

HITS

RAINMAKERS

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THROUGH THE
POWER
OF LIVE MUSIC**

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RAINMAKERS 2024

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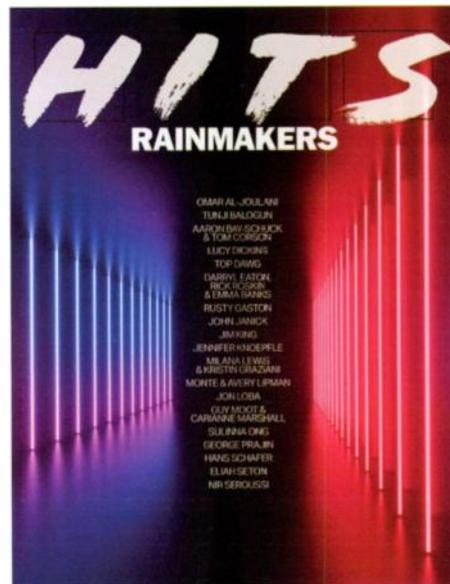
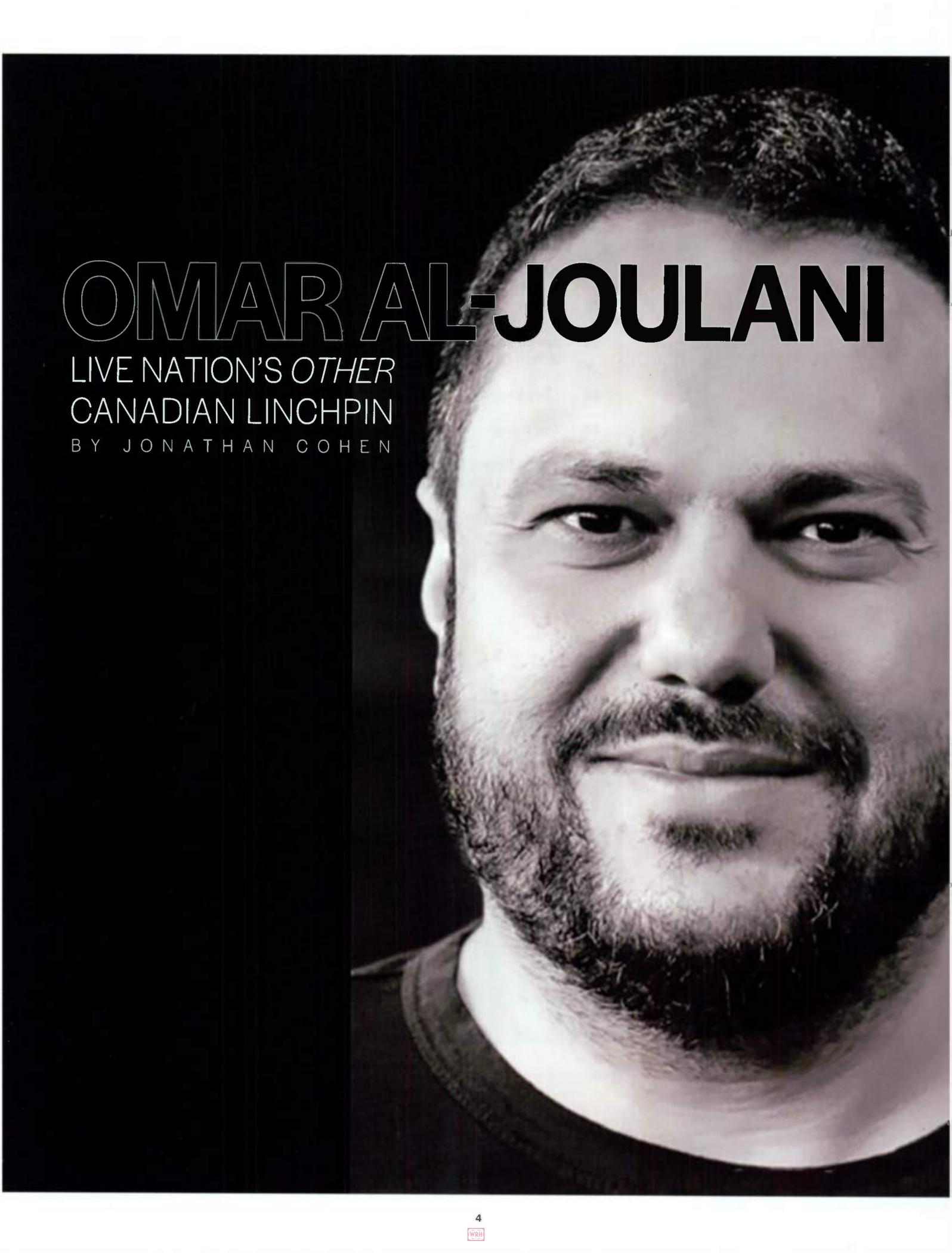


PHOTO: JOSH HAWLEY

This latest batch of *Rainmakers* profiles offers revealing, incisive conversations with a diverse array of industry leaders.

