





‘It’s much better to be my friend than my enemy’

Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra thought he walked on water. Hollywood’s biggest stars are still in thrall to the legendary producer. Ariel Leve finds out why it pays to keep Jerry Weintraub on side.
Photographs by Norman Jean Roy

If you've never heard of Jerry Weintraub, you will most certainly know his friends. He has presidents on his speed dial and has produced the biggest stars in the world from Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra to Led Zeppelin, Brad Pitt and George Clooney. Oh, and his wife and girlfriend are friends.

The phone rings. The caller ID shows an LA area code where it's 6am. "It's Jerry," the gravelly Brooklyn-accented voice says. "Jerry Weintraub."

Even announcing his name, it sounds like the start of a story you will want to pay attention to.

"I've had two million emails about this interview already and I said, 'Lemme cut through the crap — just give me her number.'" There is an immediate familiarity, as though we're resuming a conversation, not beginning one. "I want this to happen," he says.

When Jerry Weintraub wants something to happen, it happens. For more than five decades he has been a larger-than-life manager, promoter, producer and legendary impresario for a Forbes list of the great and the powerful. His memoir, *When I Stop Talking, You'll Know*

and there are loads of intimate stories about the biggest names in show business, there is an emotional narrative that drives the story — a chance to see what it's like behind the curtain with the wizard.

There are humorous moments too. When Led Zeppelin played at Madison Square Garden, Weintraub collected a hand-stitched, double-breasted suit he had made for himself in London. He hung it in the dressing room with a note pinned to it that said: "Hands off!" He then takes his place to watch the show. As the band come onstage, he notices John Bonham, the drummer, is wearing his jacket. Bonham sits behind the drums, rips off the sleeves and shouts: "How do I look, Jerry Weintraub?"

One of his most trenchant features is that he never gives up. He believes there's no problem he can't solve. When Zeppelin needed to be the loudest band, he had huge fake speakers put on stage. When Elvis needed to sing to a sold-out audience, he had 5,000 seats taken out of an arena.

Weintraub has something else that sets him apart. Influence. There are people who have had



WHEN CLOONEY, PITT AND DAMON GOT THEIR PRINTS ON THE HOLLYWOOD WALK OF FAME THEY INSISTED THAT WEINTRAUB HAD PRINTS DONE TOO

I'm Dead, is out now and there's a reason the subtitle is: *Useful Stories from a Persuasive Man*. Two weeks later, I'm on my way to a private island in the Bahamas.

In 2009, he was dying. This year, he is on top and more robust than ever. He produced the original *Karate Kid* as well as co-producing the current remake with Will and Jada Pinkett Smith; the film stars their 12-year-old son, Jaden. Even though initially Weintraub didn't go for the idea when the Smiths first approached him ("I didn't want to risk ruining my legacy," he says, with characteristic candour), they won him over. It was, he says, one of the best experiences he's had making a movie and he's thrilled with the result.

The film grossed \$56m in its opening weekend in the US and reached No 1 at the box office. Along the way he became "Uncle Jerry" to Will Smith and his family. "History always repeats itself. The trick is to be alive when it happens."

At 72, he is more alive than most people half his age. His book is on its seventh print run in a genre that usually falls flat. Why? Because aside from the fact that he's a notoriously great



it and lost it, but his power has endured. He doesn't self-destruct and he doesn't worry if it all comes crashing down. Even his weaknesses — drugs, drinking, women — which he admits to, haven't derailed him.

Two flights and a 30-minute boat ride pass before I land on Guana Cay at sunset. This island is the site of Baker's Bay, a luxurious private-members' golf resort that Weintraub co-owns. You have to have many, many millions to join.

Men with walkie-talkies escort me to a golf cart and, 10 minutes later, I'm driven onto a pristine golf nirvana. We drive around looking for "Jerry and Susie". Suddenly another golfcart is spotted driving towards us. Weintraub has one hand on the steering wheel and a vodka cocktail in the other.

"Welcome!" he calls out. In person, he has both an imposing and approachable presence. And despite his 72 years there is a confident sex appeal.

Susie Ekins, his red-headed girlfriend and constant companion, is petite and warm. They have been together for nearly two decades. He refers to her as "Mrs Weintraub".

