenue-producing bands such as Aerosmith and the controversial heavy metal band Guns 'N Roses, for whom he weathered controversy over the band's homophobic song "One In a Million." Geffen was also able to resuscitate Cher's career by using his shrewd business acumen as well as capitalizing on their former romantic attachment.

Although Geffen had been linked romantically to both Cher and actress Marlo Thomas, his homosexuality was an open secret in the entertainment industry. Geffen had already lost several of his close friends to AIDS, but he was particularly affected by the death of his pal and partying companion Steve Rubell, owner of the infamous New York disco Studio 54.

According to Tom King, after Rubell's death in 1989, Geffen began making large donations to individuals and charities that were helping people with AIDS. His gifts include \$2,500,000 to AIDS Project Los Angeles, \$2,500,000 to Gay Men's Health Crisis of New York, and \$1,400,000 to AIDS Action in Washington, D. C.

Geffen's particular support of AIDS causes roused the attention of queer magazine columnist Michelangelo Signorile who, in 1990, blasted Geffen as a hypocrite for not coming out as a gay man.

Tom King has noted that Geffen had resisted making an open statement because of a strong belief that his sexual orientation was a private matter. Geffen realized that by virtue of his success, however, he had become a public figure, and at a 1992 benefit for AIDS Project Los Angeles, David Geffen declared that he was a gay man.

Somewhat surprisingly the disclosure did not detract from Geffen's reputation. In fact, it was viewed by many of his associates as a long overdue and honest admission that could only increase his stature in the entertainment industry.

In 1990, Geffen again struck gold by signing alternative bands Nirvana and Sonic Youth to his record label. That same year, Geffen decided it was time to sell Geffen Records and, after a series of tense negotiations, the label was acquired by MCA for \$540,000,000.

In 1994, Geffen joined with noted movie director Steven Spielberg and former Disney Studios chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg to form the media conglomerate DreamWorks SKG. Continuing to use the skills he had honed successfully over the previous thirty-plus years, Geffen works behind the scenes at DreamWorks, brokering deals, colluding with friends, and antagonizing his enemies.

In May of 2002, Geffen donated \$200,000,000 to the medical school at UCLA--the largest single donation ever given to an American medical school. University officials announced that the school would be renamed the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA.

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### **About the Author**

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