

Sharon Osbourne: Music Industry Pioneer, Master of Reinvention, & Bada\$\$ Matriarch (A)

Sharon Osbourne stood at the door to her car, a little out of breath, but triumphant after a visit to a marketing firm that had long been profiting – unethically and illegally, in her view – from Ozzfest, an immensely successful, global concert festival tour that she had launched in 1996. Though she usually left these sorts of discussions to attorneys, she had decided to get involved more directly this time. The visit had gone well, with the company admitting fault and agreeing to stop selling the data from Ozzfest ticket purchasers – but tempers had flared and the discussion had been contentious. And now, having dramatically and victoriously exited the building, Sharon realized, “I think I just left my car keys in their office.”

The marketing firm incident was not the first disagreement of Osbourne’s storied career, nor would it be the last. It was, perhaps, emblematic of a career marked by challenges, drama, business savvy, and success beyond imagination. Having become famous in the United States as creator and star of MTV reality hit and Emmy winner *The Osbournes* (2002 - 2005), Osbourne was perhaps best recognized in 2018 as the plain-spoken (some might say outspoken) and witty co-host of popular US daytime talk show *The Talk*, as a longtime judge on *America’s Got Talent* (2007-2012), and a judge on UK primetime series *The X Factor* (2004-2007, 2013, 2016-present). But Osbourne’s professional career was far more extensive than even many of her contemporary fans likely realized, her most noteworthy successes having derived from the decades in which she shattered many glass ceilings as one of the only female – and one of the most successful – rock music managers in the world.

As Osbourne turned to walk back into the office that she had just left, knowing that the next few minutes would tarnish her feeling of victory a little, she thought about the many battles she’d fought – and almost always won – over the course of her career. Osbourne laughed to herself about the ridiculousness of the moment, pushed open the door to the office she had just flounced out of, and smiled graciously. “Excuse me, I hate to bother you again. But has anyone seen my keys?”

Breaking All the Rules

Sharon Osbourne’s career in music and entertainment management began, arguably, before she could crawl. She grew up watching, then working for, and then helping to lead the business of her father – Don Arden – a man known for his success and hard-boiled approach to managing an array of British and American musicians. Arden had managed some of the best-known musical artists of their time, including the Electric Light Orchestra, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, and Air Supply (while turning down an approach to manage the group that grew into The Beatles). Nicknamed the “Al Capone” of the industry, stories of Arden threatening or intimidating clients and others were the stuff of legend – and, though some stories were fabricated or embellished by rivals, as many or more were fact. Richard Griffiths, former President (at different points in his career) of Virgin Publishing, Epic Records, CBS Records, and BMG Western Europe, recalled: “In my first ever job, when I was 19, I worked in a place where it was said that Sharon’s father

hung the manager of the 'Small Faces' out the window whilst explaining that he would no longer be managing the band."

Sharon's childhood was anything but conventional. While her school friends were having playdates and attending parties, Sharon was expected to forego those rites of passage. From a very young age, her life revolved around the family business. She reflected,

"Before I could even speak, all I knew was being on the road with an artist. From Bill Haley, Gene Vincent, Brenda Lee, the Everly Brothers, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, Sam Cook... I watched them perform, went on tour with them, grew up with one artist after another. In my house, there were no children's birthday parties or friends coming over to play. A very rigid rule of the Arden house was that it was all about work. 'Shut the f*** up. Sit there. Eat your dinner. F*** off to bed, because I've got a meeting, and if you're gonna be in the room, shut the f*** up'."

In *Extreme*, one of three best-selling autobiographies, Sharon recounted an example of how her father's business dealings often spilled over into the Arden family home.

"Gene Vincent was always drunk and he'd be regularly waving a gun around. Or someone had done something against my father, and he'd be threatening to kill the bastards. Violence was never far away from my father. From as early as I can remember people were frightened of him" (2005, p. 26).

Though to the outside world Arden was a huge success, with a glamorous (and hedonistic) lifestyle that befit his stature as one of the industry's biggest players, there were many cracks in this gilded façade. Arden's spendthrift behavior resulted in financial strain that was both significant and unknown to most.

Arden moved the family from Brixton to an exclusive address in Mayfair, bought his long-suffering wife exquisite diamonds, and treated himself to a fleet of prestige cars. But, as Sharon remembers, behind the smoke and mirrors the Ardens' reality was very different. Describing her father as a "bad businessman," she said:

"My father had seen rock 'n' roll as a license to make money, but it wasn't, and turnover isn't income, and if he earned £4,000, he'd spend £5,000, and we'd be ... in [trouble]. And the phone would be cut off, and the electricity would be cut off, and the water would be cut off, and the cars would literally come and go" (Osbourne, 2005, p. 34).