Weintraub owns four homes and is so well off he can't remember the last time he flew on a commercial jet. "I don't know," he laughs. "Back when I was a kid maybe." And yet there is none of the

discomfort one usually feels around people who are in another stratosphere of wealth. Perhaps this has to do with Weintraub's working-class roots. His father, Sam, was a travelling jewellery salesman, his mother, Rose, a stay-at-home mum. As a young boy he would bunk school to go to the movies. He imagined his life and made it happen. It's not just that he didn't take no for an answer, he didn't hear the word at all.

He writes in his book: "When you dig through all the craziness of my life, you'll see that I'm just a guy from the Bronx who knows how to attract a



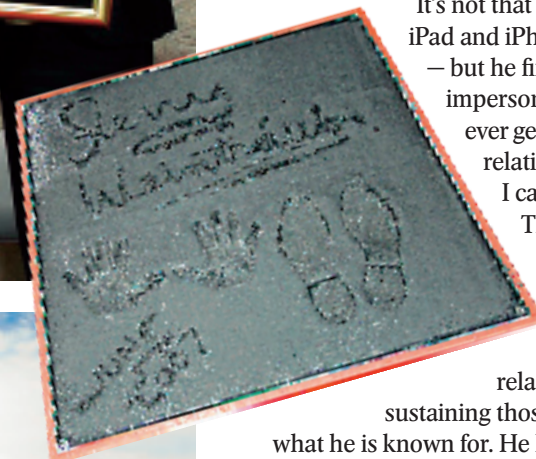
Above, from left: Pitt, Clooney, Weintraub and Damon at the Hollywood Walk of Fame, 2007.

Right, inset: Weintraub's size-10 feet in Tinseltown concrete

Right: Jackie Chan and Jaden Smith take The Karate Kid remake to new heights

Left: with Julia Roberts at the Ocean's Eleven premiere, 2001

Far left: Cindy Crawford takes pointers from Weintraub's book in May



crowd. I get people to notice the sapphire so it's not lying in a cellar where it might be found in a hundred years, long after the man who mined it has died. That is my talent."

Then, with characteristic bravado, he adds: "If I'd been around Van Gogh or Melville, they would not have had to wait so long for fame."

I swap places with Susie and ride with Weintraub off the golf course to where a celebration is beginning. Minutes later I'm immersed in a Caribbean spectacle. Bahamians dressed in masks with cowbells and whistles

mingle with affluent guests amid plates of lobster and crab on ice. Filet mignon and mahi-mahi are on the grill. Weintraub shakes hands and poses for photos, all the while insisting: "Call me Jerry."

If you didn't know better, you'd think he was running for office. Off to the side, I sit at a table with Susie who shows me a photo in her iPhone of a handsome blonde woman. "That's Jane," she says with affection.

Susie, the love of Jerry's life, is his girlfriend. Jane, the *other* love of his life, is his wife. They've been married since 1965 and have three

grown-up daughters. He also has a son from his first marriage. Jane, who is his second wife, is also "Mrs Weintraub".

"We'll go over all of that tomorrow!" Jerry declares. Then he pops a piece of stone crab in his mouth and he is off, dancing into the night.

The following morning we meet for breakfast at 8.30am sharp on a patio that overlooks the beach. He's been up for hours and if he has a hangover, he hides it well.

He wakes up every day at 4am and is in the gym at 4.30 or 5. He watches news shows on TV while he's on the treadmill. There are things he checks daily: movie grosses, the stock market and his new "addiction", the Amazon ranking for his book.

By 8.30am he's on "the phones". He has a call sheet that his office sends him every night and he tries to return everyone's phone calls. "I like people to return mine."

It's not that he's a luddite — an iPad and iPhone sit on the table — but he finds email impersonal. "You don't ever get the flavour of relationships over email. I can't express myself. There's no back and forth. I'm always saying the wrong things."

Building relationships and sustaining those relationships is what he is known for. He has something more important than money: a network.

He mentions having had cancer in his book but gives it only a sentence or two. What follows is a story about the only time in his life he had a feeling it wouldn't work out. It's not in the book. In 2009, he had back surgery and contracted a serious bacterial infection. He turned his bedroom at home in Palm Desert into a hospital because he wanted to be in his own house.

"No one knew what it was. I've heard 18 different stories — it was staph, it wasn't staph — whatever it was, it was killing me. Literally eating up my body."

He was told he wouldn't make it.

"I had a least five or six doctors taking care of me. I had an IV in me for 16 weeks. A drip to keep me alive."

