

A NIGHT OUT WITH

Clive Davis

One Rock Angel Who Refuses to Fall

By ALEX WITCHEL

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. — “Have fun, Dad,” called one of Clive Davis’s sons, as his father approached the red carpet outside the Beverly Hills Hotel on Tuesday evening. Mr. Davis, who has been the host of this pre-Grammy gala since 1974, when he founded Arista Records, waved.

The party, a sit-down dinner for 600, followed by a concert of artists from all labels, is known as the Grammy equivalent of the legendary Swifty Lazar Oscar bash. And this year’s celebration had a special resonance for Mr. Davis, 67, who is known mostly for his successes with radio-friendly, schmaltzy pop hits like Barry Manilow’s “Mandy” and Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You,” and for his longevity in a business known for burnout. Mr. Davis operates like a politician; lots of glad-handing up front while he controls business out of earshot.

A year ago, his future seemed doubtful, when BMG Entertainment, which owns Arista, wanted to shift him to a corporate position rather than allow him to keep receiving equity in the company. It was questionable timing on BMG’s part; Arista was having its most profitable year ever, Mr. Davis was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and received a Grammy Trustees Award. Unsurprisingly, he left.

After plenty of outcry from artists like Ms. Houston, Aretha Franklin and Carlos Santana (whose Grammy-winning “Supernatural” album Mr. Davis produced, selling 22 million copies since 1999), BMG buckled and entered a 50-50 partnership with him, investing \$150 million in his new label, J Records. So this year’s party had a triumphant “I’m still here” quality.

The legend Mr. Davis has built for himself through the years as an industry guru drew an eclectic crowd, from old-time Hollywood fixtures like Dick Clark to the freshly minted hip-hop artist Eve. People flocked around Mr. Davis, seeming to want to touch him just for luck.

Inside the hotel was a second red carpet

for television crews and the early arrivals — the kind who consider cocktail parties an opportunity instead of an obligation — who slurped down the pre-poured cosmopolitans and positioned themselves as near to the cameras as they could get.

Jo Schuman, the producer of the San Francisco musical, “Beach Blanket Babylon” and Mr. Davis’s first cousin, darted in and out of the crowd, stopping to welcome Mayor Willie Brown of San Francisco, elegant in a long black evening jacket. After George Benson, Kenny G and Steven Seagal made their entrances, she pointed out one of Mr. Davis’s newest discoveries, Alicia Keys, a young woman wearing cornrows and rhinestone-studded sneakers.

“Clive is as excited tonight for Alicia Keys as he was for Janis Joplin,” Ms. Schuman exclaimed. Mr. Davis began his career

A record industry guru with the mind of a banker and the ears of a teenager.

at CBS and was president of Columbia Records from 1965 to 1973. At the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967, he signed Ms. Joplin, and through the years some music industry executives have accused him of taking credit for discovering pop music, too. An industry joke has it that Clive Davis has such a big ego, he thinks CD’s were named after him.

Less funny were the charges in 1973 that he stole money from Columbia for personal expenses, including a son’s bar mitzvah; those allegations were never proven, but have dogged him since.

It seems like the perfect revenge that Mr. Davis’s party has turned into the bar mitzvah of every boy’s dreams: a glitzy gathering of stars and babes.

But first, there is the matter of moving 600 people from cocktails to dinner. Mr. Davis made snail’s-pace progress amid the hugs and kisses. He is the undisputed master of the individual schmooze — clamping his hand on your shoulder, he moves you away from a group, whispers something in your ear, not terribly intimate or important, but it looks enough like it is so that everyone watching wishes he would do the same to them.

Gladys Knight arrived, then Tony Bennett, and Mr. Davis gave the whisper treatment to both, along with Gloria Estefan. As the flashbulbs popped, guests were inexorably drawn into Mr. Davis’s orbit. One punky-looking blond girl got so close she was even photographed with him; when someone asked a member of Mr. Davis’s staff who she was, he answered, disgusted, “No one.”

Outside the ballroom, Narada Michael Walden, who has produced Whitney Houston albums among others for Mr. Davis said, “Clive’s ears are really his gift, and when he believes in something he can push the buttons so the world hears it.”

Or as Barry Manilow once said, “Clive has the mind of a bank executive and the ears of a teenager.” Mr. Davis had no musical training as he grew up in Brooklyn. He put himself through New York University at night and earned a full scholarship to Harvard Law School. He only discovered “the ear part,” as he calls it, once he was in the business.

“Yo, wassup, how you been?” was the question of choice among the younger artists, as Mr. Davis, hounded by admirers, squeezed between the tables. The volume was deafening.

“Oh, my darling,” called Jackie Collins, “I’m having a fabulous time!” Mr. Davis headed toward a group of very young men who were eating as if they hadn’t seen food in a week. “How ya doing?” one said to Mr. Davis, rising to shake his hand, while clutching a roll in his other fist.

Who was that? “’N Sync,” he said. Oops. Meanwhile, half the tables still had uneaten lobster appetizers waiting for guests who had never taken a seat, while others were



Marissa Roth for The New York Times

Clive Davis, center, with Lance Bass, left, and Chris Kirkpatrick, members of 'N Sync, at Mr. Davis's pre-Grammy sit-down dinner for 600.

already on dessert. Conditions surrounding Mr. Davis had reached the danger point, with photographers trampling people to get shots of him with Quincy Jones.

In the middle of the crush sailed the Los Angeles socialite Barbara Davis, her black-sequined jacket glittering. “Isn’t this fun?” she asked blithely, as a waiter almost spilled a tray of cosmos on Chaka Khan. “I love the music people.”

She has that in common with Mr. Davis (no relation), though sometimes his artists can be difficult to love. When Mr. Santana’s “Supernatural” album took off, he told the press he owed his success to an angel named Metatron.

Mr. Davis took no offense. “Carlos is being true to himself to talk about the angel,” he said. “And then I would say, ‘You know, Carlos, we’re up to 21 million now.’

I’m myself, he is himself and that’s fine. I’m close to my artists, but it’s all about their careers. It’s not about hanging out.”

Three hours after the party started, Mr. Davis still had not sat down. The concert finally began, an hour late. Michael Greene, the president of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences introduced Mr. Davis, saying: “God finds a way to take us to our limit and forges a new resolve inside of us. I don’t know anybody who’s been to the top of so many mountains as Clive Davis.”

He took the stage, reveling in the politician’s ultimate glory — a handpicked constituency. The show went on, Gladys Knight brought down the house, and Alicia Keys sang as guests glanced at each other knowingly and nodded in deference to their host.

Looks like he did it again.