Michael Gudinski

September 1991

LATE LAST YEAR, AN ANONYMOUS seven-page fax landed on the desks of hundreds of people working in the Australian rock industry. The document accused its subject of ruthlessly eliminating his competitors and of creating a monopoly which had crippled the local world of rock and roll. Everybody in the industry seemed to get a copy, as did public servants and members of Federal Parliament.

The man defamed was Michael Gudinski, record company boss, international promoter, music publisher, merchandiser, band manager, booking agent, industry powerbroker and impresario-at-large.

Michael Gudinski's public position on the fax is to declare it meaningless—the act of desperadoes bearing a grudge. Whoever sent it—and he believes he knows who was responsible—has no standing in the industry. 'Otherwise they would have put their name or names on it,' he says.

In the privacy of Gudinski's silver-grey Mercedes, the message is somewhat different. 'There's just one thing I need to know,' he says urgently. 'Did you decide to do the story [on me] before or after you saw the fax?'

'Before.'

'Okay, I'm smiling now,' he says. 'If it wasn't so dark you'd see—there's a big smile on my face.'

It's true. Michael Gudinski has only just started smiling, even though he has not stopped talking since we first met 10 minutes ago. He pulled up outside my Melbourne hotel by throwing a 180-degree turn in the middle of Little Collins Street. Rock music blared from his car stereo, and before the seat belt had even finished its electronic slide across my shoulder, the 38-year-old bearded kid behind the wheel was into his high-velocity monologue.

He'd seen the questions I had sent him that morning, as requested, and he liked some but didn't like others. He would answer some but he wouldn't answer others—in fact, he would add some of his own for good measure. He then began talking about himself, the Australian music industry and the way the two were inexorably linked. He talked about what he knew about me, where I had worked before, what I had written, what he liked about my stories, what he didn't. He told me that half the people I had already interviewed for this story had called him, some of them to express their concern about the direction the story might be taking.

Gudinski is almost as well briefed about his interviewer as his interviewer is about him. But now, with the small matter of that libellous document clarified, the anointed godfather of Australian rock music is smiling to himself in the dark.

And why not—there's plenty to be chuffed about. He's still dining out on Billy Joel's $10-million-grossing national tour earlier this year; there are the continuing delights of Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan's astonishing success overseas, forcing 'the knockers to put their heads in their arse'; there are the recent awards bestowed on his new signing, Aboriginal singer Archie Roach, by the Australian Record Industry Association (ARIA) for best Australian new talent and best indigenous record; and there's the thrill of his organisation that imports overseas acts, the Frontier Touring Company, managing only days ago to snatch the US band Jane's Addiction away from another promoter.

There's pleasure to be derived from the big picture, too. Gudinski's group of companies is now one of the largest independent music empires in the world; his flagship, Mushroom Records, is the biggest independent record company in Australia; his national booking agency, Premier/Harbour, represents nearly 80 per cent of the established rock bands in the country; his Liberation label, with more than 30 overseas acts in its catalogue, has become a licence to print money; his publishing arm, Mushroom Music, goes from strength to strength; his merchandising company, Australian Tour Merchandising, is the pacesetter in its field, now branching out from rock and roll to football; and his new venture with good friend and partner Ian 'Molly' Meldrum, Melodian Records, is also continuing to do well, despite the fact that Gudinski recently felt compelled to smash Meldrum's head against a microwave oven 'to knock some sense into it'.

And what's more, as we hurtle through the streets of Melbourne, the night is still young for a man with a penchant for five gigs a night, and for hanging out with 21-year-old rock stars till dawn. Between now and 2 am, he'll visit TV studios to see two of his acts record for *MTV*

and then he'll drop into a Richmond pub to see the newly signed Deborah Conway sing, along with another act he wants to snare. Finally, he'll return to the sanctuary of his Toorak mansion, where his wife, Sue, and two young children will almost certainly be asleep. He'll find a plate of his favourite home-cooked Thai food waiting for him in the fridge. All he'll have to do is heat it up. (If the microwave still works.)

