



Some say music and business don't mix. But perhaps they haven't met Cory Rooney.

As a composer, producer and keyboardist, Rooney is responsible for dozens of hits by Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony, Mary J. Blige, Jessica Simpson, Destiny's Child, R. Kelly, Nas, Christina Milian, Thalia and others.

BUT WHILE ROONEY WAS SCALING THE CHARTS, HE WAS ALSO CLIMBING THE corporate ladder at Sony Music, where he was appointed a Senior Vice President in 1998. Thanks to Cory's ability to deliver in both the studio and the corporate environment, he usually serves as Executive Producer on his projects.

Rooney has the music business in his blood. His parents, Herb Rooney and Brenda Reid, were members of the Exciters, a '60s R&B group remembered for such hits as "Tell Him" and "Do-Wah-Diddy." Cory cut his teeth on the oldies circuit with an all-family incarnation of the Exciters. "We were like the Partridge Family," he laughs. "All my brothers and sisters were in the group."

When we caught up with Rooney, he took a break from remixing a track by new Casablanca artist Ryan Leslie to share his candid observations on some of the ways music and business do mix.

What prompted you to become a music exec as well as a musician?

18 years ago, I met [Sony Chief] Tommy Mottola because of some rap records I'd done. One of them, Father MC's "I'll Do 4 U," featured Mary J. Blige. At the time, Tommy was dating Mariah Carey, and apparently that's the only record she'd play. Tommy told me I had the ability to translate between what people were talking about on the street and what they talked about at the label. He said it was a rare talent, and he encouraged me to pursue it.

Which instruments do you play?

My main instrument is keyboards and, at this point, the only instrument I use 98% of the time is a Yamaha Motif ES8. It's so loaded with great sounds that it's like one-stop shopping. I have racks and racks of instruments, but they're all in storage. The Motif is a combination of all the great keyboards of all time. Anything you could possibly want—it's there. I don't just use it for demos. Jennifer Lopez's last two records were done mostly with ES8s.

How do you keep your ear to the street?

I surround myself with my nephews and their friends. They're between 14 and 22 years old, and brutally honest about everything. Also, I opened up a barbershop in Queens right near where I grew up. I sit in the back room, getting a sense of what people really think and say about our music. In fact, I just shot a pilot for an MTV reality show based on the barbershop. I tell you—if record companies stayed more in tune with the public like that, our music would be better. Too many people at record companies only know how to follow the heat of the producers at the top of the charts. No one takes chances. No one uses their instincts. They just surf the charts, see who has a number-one record and then they all hire him for the next six months until they move on to the next guy.

So you're sort of a cultural translator between the street and Middle America?

That's 98% percent of what I do. Even if I'm not producing or writing the song, I need to find and sign the artists based on my understanding of what people want.

And what do people want?

Simplicity. A straightforward, commercial sound. A lot of musicians and producers are on a quest to be different. But I tell people over and over that there is a formula for success. That's why all the biggest songs of my career were written in 15 minutes. "Real Love" by Mary J. Blige is one example. "Ain't It Funny" by Jennifer Lopez is another. "Independent Women, Part 1," by Destiny's Child was so simple, it took me longer to plug in my equipment than to come up with the track. I did two Marc Anthony hits—"I Need to Know" and "You Sang to Me"—in one night. If someone else had tried to do those songs, they would have made them too complicated. It's not because I'm not putting in the effort. I just think about what slice of pie I'm going to cut today, and that's what I do.

Notes from the Executive Producer

Cory Rooney

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