
September 2, 2007

The Music Man

By LYNN HIRSCHBERG

Rick Rubin is listening. A song by a new band called the Gossip is playing, and he is concentrating. He appears to be in a trance. His eyes are tightly closed and he is swaying back and forth to the beat, trying at once to hear what is right and wrong about the music. Rubin, who resembles a medium-size bear with a long, gray beard, is curled into the corner of a tufted velvet couch in the library of a house he owns but where he no longer lives. This three-story 1923 Spanish villa steeped in music history — Johnny Cash recorded in the basement studio; Jakob Dylan is recording a solo album there now — is used by Rubin for meetings. And ever since May, when he officially became co-head of Columbia Records, Rubin has been having nearly constant meetings. Beginning in 1984, when he started Def Jam Recordings, until his more recent occupation as a career-transforming, chart-topping, Grammy Award-winning producer for dozens of artists, as diverse as the Dixie Chicks, Slayer, Red Hot Chili Peppers and Neil Diamond, Rubin, who is 44, has never gone to an office of any kind. One of his conditions for taking the job at Sony, which owns Columbia, was that he wouldn't be required to have a desk or a phone in any of the corporate outposts. That wasn't a problem: Columbia didn't want Rubin to punch a clock. It wanted him to save the company. And just maybe the record business.

What that means, most of all, is that the company wants him to listen. It is Columbia's belief that Rubin will hear the answers in the music — that he will find the solution to its ever-increasing woes. The mighty music business is in free fall — it has lost control of radio; retail outlets like Tower Records have shut down; MTV rarely broadcasts music videos; and the once lucrative album market has been overshadowed by downloaded singles, which mainly benefits Apple. "The music business, as a whole, has lost its faith in content," David Geffen, the legendary music mogul, told me recently. "Only 10 years ago, companies wanted to make records, presumably good records, and see if they sold. But panic has set in, and now it's no longer about making music, it's all about how to sell music. And there's no clear answer about how to fix that problem. But I still believe that the top priority at any record company has to be coming up with great music. And for that reason, Sony was very smart to hire Rick."

Though Rubin maintains that his intention is simply to hear music with the fresh ears of a true fan, he has built his reputation on the simultaneously mystical and entirely decisive way he listens to a song. As the Gossip, which is fronted by a large, raucous woman named Beth Ditto, shouts to a stop, Rubin opens his eyes and nods yes. This is the first new band signed to Columbia that he has been enthralled by, but he is not yet sure how to organize the Gossip's future. "Let's hear something else," Rubin says to Kevin Kusatsu, who would, at any other record company, be called an A & R executive. (Traditionally, A & R executives spot, woo, recruit and oversee the talent of a record company.) "We don't have any titles at the new Columbia," Rubin explains, as Kusatsu, the first person Rubin hired, slips a disc out of its sleeve. "I don't want to create a new hierarchy to replace the old hierarchy."

Rubin, wearing his usual uniform of loose khaki pants and billowing white T-shirt, his sunglasses in his pocket, his feet bare, fingers a string of lapis lazuli Buddhist prayer beads, believed to bring wisdom to the wearer. Since Rubin's beard and hair nearly cover his face, his voice, which is soft and reassuring, becomes that much more vivid. He seems to be one with the room, which is lined in floor-to-ceiling books, most of which are of a spiritual nature, whether about Buddhism, the Bible or New Age quests for enlightenment. The library and the house are filled with religious iconography mixed with mementos from the world of pop. A massive brass Buddha is flanked by equally enormous speakers; vintage cardboard cutouts of John, Paul, George and Ringo circa "Help!" are placed around a multiarmed statue of Vishnu. On a low table, there are crystals and an old RadioShack cassette recorder that Rubin uses to listen to demo tapes; a framed photo of Jim Morrison stares at a crystal ball. In Rubin's world, music and spirituality collide.

"That's why they call him a guru," Natalie Maines, the lead singer of the Dixie Chicks, explained to me in August, calling from her home in Los Angeles. Maines, who has been with the label since 1997, first worked with Rubin in 2004. "At first, I didn't know if I was down with all that guru stuff. I thought, We're making a record — I don't want to be converted. But Rick's spirituality has mostly to do with his own sense of self. When it comes to the music, he's so sure of his opinion that you become sure of his opinion, too. And isn't that what gurus do? They know how to say the right things at the right time and get the best out of you."

Kusatsu, who has elaborate tattoos on both forearms and a match stuck behind his ear, puts the CD into Rubin's wireless system. This is the fourth male singer-songwriter with an acoustic guitar that Rubin has heard today. The music is heartfelt, spare, poetic. "There were a lot of girls in the audience," Kusatsu says as the track begins. Rubin closes his eyes and gently rocks back and forth. His hands are resting on his stomach, and he seems to be almost meditating. "Everything I do," Rubin told me earlier, "whether it's producing, or signing an artist, always

starts with the songs. When I'm listening, I'm looking for a balance that you could see in anything. Whether it's a great painting or a building or a sunset. There's just a natural human element to a great song that feels immediately satisfying. I like the song to create a mood."