So who cares about some dumb, malicious document circulated by a bunch of guys you regard as losers? You can afford to smile when you're king of the mountain.

MICHAEL GUDINSKI'S OFFICE SITS AT the top of a spiral staircase in a building of chic black lacquer and glass partitions in Albert Park, Melbourne. There's a stack of CDs and cassettes on his desk, the deafening roar of a music video pouring from his television screen, an intercom system in full cry and three phone lines ringing almost non-stop.

This is the throne room of the man who has helped shape and nurture the Australian music industry for 20-odd years. According to Toby Creswell, editor of *Rolling Stone* magazine: 'Without Michael Gudinski or someone incredibly similar to him, there wouldn't be any music industry in Australia.'

Gudinski has been behind many of the major acts to have emerged in the past two decades—from Chain, Madder Lake, Renée Geyer and Skyhooks, in the early days, through to Sports, Split Enz, the Models, Jo Jo Zep and the Falcons, Hunters and Collectors, Paul Kelly and the Messengers, and the Choirboys—and has revitalised the careers of others, including the Angels, the Church and Jimmy Barnes. Oh yes, and there's Jason and Kylie and Dannii, too. But if Gudinski has signed up more local bands than any other record company in Australia, he has, on the other hand, missed the boat on the biggest bands that we've produced—AC/DC, INXS, Men at Work and Midnight Oil are not on his books. His detractors claim that's the price you pay for trying to do too much.

So behind the bravado of the ageing wunderkind of rock is the gnawing sense of being denied the final glittering prize. 'It is a frustration,' says Gudinski, 'but we'll get there.' Vaulting ambition is, after all, what fires him. The man who says he's happy to be a big fish in a small pond also dreams of a Mushroom office in every country in the world and three number one hits in a row in America.

Certainly, he's a driven man. The solid frame is perpetually in motion: the eyes squinting and darting, the fingers constantly drumming and clicking, the feet shifting, his conversation careering from one half-finished

sentence to the next. As he says himself: 'I'm a pretty movey sort of guy. Jumpy and stuff . . .'

His life is spent running between countries, states, meetings, ventures, organisations, people . . . fuelled by a natural restless energy but also by an unquenchable need, it seems, to prove himself. And if it can't be done by creating international rock acts, it'll be done by accumulating money, power and soda-pop stars. This is a man who needs to win, whether the game is music or Monopoly. He's like a swaggering cowboy, posturing and chest-thumping his way around musicland, trailed by a reputation for ruthlessness.

But Gudinski is also surprisingly well liked. He wins friends with a manic personality that's part-Jewish schmalz, part larrikinism—topped up with infectious energy.

'He has an enormous ability to get up in the morning and sound enthusiastic,' says John Woodruff, manager of the Angels. 'He is one of the most enthusiastic people you'll ever meet about anything. I bet you he sells you on every fucking band he's got, 'cause that's what he does. He lives, breathes, eats, drinks and sleeps it.'

He also seems to inspire unswerving loyalty from his staff. In the industry, they call Gudinski and his co-workers The Family, because some of his colleagues have been with him for up to 20 years. 'The loyalty factor around Michael is incredible,' says Gary Ashley, who started his career at Mushroom Records by taking the rubbish out and is now general manager. 'But that has its downside. He controls people's emotions without realising it. He certainly controlled mine for a long time. You just hang on every word. He's a natural leader.'

SO IT'S EASY TO LIKE Michael Gudinski when you've never done battle with the man and you're sitting with him in one of the finest Japanese restaurants in Melbourne. There's something boyish and ingenuous about the way he turns up his nose at the sushi and then begins to regale you with all the food he won't touch: alfalfa sprouts, bean curd, oysters, cuttlefish, scallops, pork, turkey, duck . . . as well as habits he has given up of late: desserts, tea with sugar, lemonade with Chinese food.

'I can talk well about food at the moment,' he says, 'because I'm very proud of myself. I've lost a stone [since the Billy Joel tour]. And I started swimming . . . I was tubby and my wife was really worried about so many younger people having heart attacks . . . and I *am* under stress.'