The execs featured herein work at record labels, music publishers, event-promotion giants, agencies, management firms, DSPs and distributors. They come from all over the planet, but they share a deep passion for their work and a spirit of innovation. They candidly shared with us the (often circuitous) paths that led them to their present perches, and the joys and challenges of the present biz landscape. Collectively, their diverse stories weave a remarkably cohesive narrative about the ever-evolving business.

A black and white close-up portrait of Omar Al-Joulani, a man with a beard and short hair, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

OMAR AL-JOULANI

LIVE NATION'S *OTHER*
CANADIAN LINCHPIN
BY JONATHAN COHEN

n another universe, Omar Al-joulani might have been a mover and shaker in the world of Canadian politics, but luckily for concertgoers around the world, he decided to make a career out of the live-music business instead. The Toronto native has spent the past 14 years at **Live Nation**, where he's currently president, Touring, and has overseen massive outings by everyone from **JAY-Z** and **Beyoncé** to **Swedish House Mafia** and **The Weeknd**. Artists and managers frequently salute his ability to help grow their businesses without sacrificing their creativity or independence.

Al-joulani tolerated lengthy quizzing by *HITS* about his formative days on the Canadian music scene; crossing paths with fellow Canucks and future LN colleagues **Michael Rapino**, **Arthur Fogel** and **Steve Herman**; the ascent of hip-hop and country artists to stadium-headliner status; and what he learned from going on the road with **Michael Bolton** and **Kenny G** (hint: it wasn't how to play smooth jazz).

Where did you grow up? How much was music a part of your early life?

I grew up in Toronto as a child of the '80s. My first real understanding of music probably was **Michael Jackson**, and I'll never forget staying up to watch the debut of the "Thriller" video. I was a little scared, if I remember correctly.

There was always music on at my house, especially in the kitchen. My mother's Lebanese and my parents are both Arabs, and I really grew up listening to music they would listen to—Arabic music from the '50s and '60s. As I got older, it was '90s grunge time, so there was a lot of **Nirvana**, **Soundgarden** and **Pearl Jam**.

At what point did you consider music as a career?

I went to **Carleton University** in Ottawa, where I was a political science major. I was working on Parliament Hill, which is our version of the Capitol, and thinking I was either going into law or politics.

Carleton had a very vibrant entertainment program, with three performance venues on campus. We used to put on bigger shows in the quad, ticketed shows and free shows, and I wound up getting involved in the residents' association there as the entertainment director. Interestingly enough, a generation prior, [Live Nation SVP Touring] **Steve Herman** had the same job. I didn't know Steve, but I started doing a little research on him. He'd just started **Core Audience** with [Live Nation President/CEO] **Michael [Rapino]**, so I had a little understanding of the big role Canadians were playing in live. Michael and [Live Nation CEO of Global Touring] **Arthur [Fogel]** were

doing their thing and becoming big players with [The Rolling Stones' landmark] **Steel Wheels** tour. I also got a job on campus booking bands and comedians at our pub and running our orientation week, and got a bug for live at that point.

I wound up leaving university before I finished and moved back to Toronto to work at a comedy agency named **Diamond Field Entertainment**, where I was mostly booking college appearances for comedians. It was also the summer of the commercial actors' strike in Los Angeles, so all the big commercials were being shot in Canada using Canadian actors. I lived a little bit in Hollywood at that time. I was there for maybe six months, and then **Colin Lewis** called me.

I'd bought bands from Colin. He was at **The Agency Group** in Toronto, said that he was hiring somebody and asked if I was interested. So I went and sat with him and **Ralph James** and **Jack Ross**, who were co-running **The Agency Group Toronto**. I started there as an assistant—that would have been right around Halloween of 2000.