Though Sharon showed early promise as a dancer at the prestigious Italia Conti stage school, the unpredictability of her family life and related body image issues led her to leave school at 15 ("the earliest the law allowed you to leave school in those days"). With no qualifications, Sharon began working for her father full-time, starting as a receptionist, but soon becoming a conduit between Arden and some of the more unsavory characters with whom he dealt. She helped to manage his business successes, plead for extensions on unpaid debts, calm down irate clients, and hold her own in an industry characterized by outsized personalities and big money. Observed Colin Newman, a preeminent music industry accountant, who first met Sharon at the start of her career, when he was working for her father,

"She's been there, she's seen it. Sharon witnessed a lot of things. She also learned about the industry's ups and downs ... You could be at the top one week and at the bottom the next week. You could have success, have failure, and still have the resilience to bounce back. Sharon worked in a tough environment, but ascended through the ranks rapidly. As a young woman, she would go out on big world tours with the artists. Being in charge, being in control, and saying 'no' can be very difficult. She learned to be fair, but tough. She was simply a class above others."

Sharon's own recollections echoed those of Newman, albeit expressed in her inimitably candid way. "Success meant I had to stand my ground," she said. "Otherwise, someone would've stolen my act. They would have accused me of just being an old groupie. Next. Gone. Bye. So, I had to know more than anybody else, and be tougher than anybody else."

Newman emphasized, however, that Sharon was also excellent at cultivating professional relationships.

"She could have a show run by a specific promoter. And let's just say, at the end of it, the promoter lost \$50,000. It's not Sharon's problem. But she would make sure that, next time around, when the artist came back on tour, she'd go through that same promoter, and he'd make money. Sometimes, you'd get a promoter who would say, 'I lost \$50,000 tonight, I'm really upset,' and then you'd look through his expenses and there would be \$100,000 unaccounted for. You'd want to kill him! Sharon became very perceptive in these negotiations as to how to be fair to everybody and at the same time, make sure they were being fair to her and her artists. If they weren't ... watch out!"

Rock 'n Roll Rebel

In 1976, after Arden had decided to expand his empire by moving his business from London to Los Angeles, Sharon – now in her early twenties and an experienced manager – went with him. Two years earlier, Arden had signed Black Sabbath to his management company – a considerable coup, given the band's cachet in the rock world. Formed in 1968 by Ozzy Osbourne, Tommy Iommi, Geezer Butler, and Bill Ward, Black Sabbath had already scored five huge hits before allying themselves with Arden. Each album had broken into the top 25 in the Billboard charts, and the top 8 in the UK rankings. The band's second album, *Paranoid*, reached number one in the UK, and its third album, *Master of Reality*, rose to number five in the US. The band was recognized by the Recording Industry Association of America as having a host of gold, platinum, and multi-platinum certifications – its first four efforts accounting for more than 12 million albums sold in the UK, US, and Canada alone.

In taking on Black Sabbath, a band with such huge success and huge potential, Arden seemed poised to continue enhancing his own roster and returns. To the extent that the band might be difficult, that would not be all that different than other bands he'd managed in the past; artists (and, in particular, musicians) were notoriously mercurial and prone to at least some dysfunction. Beyond that, however, having encountered innumerable challenges both trivial and grand, Arden had no reason to anticipate that Black Sabbath would be unique. On that front, Arden was in for a big surprise.

Though Black Sabbath had secured fame and fortune in its earliest years, relations between the four founding members were hugely strained when Arden began to work with them. These tensions were exacerbated by the members' use (some might say abuse) of drugs and alcohol. In 1977, the band's electrifying front man – Ozzy Osbourne – briefly left the group for a solo project. Though he returned shortly thereafter, the band officially and completely severed their relationship with him in 1979, having tired of the colorful disagreements that had become commonplace. Over that same time period, Ozzy and Sharon began to fall in love.

In the short term, the band's partial dissolution looked to benefit Arden, who could reap the simultaneous rewards of managing both Black Sabbath (with its replacement member) and Ozzy (as a solo artist). The truth was more complicated. Black Sabbath retained a loyal following in the UK after Ozzy's departure, but they sold substantially fewer albums overall. Meanwhile, Ozzy - now signed to Arden's own label, Jet Records - continued to experience great success, but with Sharon handling the direct management responsibilities. This latter arrangement created a growing rift between father and daughter, as Sharon's confidence in both her independent managerial ability, and in her relationship with Ozzy, grew stronger.

In 1980, *Blizzard of Ozz* - Ozzy's debut solo album - was released in the UK, rising to #7 on the British album chart. In 1981, the album was released in the US, rising to #21. A huge hit, with more than 4 million album sales, it included *Crazy Train*, a single that secured a #9 ranking on the US rock charts. It also spawned a 131-city European and American tour. Ozzy, already famous, was now a standalone rock star. And all of Ozzy's success had been managed by Sharon.

In 1982, as the wedding date for Sharon and Ozzy approached, Sharon began to ponder some long discomfiting aspects of the professional web between Arden, Ozzy, and herself. Sharon felt that her ability to support Ozzy was constrained by creative decisions her father was making - choices with which she disagreed. She also felt that her father was exploiting Ozzy financially, withholding monies owed to him from record sales and tours. She found herself at a crossroads, trying to determine if she should try to separate Ozzy and herself legally from the Arden contract - or if she should continue to work within the system that Arden had created.

