

SETS AND THE CITY

After six years of unsteadiness, New York's film and television business is booming

By Ethan Shanfeld



When Rafael Espinal took office in February as New York City's entertainment chief, he looked around and saw a city that was thriving but had yet to recover from a yearslong slump in film and TV production. "The number of permits we were seeing was 50% compared to pre-pandemic," says Espinal, sitting in a lower Manhattan coffee shop that used to be a bank. "I joked to my team that I remember seeing tumbleweeds roll through our office."

The slowdown reflected a larger trend: In the past handful of years, Hollywood not only deserted Hollywood but America at large, with major productions decamping to London, Canada or Budapest in search of cheaper crews and sweeter tax breaks.

So the media and entertainment commissioner got to work, taking scissors to the city's red tape at the same time that recent improvements to the state's tax incentive were attracting a swarm of new productions. Thanks to a 30% refundable tax credit backed by an annual pot of \$800 million, as well as enhanced post-production and above-the-line incentives, "New York is one of the more affordable places to shoot in the world," Espinal says.

Now, the city's soundstages are reaching capacity and productions are flooding the streets of the Big Apple, from "The Gilded Age" to "American Horror Story" to the upcoming "Exorcist" movie. The budget enhancements convinced "The Devil Wears Prada 2" to remain in New York, which supported more than 1,400 local cast and crew members and engaged 550 local vendors. According to Empire State Development, New York's economic development agency, the 46-day shoot generated \$67.9 million in total economic activity and \$45.8 million in local wages.

Anne Hathaway in "The Devil Wears Prada 2," shot in New York City



As America has lost ground in the global production race, New York's share of the pie is increasing. After six years of unsteadiness, the state's film and television business is booming: Production spending rose 57% year-over-year in the second quarter of 2026, to nearly \$1.06 billion, with 19% more projects shooting. "The tax incentives are oxygen. You can't live without them," says Adam Gordon, a real estate developer who — with Robert De Niro and his son Raphael De Niro — co-founded Wildflower Studios, a sleek compound in Astoria

with modular soundstages and sweeping views of the Manhattan skyline.

Wildflower opened in 2024, when the industry was crippled by shrinking studio budgets and reeling from the aftermath of twin labor strikes. Thanks to Gov. Kathy Hochul's budget amendments, signed in 2025, the studio has never been busier. New York City has processed 4,311 filming permits so far in 2026, a 27% increase from last year, with more than 600 projects filmed on public property this summer.

"Screen time alone pays for the credit," says Doug Steiner, who in 2004 opened Brooklyn's Steiner Studios, home to "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel" and "Boardwalk Empire." "That visibility for New York is so important," he adds. "It's product placement: New York City is the product."

The thinking is that by subsidizing productions that show off New York, not only is the state boosting local business and employment — it's also advertising itself. It's become a cliché that New York is "the fifth character" of "Sex and the City," but there's a reason why hundreds of people still flock to Carrie Bradshaw's West Village stoop every week.

There's also the fact that, even with movie magic, no other city can truly pass for New York — not even Toronto, which is standing in for Queens in FX's "Adults" and Manhattan in Sarah Polley's upcoming "The Bell Jar" adaptation.

"You can't replicate the city anywhere else. It's not the same," says Robert De Niro, whose career is built on "Taxi Driver," "Raging Bull" and "Goodfellas"

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Wildflower Studios is developed by lifelong New Yorker and film industry veteran Robert De Niro and real-estate visionary Adam I Gordon, Raphael De Niro, and designed by the groundbreaking architectural firm Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG).

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— New York movies that were actually shot in New York. “I consider it the best city in the world, and the more that’s happening here, the better.”

That said, “We’re happy to ‘cheat’ other locations,” says Rhoda Glickman, ESD’s film and arts chief. “When something’s supposed to be in Washington, D.C., and we film it here — it’s not beneath us to do that.”