This experience was something he couldn't control. "I'd always been afraid of death. In 2008 and 2009, I lost a lot of friends. I visited them just as they were dying. I came to the place where I wasn't scared any more. I brought my family in to say goodbye. Everyone was standing next to the bed — the rabbi, the doctor, Susie, Jane, my kids — I thought that was it. I was finished.

"I looked awful and I didn't want to see anybody. George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Matt Damon all came to visit and I told Susie not to let anyone in. Clooney snuck in behind the florist." ➤➤➤

Interview

Below top: fellow hellraiser Frank Sinatra, 1964

Below centre: Led Zeppelin at a Weintraub-promoted gig in New York, 1977

Below bottom: puppy love for the Bushes at a Weintraub function, 1983



He recounts having a near-death experience.

"I felt myself float out the window. I swear to you, I was out the window. The rabbi was screaming at the top of his lungs, 'You can't have him. He can't go now.' And the next thing I knew, I woke up. Now I don't know what happened, but I had an experience. I came back."

After that, he got better.

We are seated at a table overlooking the Caribbean and it's not hard to imagine this is where he would sit with a president or movie star. Is there anyone he can't get on the phone?

He shakes his head and smiles. "I know everyone. I can call anybody."

Barack Obama?

"Sure I could call Barack Obama. Do I want to call Obama? No, because I have nothing to say to him. But I promise you, it could happen."

David Cameron?

"Who? You mean the prime minister? I don't

know him. But I'm sure I could get to him."

Who can't you get to?

"I'm telling you, I can get to anyone." He explains. "Politically, I'm a source of fundraising. And politicians like sources of fundraising."

How does it feel to get to anyone in the world?

"It feels like you shouldn't abuse that power.

I don't want to go to Downing Street and talk about the weather. I wouldn't waste his time."

Weintraub admits not everyone is charmed by him. He gets along with everyone, he says, but some people can be intimidated.

"I'm not a good enemy to have. I'm a much better friend. It's much better to be my friend than my enemy. Because at some point, something is going to come across my desk and everything that goes around comes around."

He can't stand people who are fanatical — religious or political, whether far right or far left, and considers himself to be a centrist. He is not a Republican but is close friends with George HW Bush ("Bush 41") and there is a mutual admiration that goes back many years.

Is he friends with his son? It is the first and only time he is guarded before responding.

"Uh, I know his son. Very well. For a long, long time. I don't talk about his son."

After a few seconds he continues: "Bush 43 [the 43rd president] and I are friendly. I've known him since he was a young man. We know each other very well. But my friend is Bush 41, the guy that I cared about and worked for."

He returns to the subject of not being able to make something happen. It's been on his mind.

"I did fail with one thing... I failed twice. I was trying to get a presidential pardon for a friend of mine. I tried with Clinton and I couldn't get it. And I couldn't get it with Bush 43."

He won't say the name of this person on the record. "If there was anyone who deserved it, it was this guy. I worked very, very hard on it and I pulled out all the stops. I had senators lined up and governors lined up and I couldn't get it."

He shakes his head, still bothered by the defeat. "But it will happen. I know it will."

In 1963 Weintraub formed his own company, called Management Three. He was by then living in LA and managing various musical acts, and one night he was in bed with his wife, Jane, by his side, when he had a dream. He keeps a notepad on the bedside table and he woke up in the middle of the night and wrote down "Jerry Weintraub presents Elvis Presley". He told his wife he was going to promote Elvis and take him to Madison Square Garden. "That's crazy," his wife said. "You don't even know Elvis."

The next day, Weintraub called Colonel Tom Parker, Elvis's manager. He told him he'd like to take Elvis on the road. The Colonel said no way. Weintraub persisted. He called every day for months. A year later, the Colonel called. He

The boldest swinger in town — 'I'm just a guy from the Bronx'



would be at the Hilton Hotel in Las Vegas at 9am and if Weintraub showed up with a cheque for \$1m it would happen. From that point on, he was in business with Elvis. He took Elvis on tour and by the end of it, at 26, he was a multimillionaire and had a new company, Concerts West, which became the largest concert business in the world.

There is a story he tells about the scene at Graceland just after Elvis died. With the coffin in the other room, Elvis's father and the Colonel were arguing about selling T-shirts to the mourners. Weintraub interrupted. "What's wrong with you guys?" he said. "The body is in the next room. We're about to leave for the funeral. Show some respect." They went to the funeral in a long line of white Cadillacs. "What a bizarre moment," he says. He rode in the car behind the hearse.

