



Book When I Stop Talking, You'll Know I'm Dead

Useful Stories from a Persuasive Man

Jerry Weintraub
Twelve, 2010
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Recommendation

Jerry Weintraub loves Jerry Weintraub and believes that Jerry Weintraub has led a fascinating life. As a result, Jerry Weintraub loves to tell stories about Jerry Weintraub. Here, Jerry Weintraub tells a lot of them, about promoting stars and making deals. Most are quite short. Many are compelling. Weintraub dispenses show business gossip, Mafia talk, family tales, accounts of rock music and movie excesses, and instructions for a successful career in promoting, agenting, managing and producing, all of which he carried out with astonishing success. *BooksInShort* recommends Weintraub’s insider yarns and finds that mostly what Weintraub presents is his joy at being Weintraub. That this delight remains for the most part charming underscores a continuing theme: His charm allowed Weintraub to pull off career moves few others would have dared.

Take-Aways

- Jerry Weintraub’s career is a model of nerve, savvy and good luck.
- Weintraub’s charm and chutzpah enabled him to benefit from a series of powerful mentors.
- His natural gifts include the abilities to promote, improvise and persevere.
- Show business requires brains, audacity, fearlessness and personal integrity.
- Weintraub’s charisma and effectiveness won him success and respect in the entertainment industry.
- He worked with and learned from many celebrities, from Elvis Presley to Frank Sinatra.
- Elvis Presley’s manager, Col. Tom Parker, did business on a handshake – but he wanted a million dollars first.
- Frank Sinatra really did do things his way – and also made contracts on a handshake.
- Weintraub’s reach extended to the halls of power. His close friends included President George H.W. Bush and Armand Hammer.
- Weintraub learned to trust spontaneity, to appreciate mentors, to understand every acquisition, to have as few partners as possible and to invest in talent.

Summary

The Home Town: The Bronx

Jerry Weintraub grew up in the Bronx borough of New York City. After high school, he joined the Air Force. During basic training in the south, he was subjected to anti-Semitism, but responded with cunning rather than violence. While stationed in Alaska, Weintraub made money setting up Florida tours for his fellow servicemen. He always understood that this venture – like most of the segments of his career – would be a short-term proposition. In 1956, when his enlistment was over, Jerry’s father, Sam, offered him a monogrammed briefcase and a chance to join his jewel-selling business. Jerry declined and set off on his own course. Growing up, Jerry

learned a crucial lesson from his father, who had acquired a huge sapphire of no great worth. Sam named it “The Star of Ardaban,” and commissioned a special case and display for it. Using the stone as his entrée, Sam sold jewels to customers who never would have spoken to him otherwise. Thus Weintraub learned at a young age that promotion and packaging trump content.

The Education: The Neighborhood Playhouse School

Instead of college, Weintraub auditioned for Sandy Meisner’s method-acting academy, The Neighborhood Playhouse School. Weintraub was no actor, but he discovered a lot of useful information there, foremost that actors (in fact, all talented people) are insecure and fearful. This means that a good manager must ease his creative clients’ concerns and give them a safe place to be as original as they can. As part of the curriculum, Weintraub had to dance for Martha Graham. He refused, and she called him “a klutz.” Years later, he produced a show starring Graham’s company. Impressed, she called him “her impresario.” No, he told her, “I’m your klutz.”

The Mentor: Lew Wasserman of MCA

After brief stints as a page at NBC and a mailroom clerk at the William Morris Agency, Weintraub bluffed his way into a job as a junior agent at the Music Corporation of America (MCA). Lew Wasserman, the powerful agency’s legendary boss, eavesdropped on Weintraub fighting with his girlfriend for three hours over the firm’s coast-to-coast phone line. Wasserman was intrigued when Weintraub told the truth about the call. As his protégé, Weintraub thrived, but he left MCA a few years later – against Wasserman’s advice – to open his own firm, Directional Enterprises.

“I did not want to follow another man’s script. I was living my own light, following my own light.”

In 1961, Weintraub married his high school sweetheart and soon started managing Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. While Weintraub was producing their show in Brooklyn, mobsters attempted to extort money from him. Weintraub’s father set up a meeting with one of the U.S.’s most powerful Mafia figures. The mobster made Weintraub swear that he would never do anything illegal, because, if he did, the mob would demand a piece of it. Weintraub promised and the crime chief got the mobsters off his back. Years later, Weintraub was going to invest in a theatre. The same Mafioso let him know that the mob was involved in the theatre. Weintraub did not invest, and those who did ran into trouble. Weintraub also managed musician Kimo Lee, who bequeathed him the rights to a song called “Blue Hawaii.” Later it became a hit for Elvis Presley.