Sharon's instinct was to walk, but the consequences of that decision would be far-reaching and complex. Not only would she face an inevitable, bitter legal dispute with Arden (and other stakeholders to his business), she would also destroy what had been a fraught, but still important family relationship. She would need to quickly identify another label willing to take Ozzy on, no mean feat given the likelihood of protracted litigation with her father. She would also have to face the prospect of provoking Arden, who might seek retribution even if she won a legal fight. Torn between the options, Sharon felt temporarily uncertain - a feeling that was, in so many ways, uncharacteristic of her. The "right" decision was not necessarily the "best" decision - and all options were mired in uncertainty.

ENDS

Sharon Osbourne: Music Industry Pioneer, Master of Reinvention, & Bada\$\$ Matriarch (B)

The date of Sharon and Ozzy's wedding – July 4, 1982 – was, perhaps entirely by coincidence, a poignant one. During their romantic ceremony, overlooking the ocean in Maui, Sharon had vowed to love and honor her new husband, but she had also secretly sworn to do the right thing by him, no matter the consequence. She knew, though she hadn't yet spoken the words aloud, that it was a *fait accompli*: Sharon's own "independence day" was looming.

"All I could think of was this: my father is stealing from my husband. Here was this man whom I absolutely adored, who had given up everything in his life for me, and my family was trying to destroy him. I didn't care about me ... I was ashamed, deeply ashamed" (Osbourne, 2005, p. 185).

Shortly after the wedding, Sharon severed all ties with her father and began the complicated process of extricating Ozzy from the Arden deal. Having been advised that her father might take revenge against her (perhaps even violently) for leaving and taking his "cash cow," the couple initially went into hiding. Over time, communicating solely through attorneys, an agreement was thrashed out: (1) Sharon and Ozzy would pay \$1.5 million to free Ozzy from his contract. (2) The two would receive no fees for the merchandising, tours, and royalties associated with Ozzy's existing work. Perhaps the most bitter pill to swallow? (3) Ozzy would be required to produce one more album for Arden, from which he and Sharon wouldn't see a penny.

An onerous deal at best, there was a bright light to be found. Even prior to resolving the litigation, CBS Records had signed Ozzy. CBS agreed to lend the funds needed to buy the couple out of the Arden contract, with repayments coming out of Ozzy's future earnings. It had been a long, traumatic negotiation, but finally, Sharon was out on her own. The couple was at last free to plan their life, and build their brands, together.

As Colin Newman, who was working for Don Arden during this tumultuous period, recalled, the repercussions for Sharon's separation were far-reaching. "Sharon's decision to walk away led to a massive family break-up ... it was a very tough call." At the same time, Newman observed that Sharon's handling of the situation revealed as much about her negotiating skill as it did about her toughness and bravery.

"Imagine, you're working for your father, who's managing an artist. The artist is signed to his label, and then things are turning bad. And you actually negotiate getting him off that label, onto his own direct contractual relationship with a record company. It was really quite the achievement for Sharon to pull it off, but it caused her a lot of heartache and aggravation over the years. Sharon will always fight for what is right, though, whatever the personal cost to herself. I was hugely impressed."

Sharon, on her part, felt resolved about the future, but not without some residual frustration. She reflected, "We had every right to sue for the money that had never been paid on the tours and record royalties, but we didn't have the resources, we didn't have the time. We wanted them gone. We wanted the cord cut."

See You on the Other Side

Sharon's focus on the "bigger picture" was to pay off. Happily ensconced with CBS Records, Ozzy was flourishing under his wife's creative and managerial control. While she worked tirelessly – negotiating contracts, organizing tours, designing stage sets, and employing band members and crew – the former Black Sabbath front man continued growing as a solo artist, and appeared to be well on the way to becoming a rock titan in his own right.

Sharon's profile was on an upward trajectory, too. As one of the few female managers in the business, Sharon had, for years, faced an uphill battle in her bid to be taken seriously. With Ozzy's success so clearly attributable to her, the industry was finally sitting up and taking notice. Reflecting back on Sharon's emergence as an independent manager, Michelle Anthony, Executive President of Universal Music Group, noted, "Ozzy had left Black Sabbath, and Sharon created his brand. All of those wonderful first solo albums, like *Blizzard of Ozz*, all the theatrics, the stage design, everything ... That was all her."

Michelle had met Sharon shortly after the Osbournes' acrimonious split with Arden, having been in an executive role at CBS Records at the time. The two had forged a connection in part because they had a lot in common. Michelle's father, Dee Anthony, was also a notorious talent manager, and Michelle had, like Sharon, been immersed in the entertainment world since birth. Though the two had taken different paths through life, Michelle pursuing college and then a USC Law School degree, they found themselves professionally aligned and personally connected. "I became their record company," Michelle recalls. "And Sharon and I became close friends."

Michelle was immediately struck by Sharon's talent – observing that her artistic flair, as combined with hard-won managerial savvy, made her unique within the industry.

