

NO TIP?
NO PROBLEM!

E-MAIL: THE NEW ASSISTANT

**USA ON THE
ROCKS**

VANNA
IN HER OWN WORDS

ENTERTAINMENT



Hit Man

**The guy who signed
Slick Rick and Jay Z is still killing it
By Devin Leonard**

Photograph by Boru O'Brien O'Connell

Does anybody need anything?" asks Lyor Cohen. "A martini?" On a private plane flying from Newark to Kansas City, Mo., Cohen, one of America's best-known record company executives, isn't serving drinks. But the flight attendants are ready to take orders—even though it's early afternoon and nobody's ready

for cocktails just yet. 300 Entertainment, a startup record label that Cohen co-founded almost two years ago, is flying a group of executives, journalists, and assorted hangers-on to see its biggest act, Fetty Wap, an amiable rapper whose effervescent hit, *Trap Queen*, a drug dealer's ode to his girlfriend, broke out this summer. In a few hours, Fetty Wap will open for R&B star Chris Brown. Cohen wants to be there, along with everybody he can fit on the plane.

Cohen, who is 6-foot-5 and looks as if he were born to play an assassin in a Hollywood thriller, is also trying to show that 300 is for real. In November 2013 he announced that he and his partners were creating a new kind of record company, one that would challenge its larger rivals by melding the talent-scouting skills of industry veterans with technology that mines the Internet for undiscovered acts. They raised \$15 million, including \$5 million from Google, as reported by *Billboard*. Once a highly paid executive at Warner Music Group, Cohen says he's content to sit in a cubicle in a small office and use the same bathroom as his employees. "I know this doesn't look like we adjusted the cost structure," he concedes, glancing around at the jet's white-leather interior. "But if I told you how much I got this plane for, you would be very impressed."

Without a large team of marketing people and a back catalog of old hits, some wonder if Cohen's company can survive. "A lot of longtime observers have been watching 300 Entertainment to see if he can get traction," says Larry Miller, director of the music business program at New York University. Surely, Cohen's competitors would like to have signed Fetty Wap, whose sing-song melodies stood out in a summer of formulaic anthems. Fetty Wap doesn't look like anybody else either; he's missing an eye because of childhood glaucoma. "The Fetty Wap thing was great," Miller says. "But people want to see if it can really blow up and become a real business."

Cohen came up at a time when the industry was dominated by self-styled A&R executives proud of their ability to recognize and schmooze talent. If you could do that, the rest was easy. "The way to get rich is to keep walking around until you bump into a genius," said the late Ahmet Ertegun, founder of Atlantic Records. As streaming music took off, technology companies claimed they could do a better job finding artists that people liked by using data. But anybody who's used these services knows there is something unsatisfying about computer-driven

recommendations; that's why some of streaming music's biggest players like Spotify and Apple play up the humans involved in their offerings.

Sipping tea on the jet, Cohen, 56, says he's trying to blend old and new school approaches. Born in New York City, he grew up in a household he describes as "a hippie Jewish think tank," and he got into the music business by promoting concerts for Red Hot Chili Peppers and the seminal rap group Run DMC. Cohen became the latter group's road manager and eventually head of Def Jam Recordings in 1987. "We came in as a disruptive force with rap music," he says. "'Disruption' is not a bad word but a word we embrace."

At Def Jam, Cohen had a tendency to be the loudest person in the room, even around the Beastie Boys, Public Enemy, and Slayer. "He used to be a screamer," says Bill Adler, Def Jam's publicity director from 1984 to 1990. "He's a more seasoned individual now." Yet Cohen could also be nurturing. Jay Z calls him his "mentor." Other rappers affectionately nicknamed him "Lansky."

When Edgar Bronfman Jr. took over Warner Music Group in 2004, he put Cohen in charge of the company's U.S. recorded music division. There he nurtured acts such as Bruno Mars and Death Cab for Cutie and persuaded many of them to sign so-called 360 deals, which entitled the company to a cut of touring and merchandise income. "I was the architect of that," Cohen says.

Cohen, in turn, made an annual salary as high as \$3 million along with big bonuses. He lived in a town house on the Upper East Side and dated fashion designer Tory Burch. But in 2011, Russian-born billionaire Len Blavatnik bought Warner Music. In little more than a year, Cohen was gone.

He took some time to think about his next move. In the fall of 2013 he spoke at MIT, telling students that when he was at Def Jam, he found acts to sign by monitoring radio stations. Now, Cohen said, he planned to use the Internet to do that more efficiently, but following online traffic alone couldn't generate hits: "All you smart people, you could come up with an algorithm, but somebody still has to show up and say, 'Yeah, I feel that.'"

In November of that year, Cohen unveiled 300, which he founded with former Def Jam colleagues Kevin Liles and Todd Moscovitz. (They took the name from the Hollywood blockbuster about a small band of Spartan warriors who held off an invading Persian army.) At the time, 300 had a deal with Twitter giving it exclusive access to music-related data. Cohen says the arrangement hasn't worked out. "We've suspended the deal until they get more engineers in place," he says. (Matthew Plotnik, who runs music partnerships at Twitter, says the company looks forward to continuing to work with 300, which he calls "an innovative label.")

