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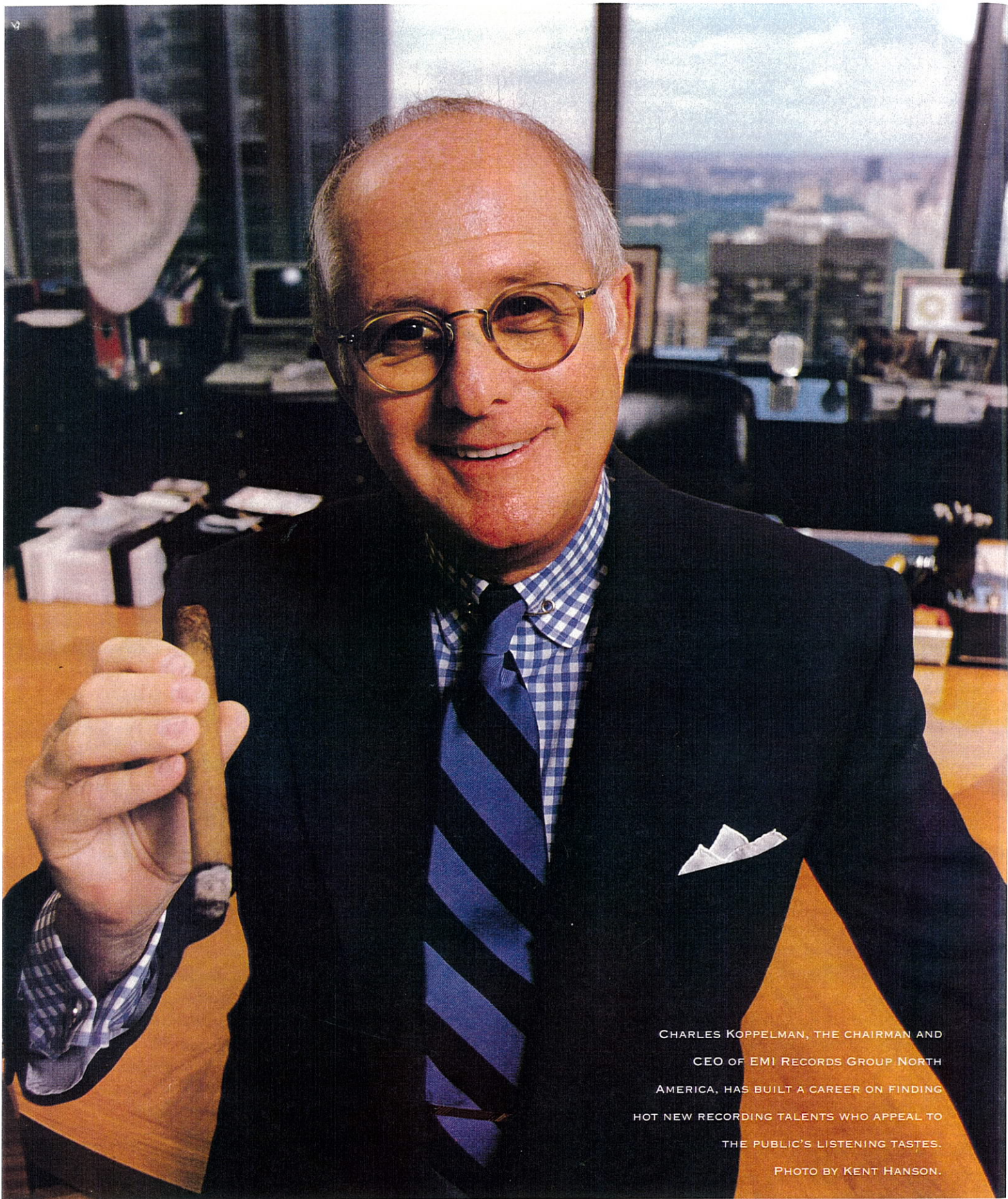
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**CHARLES KOPPELMAN,
WHOOPI GOLDBERG,
PENS & DAUM**





CHARLES KOPPELMAN, THE CHAIRMAN AND
CEO OF EMI RECORDS GROUP NORTH
AMERICA, HAS BUILT A CAREER ON FINDING
HOT NEW RECORDING TALENTS WHO APPEAL TO
THE PUBLIC'S LISTENING TASTES.
PHOTO BY KENT HANSON.

