

# CALENDAR

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MO OSTIN,  
1927 - 2022

## Record label legend

Longtime Warner Bros. exec reshaped the industry with artist-first approach.

BY MELISSA GOMEZ

Mo Ostin, the music executive who helped transform Warner Bros. Records into one of the most admired music labels in the world and who earned respect and lasting allegiance from musicians from Los Angeles to London for his artist-friendly philosophy, died on Sunday. He was 95.

His death was confirmed by multiple sources close to the executive. The cause of death was age-related.

During his 31-year career at Warner Bros., Ostin advocated for changes that would help the then-small record label challenge and ultimately outpace industry leaders during the '60s and '70s, an era of adventure-some and varying musical styles. From Frank Sinatra to Jimi Hendrix to Prince, Ostin coaxed a wide variety of musicians to the label, and then gave them the elbow room they needed to be creative.

But in the late 1990s, when downloads replaced actual records and piracy cut into industry margins, Ostin chafed under the growing corporate culture at Warner Bros. and walked away, only to team up a year later with former rival David Geffen at DreamWorks and return as a dominant figure in the recording industry.

"Unlike other executives we talked to, Mo seemed genuinely interested in our music," Mike Mills, the former bass player with R.E.M., told The Times. "But the best thing about him was that he seemed honest. So we trusted him and it paid off—in spades."

He was born Morris Meyer Ostrofsky on March 27, 1927, in New York City, to immigrant parents who'd fled Russia during the revolution. [See Mo Ostin, E3]



WESLEY LAPOINTE Los Angeles Times

ROBBIE CONAL, guerrilla poster artist, has a new work, "Supreme Injustices," popping up on the streets of Los Angeles.

## Taking it to the streets

Protest poster artist Robbie Conal is back — with Supreme Court in his sights

CAROLINA A. MIRANDA



It's 10 o'clock on a Friday night, and almost three dozen people have gathered around a table at Canter's Deli on Fairfax to plan a mission. It's the day the U.S. Supreme Court has overturned Roe vs. Wade, in a decision that cites a 17th century witch trials judge whose big claim to fame was establishing the idea that a woman can't be raped by her husband.

Standing amid the crowd is Robbie Conal, in a striped shirt and baseball cap, holding court. He is, as he puts it, "really pissed off."

Conal has for decades been papering the streets of Los Angeles with political broadsides that decry corruption, hypocrisy, warmongering, homophobia and sexism, rendering their greatest (frequently male) purveyors in grotesque, downright oleaginous ways: crumpled and jowly, with cold, unfeeling glares. These images he frames with biting slogans whose fonts are usually designed by his

wife, graphic artist Deborah Ross.

One of his more memorable pieces, from 1991, depicted former Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist with the phrase "GAG ME WITH A COAT HANGER" — a reference to a gag rule, first devised during the Reagan administration, that prevented doctors from counseling patients about abortion.

Now, 30 years after reproductive rights activists fought to have that gag rule rescinded, Conal is back with another poster, "Supreme Injustices," that takes on the six justices who voted to overturn Roe. "Exactly 30 f— years ago," he tells the assembled crowd. "And here we are again."

Gathered at Canter's are friends, artists and activists who have turned out to put up his poster. This includes a group of women Conal has dubbed "the Guerrilla Matrons," who have been collaborators since the early '90s. Some have brought their daughters and granddaughters along. "He puts out the bat signal," says artist Tony de los Reyes, "and we all gather at Canter's."

After a quick instructional session and a run-through of "Robbie's rules of guerrilla etiquette" (e.g., don't [See Conal, E3]

### Running with 'Sharp Stick'

You can't help but think that someone's going to get hurt in Lena Dunham's first feature since 2010. E2

Comics ..... E4-5  
Puzzles ..... E4

### AN APPRECIATION

## Her impact was astronomical

Nichelle Nichols was underutilized, but everything on 'Star Trek' ran through her.

ROBERT LLOYD  
TELEVISION CRITIC

The original "Star Trek" may have been canceled in 1969, but it is still with us. That three seasons of a television series could in those days produce 79 episodes led to a healthy life in syndication, which brought the voyagers of the starship Enterprise new generations of viewers and led to the creation of a dedicated fandom, multiple ongoing conventions and the eventual cre-

ation of a franchise that continues to pay respect to the original.