After founding Concerts West, Weintraub presented Frank Sinatra at Madison Square Garden in a concert called The Main Event that



was broadcast around the world by satellite. He also helped to handle and promote artists such as Bob Dylan, Neil Diamond, the Beach Boys, Queen and many others. Along the way, some, like Frank Sinatra and John Denver, became like family to him.

There is an entire section in the book devoted to John Denver, who, as Weintraub writes, he

'I KNOW EVERYONE,' HE SMILES. 'I CAN CALL ANYBODY. I COULD CALL BARACK OBAMA. I DON'T KNOW CAMERON, BUT I'M SURE I COULD GET HIM'

“cooked from scratch”. What followed were mega-hits like *Sunshine on my Shoulders* and *Rocky Mountain High*. Weintraub explains how Denver went on to break his heart.

“We had a very close relationship,” he says. Even now, years later, the break-up appears to haunt him. “I loved him very much. And then one

day, he just walked in and fired me. I never asked him why. He asked me if I wanted to know. I told him, ‘I have in my own mind why you did it. And I prefer my version to anything you could tell me. I don’t want to talk about it.’”

What was his version? “His father died. He got divorced. I was the dominant figure in his life and he didn’t want me to replace his father, and he

wanted to be in charge of his own destiny. I was in charge of it so I was expendable. I don’t know if that’s true or not, but I know I didn’t steal anything from him, I didn’t hurt him.”

Denver was killed in a plane crash in 1997.

“I never had closure,” Weintraub says.

By the early 1980s Weintraub had moved from

the music industry into film and become a full-time producer. He had made his debut with Robert Altman’s 1975 feature, *Nashville*.

Weintraub explains in the book how nobody in Hollywood would make the film — which later went on to win an Oscar and receive a further four nominations including Best Picture.

He also believed in a small film called *Diner* which launched the careers of Kevin Bacon, Ellen Barkin, Mickey Rourke and the first-time director Barry Levinson. Then there are the *Ocean’s* movies: *Ocean’s Eleven*, *Twelve* and *Thirteen* have grossed over \$1 billion. He is so close to George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and Matt Damon that he refers to them as his kids. Getting that stellar ensemble — which includes Julia Roberts, Andy Garcia and Don Cheadle — together, and managing to balance the movie-star egos is tricky. They do it in large part because of their affection for him. Plus, they ►►► 51

Three and easy: with wife, Jane (right), and girlfriend, Susie (left)

have fun. He sent the script to Julia Roberts with a \$20 bill and a note that said: "I know you get \$20m for a movie but you'll have to work for less on this one."

When Clooney, Pitt and Damon got their footprints implanted on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, they insisted that Weintraub had his footprints as well. When it was time to step into the cement they played a practical joke on him. They had gone out and purchased size-14 clown shoes — which all three used. Weintraub's size-10 feet appeared tiny by comparison.

Weintraub has also managed his personal life in a way that reflects his ability to work things out, no matter what. He married blonde bombshell Jane Morgan in 1965, and they are still happily married. However, they are not living together and their relationship is platonic. He lives with and is romantically involved with Susie.

They both look after him. "Big time! Like I'm the Shah of Iran! They have given themselves completely to me. Both of these women. And that's extraordinary."

He respects that? "If I didn't, they should take me away and give me a lobotomy."

When it's pointed out that a lot of modern men might find that devotion unattractive or outdated he doesn't flinch.

"I come from a different time. First of all, both Jane and Susie have careers. Jane was a huge singing star. When I first met Jane, Howard Hughes and Aly Khan were sending gifts over to the house trying to go out with her. I don't know if you ever saw pictures of her when she was younger — she was a f***ing knockout. And she ended up with me. She gave up her career for me. *She* did it. I didn't ask her to."

There is no possessiveness or jealousy between Susie and Jane.

"We knew early on. We knew people would pass judgment. Jane said, 'Look, I don't want a divorce. If Susie needs to marry you, we'll get a divorce — but I don't want one.'

"She was able to make it work because she and I decided that no matter who said what, we would have a united front. Whoever couldn't get on that wavelength — f*** 'em. Believe me, there were people who were upset with her. And upset with me. Morally wrong and whatever. But we didn't listen."