"It's very rare that you come across a person who's both creative as well as astute in business. Usually, a person leans towards one or the other, but Sharon was the whole package. She could sit in the studio and know what sounds good or what wasn't quite a song yet. She had the eye: she could tell when something looked great, or when it was lacking. She was also an incredibly smart businesswoman who drives a very hard bargain."

As great as Sharon's improving profile (and Ozzy's robust record results) might have been, all was not financially sound in the house of Osbourne. With an album still due to Arden's label (what became *Diary of a Madman*), CBS could not debut an Ozzy album until 1983 (*Bark at the Moon*). The time lag from deal to CBS album to actual album sales was such that the Osbournes found themselves stuck waiting for loan repayment. More problematically, for as long as album proceeds were directed towards paying off the \$1.5 million agreed in the Don Arden dispute, the couple was missing out on what they needed most: a livable wage.

"Ozzy had nothing," Sharon remembered. "We had no money. We had no home. We had to keep touring because that way we wouldn't need a home. For the first three years of our marriage, we lived on the road." The strain on the Osbournes' lives – with a new baby, and another on the way – was significant. Sharon craved stability and a permanent home in which to raise her growing family.

In considering how they might dig out of the financial hole in which they found themselves, Sharon focused on the one potentially lucrative asset that she and Ozzy still retained – something that Don Arden had desperately tried, but failed, to appropriate from his erstwhile artist. “He had always tried to get Ozzy to sign over his publishing rights,” said Sharon. “While we were on tour, he’d send one of his lawyers out with one of the hoods, but we’d resisted. Always resisted. And thank God we did. Because the only thing we had to raise money on now was his publishing” (Osbourne, 2005, p. 186).

As Sharon became progressively more concerned about the financial situation, word reached her that Arden remained interested in acquiring Ozzy’s publishing rights. Selling them to him at this point would certainly be helpful. At the same time, the emotional and other costs of re-engaging with her father were unappealing, to say the least. Perhaps CBS would be willing to step in – but an approach there felt complicated, given the nature of the existing financial arrangements. Another option was Virgin Music Group. Richard Branson had hinted about an interest in the past. Sharon worried, however, as Branson was a tough negotiator, and brokering a contract with him may not give her and Ozzy the money that they desired for such a valuable – and irreplaceable – body of work. There were issues of ideal partner to consider, but also issues of deal in particular. Sharon wondered what sort of figure might help resolve her and Ozzy’s financial situation in the short term, without creating a new financial challenge down the road. Sharon worried about the possibility that a short-term reward might pave the way towards long-term ruin.

ENDS

Sharon Osbourne: Music Industry Pioneer, Master of Reinvention, & Bada\$\$ Matriarch (C)

In 1983, Sharon Osbourne approached Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Records, with an offer to sell Ozzy's global music publishing rights. With Ozzy now an established and commercially successful artist, it seemed clear that the rights would reap long-term rewards for their owner - Sharon wanted to ensure that the owner was someone who knew and valued Ozzy appropriately. Colin Newman recalled: "Richard [Branson] made a big deal to Sharon and Ozzy of 'come on to my boat and sign your contract.' It was his technique, his charm."

His hospitality and affable personality aside, Branson knew how to drive a hard bargain. According to Richard Griffiths, who helped broker the deal in his capacity as Managing Director at Virgin Music UK, "It was brilliant for both Richard [Branson] and Sharon, because we gave her and Ozzy a lot of money, but we took a larger percentage than we would normally have taken - because we were giving them so much cash up front."

Sharon had some ambivalence about the arrangement. While she was, and remains, "hugely grateful" to Branson for helping her and Ozzy out of a perilous financial situation, the decision to sell the rights was far from easy. She reflected,

"Richard was very, very nice, and it was not his fault. But it was just a bad business move, The thing with publishing is that it allows artists to own their work and say who can cover their song, and who can't. The money that the publisher gets is also a huge chunk of change. You never go hungry if you have your publishing. If you're a successful writer, it's like gold dust. You never give that up. It was Ozzy's body of work, his art, that he's put his heart and soul into creating. It's like a child, in a way. Luckily, I managed to negotiate that the rights would come back to Ozzy after a set amount of time, but it was not an easy decision to do the deal."

The £500,000 that the Osbournes received upfront from Virgin was enough to shore up the couple's finances. With Ozzy on the road, playing to his burgeoning international fanbase, Sharon at last began to explore how she might expand her management portfolio. Over the ensuing years, she built out a roster of stars and a strong financial foundation - representing some of the era's most iconic acts: Gary Moore, Motorhead, Coal Chamber, and Lita Ford, to name a few. Sharon's success, across the popular music spectrum, was driven in part by her reputation as a consummate negotiator who combined frontline industry insight with both "street fighter" grit and a nurturing disposition. As Michelle Anthony noted,

"Sharon is tough in business but that doesn't mean that she's not a loving, kind, and funny person. She has all those qualities but she does drive a very, very hard bargain. She is brilliant when it comes to negotiating, and she is very smart about it. There are certain areas that no one knows better than her: one of those areas is the live space, and everything that goes along with it. It's not just how the set looks, or the production. It's not just how to make the best deals for the tour. There's something else that not many managers 'get.' Sharon always got it."

