He’s With the Bands

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The first time Neil Portnow heard Whitney Houston’s voice, it wasn’t on the radio or television. He first heard her sing on a cassette tape that Arista Records President Clive Davis sent him in 1983. Whitney Houston was 19, Mr. Portnow was the West Coast vice president for Arista, and they were about to launch one of the most memorable careers in music history.

Then, after winning more awards than any other female artist in history—415 in total including Grammys, Emmys, Billboard Music Awards, American Music Awards, and Recording Association of America Gold and Platinum Awards—Ms. Houston’s music career was cut short.

“First thing I had to do was steel myself to go to work,” Mr. Portnow, BA ’71, told the Los Angeles Times about learning of Ms. Houston’s death almost exactly one year ago. “Really, in my responsibility, I’m in the dad role and I have to take care of my family.”

The family Mr. Portnow was talking about is 20,000 musicians and music industry professionals that he represents as president of the Recording Academy, which organizes the annual Grammy awards. Steeling himself and going to work meant getting ready for “Music’s Biggest Night”—the Grammy telecast—that was happening the day after Ms. Houston died.

“We had to do something,” he said in that same interview. “But what did that look like? What would that be? It needed to be simple. It needed to be elegant. It needed to be healing because we are all hurting.”

At the 54th Grammys, Jennifer Hudson sang Ms. Houston’s classic “I Will Always Love You” on a sparsely lit stage. Changing the telecast in the final hours to pay tribute to his friend showcased both Mr. Portnow’s role as the caretaker of the music industry and the heights his career had taken.

As president of the Recording Academy, Mr. Portnow is most visible once a year when he spends about two and a half minutes in the spotlight at the Grammys addressing music’s biggest stars and millions watching at home. He spends the rest of the year advocating on behalf of all people who work in music.

That’s no easy task. The 64-year-old became president on the heels of the digital revolution that transformed music distribution and enabled Internet piracy, or illegal downloading.

“We really allowed, if you will, several generations to grow up without any education about right and wrong and consequences of illegal downloading,” Mr. Portnow said in an interview with GW Magazine. “It’s hard to put the genie back in the bottle.”

Putting the genie back may be impossible, but it doesn’t stop him from trying.

On a C-SPAN set in Washington, D.C., in 2009, Mr. Portnow gave an assessment of the music industry’s struggle with piracy.

“The best defense of copyright is to have a system where there is a legal availability that is easy for the consumer, that has the right value for the consumer, and ultimately that they might prefer that to illegal downloading or stealing,” said Mr. Portnow, who was in D.C. lobbying for the Performance Rights Bill to allow performers to receive royalties for radio play. “It’s going to take time because this is a radical shift in the way this industry has behaved for the past 60 years, but we’re getting there.”

Neil Portnow speaks at the annual Grammys on the Hill Awards, a music advocacy event in D.C.
by an estimated 8 percent to $5.2 billion in 2011, a faster pace than 2010. Most significant, the organization also estimated that the number of people paying to subscribe to a music service like Pandora or Spotify increased by 65 percent in 2011 to 13.4 million.

The report also stated, however, that “piracy remains an enormous barrier to sustainable growth in digital music” and estimated that one in four internet users “regularly access unlicensed services.”

Combating illegal downloading is a continuing struggle, but it is not the only challenge spawned by digital distribution. At last year’s Grammys on the Hill Awards—an annual music advocacy event in D.C.—Mr. Portnow held up a small digital music player above the podium.

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Since becoming president of the Recording Academy in 2002, Mr. Portnow has pushed for educating consumers about the detriments of illegal downloading while acknowledging that wide-scale behavior changes take time.

“Unfortunately, the music industry let this get out of its control,” he says. “The creation of compact disks and moving content to a digital platform was brilliant in many respects. It created a windfall for the industry on a lot of levels.” Record labels could suddenly leverage existing catalogs for a new wave of consumers eager to hear old favorites on the latest platforms.

Statistics from the Recording Industry Association of America, the trade group representing American music companies, also show that the situation may be getting better—and that it’s a slow process.

Sales figures for 2011 show that it was the first year that digital music sales surpassed physical sales in the United States, showing the increasing popularity of purchasing digital music legally. A 2012 report from the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, which represents the recording industry worldwide, said that global revenues for record companies grew
When a song is played digitally, people see the title, album, and artist, but none of the other contributors who used to be listed inside CD and tape cases. “Surely if those devices can access millions of tracks in the cloud, we can find a way to acknowledge those who created the tracks right here on Earth,” he said at the event.

Inside and outside of the digital universe, looking after his family of music creators is Mr. Portnow’s main concern. He has also bolstered the academy’s charity, MusiCares, which offers a safety net for people who work in music and makes sure the Recording Academy “takes care of our own,” he says.

“Musicians are independent contractors with no health insurance. They’re very vulnerable to difficulties not only financially but healthwise,” he says, adding that MusiCares also offers help with substance abuse and addiction issues.

“If a drummer breaks a leg, we’ll pay your rent,” says Mr. Portnow, who has given a MusiCares Person of the Year Award to Barbra Streisand and Paul McCartney in recent years (Bruce Springsteen is the 2013 recipient).