He also seeks a melody. As a kid growing up in Lido Beach, on New York's Long Island, Rubin loved the Beatles. "I never really liked the Stones," he said. "Although, I loved the Monkees — they had all the best songwriters." Through his passion for the Beatles, he became fascinated by the seductive, addictive power of songs. From the first hip-hop records he produced for L L Cool J and the Beastie Boys, he insisted on classic song structure. "Before Def Jam, hip-hop records were typically really long, and they rarely had a hook," he continued. "Those songs didn't deliver in the way the Beatles did. By making our rap records sound more like pop songs, we changed the form. And we sold a lot of records." The Beastie Boys' "Licensed to Ill" (released in 1986) went on to sell what was then an astonishing four million plus records; earlier that year, "Walk This Way," which combined Run-D.M.C. and Aerosmith, was the first crossover rap single and revitalized Aerosmith's career. Rubin masterminded both.

Whenever he agrees to produce an album, Rubin scrutinizes the songs before going into the studio. Currently, he is producing records for the hard rock band Metallica, the nerd power-pop band Weezer (it is part of his deal with Columbia that he can produce albums for acts that are not signed to the label) and the legendary Neil Diamond. At the moment, Metallica is touring in Europe, Weezer is writing a new batch of songs and Diamond has just started in the studio. Rubin works slowly — it can take him years to finish an album. "A lot of that is because of the songs," Rubin explained. "I try to get the artist to feel like they are writing songs for the ages rather than songs for an album. As they write, they come over and play the songs for me. For some reason, most people will write 10 songs and think, That's enough for a record, I'm done. When they play the songs for me, invariably the last two songs they've written are the best. I'll then say, 'You have two songs, go back and write eight more.' "

His responses are instant, specific and constructively definitive. "He doesn't even take notes," Maines recalled. "He listens with his eyes closed, presses 'pause' and then says, 'You need another chorus,' or 'There isn't enough of a bridge.' He's really precise, and you go back to work." In the early Metallica sessions, Rubin has been exacting about different drum sounds. "Lars" — Ulrich, the drummer — "will play two things for me, and I'll say, 'This one is great and that one is terrible,' " Rubin recalled. "Lars will say: 'How do you know? They both sound good to me.' Well, I just know. The right sound reaches its hand out and finds its way. So much of what I do is just being present and listening for that right sound."

Back in the library, the singer-songwriter's demo is ending. Rubin opens his eyes, blinks and says to Kusatsu: "We may have found one. Does he have any other songs I can hear?" While Kusatsu cues up the next sampling, Rubin texts an assistant on his BlackBerry. Within minutes, a chocolate protein drink is brought to him. As Rubin sips, he listens to the next track — a derivative, meandering song that drones like early Dylan without the lyric sophistication. With his eyes closed, Rubin begins to shake his head slowly. He looks disappointed. "And you wonder why people don't buy CDs anymore," Rubin says. "One song is great and the other is. . . ."

His voice trails off. As a producer or the head of a small independent label, Rubin could afford to be very particular. But Columbia, which is the home of established stars like Bruce, Beyoncé, Bob, Billy and Barbra, desperately needs a jolt of the new. It has also been years since Rubin worked with an artist who is not yet established. Since producing System of a Down in 1998, he has focused on reinvigorating the careers of Johnny Cash and producing records for well-known musicians like Tom Petty, U2 and Justin Timberlake. One of the biggest challenges of the Columbia job is to find unsigned artists and help chart their course.

"I don't know about this guy," Rubin says diplomatically. Kusatsu nods. "I don't want to make a decision for the wrong reason," Rubin continues. "The most important thing we have to do now is get the art right. So many of the decisions at these companies have not been about the music. They sign artists for the wrong reasons — because they think somebody else wants them or if they need to have a record out by a certain date. That old way of doing things is obsolete, but luckily, fear is making the record companies less arrogant. They're more open to ideas. So, what's important now is to find music that's timeless. I still believe that if an artist gains the belief of the listener, then anything is possible." Rubin pauses and looks at Kusatsu. "What else can I hear?" he asks.

This summer, Columbia Records began a program called Big Red. The company invited 20 college students from Harvard, Penn State and the University of Miami to work on various music projects. The interns concentrated mostly on the digital marketing and promotions departments in Columbia's offices in Midtown Manhattan, which are on Madison Avenue in a granite skyscraper designed by Philip Johnson.