The Singer: Jane Morgan

Jane Morgan was a beautiful blonde star. After Weintraub became her manager, they fell in love. He divorced his wife and married Jane, who opened many doors for him. Weintraub already had a son, and he and Jane adopted three daughters, and worked for adoption-related charities for 20 years. Jane spent her childhood summers in Kennebunkport, Maine. When she and Jerry first visited there, he tried to play tennis at a local club, which turned him away since it did not admit Jews. Jane told a friend of hers, who invited Jerry to the club as his guest. That was George H. W. Bush. He and Weintraub became lifelong close friends. Weintraub later spent many nights at the White House and often attended state dinners. He also joined the tennis club, “the yacht club and the golf club.” (The couple separated after many years, but remain married. When he confessed a new relationship, Jane accepted it, to his initial surprise. She doesn’t want his public, boisterous life or a divorce; she wants to maintain her family and live quietly. They remain close.)

The Bigger Agency: Management Three

In 1963, Weintraub and two partners created Management Three, another talent agency. Soon after, Weintraub had a dream in which he promoted Elvis Presley’s concerts. The next morning he contacted Elvis’ manager, Col. Tom Parker, who told him to get lost. Weintraub, who advises kids to “persist, push, hang on, keep going, never give up,” telephoned Parker every day for more than half a year. When Parker finally agreed to meet, he told Weintraub to bring a certified check for \$1 million. Weintraub scrounged up the money and gave it to Parker to pay Presley to tour. With no contract, they were in business. Weintraub, then only 26, learned a lot about promotion from the Colonel, notably: “We were not interested in niche marketing or in targeting a specific demographic – we wanted them all.” Though polite, Presley made “all the artistic decisions.” Jerry learned from him to let artists do as they think best, and to earn them enough money so they could. In 1977, when Elvis died, Weintraub flew to Memphis for his funeral. When he saw the mixed-race crowds lining the funeral procession’s route, he realized that, in show business, segregation didn’t exist and that the biggest artists henceforth would cross all racial divides.

The Legend: Frank Sinatra

Frank Sinatra called Weintraub in 1972. He told Weintraub he was going to promote his concerts. When they met, Sinatra said, “I’m never going to disappoint you. And you know what, kid? You’re never going to disappoint me.” They shook hands; that was their deal. Weintraub found that Sinatra actually did do things his way. He presented Frank in a live national TV show from a boxing ring in Madison Square Garden. The show had lots of snags, but Frank was unruffled. Everything went well. Frank taught Weintraub to enjoy spontaneity, to let things happen.

The Country Boy: John Denver

Weintraub became John Denver’s manager when Denver had just one success as a songwriter – “Leaving on a Jet Plane,” covered by Peter, Paul and Mary. Weintraub believed John could be a huge star and that Denver’s upcoming album, *Poems, Prayers and Promises*, had an obvious hit song, “Take Me Home, Country Roads.” Weintraub’s problem was how to debut this unknown singer nationwide. Weintraub booked Denver on a solo tour of major U.S. radio stations. Denver would come in alone, with his guitar. He was charming and DJs liked him. Jerry got Elvis Presley to speak positively of Denver’s music in public, proving that, “A mention by Elvis Presley was the same as a multimillion dollar ad campaign.” Then Weintraub had Frank Sinatra appear with Denver. When the album was released, Weintraub bought “every billboard on Sunset Boulevard from Bel Air to Hollywood,” so people thought Denver was huge before his first album appeared.

“Something new is coming; every ten years a big hand comes down and sweeps the table.”

In 1974, when Denver was unknown, Weintraub booked him on some ABC television shows for \$2,500 per appearance, but ABC canceled. Weeks later, “Country Roads” became an enormous hit. ABC soon signed a deal to pay Denver \$350,000 per appearance. After “Country Roads” (then Denver’s only hit as a singer, though he had written other hit songs), Weintraub insisted on presenting the next album as a greatest-hits collection. He wanted the world to see Denver as someone who “had always been famous.” The album went to number one. Despite success, Denver was fearful and never content. Weintraub, who made “ten, twelve million with John” annually for many years, believed Denver’s father had never praised or encouraged him, so John wanted to impress him, but also resented him. As Denver’s manager and friend, Weintraub had a paternal role. Years later, Denver fired him, thinking that was the way he could run his own life.