As communications officer Lt. Uhura (the first name Nyota was a later addition), Nichelle Nichols, who died Saturday at the age of 89, was with the show from first to last, including the subsequent "Star Trek: The Animated Series" and six feature films built around the original cast. Nichols was an elegant, poised performer — she was a trained dancer who held herself like one, just sitting at her console, one leg forward, one leg back, one hand to her earpiece — and in a series in which overacting can sometimes seem like the baseline, she never did too much. But [See Nichols, E6]

## A symphony of collaboration

Dudamel will lead 106 musicians from 22 nations in Hollywood Bowl performance.

MARK SWED  
MUSIC CRITIC

On Saturday morning, Gustavo Dudamel stood before a large orchestra of young musicians, along with a handful of eminent mentors seated among them, ready to give the downbeat. "Be careful of the level of volume you give me," he said with a sly smile, before launching into a rehearsal of a raucous new piece. The exuberant orchestra clearly knew he didn't mean hold back, just make it glorious.

The rehearsal space in the Los Angeles Philharmonic's new Judith and [See Dudamel, E6]



JUSTIN KATIGBAK For The Times

GUSTAVO DUDAMEL conducts a rehearsal with international young musicians at the L.A. Phil's Judith and Thomas L. Beckmen YOLA Center in Inglewood.

# Conal on the fine art of protest

[Conal, from E1] paste on private property), posters and buckets of paste are distributed and the volunteer army is off. Los Angeles will wake up the next morning to the sight of the “Supreme Injustices” on electrical boxes, bus shelters and construction walls around the city.

At 77, Conal remains steadfastly committed to creating work that afflicts the powerful. A selection of some of his early posters — including works critical of Reagan and former LAPD Chief Daryl Gates — is currently on view at the Riverside Art Museum in the group exhibition “What Would You Say?: Activist Graphics From the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.”

On a recent Saturday afternoon, we met at Track 16, the gallery that represents him. In this conversation, which has been edited and condensed for clarity, Conal discusses his youth in New York City, the fistfight that bonded him to an esteemed mentor and what he’d tell the Supreme Court justices if he could meet them in person.

## What needs to happen to spark a Robbie Conal guerrilla poster mission?

I have to get really pissed off — which is easy. There’s so many bad guys and so little time. You know those thermometer things at state fairs where you hit the thing and it goes up? I have one of those inside my body. The more hits I get, and the more hits I get for a certain perpetrator, it gets to a critical point where the bell goes ding.

For “Supreme Injustices,” even before [the Roe decision] was leaked, you could tell with your Spidey sense that this was going to be really bad. That was like six bells going off.

I was brought up in a very politically conscious atmosphere. My dad was blacklisted. We watched the McCarthy hearings as a family through the [spring] of ‘54 from my parents’ bed.

## Your parents were labor organizers. How did that shape your worldview growing up?

I’m a red diaper baby. My

mother’s breast milk was pink. They would drag me to all of these meetings. “Robala, you’re coming!” They’d be, “Sit right here, Robala. Right up front. If you have questions, you ask them.”

Since my parents were saving the world from capitalist greed, I was a latchkey kid. They considered the major museums as daycare centers. I was raised by the Met and the Modern [the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art]. [Picasso’s] “Guernica” was my friend. We got along great.

I used to try to scare myself. You know James Ensor? In ‘51, the Modern bought a painting of his — something like “Death Accosted by Masks.” [The title is “Masks Confronting Death,” painted in 1888.] I loved that painting. But I was scared of that painting.

**What was your first political poster?**

The first one was in ‘83 and it was “Hands Off Central America.” That was for an organization. [Artist] Jerry Kearns and [critic] Lucy Lippard and a few other people that I knew from political things had this organization. It was influenced by [painters] Leon Golub and Nancy Spero [who were married]. They were my art mom and dad. And they were a part of that group.

## How did you become friendly with Golub and Spero?

I got a Rockefeller artist-in-residence fellowship at the University of Georgia at Athens. The first day, the chair of the department, he says, “We have a guest lecture program. Who are you interested in?” And I said, “Leon Golub.” And he said, “Get him to come down.” I said, “I don’t know him, he’s just my favorite artist.” And he said, “Don’t those New York artists have a certain pride about being in the New York phone book? Call him.”

So I call him. I’m like, “You don’t know me, but ...” He’s laughing. And I said, “If there’s any chance at all, I’d like to invite you to give a lecture.” He says, “How



CAROLINA A. MIRANDA Los Angeles Times

**ON THE DAY** the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe vs. Wade, Robbie Conal, standing, mobilized friends, artists and activists at Canter’s Deli who then set out to plaster “Supreme Injustices” across Los Angeles.