At the end of their paid internships, the students took part in focus groups that were closely observed by Steve Barnett, Rubin's co-head at the label, and Mark DiDia, whom Rubin brought in as head of operations, as well as by other Columbia executives. The focus groups may have been the real point of Big Red — Barnett and the New York executives, especially those who had been at Sony for years, wanted to try to take the pulse of the elusive music audience. "The Big Red focus groups were both depressing and informative, and they confirmed what I — and

Rick — already knew," DiDia told me afterward. "The kids all said that a) no one listens to the radio anymore, b) they mostly steal music, but they don't consider it stealing, and c) they get most of their music from iTunes on their iPod. They told us that MySpace is over, it's just not cool anymore; Facebook is still cool, but that might not last much longer; and the biggest thing in their life is word of mouth. That's how they hear about music, bands, everything."

Few of the kids knew that record companies participate only in the profits from records — that they derive no income from a band's merchandising or touring revenues. And they all thought that the Columbia logo stood for something prestigious, except in the hip-hop world. There it was deemed too commercial and corporate, but anywhere else it still represented a kind of impressive imprimatur. "Which was good news," DiDia continued. "It means we still have a brand that commands respect."

His insecurity on this point reflects the trepidation that is consuming the music business. Seemingly overnight, the entire industry is collapsing. Sales figures on top-selling CDs are about 30 percent lower than they were a year ago, and the usual remedies aren't available. Since radio is no longer a place to push a single, record companies have turned to television and movies. "High School Musical," which originated with a Disney Channel television show, was the top-selling album of 2006, and not only has "American Idol," with its 30-million-plus audience, created best-selling singers like Kelly Clarkson and Chris Daughtry, but an appearance on the show can also boost sales. When Jennifer Lopez performed on "American Idol," it was considered worth noting that her album "Como Ama Una Mujer," already out for four weeks, dipped only 7 percent rather than falling by the usual double digits. More impressively, songs that are heard on popular shows like "Grey's Anatomy" become instantly desirable. When the Columbia artist Brandi Carlile's song "The Story" was featured on the ABC show, it posted a 15 percent jump in sales and was downloaded 19,000 times in one week. Before being heard on the show, the song had been available for nearly two months without any notable interest.

"Until very recently," Rubin told me over lunch at Hugo's, a health-conscious restaurant in Hollywood, "there were a handful of channels in the music business that the gatekeepers controlled. They were radio, Tower Records, MTV, certain mainstream press like Rolling Stone. That's how people found out about new things. Every record company in the industry was built to work that model. There was a time when if you had something that wasn't so good, through muscle and lack of other choices, you could push that not very good product through those channels. And that's how the music business functioned for 50 years. Well, the world has changed. And the industry has not."

Steve Barnett, who is 55 and was the sole head of Columbia until he agreed to split his role with Rubin, was president of Epic Records, also a division of Sony, until 2005 and was well aware of the seismic shifts in the business. Barnett's corner office on the 25th floor of the Sony building is like a miniversion of the Hard Rock Cafe — autographed guitars belonging to Jeff Beck, Korn and Angus Young from AC/DC rest in their stands, and the walls are covered with vintage posters from the celebrated New York rock venue the Fillmore East. To the right of Barnett's large desk, above the framed Johnny Cash portrait, is a sign that reads, "Your Faith Needs to Be Greater Than Your Fear." "I have always believed that," Barnett told me in mid-August, "but it seems particularly relevant at the moment."

Barnett, who is English, is a sharp counterpoint to Rubin. He lives with his wife and two of their four sons in Connecticut. He has neatly parted sandy brown hair, and on the day we met, he was dressed in a blue button-down shirt, tan slacks and Gucci loafers with dark socks. Barnett is polite, careful, aware of his corporate status. Yet he supported recruiting Rubin. "My wife's father is Dick Vermeil, the former coach of the St. Louis Rams," Barnett explained. "My sons would go to training camp, and when Marshall Faulk started playing for the team, they called me and said, 'Not only is this guy a great player, he makes everyone around him better.' Of course, the Rams went on to win the Super Bowl. I think Rick Rubin is our Marshall Faulk. I knew he would change the culture here."

By the time Barnett first approached Rubin about coming to Columbia, Rubin had already decided that he would have nothing more to do with Columbia Records. This was because of the company's handling of the Rubin-produced Neil Diamond record "12 Songs" in 2005. Diamond was a hero of Rubin's, and he spent two years working on the album, persuading Diamond to record acoustically, something he hadn't done since the '60s.

"The CD debuted at No. 4," Rubin told me at Hugo's, still sounding upset. "It was the highest debut of Neil's career, off to a great start. But Columbia — it was some kind of corporate thing — had put spyware on the CD. That kept people from copying it, but it also somehow recorded information about whoever bought the record. The spyware became public knowledge, and people freaked out. There were some lawsuits filed, and the CD was recalled by Columbia. Literally pulled from stores. We came out on a Tuesday, by the following week the CD was not available. Columbia released it again in a month, but we never recovered. Neil was furious, and I vowed never to make another album with Columbia."

