

Allen Grubman,  
New York City, 2013



# ALLEN GRUBMAN

ALONG WITH NEGOTIATING LUCRATIVE DEALS FOR HIS CLIENTS, HE ACHIEVES ARTISTIC FREEDOM FOR THEM AS WELL.

BY ANTHONY DECURTIS

**W**hen Bruce Springsteen was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1999, he saw fit to acknowledge his lawyer Allen Grubman to the audience – many of whom were Grubman’s clients themselves. “As folks know, the Money Man goes to the record company, and he’s in charge of bringing back the pink Cadillac,” Springsteen explained. But when Grubman makes that trip, Springsteen continued, he brings back “the pink Cadillac, the blue Cadillac, the red Cadillac, the yellow Cadillac, the pink Cadillac with the white walls.”

That’s not the end of the story, however. Because he then takes “the blue Cadillac, and . . . the hub caps off the yellow Cadillac.” As Springsteen concluded on a philosophical note, “That still leaves you with a few Cadillacs,” after all, and ensures that you won’t “be broke when you’re riding in the black Cadillac.”

Springsteen’s words are no less true about Grubman today. He remains, as he has been for decades, the go-to guy when superstar artists and top-flight executives require representation in their professional negotiations. He tops everyone’s list as the most powerful – and, it’s often suggested, the richest – lawyer in the music business. As Grubman would be the first to tell you, he’s not a theoretical master of the intricacies of the law and legal history. He is, however, a master at getting people on

opposite sides of the table to discover why it’s in their best interest to make a deal in which everybody wins. He is, as one industry observer put it, “a shrewd judge of the true psychology of power.”

Grubman’s philosophy is that, in the end, “everyone has to feel good, but they should feel a little bit bad, because then they remember they’ve had to give up a little something, too. You don’t want to do a deal where one guy feels he’s been taken advantage of, because then he’s always going to try to get back at you for it.”

Most often, all participants in his negotiations do leave with a Cadillac or two – along with the sense that they got something in return for anything they gave up. It’s a rare gift, and that’s why Grubman is one of three recipients of this year’s coveted Ahmet Ertegun Award. The honor is especially appropriate, given that Grubman was one of the original founders of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1983, along with Jann S. Wenner, Seymour Stein, and Ertegun himself. Grubman is also the very first practicing attorney to be inducted here, and he remains active as the secretary-treasurer of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Foundation’s Board of Directors.

The secret to Allen Grubman’s success, as he explained to *Vanity Fair*, is “a combination of instinct, balls, and common sense.” As is typical of him, however, he used a Yiddish term to convey that group of virtues: *sechel*. That common touch is one of the sources of Grubman’s

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great appeal. Indeed, he is well-aware – and proud – of his proletarian roots. He was born to Jewish parents in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and graduated from Brooklyn Law School in 1967, by his own account, at the very bottom of his class.

“Growing up without a lot of material comforts creates a drive in a human being, knowing you have to do it on your own,” Grubman has said. “You have to develop a lot of survival instincts, because you don’t have the safety net that affluent kids have. My safety net was a cement floor.” But Grubman had fallen in love with the entertainment industry as a child. When he was 10, he sang show tunes on a weekly NBC show called *Horn & Hardart Children’s Hour*, and he later worked as a messenger at the William Morris Agency and as a page for *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Performing on NBC was far from the only thrill for him. “They’d send a limo, a car and driver, to Brooklyn!” he told the *Los Angeles Times*. “It was totally unheard of. In my neighborhood, I was a *macher*. I was on a TV show.”

A few years after law school, representing George McCrae and his indelible disco hit “Rock Your Baby,” and then the Village People, KC and the Sunshine Band, and Kool & the Gang, established Grubman, however tenuously, as a presence in the music industry. As always seems to be the case with him, a run of fortuitous introductions – Tommy Mottola, Walter Yetnikoff, David Geffen – almost instantly swept him into the uppermost echelon of the music business.

He has amassed a client list that would go on, at various points, to include the likes of Springsteen, Mariah Carey, Billy Joel, John Mellencamp, Madonna, Sean Combs, Lady Gaga, U2, and Bette Midler. His personal charm has rarely failed to carry the day in his dealings with both clients and adversaries. Grubman described his first meeting with David Geffen, a fellow Brooklyn native, like this: “He’s from Borough Park; I’m from Crown Heights. We were sitting there, saying, ‘So you

went to Nathan’s? Did you also shop at Neil’s on Kings Highway? Did you go to Dubrow’s Cafeteria?’”