The Agency Group was part of a global company, which was really interesting to me. The agencies at that point weren't very global. **CAA** hadn't opened in London yet. **WME** hadn't opened in London yet. We had a London office that was really the engine of the company, and we had an office in New York. I quickly started booking artists in both the U.S. and Canada and Australia. When you're in Canada, the market's only so big, so you're looking for an opportunity to book outside Canada. I worked closely with Colin on a bunch of genres at that time that weren't necessarily well represented in Canada, so we did a lot of reggae and hip-hop.

Steve Herman had been running **Clear Channel** after he and Michael sold **Core**. Michael went to the U.S. and Steve stayed and ran **Clear Channel Canada**. We were a real scrappy little independent agency in Toronto, competing with **S.L. Feldman and Associates**, who were really the big kahuna—they would have, like, 97% market share, and we were just scratching out a living.

And then this Canadian band by the name of **Nickelback** blew up. **Ralph James** was their agent and still is. They were really the first band to blow up that then didn't fire us. They were the most loyal band you could ever find, and they were the biggest band to come out of Canada in a long time. Their success helped fuel our growth and allowed us to hire **Steve Herman**, which is how I eventually got to **Live Nation**.

When did you move to the U.S. to stay?

In 2006 Steve asked if I wanted to move to L.A. to continue growing my career. There wasn't that much growth



With The Weeknd

“I WAS BOOKING ALL OVER EUROPE, THE U.K., AUSTRALIA, ASIA, SOUTH AMERICA, ALL THROUGH THE MIDDLE EAST AND INTO AFRICA... I LEARNED WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE ON THE ROAD WITH AN ARTIST AND TRAVEL ALL OVER THE WORLD... I BEGAN TO SEE WHAT LIVE ENTERTAINMENT MEANT TO PEOPLE IN ATHENS, ISTANBUL, ROMANIA, BULGARIA...”

opportunity in Canada, so I moved to L.A. and immediately started working on artists internationally. I was booking all over Europe, the U.K., Australia, Asia, South America, all through the Middle East and into Africa, working with a gentleman by the name of Keith Naisbitt [now EVP of touring at Independent Artist Group], who gave me an opportunity to really learn the rest of the world. I worked with a bunch of great artists very closely, like Michael Bolton, Kenny G, REO Speedwagon, Boy George... I learned what it was like to be on the road with an artist and travel all over the world. I did that for about three-and-a-half years, and I started to see the business changing at that point.

I was really watching what Arthur was doing with the global touring model. I began to see what live entertainment meant to people in Athens, Istanbul, Romania, Bulgaria, South America... Steve Herman had moved to Live Nation from The Agency Group and asked if I wanted to move over and take a job working for him as a tour director. Ironically, one of those tours was Nickelback.

I made a very lateral move—maybe even a bit of a step down—from being an agent to being a tour director. But I really learned the other side of the business and what it took to be a great promoter and partner for

the artist. A lot of what I'd learned as an agent came in handy because as a tour promoter, you're really on the artist team. The old adversarial promoter/artist relationship was changing, and the new paradigm was for the promoter and the artist to be partners.

Backing up for a minute, how did the decision to leave school early go over at home?

Not well. I'm the oldest of three siblings, so I was setting the example. It was hard to explain to my very blue-collar, hardworking parents what the entertainment business was going to look like, especially when I wasn't making enough to live on my own and moved back into their condo for a year. They were very helpful and supportive, but there was a little bit of disbelief. Now we laugh about it, but at the time, it was definitely tricky.

Have you ever taken them to a concert you could tell was significant to them?

The two that stand out: Prince did a couple arena shows in Toronto in 2011, and that was really special. Shakira is half Lebanese, so taking my mom to that was also special. My family started to understand that this was a real business and not all flash. There's a tremen-

dous amount of math behind it all and logistics and organization and a lot of people working really hard.

In 2024 the fact that an EDM artist plays an arena doesn't seem strange. The fact that a hip-hop tour plays a football stadium doesn't seem strange. But when you worked on tours like On the Run and Swedish House Mafia a decade ago, it was game-changing.

Swedish House Mafia goes back to [JAY-Z and Kanye West's] *Watch the Throne*, which was the first hip-hop tour of its size. It's what unlocked for me the potential for other genres that hadn't been at that scale. JAY-Z paved the way for a lot of what we're seeing today—the innovation he's shown over the years in how he's chosen to tour. The Swedish House Mafia relationship came from Roc Nation. When I got involved, they were being managed by 360, which was a Roc Nation company. That's how I got inserted into the mix as someone who could help them figure out how to tour.