THE ART OF LISTENING

CHARLES KOPPELMAN FINDS
MUSIC THAT EVERYONE
LIKES TO HEAR

by Mervyn Rothstein

Charles A. Koppelman, chairman and CEO of EMI Records Group North America, rises from his mammoth, semicircular, blond wooden desk in his ultramodern mid-Manhattan office. He glances out his 42nd-floor corner window at all of Central Park spread before him in a green-and-blue aerial view, which makes it seem more a feature of a highly detailed, multicolored map than a living expanse of nature and humanity. Then he slowly lifts the cover of his stark black Davidoff humidior, surveys the hand-rolled splendors that lie within, and reaches for an elegantly long Cohiba Esplendido.

"I'm very lucky," he says, pausing to light his Cuban cigar and take the first aromatic puff of the day. "I really love what I do. I'm someone who looks forward to Mondays."

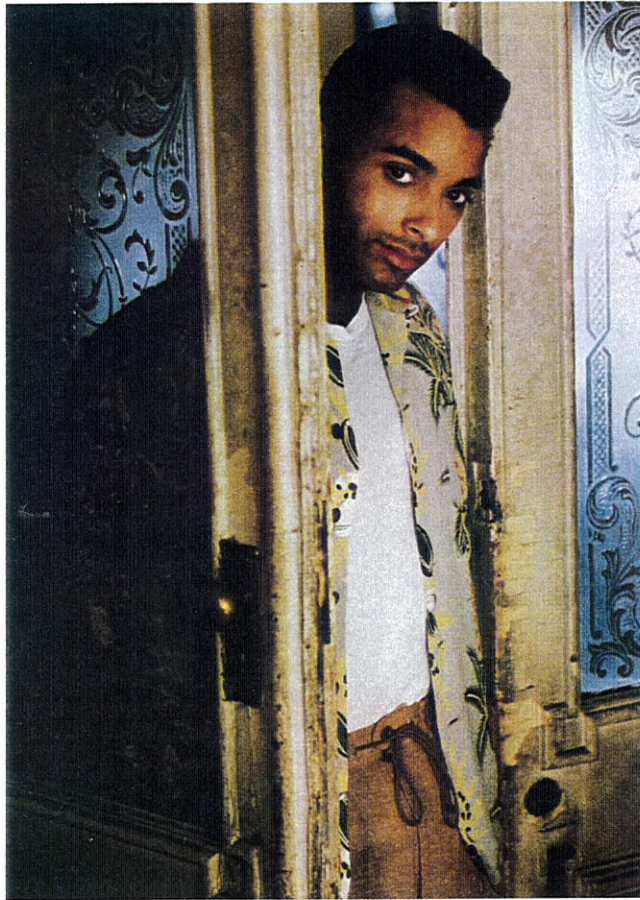
And well he should, for at 53, Koppelman is a giant of the American music business. As chairman and CEO, he is responsible for the record companies within the North American division of the British conglomerate Thorn EMI: Capitol Records, the legendary label of the Beatles, Nat "King" Cole, and the young Frank Sinatra; Liberty Records, the country-music home of Garth Brooks and Tanya Tucker; EMI Records Group, which comprises the contemporary labels Chrysalis and SBK Records; Angel Records, which specializes in classical music and Broadway cast albums; EMI Latin, and EMI Canada.

In his 30 years in the music world, he has discovered or worked with some of the most famous and popular recording stars of the era. The first artists he signed were the Lovin' Spoonful in 1965. He persuaded Bobby Darin to record the song "If I Were a Carpenter" and coproduced the record. In 1973, while working for Columbia Records as head of artists and recordings, he signed Janis Ian. After 1975, when he got together with builder Samuel Lefrak to form the Entertainment Company, he produced and found songs for Glen Campbell ("Southern Nights"), Dolly Parton ("Here You Come Again"), Paul Anka, Cher, Eddie Murphy, The Four Tops, and Barbra Streisand (five albums, from "Songbird" to "Guilty," including her smash-hit pairings with Donna Summer and Barry Gibb).

Koppelman produced the music for the television show "Fame." In the mid-1980s, his son Brian, then a student at Tufts University in Boston, discovered a brilliant young performer named Tracy Chapman and brought her to his father. Then came rapper Vanilla Ice, whose first album, "To the Extreme," was No. 1 for six weeks and sold more than 7 million copies, and the vocal group Wilson Phillips, whose debut album sold more than 5 million copies. And then his most recent successes: Arrested Development, which won two Grammys this year, for best new artist and best rap performance by a duo or group, and Jon Secada, the composer and singer who garnered a Grammy for best Latin pop album.