WESLEY LAPOINTE Los Angeles Times

**ROBBIE CONAL** estimates he’s put thousands of protest posters on the street, like these at Track 16.

much money do you have?” I look at the chairman and he holds up three fingers. I say, “Three thousand?” He goes, “No, three hundred.” [Leon] tells me, “I have a show in Atlanta coming up. If you can do everything for me — come get me, keep me fed — if you do that, I can make an evening out of it.” So I borrow a pickup with a gun rack and I go get him.

The University of Georgia is huge. His talk is in this auditorium. It has like 800 people and it’s packed. And [Leon] is sitting in this wooden chair in the middle of the stage and he’s like, “I did this. I did that.” [Conal pretends to click through slides.] All of a sudden there’s a fight in the balcony — a fistfight. It turns out there’s one art professor who thought Leon’s early art was better, but when he switched to making paintings about Vietnam, he didn’t like it very much. And the other had a different view.

That was a bonding moment for me and Leon.

## How many posters do you think you’ve put out on the street over the course of your life?

Thousands. They were usually printed in editions of 3,000, sometimes more. We took them on tour — like garage band rock ‘n’ roll tours. They were pretty funky. I’d be sleeping on some artist’s floor under the El in Chicago.

We were once in Washington, D.C., which is ground zero for most of my subjects. We had a range of people helping us. Political functionaries, low-level bureaucrats, lawyers, artists, graphic designers, but also the Lesbian Avengers — and they were fantastic. One night at like 3 in the morning, I’m driving around one of the roundabouts in D.C. and I see a picnic in the roundabout: gingham tablecloth and Chianti in the basket and

cheese and grapes and they’re playing Otis Redding. And there are like eight women having this picnic and I’m like, who the hell is that? And I go peek and they’re like, “Robbie! It’s the Lesbian Avengers!”

They were partying after getting everything up. They turned it into a celebration.

**It strikes me that U.S. protests could use better graphics. In Mexican and European protests, you’ll see incredible posters and costumes. Here, everyone has crude cardboard signs. Why do you think our protest graphics game is weak?**

That’s a big question. The Center for the Study of Political Graphics, they’re fantastic. They have an international collection of international protest art. I was on the board for a long time. [They] would have these exhibits of political protest art from the United States at a library or somewhere.

We’d go to the opening and the stuff looked terrible. Well, it wasn’t terrible — just kind of pathetic. These are people who are not artists making things because they care so much. It’s embarrassing to me that there aren’t more American artists who are involved in making public protest art.

It’s not that it doesn’t happen in the United States. You can talk about the great Barbara Carrasco, who for 20 years did banners for farmworkers, and it was fantastic stuff. You also had Rupert Garcia in the Bay Area — he does great stuff. It’s art that has a tradition back to the Mexican Revolu-

tion and before. You have José Guadalupe Posada [known for his prints of skeletons].

When people say, “Who are your influences,” I tell them it’s Daumier and Posada.

## Your work often dwells in the grotesque. Why is that interesting to you?

It’s not interesting to me. It’s the way it is. These people are grotesque. The corrugation of their flesh is a metaphor for the corruption of their souls.

## How have you adapted your work to the digital age?

It’s affected me a lot — particularly in terms of distribution. To give you an example: We did this one poster and we put up like 400 of them in L.A. Usually my practice would be to take them on tour and go to major cities around the country and have local volunteer guerrillas go out in the middle of the night and put them up. But these days, that’s not so possible for me. People say, “You’re the O.G.” I’m like, yeah, the Old Guy.

But with this poster, Debbie said, “Let’s offer to send poster packs to people around the country who are willing to put them up.” And this being the internet, we got messages from Anchorage, Alaska; El Paso, Texas; Nashville, Tennessee; Missouri — Josh Hawley country. I’m not gonna get there.

## If you could tell the Supreme Court one thing right now, what would it be?

It’s unprintable.

# Longtime executive transformed Warner Bros.

[Mo Ostin, from E1] lution. Ostin was 13 when he and his family, including his younger brother Gerald, moved to Los Angeles and opened a tiny produce market near the Fairfax Theatre.

Ostin attended Fairfax High School and then UCLA, where he earned a degree in economics. He attended UCLA Law School but dropped out to support his wife, Evelyn, and his young son.

A childhood neighbor, Irving Grankz, led him in the direction of music. Grankz’s brother, Norman, owned Clef Records, whose stable of jazz stars included Charlie Parker, Count Basie and Duke Ellington. Before long, Ostin — who changed his last name because people seemed to stumble on Ostrofsky — was the company’s controller.