I think we get lost sometimes trying to put artists into genres. For me, it's always been about applying the same

principles that you apply to any contemporary artist. I always like to say that the word "pop" comes from "popular," so any artist who can go out and sell 50,000 tickets a night is pop. I've taken this from Arthur—the job of a promoter is to take an artist at whatever size they may be and to help them get bigger. Sometimes that's taking a club act to a theater or an arena act to a stadium. I play a role on a very large team and that role is to help the artists get bigger.

With Swedish House Mafia, there were a few tests that had proven that fans wanted to see them in arenas; they were the only electronic act to have sold out **Madison Square Garden**. We sat down and looked at the markets where we thought they could do that business at scale and really only played those markets. We scaled the venues as GA by section, which was very important for them. They were the first artists to do that. They put together a phenomenal worldwide marketing campaign, and I did my part along with [then-agent] Sam Kirby Yoh and [then-manager] Amy Thomson and everyone else in that group.



“I THINK WE GET LOST SOMETIMES TRYING TO PUT ARTISTS INTO GENRES. FOR ME, IT’S ALWAYS BEEN ABOUT APPLYING THE SAME PRINCIPLES YOU APPLY TO ANY CONTEMPORARY ARTIST. I ALWAYS LIKE TO SAY THAT THE WORD ‘POP’ COMES FROM ‘POPULAR,’ SO ANY ARTIST WHO CAN GO OUT AND SELL 50,000 TICKETS A NIGHT IS POP.”



From left: With exec-entrepreneur Lawrence Vavra and attorney Peter Paterno; with JAY-Z

I helped put some pieces together for On the Run, but it was all JAY and Beyoncé. They decided to tour together, they came up with the name of the tour and the creative and they gave us the time period. I think you're right about that tour being a turning point. We saw Beyoncé then come back and sell out stadiums on her own. That summer of 2014, right after On the Run ended, we did Eminem and Rihanna's Monster Tour, which had two stadium sellouts each in L.A., New York and Detroit. They also both paved the way for others.

In terms of what Live Nation has or will have in the market, what are you excited about?

I'm excited for so much. I have to tell you, it's a great time to be around the live music business. It was exciting to see Diljit Dosanjh play sold-out stadiums in Vancouver and Toronto. He's a Punjabi artist who sings in Punjabi, and he's a first-generation Canadian. His family's from India. He's melding contemporary beats with rapping in Punjabi. I'm excited to see Tate McRae, who I think is well on her way to being the next big Canadian pop star, as I wave the Canadian flag. I'm excited for another run of blink-182, which has been a tremendous amount of fun as they reunite. And clearly, USHER is another one. We're so proud of all the hard work that Ron Laffitte and his team have done to create this amazing experience that's risen out of Las Vegas and has now gone global.

Speaking of new genres, Burna Boy went out and played arenas and started to show that Afrobeats is here to stay. I saw Zach Bryan in Toronto and was lucky enough to work with him on his Canadian shows. There were 20,000 people singing every word, which was quite amazing. Shakira did a Times Square performance to set up her tour. It's really her time to go out and show just how big she is around the world. Gracie Abrams. Red Hot Chili Peppers. Glass Animals. I could go on and on.

Live Nation has launched some interesting single-day mega-fests like When We Were Young, and people seem to be responding quite favorably.

[Live Nation Festival Promoter] Jeffrey Shuman is a genius. I don't use that term lightly, especially for non-artists. But Jeffrey is an artist; he's a *creative* genius. Every time he sends me a poster and says, "What do you think?" I'm amazed by the way his brain works. I have so much respect for what he's able to do and that he can get it all done in one day and make it an easy fan experience. If you look at When We Were Young, how are you ever going to top the first two iterations? By giving fans this amazing opportunity to see their favorite artist play their favorite album in its entirety. Jeffrey's partnerships are so smart. His partnership with USHER on Lovers and Friends is just so smart. He partnered with [manager David] Beno [Benveniste] and [his client System of a Down] on Sick New World. He really knows who to get into business with and the tastemakers to be involved with.

You need to be kind of an artist whisperer in your job. What skills have you found come in handy when working with these creative people and their teams?

I don't know that I'm a whisperer—I'm actually quite a loud individual by nature. But not growing up around artists, I feel so lucky to be in a creative environment every day and call it my job. I like to get up in the morning and work. I find it all fun. The harder I work, the more fun I have.

I think the only secret, which is really no secret at all, is to always be completely honest. Artists and their teams hear a lot of B.S. from a lot of people. Everyone in the room has an agenda. The important thing is to be transparent about what your agenda is. Our agenda is to support artists in promoting as many shows in as many places around the world as makes sense. That's our mission.