Hollywood has come back to New York, and as Espinal sees it, it’s his job to keep it there. “I’m a firm believer that no matter how high the tax credit is, if you don’t have an infrastructure in place that supports filming, then it creates a burden on productions that’s not going to further attract them to your city,” he says. He attributes New York’s recent success in part to his office’s “white-glove service” — that is, his people pick up the phone and help find solutions.

The first production Espinal greenlit was “A Quiet Place Part III,” which required a shutdown of the Manhattan Bridge for an alien invasion. The massive set-piece required coordination with the NYPD, the MTA and the Port Authority. And while actors battled CGI aliens, Espinal went up against a vocal community group, amplified by the New York Post, that banded together in opposition to the production and its temporary disturbance of local businesses (which were compensated by the production).

Instead of ignoring the noise and letting the backlash blow over, Espinal showed up to the set and posted a video explaining to New Yorkers why, in the long term, productions like this are a boon to the city and its inhabitants. “We’re going to have folks flying into our city, spending tourist dollars to be able to see where that shot took place,” Espinal says of the lower Manhattan apocalypse.

“When a [project] is filmed in New York, the paycheck stays in New York,” says Emily Mijatovic, ESD’s downstate communications director. “It’s also about the jobs for the local folks: the electricians, the carpenters, the drivers, the makeup artists.”

The production boom isn’t limited to film and TV projects; Espinal also shouts out Cardi B’s “Ah Ha” music video and Josh Safdie’s Knicks-themed Nike commercial. And New York is the epicenter of short-form social media series like “Subway-Takes” and “Are You Okay?,” which send scrappy film crews around town. The shows are part of a growing cottage industry that the city is supporting by streamlining the permit process and giving out awards to creators.

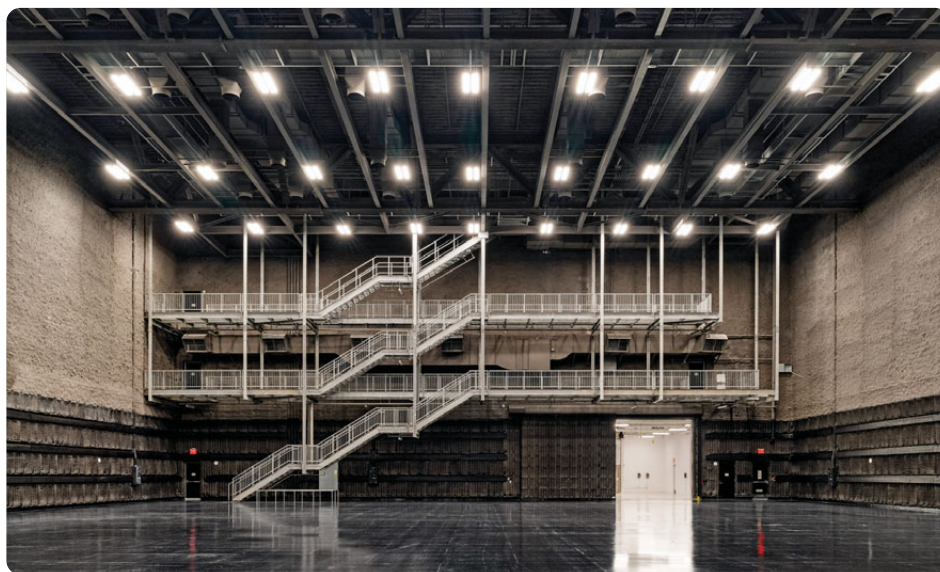
“Every single city, state, country in the world is thinking about how they lure the big productions,”

Espinal says. “But I think the meat and potatoes is our smaller productions.”

The vibes are less celebratory in Los Angeles, which remains the global epicenter of the entertainment industry but has been severely injured by production flight. California has recently taken steps to stop the bleeding, but local barriers have frustrated producers and forced many below-the-line workers to pack their bags to head to Texas, New Jersey and, yes, New York. In 2025, L.A. logged its worst year of location shooting outside the pandemic period.