As the clients got bigger and the deals more consequential, Grubman’s rough-hewn graciousness became increasingly invaluable. “I like to think that the negotiations that I’m involved in are fun; they’re very light-hearted,” Grubman has said. “I don’t believe that any negotiation should get tense. ‘Cause at the end of the day, what we all want to do is accomplish the same thing.”

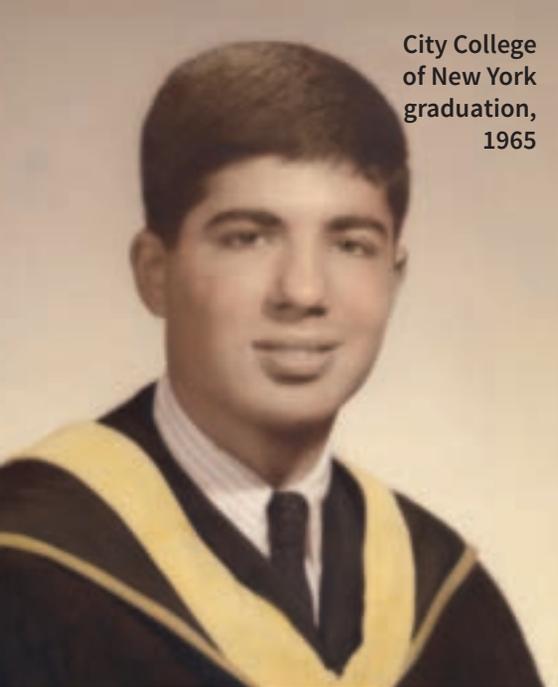
Mellencamp explains it even more directly. “Allen realizes that being friends with people is really his job. It’s not just a business relationship. All his friends are his clients.” In Geffen’s view, “Allen’s a very smart, very nice guy who somehow manages to keep everybody happy.”

Jon Landau, Springsteen’s manager, articulated the most playful reason for taking Grubman on as Springsteen’s lawyer: “You’re going to spend a lot of time with the person who represents you to a record company. I sensed it’d be fun.” He no doubt also understood that, along with his lucrative deals, Grubman invariably achieves much greater artistic freedom for his clients.

In addition to an array of powerhouse artists and executives, Grubman’s current firm, Grubman Shire Meiselas & Sacks, represents record companies and major publishing companies, as well as iHeartMedia, MTV, and Live Nation. His firm is one of the largest entertainment law practices in the country.

Through the years, though, Grubman has made a point of playing down the high-mindedness of his work and playing up his working-class origins. “If I had a family crest,” he laughingly told one reporter, “it would be an ‘S’ with two vertical lines. That’s my crest – the dollar sign.”

Grubman strikes a different tone, however, when discussing his induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. “I’m very proud of that,” he said recently. “It feels wonderful. It feels satisfying. It reconfirms to me that there’s been some meaningful purpose in my life, and that’s very important to me. So I feel absolutely great.”



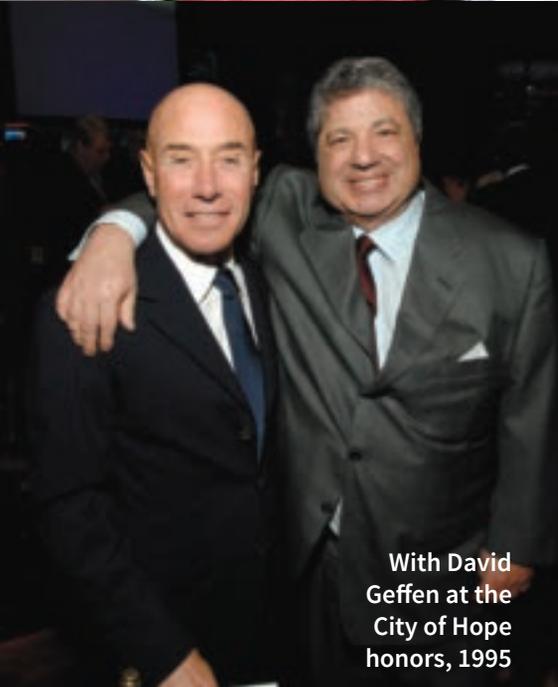
City College  
of New York  
graduation,  
1965



With the Village  
People, c. 1978



Two-fingered  
salute, c. 1984



With David  
Geffen at the  
City of Hope  
honors, 1995



With Miles Copeland,  
John Sykes, and  
Ian Copeland (from left), 1984



Celebrating the  
historic sale of Bruce  
Springsteen's catalog,  
with Springsteen and  
Jon Landau, 2021



With Lady Gaga and  
Tony Bennett, 2014