In the late 1950s, Sinatra tried to buy Verve Records, which had taken over Clef. The label eventually sold out to MGM Records, and Sinatra decided to start his own recording label, Reprise Records, and asked Ostin to lead his new enterprise.

By 1963, Sinatra sold his company to film mogul Jack Warner. Ostin, partnered with Warner Bros. Records, helped bring on important acts, including British rock band the Kinks, which he personally signed on. The band’s success — six top 40 U.S. singles — motivated him to pursue the rock genre.

Artists such as Jimi Hendrix, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, Fleetwood Mac, R.E.M., Madonna, Paul Simon, Talking Heads and the

Red Hot Chili Peppers followed.

He told Billboard magazine years after he retired that he trusted Prince so implicitly that he often would not hear the music he was working on until the musician came into his office and played the finished product, often singing along as Ostin listened.

“The thing you’ve got to learn is trust your instincts,” Ostin said in a December 1994 interview with The Times’ Robert Hilburn and Chuck Philips, the first formal one he granted during his three-decade career at the company.

Ostin, who was named CEO and chairman of Warner Bros. Records in the ‘70s, had a reputation for avoiding interviews; it took years of requests and lobbying from friends to get him to even agree to the single meeting with The Times. During the interview, he admitted that avoiding the media was “a personal hang-up” and that to him, “The artist is the person who should be in the foreground.”

His attitude toward building an artist-oriented company — a philosophy shaped by his time working with Sinatra — was why many artists remained loyal to Ostin. He told The Times that he believed the business was about freedom and creative control.

“Part of our hallmark has always been to work with controversial artists, artists who were on the edge, artists who people thought were weird,” Ostin told The Times.



ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

## FROM SINATRA TO PRINCE

Mo Ostin, pictured after he retired from Warner Bros. Records, worked with music giants including Jimi Hendrix and Madonna.

But by the mid-1990s, Ostin said Warner Bros. Records had become a different company than the one he had groomed. When asked to cut his payroll, Ostin balked.

“Yeah, we might have been able to slash some overhead and make a little bit more money. You can always do that if you’re a penny-pincher,” Ostin said.

Warner Bros. begged him to stay, offering him a three-year extension. But Ostin had had enough. Simon and Young were among the artists who stood by his side as the feud became public.

“It was the toughest thing I’ve ever been through

in the business — and it shook me to the core,” Ostin said.

But his time away was short-lived.

In October 1995, Ostin confirmed he was joining the newly founded record company partnership DreamWorks SKG, started by Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen, whom Ostin had competed with fiercely but whose admiration he had also earned. Ostin’s son Michael and longtime colleague Lenny Waronker, both former Warner Bros. Record executives, joined him.

“The idea of starting over

from scratch, of doing something fresh, of redefining my life at this stage of my career is very appealing to me,” Ostin told The Times.

While he headed DreamWorks SKG, the company signed on talents like Nelly Furtado, Papa Roach and Jimmy Eat World before it sold to Universal Music Group’s Interscope Records in 2004. Ostin retired soon after.

In 2003, Ostin was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, where he was introduced by Young and Simon.

“A record exec who knows music is more than a business” is how the hall of fame

described him. “He encourages creativity and risk-taking and knows a future star when he hears one.”

In 2006, Ostin was awarded the President’s Merit Award from the Recording Academy at its Grammy Salute to Industry Icons for his contribution to shaping the modern music industry.

In 2018, Ostin was recognized and given an award for his long and successful career during the 17th Silverlake Conservatory of Music gala. That night, the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ Anthony Kiedis, co-founder of the music school, said of Ostin: “Mo is beyond historically important to this world. ... It was because he loved music. It was his giving heart that cared about music that inspired us to want to make great records and enabled us to want to start this school.”

A longtime Los Angeles philanthropist, Ostin and his wife donated nearly \$25 million to UCLA. Two of their largest contributions include \$10 million for the Evelyn and Mo Ostin Music Center and \$10 million toward the Mo Ostin Basketball Center. At UCLA, he served on the board of the School of the Arts and Architecture and the Herb Alpert School of Music. At USC, he served on the Thornton School of Music’s Board of Councilors, an advisory panel to the school’s administration.

Ostin is survived by his son Michael. Sons Kenny and Randy died in 2004 and 2013, respectively; his wife, Evelyn, died in 2005.