“You could fire a rifle down a street in L.A. where there’s studios and not hit anybody. That should tell you something,” Gordon says. “We’re not gloating, because it’s sad, but L.A. is a deeply troubled city with horrible leadership at the state and local level.”

Wildflower Studios in Astoria, Queens, founded by Robert and Raphael De Niro and Adam Gordon



“YOU CAN’T REPLICATE THE CITY ANYWHERE ELSE. IT’S NOT THE SAME. I CONSIDER IT THE BEST CITY IN THE WORLD, AND THE MORE THAT’S HAPPENING HERE, THE BETTER.”

ROBERT DE NIRO

Still, “I don’t think all is lost yet,” Raphael De Niro says. Despite David Ellison’s threats, Paramount is staying in Los Angeles, and California continues to beef up its incentives as production becomes a key issue in statewide political races. Both De Niro’s support the bipartisan federal tax incentive moving through Congress, which is backed by Donald Trump. It’s a rare issue on which the Oscar winner and president are aligned.

On a recent tour of Wildflower, Gordon shows off a giant lazy Susan-like metal platform outside the studio. He’s standing on the rotating plate, which helps 53-foot trucks exit the parking lot without making 12-point turns — one of the many improvements suggested by the Teamsters.

“We also use this for wrap parties,” Gordon says, drifting counterclockwise like a piece of sashimi on a conveyor belt. “You put the turntables there, the bar there.” ●

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THE NEW YORK LEGENDS POWER LIST

From Zohran Mamdani to
the Knicks' starting five,
Timothée Chalamet to AOC,
these iconic figures are
changing the world

By Marlow Stern

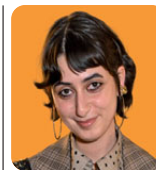


With 8.5 million people spread over just 300 square miles, New York is the most populous city in America. Home to Broadway, Wall Street, the Met, Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall,

the Comedy Cellar and, of course, the news media, New York is where the conversation starts and ends.

Variety's 2026 New York Legends Power List comprises luminaries in the areas of film, television, music, media, sports, politics and comedy, from Mayor Zohran Mamdani and "The Odyssey" leads Matt Damon

and Anne Hathaway to the Fox News brain trust and the New York Knicks. To make the list, candidates' principal residence must be in New York — sorry, Trump! — and they need to have left an indelible impact on culture. Twenty-five years after the horrors of 9/11, New York is back in a big way. Here are its power players.



**Zohran Mamdani and
Rama Duwaji**

First couple

New York City's first Muslim and South Asian mayor is one of the most popular politicians in the country, and the Democratic Socialist provides daily fodder for newspaper columnists and cable news talk show hosts, here and abroad. Mamdani and wife Rama are lightning rods that have not only the eyes of New York but the nation upon them.



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Firebrand

Ocasio-Cortez is, along with fellow Democratic Socialist Mamdani, the favored punching bag for the political right. Millions were glued to the congresswoman's social media feeds as she documented her egg-freezing journey, and the potential 2028 presidential hopeful generates front-page headlines every time she opens her mouth.

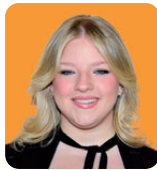


Robert De Niro

Lord of downtown

On top of being one of President Trump's most outspoken critics, the legendary actor is set to star in the hotly anticipated "Meet the Parents" sequel "Focker-in-Law." He also presides over the annual Tribeca Festival and a constellation of businesses that include The Greenwich Hotel, Nobu and Locanda Verde.