But when Barnett flew out to Los Angeles to discuss the job with Rubin, Rubin was intrigued. "I felt like I could be a force for good," he explained. "In the past, I've tried to protect artists from the label, and now my job would also be to protect the label from itself. So many of the decisions

at these companies are not about the music. They are shortsighted and desperate. For so long, the record industry had control. But now that monopoly has ended, they don't know what to do. I thought it would be an interesting challenge."

As a kind of test, Rubin made some unusual demands. "Oh, God, I would have liked to have heard those negotiations," Natalie Maines exclaimed. "Rick knows what he's worth, and I can just hear him telling them, 'You might never see me, I may never wear shoes, you're not the boss of me.' And I'm sure they were saying, 'Whatever you want, Mr. Rubin.' I was surprised Sony made such a smart decision: someone who knows music should be running the company."

In addition to his "never wearing a suit, never traveling, never going to an office" demands, Rubin also suggested (strongly) that Columbia become the first major record company to go green and abolish plastic jewel boxes for all its CDs. "They thought about it and agreed," Rubin said. "And that made me think they would listen to me. It was also a turning point in terms of how big my reach could be. In the past, I would not normally have access to that kind of sweeping change. At Columbia, I'm able to operate on a much larger scale."

That was in late April. By August, Rubin still sounded optimistic, but a weariness had crept into his voice. "It's a big ship to turn around," he told me in the Hollywood Hills house. Simon and Garfunkel was playing in the background and Rubin was padding through the templelike rooms. "Columbia is stuck in the dark ages. I have great confidence that we will have the best record company in the industry, but the reality is, in today's world, we might have the best dinosaur. Until a new model is agreed upon and rolling, we can be the best at the existing paradigm, but until the paradigm shifts, it's going to be a declining business. This model is done."

While Columbia has made some small changes in its organizational structure, it has not instigated the kind of extensive alterations that Rubin says are crucial to the salvation of the business. Barnett is promoting the division at Columbia that sells music directly to TV, so that a network or cable show can introduce an artist to audiences the way radio once did. At Rubin's suggestion, he has also set up a "word of mouth" department, which will probably employ some members of the Big Red focus group along with dozens of other 20-somethings. The "word of mouth" department will function as a publicity-promotional arm of the company, spreading commissioned buzz through chat rooms across the planet and through old-fashioned human interaction. "They tell all their friends about a band," Barnett explained. "Their job is to create interest."

Rubin has a bigger idea. To combat the devastating impact of file sharing, he, like others in the music business (Doug Morris and Jimmy Iovine at Universal, for instance), says that the future

of the industry is a subscription model, much like paid cable on a television set. "You would subscribe to music," Rubin explained, as he settled on the velvet couch in his library. "You'd pay, say, \$19.95 a month, and the music will come anywhere you'd like. In this new world, there will be a virtual library that will be accessible from your car, from your cellphone, from your computer, from your television. Anywhere. The iPod will be obsolete, but there would be a Walkman-like device you could plug into speakers at home. You'll say, 'Today I want to listen to ... Simon and Garfunkel,' and there they are. The service can have demos, bootlegs, concerts, whatever context the artist wants to put out. And once that model is put into place, the industry will grow 10 times the size it is now."

From Napster to the iPod, the music business has been wrong about how much it can dictate to its audience. "Steve Jobs understood Napster better than the record business did," David Geffen told me. "iPods made it easy for people to share music, and Apple took a big percentage of the business that once belonged to the record companies. The subscription model is the only way to save the music business. If music is easily available at a price of five or six dollars a month, then nobody will steal it."

For this model to be effective, all the record companies will have to agree. "It's like getting the heads of the five families together," said Mark DiDia, referencing "The Godfather." "It will be very difficult, but what else are we going to do?"

Rubin sees no other solution. "Either all the record companies will get together or the industry will fall apart and someone like Microsoft will come in and buy one of the companies at wholesale and do what needs to be done," he said. "The future technology companies will either wait for the record companies to smarten up, or they'll let them sink until they can buy them for 10 cents on the dollar and own the whole thing."

Given the competition among record companies, the subscription model is bound to be tricky to organize and implement. One problem with iTunes is that, with some exceptions, all the songs are priced equally — a Justin Timberlake smash costs the same as an Al Jolson classic. Since a listener would, ideally, pay more for a Top 10 hit, that egalitarian system costs record companies potential millions of dollars. The opponents of the subscription model feel that making all music by all artists available for one flat fee will end up diminishing the overall revenue stream. They would also have to pool their talent, which is difficult for companies that have spent decades fighting over who signs with whom to accept. "There would have to be a new economic plan," Geffen explained. "And it would have to be equitable, depending on the popularity of the artists."