It would seem that Mr. Portnow would have stopped feeling star-struck long ago, but that wasn’t the case when he handed out the award at last year’s MusiCares gala. “That is pretty awe inspiring for a kid who grew up buying whatever equipment [McCartney] was using,” he says.

After all, the Beatles were coming out with some of their biggest albums while Mr. Portnow was in college at GW—the same time he was honing valuable skills for his music industry battles.

In 1969, he leaned out of a third-floor window of what was then called Maury Hall at 19th and G streets and yelled through a bullhorn at a crowd of angry students below.

They had gathered for an anti-Vietnam War demonstration, and Mr. Portnow, the student body president, feared there would be an ugly confrontation with police.

After nearly an hour of bullhorn diplomacy, the aspiring politician was able to restore order and open lines of communication between students and administrators.

“I came from a family background where the tone and the desire was for collaboration and conciliation and civility,” says the Great Neck, N.Y., native. “That being said, [being a negotiator] is my nature.”

At GW, Mr. Portnow was readying himself for a career in public office, but he was also playing bass guitar in the Foggy Bottom Blues Band.

He first started strumming a guitar at 7 and later hooked up with some school chums for an elementary school band. Even as a child he made sure he covered the “business” end of the music, making the arrangements for his band’s practices and ensuring they had the appropriate space to rock out in.

Mr. Portnow kept playing music into his teen years, securing a not-so-gently used VW bus to haul around his fellow band mates from gig to gig. When it came time to apply for colleges, he found himself leaning toward politics, not music. He arrived at GW intending to earn a law degree.

“I had desires to be in politics and run for office and save the world. I was dead serious about it,” he says.

By the end of college, his musical inclinations took over and ultimately led him to join the organization he now leads. He joined the academy in the early 1970s as a way to promote his band—Today’s Special—by voting for his own music.

“Maybe I could vote for myself. That’s very common as to the motivations of a fair amount of [Recording Academy] members, and we welcome that,” he says.

When some friends recommended he run for the local board of governors of the academy’s Los Angeles chapter, he took the advice to heart.

He later won election as a national trustee to the academy, one of 40 across the country, and subsequently served as the...
tunity to do something on our stage that they couldn’t do on any other stage.”

Unique pairings—think the Lady Gaga/Elton John duet from 2010—turn a potentially staid night of industry glad-handing into a compelling live event.

While ratings for other premier awards telecasts, like the venerable Academy Awards, tend to remain flat or dip over time, the Grammys are enjoying a ratings renaissance. That helped Mr. Portnow when it came time to renegotiate with CBS for the broadcast rights to the annual event.

“We had the wind at our backs,” he says. The new 10-year deal inked in 2011 includes the possibility of prime-time specials along with the Grammy telecast.

Another way Mr. Portnow is helping keep the Grammy brand alive 365 days a year is with the L.A.-based Grammy Museum, which he debuted four years ago as part of the Grammy’s 50th anniversary. The 30,000-square-foot facility hosts exhibits and public programs that pay tribute to musical legacies and recording arts. He also oversees the Grammy Foundation, established in 1989 to work in partnership with the Recording Academy to preserve music’s cultural heritage.

In addition to his appearances on the Grammy stages and Capitol Hill in recent years, Mr. Portnow visited GW for an event called “How Do I Become a Music Industry Mogul?” in April 2011. He talked with students and alumni about his college experience and career trajectory.

It’s a path that led him to what he calls “the most recognized and prestigious brand in music worldwide,” and last December, Mr. Portnow celebrated 10 years as the head of that brand.

Billboard Magazine recognized his 10 years of leadership by asking the industry’s heavy hitters—like his former colleague Clive Davis—about his achievements during the past decade. Their answers were filled with descriptions like “steadfast advocate,” “bridge-builder,” “visionary,” and testaments to his unifying effect on the industry.

The magazine also asked Mr. Portnow about the legacy he’d like to leave. The answer came as no surprise for music’s father figure: “As an industry, we helped to keep people smiling, and healthy, and happy, and focused and working together to solve some of the problems we have. If that’s what can be said down the line, it’d be the greatest honor on Earth for me.”

And with his contract at the Recording Academy extended to 2015, he’s not finished yet.

“Secretary/treasurer, catapulting him toward a nationally recognized position within the academy. By then, he had long since decided that he was better suited for the business side of music.

“My music was always very dear to me, close to my heart,” says Mr. Portnow, who played both the guitar and bass professionally. “But I doubted the likelihood of making a living at it… my musicianship was good, not great.”

He had started his own production company before becoming an executive at RCA Records, Arista, and 20th Century Records, and worked with the biggest names in the music industry, chart-toppers like David Bowie, Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, Queensryche, Buddy Guy, Aretha Franklin, and R. Kelly.

Now, he stands alongside stars like these regularly on red carpets and once a year on stage at the Grammys.

Under Mr. Portnow’s tenure, the Grammy telecast has enjoyed its largest ratings bump since the dawn of people meters in the late 1980s.

When he took the job at the academy, he had to address the perception that the Grammy Awards showcase had grown too predictable, too rooted in the past. “There was not as much attention paid to the new and cutting-edge things,” he says.

“We’ve created a must-see situation,” he says of the current Grammy Awards events. “We present the artist with an opport-