My agenda is to do what's right by the artist because I want two things. I want repeat business. I want the artist not only to work with us but to continue to want to work with us. The way to build those relationships is to side with the artist even if it doesn't suit your short-term agenda. I've learned that from Michael. And two, for artists to be our greatest marketing tool in that they tell

atlantic
and it's
completely
different but
also still
atlantic



other artists why they should work with you.

A great example of that is my longstanding relationship with Imagine Dragons—I've worked with them since they were playing the House of Blues. Yet we've never had a long-term deal; we're in a long-term relationship that's not contractual. They just continue to give me the pleasure of being able to work with them.

You alluded to Burna Boy and certain genres not necessarily native to the U.S. having big live moments here. At the same time, with Zach Bryan and Morgan Wallen, country is massive in the U.K. and parts of Europe. To what do you attribute that?

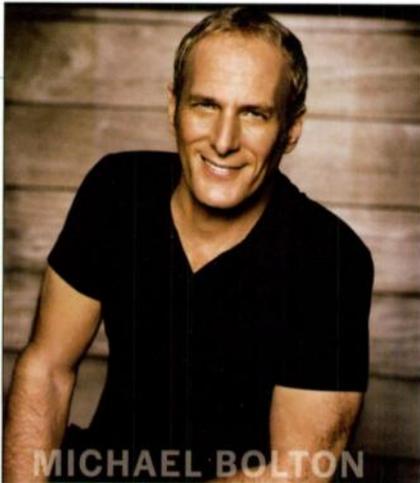
I would call it more Americana than country, but these are phenomenal songwriters who are telling a story, and their stories are universal. I think Bruce Springsteen has been a big influence in Americana. There's nobody more authentic in terms of the lyrics and the message. That's what you're seeing with the Noah Kahans, Zach Bryans and Chris Stapletons of the world—authentic, lyrically driven artists really connecting with audiences.

If you could snap your fingers and advance an innovation in the live space that's in progress but not quite there yet, what would it be?

I'd pass very strong legislation around ticketing—around secondary, around the artist's right to control transferability—and outlaw spec selling. I would pass the FAIR Ticketing reforms we introduced last year. I think that would be a much healthier ecosystem for all of us to live in: artists, venues, fans, promoters, agents, managers, industry people. To me, that's what's missing in this business.

You and Michael are brothers-in-law [Al-Joulani is married to Rapino's sister]. Are the two of you allowed to talk music at family gatherings? Or is there a moratorium so other family members can get a word in?

Business, not as much, but music, yes. We're always talking about music with the kids and seeing what they're listening to. Music is always at the core of any good family gathering—not just ours. ■



SWEDISH HOUSE MAFIA



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ANOTHER RECORD-BREAKING YEAR!**

WWE



PHOTO: RO.LEXX

TUNJI BALOGUN

Confessions of a “Cool-Ass Nerd”

BY CRAIG MARKS

A

fter successful A&R stints at Interscope and RCA, where he stewarded projects from the likes of Doja Cat, Bryson Tiller, H.E.R., Wizkid and Normani, 41-year-old Tunji Balogun was tapped by UMG poobah Lucian Grainge in late 2021 to lead Def Jam Recordings. The past years for the iconic hip-hop label have been choppy, marked by C-suite turnover, roster attrition and prolonged absences (Kanye West, Rihanna, Justin Bieber) and, most recently, a corporate restructuring. Balogun is tasked with honoring the legacy of Def Jam, which celebrates its 40th birthday this year, while moving the label forward via breakout R&B artists like Muni Long, Coco Jones and Fridayy and global acts such as Elmiene and ODUMODUBLVCK.

“That’s the challenge,” he acknowledges. “But also the exciting part, the opportunity to breathe new life into something that I not only care about, but that is culturally important. It’s an institution of Black music.”

Let’s start from the beginning. You’re based in L.A. Did you grow up on the West Coast?

I grew up in the Bay Area and in Nigeria. My parents moved to the States in 1980. I was born in Sacramento because my dad went to UC Davis, and then we moved back to Nigeria when I was three, then moved back to the East Bay when I was seven

or eight. My dad was a voracious music listener. He loved Motown, R&B and soul music and also played a lot of Nigerian music.

Then I went to boarding school in Massachusetts, because Nigerian parents *love* boarding schools. The most important thing in a Nigerian household is education. Boarding school was a culture shock.