Steve Barnett is nervous about the subscription model. "Smart people have told me if the subscription model is not done correctly," he said, "it will be the final nail in our coffin. I've heard both sides of the argument, and I'm not convinced it's the solution to our problems. Rick wants to be a hero immediately. In his mind, you flick a switch and it's done. It doesn't work like that."

Barnett has other ideas, which he is discussing with Rubin. For instance, asking Columbia artists to give the record company up to 50 percent of their touring, merchandising and online revenue. This is unprecedented — even successful artists like the Dixie Chicks make a large percentage of their income from concerts and T-shirts. "Artists should never give that money up," Natalie Maines told me. "The companies are all scrambling because of the Internet, and they will screw the artist to meet their bottom line. I can't imagine Rick will go along with that."

Rubin won't say — he'd rather concentrate on honing the new model for the industry. "I don't want to waste time," he said, sounding a little frustrated. "The existing people will either get smart, which is a question mark. Or new people will understand what a resource the music business is and change it without us." Rubin paused. "I don't want to watch that happen."

One sunny day in June, Rick Rubin was trying to decide where the new Columbia Records headquarters in Los Angeles should be located. He may not want to go to an office himself, but he still recognizes the influence that a workplace can have on a staff. "I told the corporate Sony people that we have to get out of our old space in Los Angeles as quickly as possible," Rubin said as he disembarked from his Range Rover, which was parked outside a large, one-story former factory that now functions as a sound stage. "The Sony people thought I was insane. I'm also trying to get them to move out of their offices in New York. That space is tainted with the old way. And it's not an artist-friendly place — they search you when you walk in."

Rubin, who was wearing, as usual, khaki cargo pants and a white T-shirt, was trailed by two architects who had flown in from Manhattan for this meeting. He discovered these architects, Dominic Kozerski and Enrico Bonetti, when he saw a chair they designed in a magazine layout. Rubin loves research. He's always on a quest to find just the right thing, whether it be a book or a building. Recently, he hunted down the brand of water that claims to have the greatest level of purity (Ice Age); he pored over architectural manuals to determine what kind of hinge would have been used in 1923 (for his house); and when Johnny Cash was ailing, Rubin discovered a kinesiologist whom Cash credited with extending his life. And so on. Rubin has always been passionate, even compulsive, about his interests.

"From the time I was 9 years old, I loved magic," Rubin recalled as he walked around the cavernous loftlike space. "I was an only child, and I think that had a big impact on me. I always had grown-up friends even though I was a little kid. I would take the train from Lido Beach into Manhattan, and I'd hang out in magic shops. When I was 14, I had magician friends who were 60. I learned a lot from them — I still think about magic all the time. I always think about how things work, the mechanics of a situation — that's the nature of being a magician."

In high school, around 1980, Rubin started listening to a mix of heavy metal and punk rock. (He recalls buying the Germs' record "GI" and "Back in Black" by AC/DC on the same day.) "I saw the Ramones play every week," he said. "I was the only punk in my high school." Rubin paused. "I've always been an outsider. When I did magic, I was the only kid. When I worked with Johnny Cash, I was completely out of place in Nashville. And when I started Def Jam, I was the only white guy in the hip-hop world."

Although Rubin's parents — his father was a shoe wholesaler, and "my mother's job was me" — wanted him to be a lawyer, he had other ideas. In 1983, while he was attending N.Y.U., he borrowed \$5,000 from his parents and recorded "It's Yours" by T La Rock and Jazzy Jay, a 12-inch single that became a local dance hit. Rubin then invented a label, calling his company Def Jam ("Def" meaning great, and "Jam" meaning music), and ran the business out of his dorm room. "The clerk at the front desk handled all the shipping," Rubin recalled.

Russell Simmons, who was then a hip-hop producer, loved "It's Yours" when he heard it on the radio. "I thought for sure that Rick was black," Simmons said. In 1984, a 16-year-old named L L Cool J (Ladies Love Cool James) sent a demo tape to Rubin's dorm room/Def Jam. "He was much better than anything else I heard," Rubin recalled. "And he still is. 'I Need a Beat,' L L's first single, was the real birth of Def Jam." Rubin did not release the track right away — he tightened up the structure, editing the rhymes so they more closely resembled verses in a song. The result is a spare, clean sound, rather than the endless repetitions of most early rap. "I thought the record would do well, and I asked Russell to be my partner at Def Jam. I did all the work from my dorm, and he did the promotion. Russell was five years older, and he was established. By myself, I was just a kid making records. He gave me credibility."

"I Need a Beat" sold 100,000 copies, and in the next year, Def Jam released seven more 12-inch records, selling a total of about 300,000 units. The major labels had ignored rap, dismissing it as a regional fad, but they took notice of Def Jam. CBS offered Rubin and Simmons \$600,000 to pick four acts a year, a kind of finder's fee. "I was 20," Rubin said. "I sent a Xerox of the check to my parents. That's when this stopped being a hobby. At that point, I wanted to live the life of an artist."

