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Industry Profile: Denny Stilwell, Mack Avenue Music Group President

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Interview with Denny Stilwell, Mack Avenue Music Group President

By Axel Tanner



Denny Stilwell has been the President of Mack Avenue Music Group since 2007 but his journey throughout the music industry has taken him down many different paths and experiences. Mack Avenue is a leading jazz and adult music independent record label with 7 Grammy awards, 43 nominations and a roster that includes Christian McBride, Cecile McLorin Salvant, Kenny Garrett, Macy Gray, Christian Sands, The Soul Rebels, Kirk Whalum, Stanley Clarke, Kevin Eubanks, Cyrille Aimee, MONK'estra, Joey DeFrancesco, Chucho Valdes, Jonathan Butler, Yellowjackets, Julian Lage, Tower of Power, Alfredo Rodriguez, Connie Han, Cameron Graves and many others. www.mackavenue.com

How did you first get into the music business? Were you always interested in the music industry?

When I'm asked that question, the answer I always find myself coming to is that music chooses you, you don't choose music. I've been attracted to music since I was very young and started playing band instruments when I was 9 or 10. All of music was in my DNA so I knew early that I wanted to do something in music. During my time in college I really had to ask myself whether it was best for me to continue as a performer or involve myself in the music industry more on the business side of things, which eventually led me to my involvement and career in record companies.

What inspired you to start your first music company?

That was an entrepreneurial choice. After I graduated from University of the Pacific with a degree in Music Management, I found within the first couple of years that the “big company structure” simply wasn’t for me. Working within a bigger corporation almost felt like wearing uncomfortable clothing. These experiences led me to read some books relating more to an entrepreneurial focus as I realized that the most enjoyable part of the jobs I had were the entrepreneurial elements. All the structure, bureaucracy, and political elements really just didn’t sit well with me.

Can you share your path from that first job to your current position at Mack Avenue?

My first job in the music industry was at an independent jazz label based in Los Angeles by the name of Nova Records. It was run out of the second floor of the Bon Appetite Jazz club and all three of us worked out of a tiny little room that was meant to be the manager’s office for the club. This experience was about as ground level, gritty, and street as you could get, but the jazz club downstairs had both local and national acts coming through nightly and a great culture and family was created there that I was fortunate to be a part of. I would finish work at 6 PM and come back later in the night to experience some of the best music at the time.

That experience gave me an opportunity to absorb every element of the music business. Jazz is a niche genre and this was a small company within that genre, but I got to look at every piece of the music business and see how it all fit together. If I did enough reading, asked enough questions, and talked to enough people, it wasn’t difficult to take all of the concepts at that level and apply it to what was being done with pop records at major labels.

Having a performance background also allowed me to participate meaningfully in conversations regarding A&R, studio recording and other creative elements. Combining this with my early music business experience after college at Nova Records and later, JVC Music, another jazz label, played a big part in shaping my overall outlook about how to run a music company. To do that successfully, there are so many parts of this music industry that you need to be good at or at least have a basic understanding of.

What is the philosophy that Mack Avenue uses to guide your relationship with its artists?

The core of our business revolves around identifying artists, helping them create recordings either through funding or creative input, and then marketing and distributing them throughout the world. We have a catalog of recordings in which we see it as our obligation and mission to find ways to expose those recordings, getting them awareness, recognition, and business opportunities.

We tend to be an artist-centric, creative-focused organization. We believe that it is our place to identify the art and music that will resonate and put it out there to the world. We don't necessarily see ourselves in the position of changing that art in a commercial manner unless that is a collaborative goal and conversation with the artist. If we are in business with an artist, our strength is to bring the business and infrastructure side to that relationship while the artist brings the creative element. There are always exceptions from artist to artist but this is our guiding philosophy.

How does a company such as Mack Avenue develop and maintain a strong brand?

I have learned that brand equals reputation and reputation equals integrity. We conduct ourselves from a position of integrity regardless of the circumstances. If we have a set of values that define integrity for us and follow or refer to those values when making business decisions, we will eventually achieve a strong reputation which will create and enhance the brand image that we want to have. The term "brand" is used a lot and much of it has to do with a visual image and its impact, but we think reputation and integrity come first--which will then ultimately drive the brand identity.

Having been in the music industry for many years, what would you say are the most important aspects that lead to a successful song/album release nowadays?

There are so many more moving parts nowadays compared to 20-25 years ago. Our music industry today consists of many very shallow channels whereas the industry of yesterday was made up of very few, but deep channels. The two things that remain consistent through all of the changes are planning and partnerships. Without a plan, you rely on chance, which sometimes happens because music is emotional and may get a lot of attention when it does happen. However, you can't really plan for that and look at it as a guaranteed route to success, so a good plan is necessary.

People and partnerships are the second constant. Nobody does this on their own. It takes a team of committed people to utilize all of your resources and reach a high level of success.

With the rise of independent artists, such as Macklemore and Chance the Rapper, who now have the ability for self-promotion/distribution on a professional scale, why do artists continue to sign with record labels?

Not every artist has the infrastructure, talent, or resources to make it happen for themselves. Each artist has a unique set of circumstances, so even today where there are more resources available to independent artists, it's really difficult to say that one structure fits every

artist. There are also a lot of artists who only want to focus on being an artist and view the business side of things as something that takes away from their creativity, so that is where record labels come into play. Companies that have been around for a bit also have built in relationships, systems, and global infrastructures that can seriously impact the marketing and promotion of an artist. It really just depends on the circumstances for the artist.

Any advice for aspiring music industry professionals?

Get a broad set of experiences. Even if you have a particular interest or want to go down a particular lane, it makes a lot of sense to learn about all the other aspects of the business, especially with so many new opportunities in today's music industry.

Secondly, find someone who is in the business that you can trust and call when you are faced with career decisions. A mentor will be able to provide you with guidance throughout the different stages of your career on a deeper level than just a friend or family member. Find a person who is five or more years into their career so they can talk with you about the more perplexing issues that young professionals will ultimately be faced with. There are so many things that will come up in the early stages of one's career and having a mentor will provide you with a distinct advantage.