It's also disarming—and deliberate—the way he turns to me at the end of lunch and says, 'How am I doin'?', as if he's unaware that he has given

away very little about himself, except for the delicious tidbit about Sting falling for his wife, Sue, when the rock star was in Australia.

(When Gudinski married Sue Smith, the former promotions manager at Melbourne radio station 3XY, he married not only one of the savviest women in Australian rock, but also one of the most glamorous. 'For a lot of people it was a strange relationship,' says family friend Lee Simon. 'Michael has never had "glamorous" attached to his name. Sue certainly is, but she is also down to earth. She understands the industry and is a very good character judge. She provides him with the saner side of his life.' Sue Gudinski declined to talk to me for this article.)

Gudinski's contrived concern about his performance at lunch is part of his charm repertoire. The cute question gives him an air of vulnerability—something Gudinski is perhaps hoping will improve his profile in print.

'He is enormously image-conscious,' says Melbourne rock writer David Pepperell, aka Dr Pepper. 'He has dreamed up this image of himself as the godfather of Australian rock and he can't understand why you would want to say anything bad about him. He gets enormously upset if you do . . . His public persona is everything to him. There is nothing more important than that.'

Conscious of his image he may be, but conscious of his place in the great scheme of things he ain't. The mind is fast rather than deep. In fact, Gudinski seems to take macho pride in being the anti-intellectual. He describes his sister, Tania, as 'over-educated'. She has a science degree. Gudinski does, however, enjoy reading. According to Lee Simon, he devours anything on the mafia.

As rock writer Stuart Coupe says of him fondly, 'Michael has the attention span of the average cockroach. Someone once predicted that *Young Einstein* was going to be a successful movie because Michael had sat there for two hours and watched it.' Anything that could hold his attention for that long had to be a hit. This is someone, after all, who spent part of his own wedding frantically trying to stitch together an Australian tour by the late transvestite performer, Divine.

Does Gudinski think of himself as meditative?

'Meditative? What does that mean?' he replies.

Introspective?

'What, sit there and think about things? Yeah, I sit there and think a lot about things but, no, I'm not much of a procrastinator.'

Does he like the power he wields?

'I'd be a liar if I said I didn't like the power. [But] I don't think my ego is out of control. I've got a healthy ego. I think in the '70s, in the Skyhooks era, when I was young and living the life, I was a bit egoed-out. I'm glad I got it away when I was young.'

Shirley Strachan, lead singer of Skyhooks, finds that self-image laughable. 'He loves the power. He thrives on it. He wants to control everyone. He can't help himself.'

Michael Gudinski was thrown out of home when he was 17. His Russian Jewish parents were horrified their only son dropped out of school to be a booking agent for bands. His father, Kuba Gudinski, ran a successful building company and wanted Michael to follow suit, or at least go to university, but the rebel child resisted.

The death of his mother in 1979 and of his father a year later meant that Gudinski inherited a large amount of money, rumoured to be around $2 million, which he used to buy his palatial home in Toorak.

But their deaths also robbed him of an opportunity to fully redeem himself in his parents' eyes after the collapse, in 1978, of his international touring company, Evans Gudinski and Associates. The company was liquidated with debts estimated to be in excess of $400,000. Gudinski describes the crash and the subsequent, but inconclusive, investigation by the Victorian Corporate Affairs Commission as 'one of the hardest periods of my life'. Now head of the Frontier Touring Company, which, in 1989, was voted best touring company in the world by the US magazine *Performance*, Gudinski says sentimentally that one of his greatest regrets is that his parents didn't live to see him bring out Frank Sinatra, Liza Minnelli and Sammy Davis Jnr that same year. 'If there's one thing my father would have been proud to have seen, that would have been it,' he says.