By 1987, Rubin had already discovered the Beastie Boys, three upper-middle-class guys from New York City who could rap. The trio's anthemic hit, "(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (to Party!)," which was produced by Rubin, was an instant classic: the rhythms of the words form a hook that circles and loops around your brain and will not leave. The Beasties' debut album, "Licensed to Ill," was the first rap album to go to No. 1 on the Billboard chart. "And we were still in the dorms," George Drakoulias, a successful producer who worked with Rubin for a decade, told me. "Rick didn't want to leave. He got college credits for running the record company. He stayed until he graduated. And by then, he and Russell were fighting over the direction of the company."

Each had a different idea of which bands Def Jam should produce. The partnership fell apart during renegotiations for their contract with CBS. Simmons wanted to get the biggest monetary advance possible from CBS, while Rubin wanted to bet on Def Jam, take a small amount of money for the sake of independence and make most of the cash on the back-end profits. They couldn't agree, and Def Jam was split in two, an arrangement that took nearly three years to finalize.

When things went sour, Rubin flew to Los Angeles to work on the soundtrack for the film "Less Than Zero." "I never really moved here," Rubin said now, still walking around the former factory space. "I never packed and moved. But I never left Los Angeles, even though I hadn't planned to stay." He lived in the Chateau Marmont for nine months and started a new record company, Def American. Rubin changed gears: he signed the hard rock bands Slayer and Danzig and gave a record deal to the misogynist comic Andrew Dice Clay. "At every stage of my career, there have always been people telling me not to do whatever it is that I'm doing," Rubin said. "After my initial success in rap, I started making rock records, and people said, 'Why would you do this?' I made a comedy album, and they said, 'Why this?' Now people ask me, 'Why do you want to do this Columbia job?' It's always the same answer: 'I've always liked doing the stuff that I like.' I just like good music or comedy or whatever it is, and now I have the chance to bring that to a big record company. I have no training, no technical skill — it's only this ability to listen and try to coach the artist to be the best they can from the perspective of a fan."

The architects were still daydreaming about where to put the lobby and the conference room in the factory-turned-soundstage when Rubin suggested that they drive over to another potential site for the new Columbia offices. They piled into his Range Rover, which was being driven by Nino Molina, one of his assistants. In the front seat, Rubin turned on the satellite radio and Sinatra's "Fly Me to the Moon" flooded the car. "Where we are going could not be more different than this spot," Rubin told the architects. "In a way, this factory is like a cool, old vintage Mustang convertible and the next building we're seeing is a Rolls-Royce. In the end, they are both great

and they probably cost the same money, but they are completely opposite in style." Rubin fiddled with the radio. "Every Picture Tells a Story" by Rod Stewart replaced Sinatra. "They couldn't be more different, but both work," Rubin continued.

We drove east until we arrived at the former CAA building on Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills. I. M. Pei designed this curvy, cream-colored travertine structure, and the most dominant feature of the space is its vast, soaring, three-story lobby. "This is a significant building," Rubin said. "How often do you get a chance to reinvent a landmark? Los Angeles doesn't have too many marquee buildings, and this is one of them."

The two spaces — one raw and full of promise and the other established and perfect for reinvention — are a neat metaphor for Rubin's divergent music tastes. "I've always been attracted to both new stuff and older stuff," he said as he opened the door to a plush screening room. "When I came to Los Angeles and started producing more, that became clearer to me."

At Def American, Rubin concentrated on a harder rock sound: Slayer's "Reign in Blood," which is considered to be a heavy metal classic, or the Geto Boys, whose rap song "Mind of a Lunatic" depicted vivid scenes of necrophilia and murder. "I just couldn't put out a record about sex with dead bodies and cutting off women's breasts," said David Geffen, whose company Geffen Records was the distributor of Def American. "I begged Rick not to put out the Geto Boys. In the end, I lost. He left and went to Warner Brothers."

Although Rubin claims that Geffen fired him, he stood by the Geto Boys: "I thought the art was good. As a fan, the Geto Boys were thrilling in the same way that a horror movie might be thrilling." In 1993, Rubin saw that the word "def" was now in dictionaries, and he decided to change the name of his company. Inspired by a documentary he'd seen about the hippie movement, Rubin held a formal funeral for Def. "When advertisers and the fashion world co-opted the image of hippies, a group of the original hippies in San Francisco literally buried the image of the hippie," Rubin explained. "When 'def' went from street lingo to mainstream, it defeated its purpose."

The funeral was lavish. The Rev. Al Sharpton was flown in from New York to deliver the eulogy, the Amazing Kreskin performed and Rubin purchased a cemetery plot and engraved headstone. The death of Def also marked a change in Rubin's career. He had never signed what he calls "grown-up artists," and he wanted to work with someone with enormous talent whose career had been eclipsed. "The first person I thought of was Johnny Cash," Rubin said now. "He was a little like this building — already a legend, but ripe for something different. I knew I could do something great with him."

