

# *Gil Friesen, Entertainment Executive, Dies at 75*

By PAUL VITELLO



Gil Friesen, second from right, with the band Atlantic Starr as they received their gold record, circa 1985.

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Gil Friesen, who achieved success in films and television but was best known for helping to establish [A&M Records](#) as an artists' haven for an eclectic stable of performers that included Carole King, the Police, Barry White and the Carpenters, died on Dec. 13 at his home in Los Angeles. He was 75.

The cause was complications of leukemia, said Herb Alpert, the trumpeter and band leader who co-founded A&M Records with the music promoter Jerry Moss in 1962 and hired Mr. Friesen as one of its first employees. (In the company name, "A" stood for Alpert and "M" for Moss. Mr. Friesen was known as the ampersand, Mr. Alpert said.)

Named president in 1977, Mr. Friesen helped make A&M one of the largest independent record labels in the country as well as a successful independent film studio. He resigned in 1990, after the company's sale to PolyGram Records.

A&M's artists during the '70s and '80s — most of them young, virtual unknowns when they signed with the label — included Cat Stevens (now Yusuf Islam), Joe Cocker, Squeeze, the Flying Burrito Brothers, Janet Jackson, Al Green, Amy Grant, Suzanne Vega and Peter Frampton. Mr. Friesen was known as the young artists' ally, providing them time to develop musically, as well as giving them books to read, sharing his enthusiasm for modern art, and involving them in decisions on business matters like sales and marketing.

Mr. Friesen "treated us like adults," the singer and songwriter Sting said in a 2006 interview, recalling his years with the Police.

Speaking in an interview on Tuesday, Mr. Alpert, winner of seven [Grammy Awards](#) as a musician and leader of the Tijuana Brass, called Mr. Friesen "our organizer and our visionary."

"He wasn't a musician himself, but he had a real feeling for musicians," he added.

In 1981, Mr. Friesen persuaded Mr. Alpert and Mr. Moss to start a film division. Over the next decade A&M Films produced about 20 movies under Mr. Friesen's direction, including the 1985 hit "[The Breakfast Club](#)," two early John Cusack comedies, "Better Off Dead" (1985) and "[One Crazy Summer](#)" (1986); "Blaze," a 1989 biopic about the stripper Blaze Starr (played by

Lolita Davidovich) and Gov. Earl K. Long of Louisiana (Paul Newman); and “The Mighty Quinn,” with Denzel Washington, also released in 1989.

Mr. Friesen was later a founding partner of the Classic Sports cable channel, which was sold to ESPN in 1997 for \$175 million. He became known in Hollywood as one of the few executives with entrepreneurial successes in the three major segments of the entertainment industry: music, film and TV.

Gilbert Friesen was born on March 19, 1937, in Pasadena, Calif., and grew up in a musical family. While a student at U.C.L.A., he answered an ad for a job in the mail room at Capitol Records and was hired. He worked for several years as a record promoter and artists’ manager before joining A&M, a venture that began with a handful of people working out of Mr. Alpert’s garage. By the time PolyGram bought A&M for an estimated \$500 million, it was an international corporation with 500 employees.

Mr. Friesen is survived by his third wife, Janet Friesen; their two children, Theo and Uma; and a son, Tyler, from a previous marriage.

After leaving A&M, Mr. Friesen was a board member and chairman of the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Los Angeles.

He also continued producing films. His last project, aptly enough for someone who worked just beyond the footlights, was a documentary, “Twenty Feet from Stardom,” about backup singers in the music business. It is scheduled to open next month at the [Sundance Film Festival](#).