



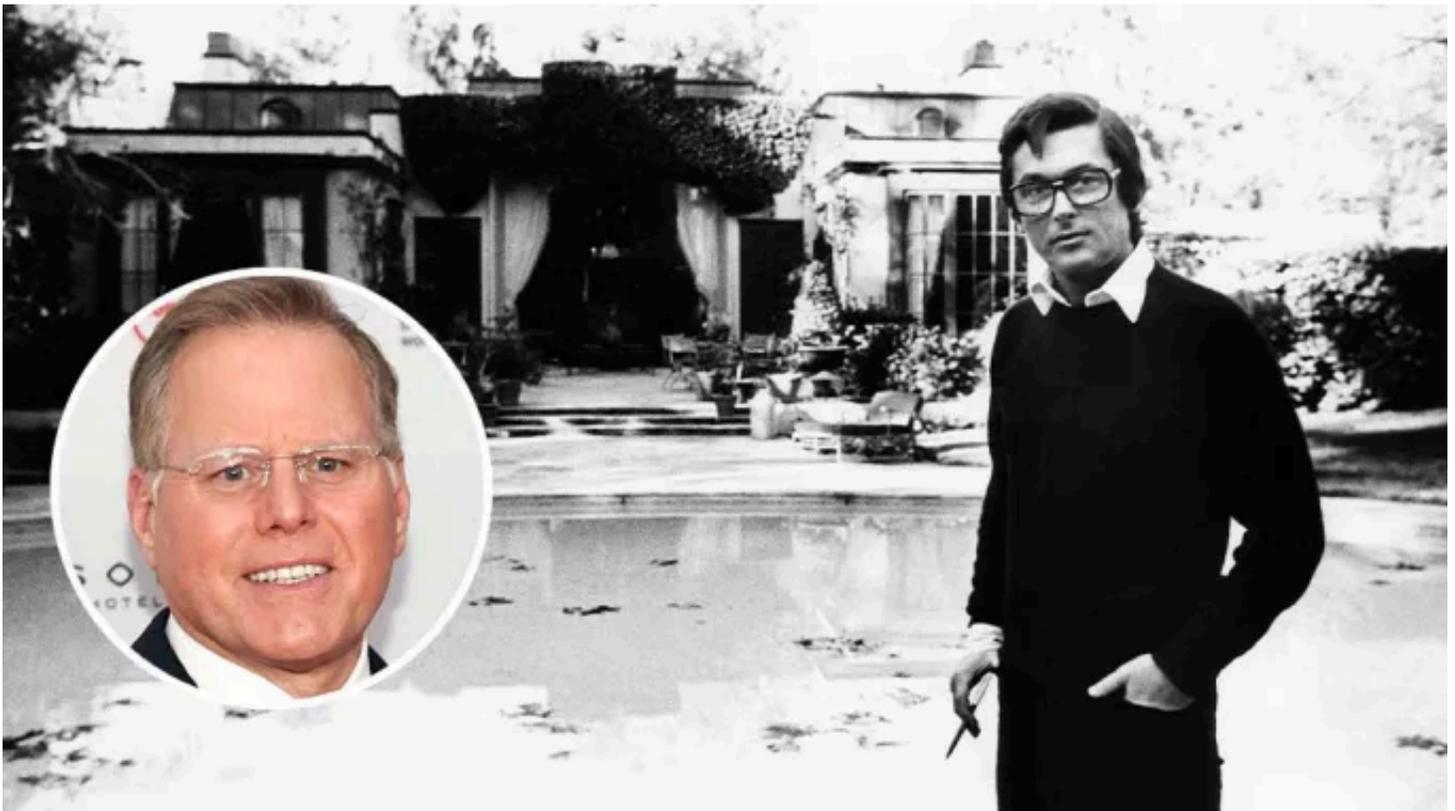
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Peter Bart: Hollywood's Hottest Dealmaker Has Found His Playhouse, But Will He Have Time To Play?



By [Peter Bart](#)

May 27, 2021 1:55pm



Discovery's David Zaslav (inset) paid \$16 million for Robert Evans' onetime Beverly Hills home

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The parties within its walls were glitzy, the arguments were epic and the scandals provided perfect gossip fuel. If only houses could talk: This one, however, is a battered shadow of its proud Regency past, its interior walls torn apart, trucks parked on its tennis court. Its only occasional visitor is David Zaslav, newly minted king of Hollywood, who comes to commune with its ghosts and summon up plans for its glistening future.



