

Created by: Debra C. Argen
Joel Dorn Interview

Interview with multi-**Grammy** award-winning producer - **Joel Dorn**.

In 2005, Joel Dorn celebrated 45 years in the record industry. He is a multi-Grammy award-winning producer, who continues producing records, and is probably one of the most fascinating people I have met in a long time.



Joel Dorn

Debra:

Joel, you have had an amazing career thus far. You have won multiple Grammy Awards; have 12 Gold albums, 5 Platinum albums, and 7 Gold singles under your belt. You're like the Midas of the record industry.

Joel:

Not really. I had a really good 1-year run from the mid-60s to the mid-70s; and then the music morphed into something different, but I kept doing what I was doing. In the 1990s, I reinvented myself, and started doing what I want to do.

Debra:

Most people would consider themselves successful if they achieved only a small fraction of what you've accomplished, yet you're still producing records. What motivates you?

Joel:

I really enjoy producing records.

Debra:

By the age of 14, you had already decided that you wanted to be in the record business, and began corresponding with Atlantic Records co-founder, Nesuhi Ertegun, which is really amazing. Not only do most 14 year olds have no idea what they want to do, the idea of contacting the head of a record label would be intimidating to say the least.

Joel:

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I think it was more like blind ambition. It doesn't seem too out of whack when you're 14 years old.

Debra:

What influences did you have in your early life that made you decide that you wanted to be in the record industry?

Joel:

I have always loved music. During WWII, my mother would keep the radio on all day to listen to the news, as our family was scattered all over. When I would wake up, my mother would play Al Jolson's April Showers for me, which I loved.

I loved clocking new releases to see which would become hits. I also loved movies and sports. It was something that just happened. I can't sing, can't dance, can't play a musical instrument, can't arrange, but I learned that there were A&R men (Artists & Repertoire) who handled the production side. In Junior High School, I decided that I wanted to either work in movies or music, and music won out.

Debra:

You began as a Disk Jockey, went on to work at Atlantic Records, and then created your own record labels, beginning with Night Records, followed by 32 Records, and your most recent, Hyena Records in 2003.

Are the challenges in the record industry much different today than when you began your career?

Joel:

The odds at achieving in the record industry are difficult. It is a young man's game; you have to change, have to adjust your talent to stay in the business. You have to find your own niche.

Challenges are challenges though. The difference is that the record industry keeps changing. If I had the attitude now that I had when I started out, I wouldn't have been able to get in. When I started, the record industry was more of a cottage industry. Now it is a major industry, not wildcatters and crapshooters mortgaging their home and betting on a song. There are major conglomerates involved that are also in film in addition to music.

Debra:

It seems that you have found your own niche. You have had the good fortune of discovering and working with some great young talents including Bette Midler, Roberta Flack, and produced the first three albums by the talented Jane Monheit.

Joel:

Jane is fabulous. She is a good kid, a good girl, very bright, and I had fun working with her.

Debra:

As a producer, do you ever "just know" that you've found a future star?

Joel:

Always. I feel it in 10 seconds, okay, maybe not 10 seconds, but a bell rings. Sometimes, even though I know they will succeed, I am not the one to take them there. I made some of the best records I ever made with Aaron Neville, but it was when Linda Ronstadt joined him that he busted out. I have also turned down some projects that succeeded.

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About 7 or 8 years ago, I produced "Jazz for a Rainy Afternoon", which went on to sell over a million records, and after Jane Monheit had been turned down by other record labels, I received a call to produce her album, which I did.

Debra:

You are a producer who crosses genres easily - jazz, afro-futuristic jazz, funk, R&B, soul, and gospel.

Joel:

I just produced a spectacular gospel album.

Debra:

How do you decide on a project?

Joel:

I have an idea and I chase it, or I wander about aimlessly and then find it. I live in a certain world, in a certain way. I play in a certain area that provides me with opportunities. I also do outside work as well, sometimes not under my own name, and produce books, television commercials, and voiceovers. This year I want to work with more young people.

Debra:

How do you work with the artists with regards to the song selection, arrangement, and order of the songs?

Joel:

I try to work with people who already bring what they have, and then I try to capture it and complement it, in order to record it properly.

Debra:

What music do you listen to when not busy producing?

Joel:

I listen to older music. Ray Charles on Atlantic Records is my favorite. I love old black Gospel music, Phil Spector records, The Drifters; I love Frankie Lymon and the Mills Brothers. I also love certain periods of music - the 30s - 70s, as well as the 50s and 60s as really being the time.

Debra:

From your resume of successes, it doesn't seem that you take much time to relax, but how do you recharge your batteries?

Joel:

I'm a treadmill guy, so when I am working on the treadmill, I listen to what I am working on and it really makes the time fly. I listen to stuff I did, or just grab stuff 'from ago.' It can be Louis Jourdan or Sly, as long as it's good, that the quality is there. I love New Orleans music; love Dr. John.

I just finished a Gospel compilation, "Gospel Music" that I made with Lee Friedlander, who I met when we both worked at Atlantic, and he was the house photographer. Today, Lee is probably one of the 10 best photographers in the world, and just had a major retrospective show in 2005 of 500 of his photographs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He wanted us to a project together, so we did the Gospel

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compilation, which I am extremely passionate about.

Debra:

What's next?

Joel:

I'm just finishing a Dr. John Live in New Orleans from 1989 CD. Dr. John has about 600 live performances on tape. I am also working on compilations for retail on Swing, Jazz, Doo-Wop, and Blues, television commercials for Time Life, and limited edition coffee table books.

I'm also a make-believe photographer. I like to walk around New York and take photographs. In the Village, there are a few blocks that are called the Freedom of Speech blocks, where sculptors, painters and other people sell their stuff. I want to see if I can put some of my photographs on a stand and see if people will buy my work. You have to be there 2-3 days per week though to establish your place, so I don't know, but I want to try to do it.

Debra:

Do you sleep at all?

Joel:

A lot of what I do is thinking about it, about creating it, so I like to have many ideas going on all the time.



Joel Dorn being Joel Dorn

There you have it, a quick look into the exciting life of Joel Dorn, award-winning producer and owner of **Hyena Records**www.hyenarecords.com. I can't wait to see what he does next!

PS - During the course of our interview, Joel convinced me that I had to give his new "Gospel Music" CD (released on [Hyena Records](http://www.hyenarecords.com) on February 14, 2006), a listen; even though this is not normally a genre that I listen to, Joel has a way about him that convinces you to try new things – to just give it a listen, and so I did; and although I still prefer other genres, you can really hear his passion on his release.

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