Among the best examples of just how well Sharon "got it" was the launch of Ozzfest - a global touring festival of live music headlined by her husband. In (year), Sharon approached the

organizers of the annual Lollapalooza music festival, suggesting Ozzy as an addition to their eclectic line-up of performers. The festival organizers' response – that Ozzy wasn't hip enough – lit a fire under her. As Sharon told *Billboard Magazine*,

"Lollapalooza, at that time, was very experimental, taking different genres of music and mixing it all together, which I thought was brilliant. So when they refused Ozzy because he wasn't perceived as being cool enough, I was like: 'Ok, we'll do something on our own, with our own genre of music, stick to what we know. We'll do our own hard-edged festival. And we outlasted others, we opened the door for similar tours, and it's been great" (November 2009).

Ozzfest became the most successful touring festival on the live music circuit. Metal heavyweights Iron Maiden, Slipknot, Pantera, Incubus, Linkin Park, System Of A Down and Marilyn Manson were just some of the names that graced the annual line-ups, generating hundreds of millions in ticket sale revenues over the ensuing years. Additionally, two compilation albums from the tour were released. Commented Michelle Anthony,

"Nobody had ever centered a festival around one artist before. Not only did it increase Ozzy's exposure, but it also gave him a whole new kind of stature with younger rock bands, as he was giving them a platform and, ostensibly, their first break. Sharon is very smart about extending a brand: for Ozzy to have had a forty-plus year career in rock'n'roll is almost unheard of. She knows how to keep him exciting and relevant."

Lightning Strikes

In 1999, when she secured the jewel in her now-flourishing management company's crown – indie, alt-rock chart-toppers The Smashing Pumpkins. The band, fronted by Billy Corgan, had undertaken an exhaustive selection process before joining Sharon's talent roster, and their signing was considered quite the coup. After a three-year stretch in which they had secured both mainstream attention and industry plaudits – including two Grammy awards for Best Hard Rock Performance (in 1997 and 1998) – The Smashing Pumpkins seemed poised to begin smashing records. Reflecting on the successful signing, Sharon said at the time,

"Billy talked to every manager in the industry, I think, and he liked me best. I can't blame him ... I think he wanted someone who would be hands-on, someone who doesn't have a whole roster of superstars, somebody who has been around a long time ... Nobody has the history I do" (*Los Angeles Times*, October 1999).

Sharon's feeling of triumph soon faded, however, as rumors of Corgan being "difficult" proved true. Recalling an incident in Germany, when local record company staff wanted to meet the man they were all "working their asses off for," Sharon said:

"They were doing everything to promote the Pumpkins' new record. They were all excited to meet Billy and take pictures. The artist will always do this, and thank everybody for their hard work. You're nothing without these people toiling for you. But Billy refused to see anybody."

While Billy's reluctance to "play the game" was considered, by some, to be part of his anti-establishment brand, he continued to push the envelope of acceptability even further, and risked incurring the wrath of the (then-powerful) music press. In one of her three best-selling autobiographies, Sharon wrote,

"Billy asked the record company to find agencies that handled 'freaks.' He wanted to hire people who looked so 'different' that they could be cast in a horror movie ... He'd say: 'If I have this extremely disfigured person next to me while I'm being interviewed, then the journalist won't ask me about my album. So, we can talk about this person.' I'm pretty unshockable, but I didn't get what he was trying to achieve. I said: 'You're just completely disrespecting people who want to help you with your career, and you're also destroying your career.'"

After only four months as the Smashing Pumpkins' manager, Sharon reached a crossroads. She found Billy Corgan's behavior intolerable, and he refused to listen to her advice. Still, record sales were robust, the band was at the peak of its success, and Sharon was receiving a healthy stipend for her services. Sharon began to wonder: should she walk away from the management deal?

If Sharon stayed, she would have to revise her management strategy and tolerate Corgan's increasingly difficult behavior. While she might try to moderate his approach in some very limited ways, there was little evidence that she could make a substantial change: she'd been around successful rock icons for far too long to have that expectation. Conversely, continuing with Corgan could mean she would need to allow him to do as he pleased, regardless of the potential fallout to either his or her career. She had "won" him in a competitive battle in which she'd outpaced so many other managers in the industry. He was inarguably one of her biggest "gets."

Quitting after such a short amount of time would surely make many question her ability, and she risked relegation from A-list industry status as a result. Personally, she would have a hard time defining herself as a "quitter"; the only time she'd ever walked away from someone was when she broke ranks with her father – and that was only because she was doing the right thing by Ozzy. Sharon wondered what to do. She was not prone to doubts, but in this situation, she felt torn.