In many ways, the Cash phase of Rubin's life, which lasted 10 years and produced five albums, has overshadowed all his other accomplishments. Rubin had worked intensively with artists before. When he produced the Red Hot Chili Peppers in 1991, he helped reinvent their sound by persuading them to incorporate melody and a more lyrical approach in their songwriting. The Chili Peppers defined their music narrowly — as rap infused with funk — and Rubin imagined a different quality. "My job was to break down those boundaries," he explained. "No band has to fit into a little box. I saw the Chili Peppers as being like the Beach Boys in some ways. They represented Los Angeles, a place of dreams." Anthony Kiedis, the lead singer, showed Rubin his notebooks, and the producer homed in on a poem about drugs and alienation called "Under the Bridge." He persuaded Kiedis to set the words to music, and the resulting song was a career-altering hit for the band.

Rubin installed the Peppers in a mansion in the Hollywood Hills that was rumored to be Harry Houdini's former home. It actually wasn't, but the house did have secret passageways, and the rumors of its history lingered. A studio was built, and the Peppers moved in with Rubin's personal chef at their service. As he always does when he produces a record, Rubin came and went. "I do not know how to work a board. I don't turn knobs. I have no technical ability whatsoever," he said. "But I'm there when they need me to be there. My primary asset is I know when I like something or not. It always comes down to taste. I'm not there to hold their hands and baby-sit, but I'm there for any key creative decisions."

And yet it was different with Cash. While Cash was an excellent songwriter, Rubin handpicked rock songs like "Hurt" by Nine Inch Nails, "Personal Jesus" by Depeche Mode and "Rusty Cage" by Soundgarden for Cash to reinterpret. (He also suggested "Addicted to Love" by Robert Palmer, but that didn't work.) He was much more involved with every aspect of the production — from the choice of songs to the arrangements to the videos — than he had been with any other artist. Rubin and Cash also had a deep spiritual kinship: during the final months of Cash's life, they took communion together every day, even though Rubin, who was born Jewish and now sees himself as not having any specific religious orientation, should not be eligible for the holy sacraments. Even after Cash's death, Rubin would close his eyes and hear Cash's voice as he said the benediction. "It was like hearing a song that you love," Rubin said. "He was there with me."

When Cash was in Los Angeles, he often stayed at Rubin's house. His bedroom, with its view of the city, was on the third floor, and Cash would take the elevator down to the recording studio in the basement. "I was always aware of how important Cash was," Rubin said. "But no one under 40 who didn't live in the South knew much about Johnny Cash besides a few hits and his name." What seems so clear now was not obvious when Rubin began working with Cash — it was risky to reinvent a living legend for a new generation.

After Cash's death, Rubín was searching for a challenge with an even higher degree of difficulty, a greater test for his powers of listening. The Columbia job is a different kind of reclamation project, but Rubín knows that, just possibly, he could restore an entire institution to greatness. "I can imagine people coming up with brilliant, creative ideas here," Rubín told the architects as they finished their tour of the building. "But Sony has to agree. I'm not sure they realize that they are selling art. Right now they could be selling any product. That's why we have to move — we're in the art business."

For the last two years, Rubín has lived in a house in Malibu that overlooks the ocean. In a way, this house is a return to his childhood in Lido Beach, where he spent his days near the water. "It's inspirational to live out here," Rubín said as he settled into a lounge chair with linen cushions facing the sea. "You feel the rhythm of the planet more keenly. I am never this aware of sunrise and sunset when I'm in town. The daily changes of nature at the beach can be deeply affecting."

Rubín has many of his business meetings here now. The '70s architecture of the house is nondescript, but the views from every room are spectacular. There's an old, elaborately carved grand piano in the living room alongside an enormous four-poster brass bed with a striking white linen canopy. When I arrived, Amanda Santos, Rubín's fiancée, was having a private yoga session. While we sat on the terrace, a small Yorkshire terrier named Henry ran between the living room and Rubín's lap. Despite a state-of-the-art sound system, there was no music playing. Only the sound of the waves.

All this Zen calm notwithstanding, Rubín, who was drinking ginger tea, was working. "Do you know about Paul Potts?" he asked as he went to the kitchen to get his laptop. "You have to see this. It totally blew my mind." Rubín found the proper link and turned the screen to face me. The clip was from a British show called "Britain's Got Talent," a version of "American Idol." Despite its popularity, Rubín has never seen "American Idol," and he had never heard of Simon Cowell, who is a judge on both programs.

