
High
Fidelity

As president of Kobalt Music Recordings North America/AWAL, Ron Cerrito, '84, champions an alternative to the traditional music industry. The company offers artists and independent labels a range of services without having to give up ownership or control.

By Natalie Missakian



RON CERRITO'S RISE IN THE MUSIC BIZ BEGINS WITH A CLASSIC RIGHT-PLACE-AT-THE-RIGHT-TIME MOMENT — a chance encounter while attending a concert at a legendary New Haven nightspot, just a few months after graduating from Southern.

"I met somebody at Toad's Place who worked at Billboard magazine, and we became friends," recalls Cerrito, '84. "They told me about an opening, and I sent in my resume and got the job. It was a really lucky first stop."

It would be the springboard for Cerrito's ascension through the ranks of the tough-to-crack recording industry, which includes stops at some of the world's biggest record labels along the way.

DURING HIS THREE DECADES AS A RECORD EXECUTIVE, WORKING MOSTLY IN PROMOTIONS, CERRITO HAS HAD A HAND IN ADVANCING THE CAREERS OF SOME OF THE BIGGEST NAMES IN MUSIC. Pearl Jam, U2, Florence + the Machine, Smashing Pumpkins, Backstreet Boys, Weezer, Jane's Addiction, and Lorde are only a sampling of the artists listed on his resume.

He even enjoyed a brief stint as a professional rock musician in his own right, as the guitarist on Los Angeles heavy metal band Lizzy Borden's 1989 album *Master of Disguise*, performing under the stage name Ronnie Jude.

Today, he is shaking up the music business as president of the edgy Kobalt Music Recordings North America/AWAL — whose roster includes both established artists like Nick Cave and up-and-coming talent like Girl in Red, Finneas (brother of rising indie-pop sensation Billie Eilish) and pop singer-songwriter Lauv. Lauv has gone gold or platinum in 15 countries.

AWAL — the name is reflected in the company's slogan, "A World Artists Love" — allows artists to bypass traditional record-label deals — and maintain ownership and control of their music.

"We are the fastest-growing recording business in the world, and I think it's fair to say that we're the biggest independent recording company," says Cerrito. "Our mission is to provide world-class marketing at a level that's competitive with any record company in the world, while giving artists creative control and flexibility they can't get anywhere else."

Raised in East Haven, Conn., Cerrito found his passion for music early. He took up guitar at age 10, studying jazz improv during his early teens. At 15, he joined his first rock band, and a few years later began playing gigs around the state, including at popular New Haven venues like the Keg House, Toad's, and the Agora Ballroom.

When it came time for college, Cerrito chose Southern, where he majored in economics, over a chance to study at Boston's Berklee College of Music. He decided a business degree would better complement his already well-honed musical skills.

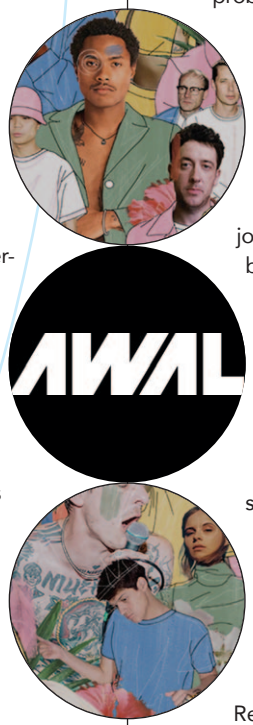
"I'd been reading music since I was 10 and logged 10,000 hours of guitar playing by the time I was 18. I really didn't think I would get a lot more out of Berklee," he explains.

By the time he arrived on campus in 1980, he was playing four to five nights a week at clubs around the tri-state area. His college experience was anything but conventional.

"I would sleep in the afternoon after finishing class and then wake up at like 6 p.m. and go to a gig somewhere in upstate New York, do my homework in a dressing room somewhere, and then come back for class [in the morning]," he says. "It was nonstop, really. But I guess that's just my nature."

Though those years were a whirlwind, he hasn't forgotten his favorite class: a first-year course through what was then the IDEA program, which brought an interdisciplinary approach to learning.

"It focused on ancient philosophers and the philosophy of learning," he recalls. "It was mind-extending and really thought provoking and interesting, and I think it probably set the tone for the next three years."



After earning his degree, Cerrito went to New York for the Billboard job, working in the chart department. He spent his days calling retailers and radio stations to find out which albums and songs were selling and getting airtime — data that was used to tabulate Billboard's famous weekly charts.

Three years later, he moved to LA and took a job in radio promotions at a small independent label before being hired in 1990 as director of rock promotions for Epic Records.

His arrival came just as the Seattle grunge scene was about to explode, ushering in a new genre of music with artists like Pearl Jam, whose 1991 debut album *Ten* was Cerrito's first campaign. It would go on to surpass 10 million in sales.

"The ability to work with artists who were shaping culture at the time was really something special," he says.

Following his 10 years at Epic, he held senior positions at several major music labels, including Columbia Records, Warner Bros. Records, and Republic Records, before joining Kobalt in 2016.

He was named president of Kobalt Music Recordings North America/AWAL a year later and has already put his stamp on the company. He led a push to diversify the label's roster, signing younger, up-and-coming artists across several different genres. The model, he says, is in line with how people listen to music today, thanks to streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music.

"The truth is, people don't listen to music by genre. They don't even listen by decade. They listen by mood. So diversification is super important," says Cerrito. "I really wanted our roster to look like what a 17-year-old's cell phone playlist would look like."

Having worked with numerous legendary artists, Cerrito says he can't single out a favorite project. But he feels proud knowing that, in some small way, his work is changing culture and making music history.

"When you're with an artist from the early stages and then you have that moment when they're playing in an arena or a stadium somewhere, it's just a great feeling knowing that you were a small part of it," he says. ■

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