His father wouldn't have been proud, however, of the other spotlight that fell on Frontier in 1989, when drug charges were laid against Gudinski's financial adviser, Philip Jacobsen, while he was on tour in New Zealand with Jimmy Barnes. 'It was totally unnecessary and he was set up,' says Gudinski when pressed on the matter. A year later, Ian Saxon, a tour manager who worked for Frontier, was also arrested on drug charges, and the National Crime Authority (NCA) was brought in to investigate Frontier's books. Says Gudinski: 'The guy [Saxon] tour-managed a couple of tours for us on a part-time basis. He was never ever a full-time employee. The NCA did go through the Frontier books and found nothing. We were totally cleared of any involvement.'

The talk turns to his wife and two young children and Gudinski becomes almost serene.

'They've given me a strong purpose and direction in life and a reason to think a bit more long-term,' he says. 'I was never much of a long-term thinker. I'd live for the minute. But now the kids and Sue have given me . . . you know, a whole, real world. It's tamed me a bit. It's made me more sensible in some areas.'

How so?

'I think my weight. Thinking about how late you can stay up. How many nights. Thinking about responsibilities. I mean, if I had one year to live I'd set up some of the great people I've got around me, give them their brief, and I'd just shut down. I'd give it all [that year] to my family. I have no doubt about it.'

The restaurant we're lunching in has emptied. By now, Gudinski is exuding bonhomie. But at the mention of his critics and enemies, Gudinski turns from kindly family man to aggressive music titan. His voice becomes menacing and a few of the staple words of the rock industry—'crap', 'wimp', 'arsehole'—start flying across the table. This is the other side of Michael Gudinski talking now; the side that many people are very, very wary of crossing.

UNDERSTAND ONE THING. THE MUSIC industry is a war zone. It is like Lebanon—a place racked by feuds and divided into fiefdoms. It is about muscle flexing and the carving up of territory. It is about winning the rare spoils of victory—which in music parlance amounts to radio airplay, record sales and bums on seats.

Take the live side of the industry for example, which is where Gudinski first learnt his trade. The agency wars of the late '70s were notorious for dirty tricks and standover tactics. Today, Gudinski and his two main lieutenants, Frank Stivala and Sam Righi, are a victorious triumvirate whose Premier/Harbour booking agency represents most of Australia's major bands.

Frank Stivala is known as 'the heavy' who runs the Melbourne end of the live circuit with an iron fist. His booking arrangements once prompted Bob 'Bongo' Starkie, the guitarist from Skyhooks, to take to Stivala's desk with an axe and chop it in half. But Stivala, who was in his office at the time, is nothing if not tough . . . and preoccupied. He once wrote a card to his mother which read: 'Dear Mum, happy birthday, love Frank Stivala.'

Sam Righi has been accused of using just about every ploy in the book to secure venues for his bands. He denies ever doing anything illegal or unethical, but his own house in Bellevue Hill, Sydney, is living testimony to the conflicts that sunder the industry. The house is still shared with a former business partner but, since a falling-out, has been divided—by a wall—down the middle. So the two men remain neighbours, but haven't spoken to each other for years.

It's not surprising that Gudinski has such tough cookies for partners. Gudinski has always been a hustler, devoting his life to becoming the

Mr Big of Australian music, but also to hauling the country out of the cultural cringe of the 1950s and '60s.

Lee Simon, former host of the popular *Nightmoves* television program and now program director of MMM-FM in Melbourne, remembers his method: 'Michael would drag radio people and music journalists out to the venues to see [his] bands playing live. He would do anything he could to get you to the venue. He would make sure you would see how the audience responded; how many people would queue up to go and see the band. He would come up with every indicator he could to show you that the song deserved airplay. And he went to more pains to do that than anybody else at the time. He didn't employ gimmicks to try to get you to listen. He just badgered you.'

Mushroom Records grew out of Gudinski's passion to showcase Australian bands, at a time when other record companies were preoccupied with overseas talent.

But supporting local music wasn't always profitable. It wasn't until 1975, when Skyhooks released its debut album, *Living in the '70s*, that Mushroom came out of the red. Five years later, Split Enz saved the company once again. Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan have been the latest—and most lucrative—money-spinners. These acts notwithstanding, Mushroom Records would have gone under had it not been for help from Festival Records and Gudinski's diversification into all areas of the music industry. That network means that artists are signed up virtually lock, stock and barrel to the Mushroom group.

