

A Life In Music

Clive Davis was Chief Creative Officer of Sony Music Entertainment. Davis passed away on June 22, 2026, at the age of 94. This interview highlights his thoughts on leadership lessons as he was one of the most respected and admired executives in the music industry.

EDITORS' NOTE As the record industry's most innovative and influential executive, Clive Davis has had a profound effect on the world of music spanning over 50 years. He has earned four Grammys in his role as Album Producer and, in addition, he has received the Grammy Trustees Lifetime Achievement Award, was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2000, and, in 2010, The Recording Academy named The Grammy Museum theatre in his honor.



Clive Davis

Born in Brooklyn, Davis graduated from New York University and Harvard Law School. He first worked at Columbia Records, where he was named President in 1967. In 1974, Davis founded Arista Records, and expanded the company to include Arista Nashville in 1988. He continued his exploration of different musical genres with the formation of LaFace Records in 1989. In 2000, Davis formed J Records, which quickly emerged as a dominant force in the industry. In 2008, Davis was appointed Chief Creative Officer for Sony Music Entertainment, a position which expanded the number of artists for whom he was creatively responsible.

Davis has impacted the worlds of Pop, Rock and Roll, R&B, Country and Hip-Hop, and has played a key role in the careers of countless artists across those genres including: Janis Joplin, Blood, Sweat and Tears, Chicago, Carlos Santana, Billy Joel, Bruce Springsteen, Aerosmith, Earth, Wind & Fire, Simon & Garfunkel, Sly & The Family Stone, Barbra Streisand, Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, Barry Manilow, Whitney Houston, Patti Smith, Sarah McLachlan, Aretha Franklin, Annie Lennox, The Kinks, The Grateful Dead, Dionne Warwick, Carly Simon, Alan Jackson, Brooks & Dunn, Toni Braxton, Notorious B.I.G., Alicia Keys, Maroon 5, Luther Vandross, Rod Stewart, Jennifer Hudson, and he launched the first six American Idol award winners to multi-platinum success.

As a humanitarian, Davis has made tireless efforts in the battle against AIDS, spearheading donations of millions of dollars for AIDS research. In 2002, the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music was created at his undergraduate alma mater, New York University.

His autobiography, *The Soundtrack Of My Life*, published in 2013, has become the largest-selling book involving music in history and a

New York Times bestseller. The Ridley Scott firm-produced and Chris Perkel directed the award-winning and highly praised documentary film on his life: *Clive Davis: The Soundtrack Of Our Lives*, which Apple TV, Apple Music and iTunes launched worldwide in 2017 and debuted at #1 on iTunes, stayed at #1 for five consecutive weeks and is now available on Netflix.

In November 2022, Davis was also one of seven honorees of the National Portrait Gallery's Portrait of a Nation awards, and his portrait was painted by David Hockney. In April 2024, Davis and his illustrious music career were celebrated at Carnegie Hall with The New York Pops 41st Birthday Gala, *The Soundtrack of Our Lives: A Tribute to the Legendary Clive Davis*.

In June 2025, Davis' legacy as one of the record industry's first and most impactful



Clive Davis with Patti Smith

advocates for Black artists was celebrated with his inclusion in the Apollo Theater's prestigious Walk of Fame in Harlem, New York. Citing Davis' 60-year history of championing Black music and signing Black artists – starting with the iconic duo of Gamble and Huff in 1971 – the Apollo simultaneously awarded him its Legacy Award.



Clive Davis with Barbra Streisand



Clive Davis with Foo Fighters after their show



Clive Davis with Janis Joplin

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership?

First is to be on the right side of the issue – to provide persuasive reasoning to justify the positioning. Two is to have healthy respect for the opposition, but with a position that clearly shows the leadership winning.

How important were mentors early in your career?

Very. I cite my mother, Florence Davis, and Goddard Lieberman, the former President of

Columbia Records, as early mentors. My mother impressed upon me the importance of “not living in an ivory tower,” meaning that I needed to get out and meet people from all different perspectives and walks of life. Goddard, as head of Columbia Records, gave me the appointment that changed my life.

What are the qualities you look for when building a management team?

A hard work ethic and a feel for dealing with people in a constructive, practical way.

How do you define success?

I define success as feeling good about where you are in life and fulfilling your life’s ambitions.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

I would advise them to develop a strong work ethic, not to expect easy achievements, and to understand that life will come with some real challenges. As I said in my documentary, “life doesn’t just go up-up-up.” Strength as a leader is often the product of adversity. ●



Clive Davis with Alicia Keys, Luther Vandross, Usber, and Snoop Dogg