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Father-daughter duo



Auteurs



The Fanatic



Screen gods



Talented transplants



Olivia Benson



Dr. Robert M. Anderson

Kingmaker



Chic family



West Village royalty



Five-tool player

Clockwise, from top left: Dominik Brnd/Getty Images for Tribeca Festival; Paul Brunooge/Patrick McMullan/Getty Image; Cindy Ord/Getty Images for SfrusXXI; Jamie McCarthy/Getty Images; Tawni Bannister; Eamonn M. McCormack/Getty Images; Dia Dpraspul/Getty Images; Christina Bumphrey/Variety; Jon Kopatloff/Getty Images; Marc Plasecki/Getty Images; Weiss Eubanks/NBCUniversal; Cindy Ord/Getty Images for Tribeca Festival; Axelle/Bauer-Griffin/Filmmagic; Taylor Hill/Filmmagic; Jamie McCarthy/Getty Images; John Nacion/Variety; Earl Gibson II/PMC



Timothée Chalamet
Hypebeast

Chalamet is a tried-and-true New Yorker, having grown up in Hell's Kitchen before attending LaGuardia High School and Columbia University. The 30-year-old three-time Oscar nominee is one of the most in-demand actors in Hollywood, and his films have grossed more than \$2.3 billion worldwide. A courtside fixture at Knicks games, he'll next grace screens in the December sequel "Dune: Part Three."



Jesse Eisenberg
Farceur

While a senior at New York's Professional Performing Arts School, Queens-born Eisenberg landed his breakout role in 2002's "Roger Dodger." Since then, he's had star turns as Mark Zuckerberg in "The Social Network" and as Lex Luthor in "Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice"; contributed to The New Yorker; written a series of plays; and helmed (and co-starred in) the Oscar-nominated drama "A Real Pain" as well as the Julianne Moore-starring upcoming musical comedy "The Debut."



Daniel Katz and David Fenkel
Cool cineastes

The A24 juggernaut is unrelenting, and its massive 2026 has only cemented its status as a top-tier brand via the \$396 million-grossing "Backrooms," the studio's highest-grossing film, as well as "The Drama," "The Invite," "Tony," "Primer," "Misty Green," "Club Kid," "The Debut" and Nathan Fielder's Elizabeth Holmes curio "You Can See Everything."



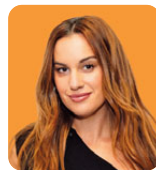
Anderson Cooper and Andy Cohen
The BFFs

These best friends not only are two of the most trusted names in news ("Anderson Cooper 360°") and gossip ("Watch What Happens Live With Andy Cohen"), but also help the country ring in the new year in style. Cooper is still the chiseled face of CNN, while Cohen recently celebrated the 20th anniversary of Bravo's "Real Housewives" franchise.



Bowen Yang and Matt Rogers
Princes of gab

Since becoming friends at NYU, these comedians have been fixtures on the cultural landscape, from Yang's Emmy-nominated stint on "Saturday Night Live" and turns in "Wicked" and Broadway's "Oh, Mary!" to their starring roles in the beloved film "Fire Island." Together, they're behind the addictive "Las Culturistas" podcast and its awards show expansion, "Las Culturistas Culture Awards," now on Bravo.



Hannah Berner and Paige DeSorbo
Girl power

These two alums of Bravo's reality-TV hit "Summer House" wear plenty of hats, co-hosting the enormously popular podcast "Giggly Squad," which recently moved to SiriusXM in a rumored nine-figure deal, as well as red-carpet events like the Vanity Fair Oscar Party. They also had a cameo in the hit film "The Devil Wears Prada 2" and are developing a scripted Netflix series produced by Amy Poehler.



Howard Stern
Confession king

Once known as the "King of All Media," Stern still regales millions of listeners a week on SiriusXM's "The Howard Stern Show," which remains a regular stop on your favorite A-listers' press tour. And the outspoken radio host expanded his reach in September, when an edited version of his show began airing on HBO Max.



Scott Galloway and Kara Swisher
Pod people

Galloway, a former finance bro and millionaire tech founder, and Swisher, the co-founder of Recode and a leading tech journalist, joined forces for "Pivot." One of the most popular news commentary podcasts in the country, the podcast covers the tech world and counts top politicians and businessmen among its listenership.