It would be easy to assume Weintraub wrote the memoir to record his legacy, but a more personal reason had to do with his children. He has a son, Michael, from an earlier marriage, and three adopted daughters now in their thirties with Jane. He is close to all his children, but feeling known by them is another story. "They know I'm a big powerful figure. They



know that I gave trust funds to them. They know that if they need something, they get it. They also know that when they come to me for something, they better have their facts together. They're gonna inherit a lot of money when I die — but I'm not dying yet. They know me in those ways."

Not feeling that he has been the best father is one of the tradeoffs he writes about in the book. He chose a path to provide for his family. Could he have been better? Given them better values? That's where he thinks he might have faltered.

"I see changes in their relationship with me since the book came out. I think they have more insight into me. I think some things that were unsaid, were said."

For Weintraub, his stars were family too. He misses Sinatra to this day. He tells some great stories about their time working together, so I ask for one that didn't make it into the book.

'THEY HAVE GIVEN THEMSELVES COMPLETELY TO ME. BOTH WOMEN. THAT'S EXTRAORDINARY. WE KNEW PEOPLE WOULD PASS JUDGEMENT'

When he was "a kid" — about 30 years old, Sinatra told Weintraub he had to go to Houston. "He says to me, 'You gotta get your heart checked. You've been running around, you drink too much' — I still drink too much — 'you gotta get your heart checked by DeBakey.'" Michael DeBakey was a world-renowned heart surgeon.

"I said, 'Frank, I got Elvis, I got no time.' He says, 'We're going to get your heart checked.' So we got on a plane and went to Houston: Sinatra, myself, and a couple of other guys. DeBakey says, 'Tomorrow, 6am, you guys come to the hospital and I'm gonna check you out. When I finish, you'll be back in Los Angeles by 10.' I said, 'Oh, that's great — I'm not gonna miss any time at the office.'

"The only instructions were no eating or drinking after 8 o'clock. We go to the hotel — 8 o'clock I get into bed. There's a knock — Sinatra's standing there with a bottle and two glasses and says 'let's have a drink.' I said, 'We can't — DeBakey said no drinking.' So Frank says,

'One drink. They're not going to find one drink in our blood. So we finish the bottle. Then we finish another bottle. Then we call some girls up and we have a party. And this goes on for four days and four nights.

"I'm scruffy, I haven't shaved — I get back on a plane and I'm slumped down and Sinatra's sitting across from me and he goes, 'Are you okay, kid?'

"I said, 'Am I okay? No, Frank. I'm not okay. You brought me here to get my heart checked and I never saw the hospital. I haven't been on the phone with the office, I haven't done my work.'

"Frank says, 'What's the matter with you? Your heart is fine. If you lived through what we did the last four days, your heart is perfect.'

He laughs. "We had a lot of that kind of stuff." When asked if he misses those days, he says no, because he had them. Then he says, thoughtfully: "But I miss *him*."

One thing Weintraub won't do is spill secrets about others. He relies on his ability to talk to the most powerful people on Earth — heads of state, movie-studio bosses, titans of industry — and connect. Not just talk, but connect. There is a paternalistic, I-got-your-back type of connection.

He is big-time and old-school but he is not an artefact. He is as relevant today as he has always been. Next up is a movie about Liberace with Michael Douglas and Matt Damon.

Before I leave he gives me his email in case there are follow-up questions. The address is taken from a film he produced — *The Avengers* — that didn't do well. Or, as he puts it, "A disaster." He smiles when he explains that he did this because he likes to remind himself every day of this failure. The one thing he can't tolerate.

For someone who can make anything happen, it must be frustrating when he comes up against something in life that, try as he may, he can't alter. When his mother got Alzheimer's, for instance, it was painful to see his father suffer. "He told me at the time, 'You know, when your mom dies, don't expect me to hang around.'"

Did he feel helpless?

"Yes," he says quietly. "But I handled it."

Two months later, his father passed away.

"Listen," he says, reaching for his iPhone to check in on his Amazon ranking, "as much money as I have, and as much as I can make happen — I'm Harry Houdini with the telephone — I can't change death."

But as he says this, it seems for a second there is a flicker of hesitation and that maybe, just maybe, it's not entirely out of the question ■ *When I Stop Talking, You'll Know I'm Dead* (Twelve, £18.99), is available at the BooksFirst price of £17.09, inc p&p. Tel: 0845 2712 135