The Music Business: Concerts West

Weintraub’s company, Concerts West, promoted many musicians and bands. He befriended Bob Dylan and signed Led Zeppelin in the mid-1970s. They played pranks on Weintraub while they were on tour, but he returned the jokes. When the group clamored for more speakers, and bigger ones, Weintraub bought boxes, painted them black, mounted them onstage and convinced the musicians that they were speakers. They believed him and were very happy with their show that night. Jerry also handled The Moody Blues. When that band dissolved, two of its members launched a new group. Weintraub invited the music press to Carnegie Hall for the band’s debut. When the press arrived, a record player was the only thing on stage. And that is how Jerry debuted the new album at Carnegie Hall.

“Every ten years, I have built a new career without quite meaning to or even knowing it.”

Weintraub reshaped concert management by booking big halls or stadiums without dealing with each town’s local power structure. This earned him a number of enemies. Weintraub had to pay a large bribe for access to Arthur Wirtz, powerful owner of Chicago’s ice hockey stadium, but it was worth it. Wirtz became his mentor and helped Weintraub book hockey arenas nationwide.

The TV Stars: Bobby Fischer and Dorothy Hamill

When Weintraub watched Bobby Fischer on television in the world chess championship in 1972, he thought Fischer could be a star. He flew to Reykjavik, Iceland – where the chess tournament was being held – to meet Fischer. He set up several deals for Fischer, but in the end they all fell through. Fischer was a chess genius, but he was too deranged to function in the real world.

“As long as you’re here, you might as well smile.”

In 1976, Weintraub saw figure skater Dorothy Hamill on TV and knew she could be a star. He asked Boone Arledge, who produced ABC’s Olympic coverage, to put Hamill in touch with him. Before the meeting was over, Weintraub had lined up shampoo endorsements and a multimillion-dollar TV deal for Hamill. “Within a few hours, this girl who had never seen a nickel in all her life was a multimillionaire.” She later moved to Los Angeles, lived with Jerry and Jane, and married their friend’s son, Dean Martin Jr.

The Blockbusters: Weintraub’s Movies

The first movie Jerry produced was *Nashville*, directed by Robert Altman, which became an enormous critical and financial success. Someone asked Jerry, “What do movie producers do?” He answered: “Solve problems.” In the mid-1970s, Jerry went through two years of drug abuse, which he ended on his own. At the end of the decade, he left concert promoting to become a full-time movie producer. He says, “You have to be willing to walk away from the most comfortable perch, because it is the most comfortable.” When Jerry produced *Dear God* (starring John Denver, with George Burns as God), he insisted on advertising the film on TV, a new tactic that worked. *Dear God* was a big hit. Jerry produced many more films, including *Diner*, *The Karate Kid* series, as well as *Ocean’s 11*, *Ocean’s 12* and *Ocean’s 13*, featuring great ensemble casts with George Clooney, Brad Pitt and Julia Roberts. In 1985, Jerry started the Weintraub Entertainment Group and, in four years, failed spectacularly, losing some \$30 million at age 50. Having a studio took him out of “the movie business” and put him in “the company running business.” In the end, his friends helped him with his losses and put him back in the movies.

The Mogul: Armand Hammer

Weintraub befriended industrialist Armand Hammer, who made his first fortune as the West’s sole business broker in Russia. He and Weintraub flew everywhere, meeting world leaders. When Premier Leonid Brezhnev died, they went to Moscow for his funeral. Bush could not get Weintraub a ticket to the funeral, but Hammer could. They sat in front. The Russians didn’t want Bush seen in the funeral’s TV coverage, so they put him in the back; Weintraub had a better seat than the president.

Life and Business Lessons

Weintraub learned many useful lessons over the years, including:

- A successful career requires mentors.
- Invest in talent. Work with the top people in your field.
- Accept good luck. Embrace spontaneity.
- Be in charge – the fewer the partners, the better. Understand every acquisition.
- Never embarrass your associates, but expect repayment for every compromise.
- Keep your business to yourself.
- Ignore those who oppose or ridicule you. Develop your innate sense of “screw ’em.”
- A healthy worldview includes connection to a sense of the infinite.
- Never fear failing, trying or looking like a fool. Don’t be “threatened by a new idea.”
- Things change. Be willing to start anew. Be true to your passions and follow them.

About the Author

Jerry Weintraub is a producer, agent, manager and philanthropist. **Rich Cohen** is a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* and *Rolling Stone*.