"I've spent the last 30 years finding, working with, and developing talent," Koppelman says, in a voice that gently betrays his New York City roots (he was born in Brooklyn and grew up in Laurelton, Queens) and that, despite its calm tone, reveals at least a hint of the precision, determination, and toughness necessary to compete in what can often be the cutthroat competition of his profession. He describes his work as "listening to songs, hearing a song and feeling it would be right for a particular artist to sing, and convincing that artist that he or she should sing it. And then finding a producer to produce it, making sure the music comes out in a way that matches my original vision, the way I imagined it when I first heard it. It's incredibly simple, and it's incredibly difficult."

Clearly, for Koppelman, it is incredibly simple. With his thinning gray hair, roundish open face, and confident self-assured demeanor, he certainly looks the role of CEO. And he dresses it, too, from the crisp white shirt to the blue- and-gold striped tie to the colorful wide suspenders illustrated with scenes from his favorite sports passion: golf. His business surroundings, too, are appropriate for his position. Music and video equipment of every kind populates his spacious realm: cassette and compact-disc players, turntable, amplifier, and VCR, all presided over by four huge gray- and-black Tandy speakers suspended from on high, one in each corner of the kingdom. Awards, plaques, and memorabilia are everywhere: a platinum record for Streisand's "Guilty," Chapman on the cover of *Rolling Stone*,



JON SECADA, ONE OF KOPPELMAN'S LATEST FINDS, WHOSE SONGS ARE RISING TO THE TOP OF THE CHARTS.



ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT HAS BECOME ONE OF THE HOTTEST RAP GROUPS. HUGELY SUCCESSFUL LOLLAPALOOZA TOUR.

Arrested Development on the cover of *Spin*, "Record Company CEO of the Year" in 1990, the 1991 Humanitarian Award from the T.J. Martell Foundation for Leukemia, Cancer and AIDS Research. Along a shelf by one set of windows sits a group of modern sculptures, among them a giant papier-mâché rendering of his ear: a gift from a partner, with a dedication: "To my friend Charles, whose ears are exceeded only by his heart."

It is an appropriate artistic gesture, for Koppelman's ears have certainly been a prime factor in his career: ears that have the ability to know, on first hearing, whether a song or performer has that indefinable something—or doesn't. It is, says Koppelman, a matter of taste: "Whether it's taste in music or taste in cigars or taste in clothes." (And indeed, he has just come from his personal tailor, where he was delayed for 20 minutes over a problem with a button.) "You have to know what is the best in order to have the best. My wife has a great expression: 'The best will do just fine.' And I think taste is what does it. You're either born with it or you acquire it."

Koppelman's ears work in a very basic way: "I'm a fan. I can't sing. I can't write music. I just think that if I'm attracted to something, everybody's going to be attracted to it. When I listen to a singer, one of the things I focus on is whether I believe that singer. Do I believe the words they're singing? Is their voice distinctive? Will I recognize that voice any time I hear it? When I listen to a song, is it

really organic? Do I feel the hairs stand up on the back of my neck when I hear it? Does it make me smile? Things of that nature that I think are the same things the audience hears and responds to. Maybe it's some sort of common—and I underline common—denominator that I have within me, because more of what I like, everybody ends up liking."