It means that Mushroom is often accused of being a monopoly and Gudinski of taking on too much, to the detriment of some of his other ventures. Gudinski says, 'I mostly do spread myself too thin. But this is no one-man show. I've got some of the best people [in the business] and they love me giving them rope.'

Mushroom's empire is a one-stop package deal for its artists, but in return, the conglomerate virtually owns them from the cradle to the grave. Some call it the artist's life-support system. Others call it an unhealthy concentration of power that involves Gudinski in huge conflicts of interest. 'Michael would do some hard time [in the US] for the things he has done here, because in the US there are anti-trust laws,' says Phil Tripp, the American-born publisher, publicist and rock journalist. 'You can't have a recording company, publishing company, booking agency, management company, merchandising company and touring company acting for the same artist at the same time, otherwise you end up negotiating with yourself.'

Perhaps the greatest potential conflict of interest exists when the manager is also the recording company, as is the case with Gudinski and

Jimmy Barnes. 'There are all these jokes about what happens when Jimmy Barnes' contract is up,' says Stuart Coupe. 'Is Michael going to sit around a big table arguing with himself?'

'That's a criticism I have heard many a time,' retorts Barnes, 'and what you really have to remember is that I'm not silly enough to leave Michael negotiating contracts for himself. That's not good business no matter how close a friend you are.'

If Jimmy Barnes is happy with Gudinski's management, the same can't be said for Skyhooks' lead singer, Shirley Strachan. Gudinski co-managed Skyhooks when it reformed and went on the road last year for three months.

'He's not a manager's fucking arsehole,' says Strachan, who now does the surf and ski reports for MMM-FM in Melbourne. 'He got wind that we were going to [reform] and he wanted to be in . . . the problem with Michael is he just can't say no to things . . . but we [hadn't decided] whether we were going to involve him or not. So Michael started his manipulation . . . [trying] to divide and conquer the band.

'I ended up telling him to fucking well go fuck himself . . . You see, in the beginning when we had the band meeting I said: "I love Michael, great guy, but, I'm sorry, the guy's got too much on his fucking plate" . . . and as it turned out, Gudinski did fucking nothing in a managerial role for the tour.'

Gudinski's response is: 'I think he's got a bit of a grudge because I was involved. There's always been a split within the band, and half the band wanted me involved and the other half didn't. I didn't hustle my way in.'

Gudinski's empire is so vast and overlapping it's almost impossible to move within the music industry without crossing his territory. You can't wield that sort of power without making a few enemies along the way.

Andrew McManus, manager of the Divinyls, claims it is 'unadulterated war' between himself and the Gudinski empire because of a financial dispute he had with Sam Righi. 'They are doing everything to fuck me over,' he says. 'I have considered taking legal action but the Divinyls don't need their name dragged through the mud.' McManus, who is not the most popular man in the industry, accuses the Gudinski empire—and the Harbour agency in particular—of trying to scuttle recent tour dates for the Divinyls, as well as a tour by an American band, Scatterbrain, that he was promoting. He also claims that because he has made an enemy of Sam Righi, he will find it almost impossible to work again in the Australian industry. The Divinyls, his major act, are now based in America under the wing of Madonna's manager.

Says an angry Gudinski: 'I've spoken to the guy [McManus] in the past couple of weeks and if he says that, he's a wimp, because he's never been able to say it to my face. I'm too busy to war. I'm too successful to bother warring. I mean, where are we? What sort of talk is that?'

'I'VE HEARD YOU'RE A CUNT,' says Ian 'Molly' Meldrum, as I enter his house for an interview. In what way, Molly? 'I've heard about you. You come across as the nice guy and then you turn into a cunt . . . ' His belligerence continues throughout the interview. Gudinski's partner in Melodian Records, Meldrum seems convinced that any investigation of the Mushroom group of companies must have sinister intent. He rails against an unrelated story that appeared in a previous issue of this magazine, and questions its decision to profile Gudinski rather than his major competitor, Chris Murphy (not the Sydney lawyer), who not only manages INXS and Jenny Morris, but has also in recent years set up the rooArt record label, as well as his own booking agency and music publishing firm. Meldrum seems unimpressed with magazines in general. ('You magazines try to say, "Is Richard Wilkins going to be the next Molly Meldrum?" Of course Richard Wilkins is not going to be the next Molly Meldrum . . . I mean the guy doesn't wear a hat; he's not gay.')