ENDS

Sharon Osbourne: Music Industry Pioneer, Master of Reinvention, & Bada\$\$ Matriarch (D)

The “creative differences” between Sharon and The Smashing Pumpkins’ Billy Corgan reached boiling point after an argument over clothing: Billy wanted to wear a dress in a music video, but Sharon considered it a “try-hard” maneuver. Reflecting on the situation at the time Sharon said, “I was basically bored with it. If he [Billy] thought I was a naughty girl, he’d give me the silent treatment. I don’t need games in my life. I don’t need stupid little boys making faces at me.” (Reuters). Sharon quit, in her own inimitable – and uniquely public – fashion.

Breaking the industry’s *omerta* code, which dictates that managers never speak ill of artists (even in the face of egregious behavior), Sharon put out a statement to the press. “It was with great pride and enthusiasm that I took on management of the Pumpkins back in October, but unfortunately I must resign today due to medical reasons – Billy Corgan was making me sick!!!”

Sharon says her decision to call out Corgan’s behavior was done “on impulse,” and she was prepared to weather any fallout.

“I did it because his behavior was so bad and insane, and we couldn’t control him. Like so many artists, he had all of these ‘yes’ people around him. ‘Oh, Billy’s tired. He doesn’t want to speak to people from the record company.’ Always making excuses. I’m not a ‘yes’ person, I will always do what I feel is right, regardless of the consequences.”

Sharon’s candor was unprecedented and the industry response was overwhelming. Reflecting on Sharon’s decision, Michelle Anthony said,

“To this day, I know so many managers who quote her. There wasn’t any social media back then, but she literally sent her resignation letter out everywhere. It was the first time anyone had called an artist out like that. Everybody knew that Billy Corgan could be very difficult, but in the past, that all stayed behind closed doors. Managers still say, ‘Oh, I wish I had the balls to do what Sharon did.’”

Sharon remembered,

“When the letter went public, I lost count of the number of managers who called me, saying: ‘Oh, my God. You did it. Oh, it’s brilliant. It’s fantastic. I wish we could do the same with this artist and that artist.’ But most won’t, because they’re making money off of them.”

You Can’t Kill Rock & Roll

Despite widespread industry support, Sharon’s experience with Corgan had taken a toll on her enthusiasm for artist management. She began, thus, to shift her focus. Among her thoughts: could she do for her family what she had done for Ozzy, and for so many other musical artists? Could she build a family brand?

Keen to increase Ozzy’s exposure outside of the heavy metal niche, she had signed him up to do a well-received UK documentary. Though the documentary didn’t get the reach Sharon thought it merited, she wondered if the concept could be adapted and expanded. She began to pitch an

Osbourne family television series, built around the family members' day-to-day lives. In a pre-reality TV era, the idea of basing a "fly-on-the-wall" series on a family's "regular" life was a very difficult sell, if not completely unfathomable (even if "regular" in this instance equaled "rock royalty"). The industry's response to her proposal was lukewarm at best.

Remembered Colin Newman,

"The Osbournes was all Sharon's idea. The TV companies weren't convinced. There were so many knock-backs. Literally hundreds of rejection letters. But Sharon kept pushing it. It was her concept. Her creation. And it was her forcefulness that made it happen, that got it to work."

Dogged persistence paid off in 2001, when Sharon's idea piqued the interest of MTV executives. *The Osbournes* premiered on March 5, 2002, soon becoming the most-viewed series in the history of the network. A perhaps bigger hit than even Sharon expected, the series' warts-and-all depiction of Ozzy and his unconventional but loving family unit (children Kelly and Jack were on camera, while eldest daughter Aimee opted out) was a televisual zeitgeist – spawning a TV genre and elevating Ozzy from his niche as "the prince of darkness" to pop culture icon. In its first season, *The Osbournes* scored the highest ratings for any entertainment program on cable television, with an audience almost eight million viewers. It won a 2002 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Reality Program, and two further seasons were commissioned.

"It was an amazing three years," Sharon reflected. "Doors opened up for us. Our lives changed overnight. Ozzy went from being a crazy metal singer to somebody that everybody wanted to meet." The family's lives had changed suddenly, and the opportunities seemed endless. There was a flip side to the sudden fame, however: they were now considered "fair game" by the paparazzi, and fodder for gossip columnists the world over. Sharon acknowledged that there were other challenges as well.

During the show's second season, Sharon was diagnosed with Stage III colorectal cancer – and allowed cameras to film her chemotherapy sessions. Her treatment was successful, but the invasiveness of round-the-clock TV crews in the family home became overwhelming. "I wasn't well. And also, it was just enough. We just couldn't keep living like that with everything going out there. There was no privacy," she said. She also wondered about the implications of filming her then-teenage children.

"It exposed them to things. A lot of criticism. A lot of scrutiny. It's hard to deal with that, but they had great opportunities on the back of the show. They've done amazing things. But I think as well as doing *The Osbournes*, another great thing was finishing it when we did and saying, 'It was enough.'"

