

live! in class at yale! david geffen!



by claire potter

David Geffen is more than the professor of CBK 138A, titled *The Music Industry and Arts Management*. He is a retired self-made millionaire, consultant to Warner Communications, Inc., discoverer of Jackson Browne, Jeri Mitchell, and the Eagles, and founder of A&M Records. Now he spends one day a week teaching the most controversial class at Yale, a seminar which, to some people, seems to reveal all of the weaknesses of the College Seminar system. It has no reading list, and, until recently, no requirements; worst of all, it's fun.

Cheer came to class unexpectedly. Linda Ronstadt and Jani Mitchell were guest lecturers, along with Clive Davis, former head of Columbia Records and founder of Arista Records. Now that's fun. And nobody says that learning can't be fun. The problem, at least from Yale's point of view, is that the students in Geffen's class were assigned absolutely no work for the term; they were only required to come to class, listen to Geffen and his guests and participate. To Yale, this means gut. To David Geffen, however, the seminar was a valid learning experience in the field of arts management.

But here one runs into the problem of determining what counts as a valid learning experience according to Yale's standards. A theoretical final exam for David Geffen's course would have to run something like this: You have five years. Get into the record business any way you can and see if you can earn \$5 million or more. This exam will be graded on a pass-fail basis.

Yale simply does not offer a format by which David Geffen could pass on what he knows and find out if he has actually gotten his message across. It puts the student in the position of listening passively, and while the sheer experience of listening passively to David Geffen might be very educational, so are a lot of things which are not accredited at Yale. This may be true of lots of college seminars now offered at Yale; it only became a problem for Geffen because the spotlight was aimed at his course from the very start. You just don't bring Linda Ronstadt in as a guest lecturer and have no one notice. What's that old expression?—The bigger they come, the harder they fall.

The question on a lot of people's minds right now is, how did the seminar ever come to be offered at all? The answer is that when the seminar passed the Committee on Teaching in the Residential Colleges a reading list, an oral report, and a term paper were included as requirements. But on the first day of class, one student said "Geffen walked in and told us to forget all that stuff, that he wanted us to come to class and listen to him and his guests, and that we couldn't learn it from books." This fact might never have come out, but for one thing. Two students who were at the first class as alternate members but were later not admitted, got mad and decided to do something about it.

"Those people he threw out were very sour about it," according to one student who stayed.

And from there it was all downhill for David Geffen. If he had expected to come to Yale and have his seminar respected for its popular subject matter and sensational guest lecturers despite its academic unconventionality, he was sorely disappointed. Publicly that the course was a gut and not worthy of Yale credit cast doubts on its respectability and gave him only trouble where he had sought gratification. As one student put it, "He's gotten a lot of abuse from the faculty for lowering the standard of a Yale education." And that certainly isn't gratifying.

One student described Geffen's reaction to the controversy as "more hurt than anything. The discrimination charge bothered him; I mean, he obviously wanted people he was interested in for the seminar. And the part about how 'the University would be apalled if they knew what was going on in there'—it's just a class, that's all."

Another commented that, "He's teaching for his own reasons, self gratification is part of it, and I think one term will do it."

When interviewed, Geffen seemed to be both hurt and angry. He must have been angry, because his voice over the phone was loud enough for a long distance connection from New Haven to China.

"I'm not interested in talking about it any more," he snapped. "If you want to come see the class, that's fine, the last meeting is on Tuesday, but I don't want to talk about it any more."

"I did it out of the best intentions and I hope that the people in the class are getting something out of it. If they consider it a gut, that's too bad. I worked very hard to put it together. I don't want any more attention for this class; the more attention it gets, the more controversy there is."

"At this point I'm careful not to create any more crap in my own life."

Geffen was offended by the attitude that many people at the University seemed to take toward him, and his own personal style only aggravated people's doubts about the course. By anyone's account, he is a hustler—his whole career in a hyped-up business is based on being able to hype better than anyone else.

Consider this story about Geffen's college career, repeated by several students in the class. According to one, "he tells it to everyone."

"He was at about four schools at one time or another," the students says, "and I guess he was at UCLA for about a term. So he finally went to New York and applied for a job in the mailroom at the William Morris agency. The catch was that he had to have a college degree even to work in the mailroom, so he told them that he had graduated from UCLA and he got the job.

"A little later, he ran into this guy in the mailroom who had been fired, and when he asked why, the guy told him that he had lied about having a college degree and that the agency had checked up on him. When they found out he didn't have one, they got rid of him.

"So David knew he was in trouble, and he watched every single piece of mail that came in, waiting for the letter from UCLA. Finally it came and he took it, forged his recommendations, and put it back in the mailroom. And kept his job."

It's easy to see why so many students are quick to point out that Geffen is the kind of guy who has a lot to teach them. "The class is completely open and relaxed," one student commented. "Granted, there isn't a lot of work required, but I agree with David about the papers. I don't think we would learn anything from them. Participation in class is the only thing that's required. He gets upset if you don't talk." Referring to the charge that the course is a gut, she claimed, "is an insult to us as well as to him."

The students also insist that they learn a lot from the guest lecturers, and that Geffen's contacts in the

recording world make him especially valuable to the course. According to one member of the class, Geffen "makes a point of showing us people who are self-made, created their own careers, because he is self-made himself. He's very friendly with everyone in the business, and that's really the reason for his success. And that's also why he's so good for a class like this. At the first meeting he told us that whenever we wanted to lecture, all we had to do was tell him and he'd try to get them."

Another explained further: "When he brings different people to class, he's not just indulging us with stars. Springsteen's manager told a lot of stories, but that's not really the point of the class. The guests and students run the class and he interjects occasionally."

However much the class is run by the students and guest lecturers, Geffen seems to rise as the strongest element in the class, not because of his capacity as a teacher, but because of his personality. Their comments indicate that they learn as much about David Geffen as they do from him. Maybe more. One mentioned that when he argues with his students he can be fairly nasty: "When Joni Mitchell was there," he said, "some guy was saying that a few record companies have no profit motive. He used a company called Rounda as an example, and Geffen got really vicious. He said that all companies were motivated by profit, and finally they were really yelling at each other. Joni had to tell them to be quiet, then she turned to the class and said, 'Now you see how he negotiates those great recording contracts.'"

Another student commented, "I've always been impressed with his gut approach to things, but you know,

he's very tense about being upstaged by the guests. Those people are great—full of lies about themselves."

They're also filled with some interesting truths about themselves, which makes the class itself indicative of the culture shock between Yale and David Geffen. "Linda Ronstadt was really freaked out because she never went to college, and there she was lecturing to Yale students," one member of the class said. "A lot of them are like that, they never went to college, so we're as interesting to them as they are to us." It seems to be a total reversal; the students become celebrities to the performers. A few students gave Ronstadt a tour of the University at her request, and she was fascinated by Beinecke.

Of course, there was the sight-seeing aspect of the experience for students as well. Geffen's students may become sought-after cocktail party guests around campus after they start regaling their friends with stories about what an ass-hole everyone says Bob Dylan is, the fact that Cher could not remember what the yellow part of an egg is called when she visited class, and the phenomenon of Linda Ronstadt's trefen septum.

In the end, of course, the students in CS88K 134a probably did about the same amount of work as students in any of a number of college seminars. They certainly had a lot of, uh, interesting experiences, and they may have learned a lot about the record business. But the Geffen controversy may spell trouble for seminars in the future by bringing questions about the way they are taught and taken under public scrutiny.

In fact, for the first time in his life, David Geffen may have produced a bomb.