

The Life of a Record Schlepper

Forty Years in the Record Business

By Jim Manfre

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Yiddish Definition:

Schlep: verb (used with object), schlep: to carry; to lug.

Schlepper: noun Slang. Someone or something that is tedious, slow, or awkward.

Schlep is a word commonly used in the record business. It was meant as an endearing expression used to refer to a record sales representative. At least I always thought it was meant to be endearing.

Dedication:

I would like to dedicate this book (manuscript, memoire, story or whatever it is) to my wonderful and loving wife Joyce (Borta), my sisters, my in-laws, my nieces and nephews and my good friend Bryan Forster. It was Bryan who introduced me to my wife and he is also the reason I got my first job in the record business. I am forever grateful. R.I.P. my friend.

Introduction

“You should write a book” I’ve been told. More than once. So here it is.

I’m not much of a writer and I will be the first to admit that. There are several stories here but much of this, for the most part, is merely an account of many of the things that happened to me in my life. I have been living a very good life which started off “normal” for the most part. A baby boomer growing up in the 50’s and 60’s in Chicago and later in the surrounding suburbs. A child of the Chicago Public School system and the Chicago Park District. Catechism at St John Bosco Catholic Church. Moved to the suburbs in the 60’s. Barely made it thru high school mostly due to lack of interest. Brief stint in the US Air Force Reserves. Brother, son, and much later husband and uncle. Hippie? Sure, that too.

But then it became a little more interesting. I had an extraordinary life changing career. This is a story about a kid, not unlike many others, who unknowingly stumbled into an amazing career in the exciting record business. Ultimately, I ended up in the heart of the business, with a clear view of its inner workings and a glimpse of its dark underbelly. It could have happened to anyone. But it happened to me. And through my job I met, and interacted, with hundreds of famous stars from Abba to ZZ Top!

Yes, I have met close to three hundred recording artists. I know this amount because I started keeping track after a few years of being in the business, and I didn’t want to forget due to my lack of memory. And it’s not like I was trying to meet stars, I wasn’t. It was just a part of my job. Some people I knew searched out every opportunity to meet famous people, but that was not me. I was encouraged and sometimes required by the companies I worked for to meet and interact with our artists. To me, it was exciting and cool and I was happy to do it, and now I have a lifetime of memories from it. I am writing this to share some of the memories.

I was an award-winning Sales Rep for the biggest record company, during the peak years of the business, in one of the country’s largest and most important markets. I met many famous people as part of my job. But this is also a story about the record business itself and my part in it. I was a small part of the “star making machinery” as mentioned in the Joni Mitchell song “Free Man in Paris”. And it all happened so fast. I was hired as a part time clerk at a record store for the Christmas season. Within a few years I became a sales representative for a major record company responsible for three states!

I am generally quiet and laid back, not a big talker and I don’t tell stories very often. Occasionally, someone will ask and I will talk about it, but not often. I’m afraid that I’m boring or telling redundant or repetitive stories. I am not writing this because I want to boast, and I do possess an ounce or two of humility. I am writing it so I don’t have to talk so much. Besides, I think I’m a better writer than talker. With all my years in the business there is a lot to say. If anyone is interested, now they can read about as much as they like.

I was no different than anyone else, just lucky to get the job(s) I did. And, I am finding it enjoyable to reminisce and write about my magical career which included having brunch with Metallica, lunch with Brian Wilson from the Beach Boys, dinner with Bruce Springsteen and drinks with Robert Plant from Led Zeppelin! And backstage and other meets with hundreds of artists including of course, Abba and ZZ Top. The first part of my story will focus on what most readers would be interested in, the famous people.

I was hired into a significant position in the record business in the Midwest. I was a key player firmly entrenched in the epicenter of the record industry. That's a story in itself which I will write about with more detail in part two. How did the business operate? How did we do what we did? What did a sales rep in the record business do? How were recording icons made? What made one record company better than the rest? In part two I touch on the "Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll" part of the business. Where did the money come from to fund that part of it? It won't be a "tell all", because some things just can't and shouldn't be written about. Some of the players are dead but some are still alive so names will not be named. But be assured I saw it all and will share what I can. The first two parts will give you a feel of what day to day life was like for my counterparts and me, a typical Record Schlep.