The series ended on a high in 2005, with Sharon opting to quit while ahead. This strategy paid off, in that she almost immediately found herself with a new, and unexpected, career as a primetime TV star in her own right. Having accepted an invitation to join the judging panel on the inaugural season of UK talent show *The X Factor*, in 2004, she clearly made an impression on the show's executive producer, Simon Cowell. In 2007, he announced that Sharon would be replacing R&B singer Brandy as a judge on NBC's ratings juggernaut *America's Got Talent*. In a statement released at the time, he remarked: "On this show, it just had to be Sharon Osbourne."

Lightning Strikes

Sharon was an immediate hit with *America's Got Talent* (AGT) viewers – and the show was equally appealing to her. She said,

“I loved, loved, loved the show. They used to do research at the end of every season: they would ask the public about the cast, and every time, I would come out as the most likable judge. They would say that I was the heart of the show, and that I was kind to people, but very straightforward.”

Through six consecutive seasons, the announcement of her parallel hiring (in 2010) as a co-host of CBS daytime series *The Talk*, and a variety of AGT judging panel shake-ups, Sharon remained on the show – a stalwart presence beloved by her viewers. As the judging panel changed, however, Sharon began to realize that she wasn't being valued as much as even those peers who joined the show after her. Though paid what, in absolute terms, might seem like a lot – \$70,000 per episode – there was a significant difference between her earnings and those of her male counterparts.

Sharon recalled,

“Howie Mandel was brought in, and he got paid more than me. Because he's a germaphobe, he was also given a private plane. With all the respect in the world – and I really do like Howie – I would look at him and say, ‘Sorry, but you ain't more popular than me.’”

The pay gap grew even greater when, in 2012, NBC announced that shock jock Howard Stern would be taking a seat on the panel.

“I absolutely adore Howard, and he's brilliant at what he does, but I think he was given \$35 million, a private plane, and accommodations for his entourage which, at any time, comprised between 5 and 12 people. All of that was paid for. You've got Howie and Howard traveling to every city on their private planes, and I was given one ticket on American Airlines.”

Without planning to take on the role, Sharon found herself acting as a standard bearer for pay equality in the entertainment industry.

“I was pissed off. It's the typical thing of, ‘Well, she's a woman. She's fine. She's married to somebody with loads of money. She's just happy to be here. I went to the production company and said, ‘This just is not right. It's because I'm a woman. I'm well paid, but I'm worth more than what you're paying me, and why should the two guys travel privately, while I'm on American Airlines, and you won't even pay for my assistant to sit next to me in the back?’”

While the wage dispute raged on, Sharon faced yet another crisis in 2012, when her then 26-year-old son Jack was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He had been slated to host a new NBC show, *Stars Earn Stripes*, but according to Sharon, his illness cost him the job. Sharon recalls, “The network had sent emails saying things like: ‘Oh, we're so happy Jack's in the family.’ The first draft of the contract came through, and he'd been fitted for outfits. After Jack was diagnosed with MS, suddenly we got, ‘Well, we're not sure. He's a liability. We can't have him.’”

Sharon's fury over the network's apparent insensitivity towards Jack only intensified when they claimed that he had never been confirmed to appear on the show. "Suddenly, they started backpedaling," she says. "Basically accusing me of lying. I told them: 'I've got emails. A contract. Why are you doing this? I felt that it was really bad that someone lost out on work because they'd been diagnosed with MS. It was discrimination.'" Faced with a network that (1) refused her a salary commensurate with her contributions or peers, and (2) failed to stand by her son (a decision that she considered both dishonest and discriminatory), Sharon again found herself at a personal and professional crossroads. "I told them, 'I'm going straight to the press with this,' and they were furious. They said, 'Don't you ever call this network again. You're dead to us. Don't you come near us.' But I was under contract for *AGT*, so I had to finish out the season."

In 2012, Sharon boarded a network airplane en route to *AGT*'s first live show and found several of the top network executives waiting for her – attempting to make small talk with her, as if nothing had happened. Infuriated, Sharon made her views crystal clear.

"I told them all to f*** off. I said, 'Did you not get it? I'm on this plane because it's easier to get to New York without having to f***** take my shoes off. That's the only reason I'm here. So, you shut up. I'll shut up, too. That's the way it is.' Cut to when we get to the studio. They all come in. 'Shazza!' They just didn't get it. So I said, live on air, 'This is my last season. I am leaving. I am leaving.'"

Her on-air resignation stunned viewers and network executives alike – and NBC didn't take kindly to being blindsided. Sharon believes that she was blocked from appearing on NBC shows, citing an invitation to present on a People Magazine TV awards show that was later rescinded (the program aired on NBC). Noting that she made a "powerful enemy" in the network, Sharon insists that she has no regrets.

"In my eyes, it could have all been avoided by them doing the right thing. They could have said, 'We love Jack, but the insurance situation is too difficult. We're going to write a nice check to an MS charity under Jack's name, and we wish you well.' Be gentlemen. Own it."

Long-time friend and entertainment executive Michelle Anthony reflected,

"*America's Got Talent* lost such a great judge after she left. She was fantastic on that show. But she always stands up for what's right. She really is fearless in that way. Her raw honesty is what makes her unique. She doesn't put on a show or a front for anybody. She speaks her emotional truth."