"This is insane," Rubín said enthusiastically as the clip began. In the video, an ordinary-looking middle-aged man waited nervously backstage. When he faced the judges, he told them he worked at a mobile-phone store and wanted to sing opera. The studio audience looked annoyed — they clearly wanted to hear a pop song — and the judges were cold and dismissive. No one expected anything remarkable from this dull-looking, forgettable guy.

But then Paul Potts sang — "Nessun dorma" from "Turandot." He had an improbably beautiful voice. "Where does that come from?" Rubín said as he watched. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. "I can't look at this without crying," he said. "His voice is so beautiful." When Potts

finished his song, Cowell said, "I thought you were absolutely fantastic." The studio audience roared with approval, and Potts beamed.

"It's August now — that show was eight weeks ago," Rubin said. "In England, Paul Potts is already gigantic, but we are going to launch him in America. This just blew my mind."

No one could have predicted that one of the first new Columbia artists to excite Rick Rubin would have been a would-be opera singer from a televised talent contest. "I certainly didn't expect his response to be so positive," said Steve Barnett, who originally brought Paul Potts to Rubin's attention. "I was surprised and pleased that he wanted to jump on it."

Rubin has an immediate plan for Potts — he wants to test the powers of his "word of mouth" department. "I want to see if we can create interest without there being a record to buy," he said. "I've told our whole staff to send it to everyone, to tell everyone, to mention it everywhere. I want to get Paul Potts out to the world." Rubin stopped for a moment. "Although, if someone tells you how great this is, it's not as moving. It's the element of surprise that makes you interested in Paul Potts: he looks so bland, and then he sings so well. If you expect him to be great, will the clip still be great?"

The question cannot be answered. A word-of-mouth campaign, like so many possible remedies for the ills of the record business, feels forced. "I just don't know how else people will see Paul Potts," Rubin said. "And I'm really glad I saw him." He paused and looked out at the surf. "I know this sounds hard to believe, but I never had any expectations of success," he said finally. "I knew what I liked, and I didn't really care if anyone else liked it. I still never assume that anyone will like anything. But I can't imagine that they won't, either."

"**Sam Cooke built** this," Neil Diamond said as he greeted Rubin at ArchAngel Studios in West Hollywood on a gray afternoon in late July. "I bought the place around 30 years ago. It's not open to the public, but I let Rick use it sometimes."

Rubin smiled. "I think the Doors made their first demo here," he said as he followed Diamond down the hall, past the walls of gold and platinum Neil Diamond records, past the framed album covers and into a glass recording studio. "And now, Neil."

For the past two weeks, Rubin and Diamond had been working on new material, and Diamond wanted Rubin to hear some songs that were near completion. "You know, initially I stalked Neil," Rubin said as an engineer prepared the first track. "Yes," said Diamond, who is trim and was wearing a suede baseball hat, dark shirt and jeans. "At first, it was a little scary — I didn't know what to make of it."

A classic Neil Diamond song about the renewing power of a relationship boomed from the speakers. Diamond looked down, a little self-conscious. Rubin, eyes closed, was seated at the engineer's console with his arms resting lightly on the mixing board. When the song ended, Rubin paused, opened his eyes and said: "You really caught a good mood on that. It lived for the first time." Diamond nodded. They discussed the merits of adding strings or changing the structure so that the bridge didn't sound so much like a chorus. "Some strings might inspire you," Rubin said. "And maybe some amplification near the end. It needs a little polish."

Diamond agreed, and four more tracks were played for Rubin's opinion. He was encouraging and specific — "a little percussion element could go here," he said. Or, "Let's shorten that rolling piano." After about an hour, Rubin hugged Diamond goodbye. They agreed to reconnect in a month, after he'd written some more songs. "I'll settle in without distraction," Diamond promised. "And then I'll be in touch."

Rubin headed back to his Range Rover. In the car, he said he had some live footage of the Gossip that he wanted to show me. "I saw the group at the Troubadour, and they blew my mind," he said. "It was the best show I've seen in five years. Afterward, I met with the band. They felt stressed, and they were having trouble writing songs. The energy in the room when they were performing was so intense, and I'm not even sure how we'd get it to feel like that in the studio. So we decided to record a live show during their European tour, and we're going to release a DVD of the live album as their first release."

Rubin looked pleased. Beth Ditto, the lead singer of the Gossip, is exactly what he has been looking for since he took this job at Columbia: she is an outsize personality in an outsize body with a Joplin-esque, bluesy voice. Ditto is the kind of artist Rubin loves — unique, ambitious and open to guidance. "For a band like the Gossip," Rubin continued, "the support of a record company like Columbia is still really important. I grew up in the independent music business, and you still really need the muscle of the majors. A record company call can still get you heard like nobody else."

Rubin paused. "That's the magic of the business," he said. "It's all doom and gloom, but then you go to a Gossip show or hear Neil in the studio and you remember that too many people make and love music for it to ever die. It will never be over. The music will outlast us all."

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