Jay-Z
Rap mogul

Though he and his superstar wife, Beyoncé, are bicoastal, Jay-Z is a Brooklyn legend and an NYC institution. His impact on the city was reaffirmed by his recent star-studded, sold-out Yankee Stadium shows, which kicked off his "Jay-Z30" tour and celebrated the 30th anniversary of debut album "Reasonable Doubt." He's also in the HBO docu-series "Jay-Z in 8" and the architect of the NFL's Emmy-winning Super Bowl halftime show.

Jalen Brunson led the Knicks to the NBA Championship in June.



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**Jalen Brunson,
Karl-Anthony Towns, Josh Hart,
Mikal Bridges, OG Anunoby**
Fab five

The New York Knicks' fairy-tale run to the NBA title, the team's first in 53 years, transfixed the city. After every thrilling win, fans poured into the streets in jubilation, hugging and high-fiving each other, and more than 2 million people attended the ticker-tape victory parade. The city has never been more united in joy, and it's mostly thanks to these five legends.



James Dolan
Kingpin

Dolan, the executive chairman and CEO of MSG Sports and MSG Entertainment and divisive owner of the Knicks, the Rangers and Madison Square Garden, has had quite the year. Not only did his Knicks go on a miracle run to win the NBA championship for the first time since 1973, uniting the entire city, but he also hosted Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce's wedding of the decade at MSG.



Roger Goodell
Big boss

As commissioner of the National Football League, a position he's held since 2006, Goodell is undoubtedly the most powerful man in sports. During his tenure, he's widened the gap between the NFL and the rest of the pro sports leagues, with



Jimmy Fallon

NFL games making up 83 of the Top 100 highest-rated TV programs last year, and he landed a historic 11-year distribution agreement in 2023 with streamers and networks for a combined \$110 billion.



Michael Bloomberg
The pioneer

He may not have won the presidency, but the former mayor of New York City is still a centibillionaire ruling over the financial software and media giant Bloomberg L.P., which offers real-time market data via its pricey Bloomberg Terminal and includes magazines like Bloomberg BusinessWeek and Bloomberg Markets, Bloomberg Radio and Bloomberg Television.



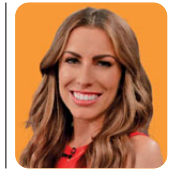
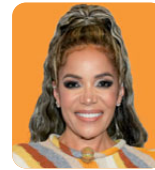
Barry Diller and Diane von Furstenberg
Power couple

One of the most unique power couples in New York City (Diller is gay, yet deeply in love with von Furstenberg), the former studio head and renowned fashion designer preside



**Jimmy Fallon, Seth Meyers,
John Oliver, Jon Stewart
(and Stephen Colbert)**
Court jesters

These late-night hosts are, along with West Coast compatriot Jimmy Kimmel, some of the most pointed critics of President Donald Trump (Fallon not so much), and the ones who seem to get under his skin the most. Colbert may be gone, perhaps at the behest of a certain politician, but he'll surely be back in some form or another.



Joy Behar, Whoopi Goldberg, Sunny Hostin, Alyssa Farah Griffin, Sara Haines and Ana Navarro
Hot-topic queens

"The View" has been at the top of the daytime talk show ratings chart for nine consecutive seasons, and it's showing no signs of slowing down. This year, it achieved its highest second-quarter ratings since 2000, showing significant gains among women 18-49, and is sure to generate numerous headlines during its landmark 30th season thanks to a certain president who loves tuning in.



Savannah Guthrie, Craig Melvin, Al Roker, Carson Daly and Jenna Bush Hager
Top of the morning

"Today," NBC's No.1-ranked morning show, has washed off the stench of Matt Lauer to become appointment television once more, led by the indefatigable Savannah Guthrie, who unfortunately became the story this year, bearing her soul in front of the nation as she pleaded with the kidnappers of her mother, Nancy, in a remarkable display of courage.