Despite the NBC situation, Sharon remained a staple on primetime British television, where she had long served as a judge for BBC talent show *The X Factor* (2004-2007, 2013, and 2016-2018). She also remained on *The Talk*, which won Daytime Emmy awards in 2016 and 2017 (for Best Talk Show and Best Talk Show Hosts, respectively). Observed, Michelle Anthony, "Sharon always comes back. She has incredible strength and resilience."

Killer of Giants

In 2018, still hard at work managing her husband, Sharon became concerned that the Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG) was limiting Ozzy's artistic freedom. Sharon and Ozzy had been told that Ozzy, who had already embarked upon his final world tour, would not be allowed to play in

AEG's O₂ Arena in London unless he also agreed to play in the Staples Center (a Los Angeles sporting and events arena in which Ozzy did not want to perform). Sharon felt the Staples Center requirement was an egregious example of "block-booking" – an industry practice in which a subset of preferred performance venues are made available only to those who also utilize a second set of less preferred venues owned or organized by the same company.

AEG and LiveNation were two of the largest live entertainment companies in the world – and had long been engaged in head-to-head competition. As Sharon was negotiating Ozzy's access to the O₂, it became clear that the corporate competition was becoming more heated – and litigious – than in the past. LiveNation began working with MSG and Irving Azoff (two other industry players) to seek legal protection against AEG's block-booking efforts. Additionally, the US Department of Justice began to pay closer attention to LiveNation – in an effort to determine if its partnership with Ticketmaster might be facilitating anti-competitive, monopolistic actions.

As the battle between industry behemoths grew more heated, Sharon began to consider getting Ozzy involved – her David against AEG's Goliath. More specifically, she wondered if she should launch her own anti-trust suit against AEG (with Ozzy as named plaintiff), in effect partnering with LiveNation, MSG, and Azoff. She recognized that a positive outcome could be precedent setting for Ozzy and for other artists. At the same time, filing suit could mean entering into an expensive, potentially long-term dispute that otherwise involved very large companies, with incredibly deep pockets. The dispute even had a media-assigned industry label: the "Venue Wars." It was almost certain that AEG would respond to an Ozzy lawsuit both publicly and fiercely – its position being that artists signed with the entertainment companies, thus abdicating the right to claim or pursue individual venue preferences.

Sharon reflected on her next steps. Sixty-five years old. Three children. Three grandchildren. She had survived a challenging upbringing, her father, financial ruin, and cancer. She had steady, high profile jobs on award-winning, immensely popular television shows in multiple countries – and was a trusted household name in both the US and Europe. She was financially secure, as were Ozzy (now aged sixty-nine) and her now-grown kids. Her husband remained a successful, touring musician, an iconoclast and heavy metal icon. Another battle would be uncertain and exhausting. And yet ... she wondered.

ENDS

Sharon Osbourne: Music Industry Pioneer, Master of Reinvention, & Bada\$\$ Matriarch (Epilogue)

In March 2018, Sharon and Ozzy filed an anti-trust lawsuit against AEG, specifically citing the block-booking policy that required Ozzy to perform at AEG's Staples Center in order to gain access to the company's O₂ Arena. At the heart of the lawsuit was the notion that the O₂ represented the only significant venue in London; to make that arena dependent on a Staples date was tantamount to blocking Ozzy from an "essential" performance in his home country. In filing suit, Sharon and Ozzy were together making a stand – not solely for their own performance rights, but also for the rights of the innumerable other artists without the leverage to wage a fight. Sharon and Ozzy had less to lose at this point in their mutual careers, and were thus well-positioned to be at the vanguard of industry change.

In April 2018, news of ongoing United States Department of Justice investigations into the practices of Live Nation (with whom Sharon and Ozzy were allied) became public. In part buoyed by this development, AEG pushed back with a request for an injunction against the Osbourne case – filed on the basis of the company's view that the companies should make venue decisions, rather than their artists. In August, a judge knocked down this claim, indicating that the case should be permitted to advance through the courts. Two days later, AEG dropped its block-booking requirements – ceding a complete victory to the Osbournes. Noted Irving Azoff, in a statement to *Billboard*, "It's a great day for artists when those of us that make a living serving them recognize that artists should have the right to their own decisions, especially regarding choice of venues to play." He thanked Ozzy and Sharon, specifically, "for standing up for everyone."

Sharon had never been the most conventional of managers, just as her husband had never been the most conventional of musicians. But, through it all, she had proven herself a shrewd business leader, a survivor, and a victor. As Richard Griffiths of [title company] noted,

"I have taken on some of the way that Sharon operates. I use those techniques myself ... What I find is that when I now go into meetings, it's much easier. People are sort of programmed to do what I want them to do, because they think if they don't do it, s***'s gonna hit the fan. But it's a mix. Sharon's tough, but she's also very funny. She is totally charming. It is the mix that makes her one of the most effective managers in the history of the business."

Sharon, as always, viewed her choice as natural. "I will always fight for what I believe in."

ENDS