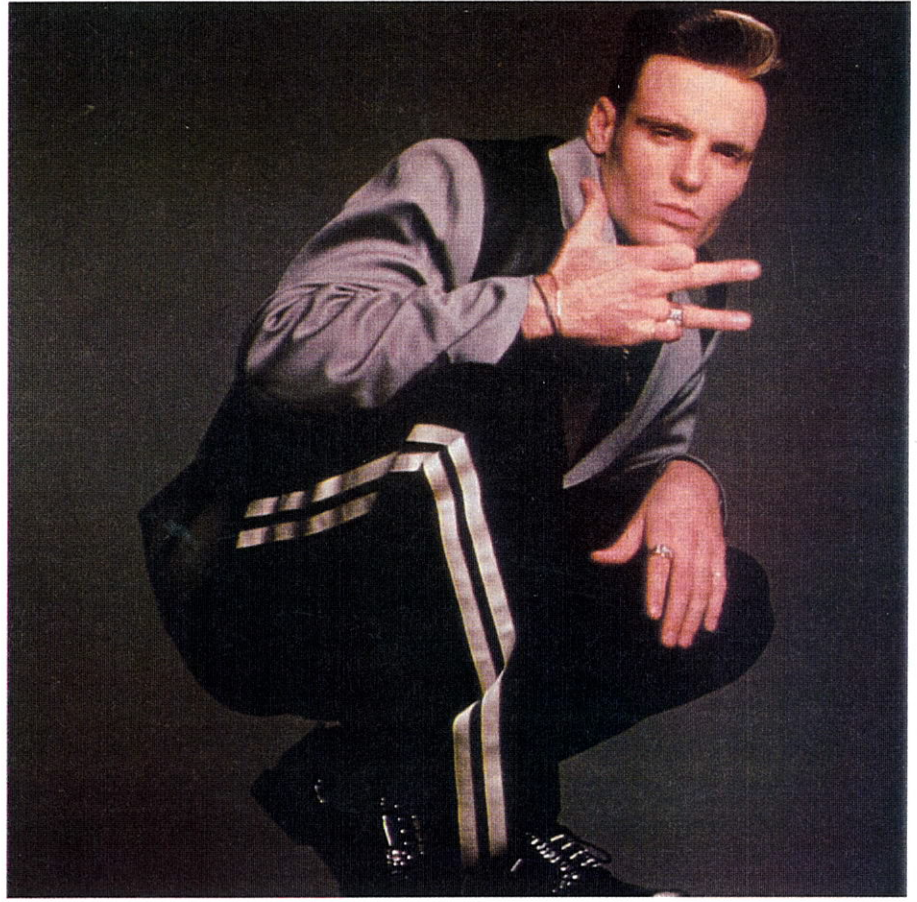
Despite his apparent instinctive ability to recognize the music that makes him dance, the art of melody did not consume much of his childhood. "All I did when I was growing up was play stickball, baseball, and basketball," Koppelman says. "If stickball was the national pastime, I think I would have been Ty Cobb." He attended Adelphi College and Long Island University, earning a degree in physical education, and an early goal was to coach or manage in baseball.

But he had a next-door neighbor "who sang all the time," and while in college he met someone else who also sang and played the guitar. "And the three of us would hang around and sometimes create some music," he says. "I didn't create the music. I was kind of hanging around. And if they were singing songs, maybe I'd try to sing on one of the notes that everyone else was singing. So there might have been three people but there was only two-part harmony."

Coincidentally, another neighbor was the editor of *Cash Box*, a music trade publication, and, Koppelman says, "from about age 14



AMERICA AND WAS PART OF LAST SUMMER'S



VANILLA ICE BECAME ONE OF THE BIGGEST STARS OF THE LATE 1980S AND EARLY 1990S WITH HIS CROSSOVER RAP STYLE.

to 18, I was exposed to reading old *Cash Box* magazines, so I somehow learned there was a business of music."

Meanwhile, his friends were still singing. "I realized that if we sang at different college events, it would be a great way to attract girls." One Easter week, he suggested that the group go into Manhattan to see whether they could get a recording contract. "We went in and knocked on doors," he says. "I had the names of all these different record companies from reading *Cash Box*. And as luck would have it, we were signed by a small record company owned by a dentist from New Jersey. It was called Shell Records. Their logo was a big seashell."

The group took the name the Ivy Three. And this unlikely creation would lead to a surprising musical hit and, for Koppelman (and another trio member, Don Rubin, who would become a long-time associate), a lifetime career.

One day, Koppelman says, while working part time in the boys' department of Gimbels, he had another idea: Why not a song about Yogi Bear? After all, the Hanna-Barbera cartoon character was the rage on college campuses. So he found a pair of songwriters and wound up working with them; the song "Yogi" was born and, wonder of wonders, became a hit. "We went on tour," Koppelman recalls. "We sang in the Midwest. We sang on the Dick Clark tele-

vision show, *American Bandstand*. And that got me interested in the music business." Sports was out, and music was in.

The Ivy Three had no other hits and soon disbanded. But Koppelman and Rubin got jobs writing songs for Alden Music, which was co-owned by music publisher Don Kirschner, whom Koppelman had met when the Ivy Three performed at Grossinger's in the Catskills. Alden's stable of writers included Carole King and Neil Sedaka, and it soon became clear that Koppelman was not in their league. But he had not really wanted to be a songwriter; he had just wanted an entree to the business. "So after about two years of unsuccessfully writing songs, Don Kirschner hired me to be the director of his music publishing company," he says. "It was just about the time he sold it to Columbia Pictures, so my first real job was as director of Screen Gems-Columbia Music. That was in 1963."