Later, Meldrum demands to know my sexual preferences and my political persuasion, and at one stage threatens to sue me or use his regular column in *TV Week* against me if I misquote him. As I'm leaving, he points out that his room is bugged and that he has our entire conversation on tape. He also tells me that Gudinski is 'one of the greatest mentors of Australian rock and roll'; that he loves him but also fights with him all the time. Only two weeks ago, he says, Gudinski shoved Molly's 'fucking head into a microwave oven'. Meldrum had scaled Gudinski's Toorak fence at 4.30 am to berate him for not turning up to a Melodian reception the same evening. Gudinski had gone, instead, to a Jimmy Barnes concert. On entering the house, Meldrum was first whacked by Jane Barnes, so angry was she at the intrusion. (Jimmy and Jane Barnes were staying with the Gudinskis.) Asked later about this clash, Gudinski offers a deep sigh, and then . . . 'I hope you realise Molly was a bit inebriated when you went round there . . . I've never ever lost my cool like that [referring to the fight]. Ever. But at 4.30 in the morning when you're sound asleep and you went to bed at 2.30 . . . I think it's a fair reaction. I'm not a violent person. [Anyway] I didn't put his head in the microwave. I smashed it against it three or four times. I was trying to knock some sense into the bloody idiot.'

If this incident says something about Meldrum and Gudinski's love-hate relationship, it also reveals how exasperating Gudinski's overloaded agenda can be to his colleagues and clients. There's only so much one man can do—and keep doing it well.

THOSE WHO WERE THERE REMEMBER it as one of the best parties they'd been to. The occasion was a welcome-home for Skyhooks in 1975. The venue was the Baron of Beef restaurant in the Dandenongs. The host was Michael Gudinski. He'd hired a train to collect journalists and industry heavies and stocked it with French champagne.

'By the time we got there, we were all pretty drunk,' claims rock writer Dave Dawson. 'Then, when we got to our table, there was a bag of dope on it. There were bags of dope on all the tables.' That's how rock entrepreneur Brian de Courcy remembers it, too. Says Gudinski: 'I love the story. It sounds great, but it's an absolute myth.'

There's no doubt, however, that Gudinski enjoys the grand gesture. At the Mushroom bash after last year's ARIA awards, costumed trumpeters welcomed guests to Melbourne's Southern Cross Hotel where the foyer was transformed into a 'Roman cave'. When Neil Young toured in 1985 with a band called the Lost Dogs, Gudinski organised the press conference to be held in a lost dogs' centre in North Melbourne. At home, he hosts lunches for the likes of Billy Joel, Bob Dylan, Sting, Tracy Chapman and Bon Jovi. But for Billy Idol, he did a bit more than throw another shrimp on the barbie.

Michael Chugg, Gudinski's partner in Frontier, remembers the 1987 Idol tour as 'pretty hectic'. 'At the end, we threw this big party at some sleaze club in Pitt Street. We had all these strippers and dancers on. Billy ended up locked in the dressing room behind the stage with his security guy on the door. He was with six girls. The story has it that he had all six girls at once.'

Gudinski wants to be thought of as a colourful character. 'I've worked on becoming a bit eccentric,' he says. 'If you don't get a bit of fun out of it, you're going to lose it. You're either going to have a nervous breakdown or get an ulcer. That's what I like about being top of the tree . . . I've got people around me who can do a lot of the day-to-day responsible stuff and I can swan around a bit.'

David Pepperell has a different theory: 'He didn't have the talent to be a rock star so he lives it vicariously. He lives like a rock star.'