Mariska Hargitay on "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit"



Robin Roberts, George Stephanopoulos and Michael Strahan
Wake-up warriors

Though "Good Morning America" is the No. 2-rated morning show behind "Today," the Roberts-Stephanopoulos era is going strong, with the team providing a heady mix of hard and soft news. And Strahan, the former New York Giants star, has provided a nice jolt of energy, expanding the show into the sports arena.



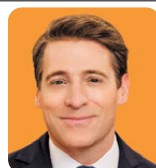
Kelly Ripa and Mark Consuelos
Morning couple

This year marks the 25th anniversary of Ripa as co-host of the syndicated morning talk show "Live With Kelly and Mark," having previously been joined by Regis Philbin, Michael Strahan and Ryan Seacrest. Since 2023, she's shared hosting duties with husband Consuelos, whom she met when the two were actors on the daytime soap "All My Children."



Gayle King and Nate Burleson
Daybreak duo

Though it's No. 3 in the morning show ratings war, behind "Today" and "Good Morning America," King and Burleson's "CBS Mornings" is the one program that's remained editorially consistent during the chaotic Bari Weiss era at CBS News, thanks in no small part to the Emmy-winning King's steady leadership.



David Muir, Tom Llamas and Tony Dokoupil
The stalwarts

These are the men — and yes, it's only men — entrusted with anchoring the three major evening news programs: "ABC World News Tonight With David Muir," "NBC Nightly News With Tom Llamas" and "CBS Evening News With Tony Dokoupil." Muir is first in the ratings, followed by Llamas and Dokoupil, who had a rocky start in the chair and remains a distant third.



Stephen A. Smith
Pot stirrer

Turn on ESPN at any time of day and you're likely to see this loud-mouthed pundit, who brings a preacher's charisma to sports coverage. Smith hosts the morning show "First Take" and "The Stephen A. Smith Show" on ESPN Radio and is the chief NBA analyst for the all-powerful sports network. He also regularly pops up on the soap opera "General Hospital" and has even flirted with a presidential run.



Greg Gutfeld
Reactionary

Want to know what the most-watched late-night show is? It's not "The Tonight Show" or "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" (RIP "The Late Show"), but "Gutfeld!" The Fox News program averages more than 3 million total viewers per episode, far outranking the competition in the 10 p.m. hour. On top of that, the controversial conservative is a co-host of "The Five," Fox News' highly-rated talk show.



Robert Thomson, Suzanne Scott and Jay Wallace
Cable-news conquerors

News Corp. honcho Thomson, along with Fox News CEO Scott and president Wallace, are the three-headed hydra in charge of Fox News, the most popular cable news network in the country. During Trump's second term, it has remained on the good side of the president, with several of its on-air talents helping Trump shape policy, and it also hosts top-rated late-night show "Gutfeld!"



Mark Thompson
News vet

Thompson, the former New York Times Co. CEO and BBC director-general, has been CEO of CNN since 2023, replacing Chris Licht after his abrupt firing and guiding the embattled cable news network through David Zaslav's tumultuous Warner Bros. Discovery tenure. Whether the British news vet will survive David Ellison's potential takeover is anyone's guess, though it'd be foolish to doubt him.



Cesar Conde and Rebecca Blumenstein
Media masters

As the chairman of NBCUniversal News Group, guiding NBC News and Telemundo, Conde is one of the most powerful Latinos in media, recently overseeing Telemundo's World Cup coverage. He's joined by Blumenstein, who's served as president of editorial at NBC News since 2023. Under their leadership, "NBC Nightly News With Tom Llamas" has been up, while "Today" sits atop the morning show ratings.