Two years later, he and Rubin went into business on their own. In 1970, they sold their company, and Koppelman went to work for Columbia Records, first running their publishing company and then as head of artists and recordings. Then, in 1975, he and Lefrak formed the Entertainment Company, which was both a music-publishing and record-production concern. "And," says Koppelman, "it just evolved from there."

In 1986, he and two colleagues, Stephen C. Swid and Martin N. Bandier, the latter of whom had been general counsel for the Lefrak

ONE OF THE BIGGEST FEMALE SINGING GROUPS OF THE PAST FIVE YEARS IS WILSON PHILLIPS, WHO ARE THE DAUGHTERS OF MICHELLE PHILLIPS OF THE MAMAS AND THE PAPAS AND BRIAN WILSON OF THE BEACH BOYS.



Organization and who had worked with Koppelman since the start of the Entertainment Company, got together to buy CBS Songs for a reported \$125 million. CBS Songs was the music-publishing division of CBS Records; its holdings included the MGM-United Artists copyright catalog, including such songs as "Over the Rainbow," "Singin' in the Rain," "New York, New York," and the music from the James Bond movies. Three years later, the partners sold their company to Thorn EMI, reportedly for more than \$300 million, and Koppelman moved to EMI Records Group North America (as did Bandier).

"It's a daily challenge," Koppelman says, slowly taking another puff of his Cohiba. For with the change of positions has come a slight change in his role. "It's as meaningful to me these days to discover a terrific young executive and nurture that person as it is to find a great young artist," he says. "Being in this business, I'm surrounded by young people who have great energy, and what I hope is to give them focus. If you can give someone who's young, whether it's your child or an employee or a partner, the guidance and the focus to harness their talent, that's something you can really enjoy."

Something else that Koppelman clearly enjoys is his cigars. And he has delighted in them for many years. "I never smoked cigarettes," he says. "When I was 23 or 24, I saw somebody smoking a Tiparillo. So I started by smoking a couple of Tiparillos, and from there I kept moving up. I spent a lot of time smoking Cream of Jamaica. Then I tried Temple Hall Claros for a long period of time. And ultimately I ended up with Davidoff Cuban No. 1's, and Montecristo Especiales, and now Cohiba Esplendidos."

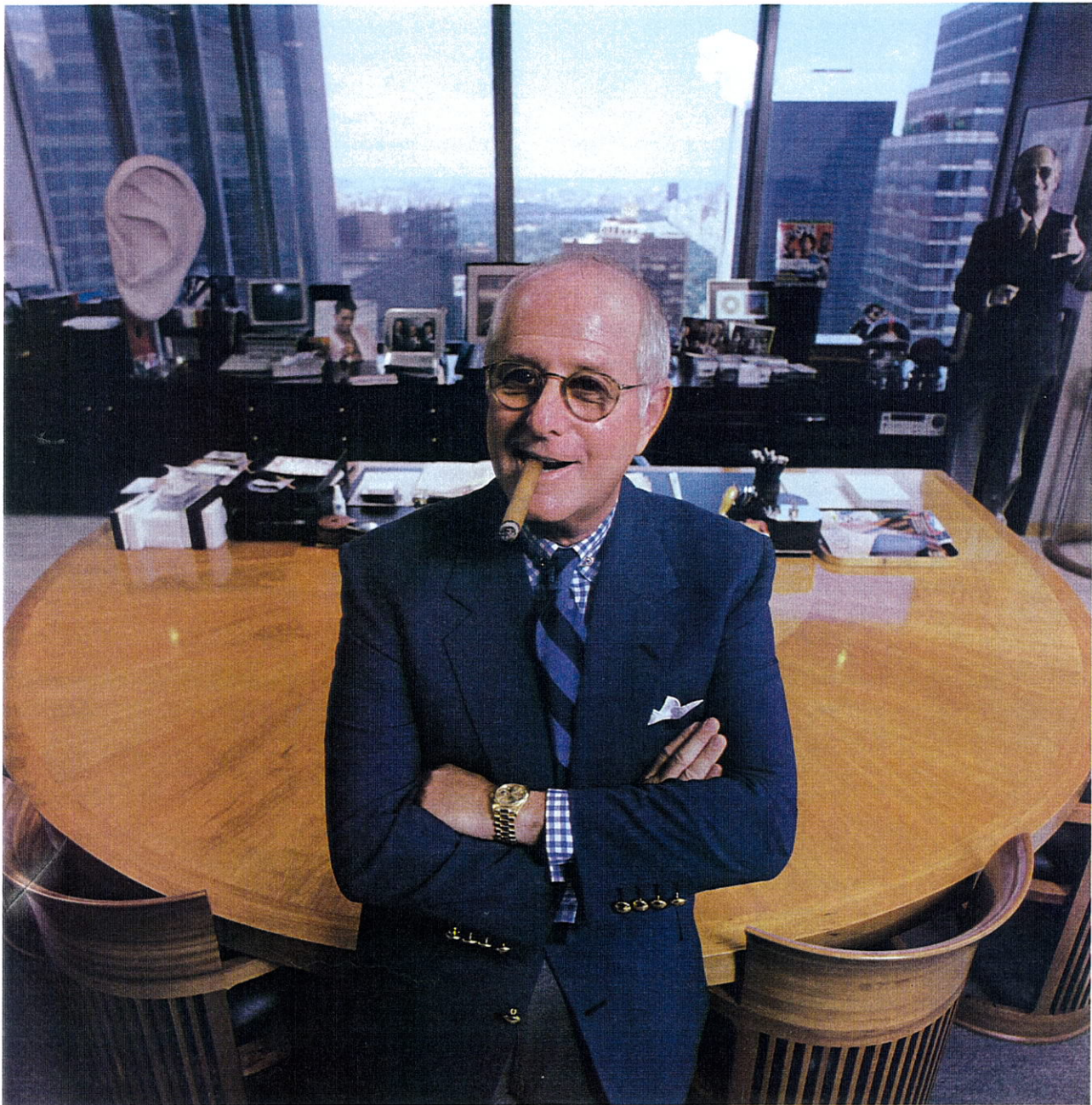
"I can't tell you that I'm a cigar aficionado," he continues, perhaps ignoring the fact that he has not one but two humidors on the window sill behind his desk (the other, in brown and blond wood, is from Dunhill and contains under its lid a plaque from the Connoisseur's Humidor Society). "But I can tell you that I love to smoke cigars. It's incredibly relaxing. And I like the taste."

