

BEHIND THE VOICES
TOP RADIO STARS

DR. BARTH GREEN
SAVING LIVES IN HAITI

LOCAL ARTS GUIDE
SUMMER CONCERTS

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Biggest misconception about hip-hop: "People think it's black music. There are more white people buying hip-hop records than anyone else."

Qualities he needs to see in an artist: "I need the artist to have a vision from A to Z. You can't just take the check and run. You have to work. If you have \$100,000, what are you going to do to blow yourself up?"

Major act that he could have signed: "Eminem. He was making Wu-Tang [type] records at the time. ... I think we would have done well with him, but probably not as well as he's done."

The inspiration behind his involvement in Think Pink Rocks: "My father had breast cancer."



KING OF URBAN COOL

HIP-HOP MAGNATE AND BOCA RESIDENT STEVE RIFKIND KEEPS THE MUSIC INDUSTRY ABUZZ WITH HIS EYE FOR TALENT AND A STREET-SMART APPROACH TO MARKETING.

Someone is always handing **STEVE RIFKIND** music. It happened at Houston's, his lunchtime hang in Boca, where one of the restaurant's help slipped him a recording. It arrives by the bushels in the mail; the chairman of SRC Records and one of the most influential business minds in the music industry estimates he receives more than a thousand demo tapes each week.

It even happened on the other side of the Atlantic. "Once, in London, I was at an Indian restaurant—dining alone—and someone handed me their CD," says the part-time Boca resident.

It's no wonder. Wouldn't any aspiring hip-hop or R&B artist want their music in the hands of the man who launched the careers of everyone from Wu-Tang Clan to Akon? At 48, Rifkind remains at the top of his game as a star-maker (R&B newcomer Melanie Fiona had a No. 1 song last year) and as a marketing innovator with his Street Team promotional arm.

He's also a man of conviction when it comes to business. Once, during a negotiation for Wu-Tang's second album, BMG was being stubborn about an extra \$20,000 in marketing—and Rifkind refused to back down.

"The head of business affairs, a woman, told me to shut the f--- up," he says. "I picked up a chair ... and threw it through the glass window next to the door. ... By not investing that extra \$20,000, it cost us \$1 million in profit."

Rifkind, whose company is presenting sponsor of the Think Pink Rocks concert at Mizner Park to benefit breast cancer awareness, spoke to Boca Raton about the hip-hop industry, Boca's potential as a music destination and much more.

Your father, Jules, ran Spring Records, which primarily involved R&B artists, including James Brown. What was it like growing up around that?

My dad's three big artists were staples of the R&B community—Joe Simon, Millie Jackson and Fatback Band—but they weren't exactly popular in the white, Jewish area of Long Island. My friends really didn't know who these artists were.

Dad didn't have these people to our house or anything, but he did take me to some of the parties. So I got to know some of them. I actually took over Joe Simon's apartment in the city when he moved to Chicago.

Growing up, I was more into sports, mostly basketball. But I also played soccer, tennis and baseball; I was too small for football. I was a great baseball pitcher—until I got hit in the head with a [line drive].

Do you try to give your kids (Alex, 14; twins Caroline and Ryan, 9) more access to the artists with whom you work?

Alex, back in the day, would call David Banner, the first artist I signed to SRC Records, while we were on vacation in Florida—and while David was in the middle of a tour. Ryan, I'm going to name him vice-president of my company when it comes to creative. The song off of Melanie Fiona's debut album ["The Bridge"] that hit No. 1 on the R&B charts ["It Kills Me"]?

Ryan picked it as a single.

Did anything you experienced watching your father influence you as you embarked on your own career?

The difference between my dad and I? He came from nothing. He watched that dollar. When he should have taken chances, he didn't because of his upbringing. I grew up not scared of the dollar. ... I grew up a spoiled kid. I was never afraid to take a chance. ... But at a certain age, he cut me off and told me I had to swim on my own.

What made you think that you had what it took to be a player in the hip-hop industry?

I didn't have any fear. ... When I moved to Los Angeles, I hooked up with a company and just bartered for rent space. I promoted records for free if they gave me an office.

I remember driving to a radio station through a horrible part of town. I thought the car had backfired—but I had driven into the middle of a gang war. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. The guy in the car with me goes straight to the floor. But I wasn't thinking

about bullets spraying. I just wanted to do my job, get to the radio station and promote this record.

What was the atmosphere in the rap business like in the early 1990s?

It was cutthroat. But we were just starting out, so we were the underdogs [Ruffkind launched Loud Records in 1991]. If we liked something, it wasn't on anybody's radar yet. To this day, I won't get into a bidding war over an artist. The second that happens, I walk away.

The first artist I signed was someone by the name of Tongue Twister. The second group was called The Alcoholics, which received critical acclaim but never quite made it. Then, we signed Wu-Tang Clan. On a \$10,000 investment, we ended up selling more than 40 million albums combined.

Even before Wu-Tang, record companies were hiring us to help them promote artists because of the creative marketing we were doing on the street. But [the success of] Wu-Tang took it to a whole different level. The bigger the record company got, the bigger

the marketing company got. Soon, corporate America came to us.

Your understanding of urban subculture is at the core of your marketing. How did the Street Team philosophy evolve?

The streets don't lie. How many times have you been to a restaurant where the reviews were horrible but the word of mouth was the opposite? What really matters? The word of mouth. If a record company hired us, we would get real information. Good, bad or ugly. We get the true feedback. If it's bad, we'll turn it around—if you listen to us.

That's why our track record with our record company became so successful. We would not put out an album until we were 100 percent sure of what we had. We'd keep testing and testing and testing until it was right.

The streets don't lie. The more records we sold without radio—just from how we marketed on the streets—the more corporate America came to us.

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How did you discover Akon?

I shattered my nose playing basketball with my oldest son in the backyard. My nose is in my hand. I'm seeing three baskets. Blood is dripping everywhere. ... But I wanted to show my son that it's OK to get hurt. So I'm telling him to pass me the ball. And I shoot it at a basket that isn't there.

Finally, I go to the hospital. I was supposed to leave that night and go to New York. But I wanted to stop by my office. ... A security guy is getting my stuff, and one of my Street Team guys comes running to the car telling me I have to hear this song.

I'm still bleeding everywhere. He puts in the CD. It's Akon. ... Instead of going to New York, I flew to Atlanta. I had my lawyers draw up papers that night. The next morning we completed the deal with Akon.

What prompted your interest in bringing more music to Boca?

I love Boca. ... When we did the second Think Pink concert, it hit me what a beautiful setting [the Amphitheater] was. ... I started asking about how we could do more in that theater. Centre for the Arts doesn't have the relationships and the knowledge that we do. Look at the shows we put on the last two years—we do this in our sleep. ... The stereotypes are part of what's holding this back. People are worried about violence with [hip-hop] concerts.

You also have an interest in bringing Hollywood to South Florida.

Why are all the big celebrities living in L.A.? If you're an A-list actor or musician, you're getting screwed. You have ... state tax and assorted other California taxes. ... Florida is doing a bad job of advertising itself. They need to hire me to do the marketing. I want to see the government help to market Florida as more than just a retirement place. 📍