This is not like most stories published about the record business. Usually, the books and stories about the industry focus on the high-level power brokers. The A&R executives and the label presidents and their dealings with the artists and their managers. Nice to read about but hard to relate to for the average person. My story is written from the perspective of the average person, at the ground level. The level most people can probably connect with but seldom saw from the inside. It's not for everyone. It's for those that are interested in what it was like in the record business from the mid-level down to the street level.

But don't be fooled into thinking that people at the ground level of our business were insignificant. Many of the people my counterparts and I knew and worked closely with at our level eventually went on to become Presidents, VP's and CEOs of huge Record and Entertainment companies. It wasn't unusual at all to see a local counterpart or customer rise to a national position of prominence in the music and entertainment industry.

Surely some of this can resonate with my peers. I write this with all due respect for those I knew and worked with in the record business, people who were my workmates in sales and promotion, my managers, our partners at the labels, our customers, our competitors, and all the people who became my friends. It was a very social business. Many of my friends had vastly different levels of involvement and relationships in our business and with the artists. Some were much more involved and some less. Some have felt the wrath of an angry artist. Some became good friends and maybe even lifelong friends with some of the artists. Many of the local reps had very close relationships with their artists. The people I worked with had many different positions, experiences and interactions. And for most, the experiences were exciting and memorable, and we all have our stories to tell.

My counterparts and I never knew what would be around the next corner. We could get a call at any time asking us to have lunch with some famous artist or to go back stage or get invited to some party. Many times, we were asked to invite our customers or key radio people. There was always something exciting going on. Always a concert or a publicity tour. And there always seemed to be a star around. I usually met our artists in a small group but on those rare occasions one on one. That was special. Most people get to meet famous people in their lives. But when you're with them one on one, take it from me, it can really feel magical. I will share some of those moments.

Part of the motivation for writing my story is that I met an extraordinary amount of recording artists and I wanted to chronicle it. Like me, most of my peers met many artists in the course of doing our jobs. Many can say they met and worked with more artists than I did. But I think I probably met more than most just because of when and where I worked. I held three highly visible positions for over three decades, two of which were in Wisconsin, one of the country's key markets for developing and breaking artists. And the record sales rep was the company's main man in out the field. And that was me.

My overall insight and understanding of the record business was unique. I had a very wide-ranging experience in the record business. In addition to being a customer and then a Sales Rep for two major record companies, I owned a small record store for a short while. I was also a partner in a small nationally distributed indie record label. Later, I taught a class at Harper College called “Get Out of the Garage: How to Make Money with Your Music”. It included the history of the record business and how it operated. Several music business professionals came to speak at my class. And now I am doing local music production. All of this provides me with the insight to understand the record business even more because I was deeply into it on so many different levels.

Please keep in mind that during my years as a sales rep, unlike today, we didn’t all carry around phones and cameras with us. And I never was an autograph collector. And most importantly, when I worked for the big record companies, I was discouraged by the higher ups, as were my counterparts, from asking our artists to take pictures with us or give us autographs. The record companies did not want their field staff bugging the artists for such things and they made sure we knew that.

However, there were many times when we were with artists, customers and radio people and cameras were around and the artists were ok with it. We often hired professional photographers for special occasions. But we never (or very rarely) asked for the photos or autographs for ourselves. “Selfies” was not yet a word. I wish smartphone technology was around then. I wish I had more photos now, but that’s just the way it was.

So, I will make up for the lack of photos with stories and accounts of the meetings, dinners, drinks, lunches, backstage meetings and other interactions with some of the biggest artists of our time. If you would like to see the photos I do have, please take a look at my website JimManfre.com.

So, this is my story, my legacy. It’s all true to the best of my recollection. Part one focuses on the stars I’ve interacted with and some additional basic comments on my record business career. This is the part most people might find interesting and entertaining. Part two focuses more on how the record business operated, and how I fit into it. Part three is about my personal life before the record business career and part four is about my life after the career.

I was a record schlepper. Here is my story. Read at your own pleasure. Read at your own risk.

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