He has from time to time tried other cigars, he says. "I'm not a Cuban snob. I'll try a Dominican cigar. But I just keep gravitating back to the Cohibas. To me they're the best."

Another of his loves, as his suspenders suggest, is golf—in part because it recalls the sporting life of his childhood. "I've been playing about seven or eight years," he says, "but I've only been serious about it for the past two or three. In the beginning, I played infrequently, no more than ten times a year. Now I play every chance I get. Yesterday I had the best score I've ever made. I shot an 87. So I'm making real progress."

What he loves most about the game, he says, is the competition—the inner contest. "I'm very competitive," he says, "and golf is a terrific way to be competitive within yourself. It's a great feeling to hit a pure shot. I loved to play basketball and to shoot the ball, and the skills in putting the ball in the hoop or putting the ball in the cup are not that dissimilar. I also used to love batting in stickball, making contact with the ball and being able to put it where I wanted to put it. Golf really combines so many of the sports I enjoyed when I was a kid."

Koppelman lives in Roslyn Harbor, Long Island. He and his wife, Bunny, have three children. "Two of them are married," he says. "And all three are now in law school."



KOPPELMAN, WHO SAYS HE ISN'T REALLY A CIGAR AFICIONADO, LOVES HIS CIGARS, ESPECIALLY COHIBA ESPLENDIDOS AND CUBAN DAVIDOFF No. 1'S. PHOTO BY KENT HANSON.

His corporate life is quintessentially bicoastal. He spends a week or so every month presiding over the company's Hollywood office in the Capitol Tower on the legendary corner of Hollywood and Vine. Commuting is accomplished by means of a chartered private jet. He stays in the presidential suite at either the Hotel Bel-Air or the Peninsula Hotel, and as is only fitting for a chief executive, he has the services of a Bentley and a driver on the shores of both the Atlantic and the Pacific.

Because he has achieved so much in his career, it is natural to wonder whether anything is missing: Is there something he wants to do that he has not yet done?

He reflects for a moment. "I don't think so," he says, sounding like a prototypically superconfident and accomplished CEO.

Is he absolutely sure?

He ponders again. He glances quickly at his suspenders, and then toward the shelf that holds a newspaper reproduction of a portrait of him at golf, painted by sports artist LeRoy Neiman. He smiles.

"I guess," he says, "I'd really like to shoot an 86." ❖

Mervyn Rothstein covers theater, film, and literature for The New York Times.