Frances Berwick
Reality ruler

As chairman, Berwick controls all of Bravo and Peacock's unscripted content, including "Love Island USA," the No. 1 streaming title of the summer; the Emmy-winning competition series "The Traitors"; Bravo's expanding live events business, anchored by the biennial BravoCon; and the scandalous, Emmy-nominated "Summer House." The British-born exec has also overseen the ongoing celebration of the 20th anniversary of the ever popular "Real Housewives" franchise.



Bari Weiss and Tom Cibrowski
The misfits

It hasn't exactly been smooth sailing for Weiss, the divisive New York Times op-ed columnist turned editor-in-chief of CBS News, and Cibrowski, the CBS News president, who've attempted to rebrand the network as more MAGA-friendly to appease Paramount Skydance CEO David Ellison. And if the pending Warner Bros. Discovery acquisition goes through, you might see Weiss put in charge of CNN as well.



Emma Tucker
Trailblazer

Under Tucker's leadership, The Wall Street Journal has emerged as one of the great media success stories. Digital subscriptions are up 30% since Tucker took the reins in 2023, becoming the first woman to lead the publication. And the Journal has produced several big investigative reports during her tenure, including a Pulitzer Prize-winning series on the chaotic culture at Elon Musk's companies SpaceX and Tesla.



David Remnick and David Haskell
Highbrow brilliance

Remnick, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, has been the editor of The New Yorker since 1998, ushering it into the digital age and expanding its readership to younger generations. Haskell, meanwhile, has done a stellar job shepherding New York since 2019, including publishing E. Jean Carroll's account of allegedly being sexually assaulted by President Trump.



A.G. Sulzberger, Meredith Kopit Levien and Joseph Kahn
Guardians of the Gray Lady

The New York Times remains journalism's gold standard thanks to its massive network of intrepid reporters scattered all over the world. And publisher Sulzberger, CEO Levien and executive editor Kahn have managed to grow the Times' audience to 13.35 million subscribers, with a goal of 15 million by 2027, while expanding its games portfolio and podcast network.



Rachel Adler
Power agent

As the head of CAA's news division, Adler commands a roster that's a who's who of media and politics, from MS NOW's Peter Alexander and CNN's John Berman to former Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg and Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative sports podcaster Pablo Torre. If you consume any news, you've seen Adler's clients.



Rob Stringer
Music maven

Since 2017, the British music executive has been chairman of Sony Music Group and CEO of Sony Music Entertainment, controlling the Columbia, RCA, Epic, Arista, Jive and Sony Music Nashville labels. His artists include the biggest hitmaker of the year, country star Ella Langley, and some other folks you may have heard of: Beyoncé, Adele, Harry Styles, Travis Scott, Tate McRae and Bruce Springsteen.



Keith McNally
Restaurateur raconteur

The brash, British-born restaurateur has long been a New York City fixture with his French bistro-inspired Balthazar, The Odeon, Minetta Tavern, Pastis and Cafe Luxembourg. His legend has only grown in recent years thanks to his page-turning memoir "I Regret Almost Everything," blissfully blunt social media persona and banning of James Corden from Balthazar.



Judy Thelen and Eliot Frost
Food phenoms

Thelen and Frost, a married couple who attended Harvard Business School together, have fast become two of the most influential people

Mark Consuelos and Kelly Ripa



Lyor Cohen
Digital guru

Cohen has been head of YouTube Music since its inception in 2016. During his tenure, YouTube has helped launch the careers of emerging artists like NBA YoungBoy and Doja Cat while serving as the go-to platform for music videos like Taylor Swift's "The Fate of Ophelia" and Drake's short film "FOMO."



Tom Bernard and Michael Barker
Indie OGs

Any New Yorker who's even tangentially involved in the film biz has rubbed shoulders with Bernard and Barker, the co-founders (along with Marcie Bloom) and co-presidents of Sony Pictures Classics. The pair have been responsible for a diverse array of cherished movies, from "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" to "Whiplash" to this year's "The Only Living Pickpocket in New York."