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Zaslav needs the house as badly as it needs Zaslav. A fiercely ambitious man with an appetite for the theatrical, Zaslav paid \$16 million for the late Bob Evans home in Beverly Hills, originally telling friends he may spend three months a year in Hollywood, creating a livelier aura for his Discovery Channel. That may now stretch to nine months, since Zaslav, having negotiated the \$43 billion Discovery-AT&T deal, has now expanded his domain to include Warner Bros, HBO and CNN.

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Discovery's David Zaslav last year

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That bit of corporate sorcery has now prompted him to re-invent the Zaslav legacy — indeed to re-shape it in the aura of the Evans legacy. There will once again be parties and stars and perhaps arguments. Discovery, home to Animal Planet and unscripted shows like *90 Day Fiancé*, may now become *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*.

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But what sort of a “time” will it be? In his New York days, Zaslav liked friends like Ron Perelman, Lorne Michaels and Jeff Zucker to hang at his Hamptons parties. But his new target list may include Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Reese Witherspoon or even the old Evans crowd like Jack Nicholson, Warren Beatty and Dustin Hoffman. But even if that crowd decided to arrive, it would not include the late Evans or his panache (he died in 2019).

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(L-R) Henry Kissinger and Robert Evans in the 1970s

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The Evans events promised a sort of promiscuous elegance: Behind one door you would find the esteemed Helmut Newton photographing two lissome nudes passionately entwined; or Teddy Kennedy swigging beer amidst a bevy of starlets; or Henry Kissinger explaining Vietnam policy to Jill St. John; or agent Sue Mengers disseminating film gigs along with quality weed. Despite the high energy, any display of incivility would result in banishment – the town’s most prominent attorney was permanently exiled for shoving his date.

While Evans’ principal scenario was to package the chemistry between filmmakers and top stars, Zaslav’s social objectives may be more corporately focused. Bob Evans at dinner would persuade Nicholson to accept the lead in *Chinatown*, praising the talent of a then young director, Roman Polanski. Zaslav, however, in his quest for major talent, may also have to answer queries about the movie’s release platform and the structure of its compensation formula.

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Fifty years ago, Evans had to worry about filling seats in Westwood, not expanding the subscriber list in Belarus. Evans’ top films might share a weekend with two or three other wannabe hits; Zaslav confronts a mind-bending blur of some 300 services, subscription-based or video on demand, all competing for eyeballs. If Evans faced a bad weekend, Zaslav confronts post-pandemic confusion:

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Evans on the phone in his office

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During the Evans era, the sources of corporate infighting were often esoteric. Evans fought valiantly for Paramount to release *Last Tango in Paris* and *Tropic of Cancer*. His corporate boss, Charles Bluhdorn, facing him in his screening room, shouted that public companies could not “dabble in porn.” He then decided to re-run the films.

Zaslav’s battles will be more expensive. His backers have praised him for keeping his average cost of content to about \$400,000 an hour while his rivals now spend \$5 million and more. Discovery, to be sure, funded *Otter Dynasty*, not *Game of Thrones*. Overall, the combined content spend of WarnerMedia and Discovery totaled \$19 billion last year, more than Disney or even Netflix. The new entity will inherit the biggest share of cable viewers in the U.S., accounting for 29% of viewing time. To sustain that position, Zaslav will have to drastically readjust his spending habits.

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He must also mobilize his charisma to keep his uneasy management in place during the one-year-plus period while lawyers and bankers hammer out legalities and obtain antitrust approval. All that

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Hollywood, a golden playground where even the most preposterous ideas could somehow become reality. But times have changed.

David Zaslav is a talented and driven man who understands change. Not long ago when he dropped by his new home he ordered some changes: Michael Smith, the celebrity designer who President Obama hired to design his private quarters at the White House, will now tackle the Evans house. The tennis court, he decided, needed to be moved three feet, and changed to a clay surface.

After all, he intended to spend more time on it, and style is as important in tennis as it is in show business.

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