300 has created what Cohen describes as "a dashboard," a proprietary computer program that monitors the Internet for songs that

Lyor Cohen's Golden Record
With more than 30 years in the music industry, the exec has worked with more than a few greats



Public Enemy



Slayer



LL Cool J



Jay Z



Foxy Brown

generate an unusual amount of activity—which could mean shared links, “likes,” Twitter raves, or iTunes sales. “It blips,” Cohen says. “It trips a wire, and then we listen to it.”

Last year, Fetty Wap lit up the dashboard. He’d already recorded *Trap Queen* in a New Jersey studio and uploaded it onto SoundCloud in March 2014. The song spread virally, attracting the attention of bloggers. Cohen and his staff sampled Fetty Wap’s songs, sized him up in person, and quickly signed him. “We don’t have to go through a whole process to sign them,” Cohen says. “We’re trigger pullers.” He and his colleagues also helped Fetty Wap craft his image as a likeable up-and-comer from Paterson, N.J., who’s humbled by his improbable rise. “He is a pretty soft-spoken guy,” says Naomi Zeichner, editor-in-chief of the *Fader*, a music magazine. “They really helped create a narrative around what he is doing.” The label’s deals with artists vary but often let them keep the rights to their music—something that was rare in the old days. “Are they better deals for the artists?” Moscovitz says. “They are better in that we pay the artists on time.”

In Kansas City, Cohen disembarks from the plane accompanied by Xin Li, his tall fiancée, who works as an executive at Christie’s. Everyone boards a bus for a preconcert dinner at Fiorella’s Jack Stack Barbecue, a touristy place. “How’s everybody doing?” Cohen asks. “Have you had the prime rib? It’s great.”

After about an hour, Cohen, loaded down with several shopping bags of barbecue sauce and whatever else he’s found in the restaurant’s gift shop, herds his entourage to the Sprint Center. He

“All you smart people, you could come up with an algorithm, but somebody still has to show up and say, ‘Yeah, I feel that’ ”



Slick Rick



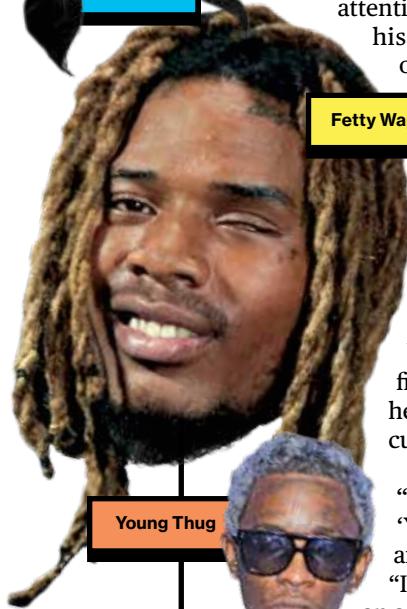
Kanye West



Janelle Monáe



Skrillex



Fetty Wap



Young Thug

guides the bus driver around traffic cones into a backstage parking lot, then spirits everybody past the guards to Fetty Wap’s crowded dressing room. Cohen may not be running a big record label, but he still knows how to pull strings.

Members of Zoo Gang, Fetty Wap’s crew, pass weed rolled in the wrappers of Backwoods Honey Berry cigars and share a bottle of Rémy Martin 1738 cognac. One Zoo Gang member rides in and out of the room on a Hovertrax. Two young women dressed for a party sit on the couch looking bored. Fetty Wap, who’s wearing olive-green shorts and what looks like a long white nightshirt, appears distracted; he’s been having voice troubles, but he brightens up when the 300 Entertainment people arrive.

“How are you doing, Fetty?” Cohen asks. “Are you feeling better?”

“A lot better,” Fetty Wap says. “We’ve been rehearsing.”

“Well, you promised us a lot, and look what you’ve done,” Cohen says.

A photographer tries to gather everyone for a group shot. “OK, everybody, put that weed down,” Fetty Wap orders his crew. Then he changes into a Kansas City Royals T-shirt, puts on some gold jewelry, and heads out to perform before an audience that knows every word of his songs. His first album, released in September, debuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* chart. As long as Fetty Wap keeps delivering, 300’s future looks good. “Having hits solves a lot of problems,” NYU’s Miller says.

To find the next Fetty Wap, Cohen had 300’s interns scour the Internet throughout the summer. Sun-ui Yum, an 18-year-old economics major at Harvard, says he and his fellow interns found a lot of promising acts. Yum sat 5 feet away from Cohen at 300’s offices. “I’ll just say that there’s nothing quite like Lyor shouting random things across the office at random intervals,” Yum wrote in an e-mail.

300’s next star may be the Atlanta rapper Young Thug. For a while, Young Thug wore dresses, which got some attention online. Since 300 signed him last year, his profile has only risen. “He’s become one of hip-hop’s most ubiquitous artists, and easily its most challenging and thrilling,” the *New York Times* wrote in September.

Recently, Cohen invited Gus Wenner, head of digital at Wenner Media, publisher of *Rolling Stone* (which his father, Jann, founded) to see Young Thug in New York. This time the rapper came out in a poncho. Wenner says he was mesmerized by an artist whom he suspects might redefine rap music. “Is this the cutting edge?” he recalls Cohen asked him. “Or is *this* the cutting edge?”

Cohen qualifies the exchange slightly. “When talking to anybody, I’m saying, ‘Yeah, this motherf---er is the cutting edge and amazing and is the new thing,’” he says. “I’m promoting them. But when I actually get an artist in front of people? It’s right there.”