Michael Gudinski likes people. And people like Michael Gudinski. Except if you've fallen out with him the way Nathan Brenner, ex-manager of Split Enz and one-time co-manager of Men at Work, has.

Split Enz's fortunes foundered largely because of a personal feud between Brenner and Gudinski. A former close friend of Gudinski at Mount Scopus primary school, Brenner now accuses Gudinski of being obsessed by power and of sacrificing Split Enz for his own ends. Brenner is one of the many who believe that Gudinski has never had overseas success with a rock band because his group of companies throws its net too wide.

'Look at Midnight Oil or INXS or Men at Work or AC/DC,' says Brenner. 'The international successes that we have had on a band level have all been outside that [Mushroom] system. I think his time has passed. I think there's a better record company around which worries about selling records—not about the distractions of management, publishing, whether they've got the agency or not, whether they've got the T-shirts or not. Michael's weakest point is his conflict of interest.'

Brenner says he believes Gudinski will now try to 'bury' him because of what he has just said. 'I won't be able to work here [in Melbourne] any more . . . He will slander my name to anyone he can think of to make sure that professionally I am rubbed out. He doesn't like criticism. He wants to survive and the way he survives is by destroying everyone else. [But] I hope you print this: I actually love him as a person. I just don't particularly like all the things he does.'

The mere mention of Brenner's name is enough to make Gudinski apoplectic. 'I don't love him,' he barks. 'I lost staff because of him and it's too late for him to love me. Because I loved him . . . but I will never ever go into business with him in any way again. He broke that band [Split Enz] up. None of them hardly talk to him . . . Mushroom Records is the only label in the world that can say that, in 19 years, it has never been to court with an act. The only time we've ever been close was with Split Enz . . . that's what I won't forgive him for . . . that he hurt what should have been one of Australia's biggest bands. I don't need to bury Nathan Brenner. He has buried himself. Who does he manage? What does he do? I don't need to bury people. They bury themselves if they're arseholes.'

So who sent the fax? Did Nathan Brenner send it? 'I had a look at the spelling,' Brenner says. 'I corrected a few things and I said, "If that's what you want to do . . . but I'm advising you against putting it out."'

The two other people most often spoken about as the authors of that document are Barry Earl and Adrian Barker. Both of them worked for years for the Mushroom organisation—between them managing the likes of Ayers Rock, the Swingers, the Models and Paul Kelly.

Each claims he was pivotal to Mushroom's early success but has never been given credit for it. Says Barker, 'I'm not looking for glory . . . and

I'm not saying I fucking did everything by a long shot . . . but I was around.' However, he gives Gudinski his due. 'He's a fucking killer of an operator. He can think on about five planes at one time. He's a quick mover, he's aggressive, he's a fun guy . . .'

Nevertheless, both believe they were brutally shafted. Barker now works as a carpenter; Earl as a hairdresser. They claim they cannot work in the industry any more, and they blame Gudinski for that. They are bitter men.

Did you send the fax, Barry?
Earl: 'Did I send it? I don't know.'
You don't know whether you sent it?
Earl: 'I don't think I sent it.'
Did you send the fax, Adrian?
Barker: 'I'm not prepared to say that I did or didn't . . . No, I don't want to say that I did send it, no . . .'

Gudinski doesn't think he has many enemies—at least not the sort you'd worry about. He says he's too busy to war, and too successful to bother. And anyway, the fax is history. For the time being, he's still king of the mountain.

'Whether the whole lot is going to blow up and shit in his face at some stage down the track remains to be seen,' says Lee Simon. 'There are a lot of people who are anticipating it will happen. There are probably a lot who are hoping it will happen. But it hasn't happened yet.'

Postscript

In 1993, two years after this profile was written, Michael Gudinski sold a half-share of Mushroom Records to Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. Five years later he sold the remainder for a reported $40 million, making him an extremely wealthy man.

In 1999 he still owned Mushroom Publishing, his new venture Mushroom Pictures and the Mercury Lounge at Crown Casino. He also retained co-ownership of the Harbour/Premier booking agency.

His abiding dream of scoring three number one hits in a row in America was as yet to be realised.