PHOTO: LESTER COHEN-GETTY IMAGES-UMG



From top: Balogun with Muni Long and Sir Lucian Grainge; with Helen Yu, Natosha Cox, TA Thomas and Jeremy "J Dot" Jones

I was definitely a fish out of water. But it taught me how to network with any type of person, and I met kids who were listening to music that I never would have listened to otherwise. Most of the other Black kids at Deerfield were from New York. When I was in the Bay Area, I was listening to West Coast rap. When I went to Deerfield, I met kids who were listening to Wu-Tang, Nas and JAY-Z.

And that was when I really started listening to lyrics. That's, like, when I put on my backpack and became a nerd. I still am a nerd. I'm a cool-ass nerd [laughs], but I'm definitely a music nerd, especially with Black music.

I was also in high school when I started writing lyrics and rapping.

What was your rap handle?

Just Tunji. That's a unique enough name, right? Even now, some people don't know my last name. A lot of people just know me as Tunji.

And what about college?

I went to Pomona College, outside L.A.. I majored in Black Studies and Media Studies, but really what I did in college was listen to more music and make music. I was one of those kids who was downloading everything because I didn't have money to go buy albums. I was part of the whole Napster generation. I had all of them: Napster, Limewire, Kazaa, mIRC. I'm surprised I didn't get hit with a lawsuit.

Once I did have enough money to buy CDs, I became the booklet kid, looking at the credits, trying to decipher who the people were behind the scenes: Who's this mixer guy who touches everything? This was all part of the foundation that led to me becoming an A&R leader. You know, I thought I was going to be an artist. But all those experiences led me to A&R.

What was your first gig in the industry?

During college I interned at Warner Bros., but my first paid gig was as a catalog manager at a ringtone company called Def Jam Mobile. It was owned by American Greetings. So when you went into your phone to buy ringtones and got onto the little landing page, I was the one curating that.

Who have been some of your mentors along the way?

Na'im Ali McNair is one of the first people who believed in me. Top Dawg had time for me and gave me opportunities. Shawn "Tubby" Holiday,

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who I worked for at Interscope starting in 2010. John Janick, who promoted me to an actual A&R role at Interscope in 2013. And eventually Peter Edge and Keith Naftaly at RCA.

In your early Interscope days, did you get much time with Jimmy Iovine?

A little. I have a couple of good stories. I kind of came up in the underground rap scene, and I got to know Macklemore. Great guy. When he started to break at the end of 2012 as an indie artist, Jimmy was very curious about him and was like, "Who the fuck is this guy? How do we not know about him?" So I was able to set up a meeting with Jimmy, John and Macklemore. Knowing that Macklemore would never sign a deal, but just the fact that I was able to get him into the room, Jimmy was like, what's going on with this kid?

The other thing with Jimmy—and this is so random—is that the first time I got noticed for something at Interscope involved Scotty McCreery, who'd won *American Idol*. One night, about a year before he won *Idol*, I was at Tubby's house. And this producer, Lil' Ronnie, came over and was playing demos, and he played a country song. I've never worked in country. I was like, wow, that's a good song, but I figured I would never hear it again. Then, months later, McCreery wins, and I ended up ringing Ronnie: "Yo, what's up with that song?" Because there was a label-wide search for music for this guy, and Interscope wasn't really doing country. I sent the song to Dave Rene, who was Jimmy's music guy, and "I Love You This Big" became McCreery's first single. That helped get me on Jimmy's radar as well.

How did Peter and Keith figure into your career?

They understood the R&B stuff, the left-of-center stuff, the weird hip-hop stuff that I liked. And they just were like, go for it. I got lucky because the first thing I signed was Bryson Tiller, and that immediately blew up. They believed in me, they empowered me. I had a JV label at RCA [Keep Cool] after a while. Peter's a music guy first. It's always about the creative for him.

What was the interview process like for the Def Jam gig?

There wasn't really an interview process. I'd left Interscope, gone to Sony and went on a run. I was lucky enough to have had tremendous success at RCA. So Lucian was aware of the work. I'd had a couple of meetings with him before the meeting. But I didn't know that he thought that I could do

this job. There were a few other roles at Universal that I thought he might bring up. Joie Manda had just left Interscope, I thought maybe he was going to offer that. So when he brought up the Def Jam job, I was like, "Oh shit, for real? Okay, let me think about it." It was a tough decision, because I was really loving the work I was doing at RCA. I had my own label, and a ton of artists who were doing really well. But the opportunity to help refresh such an iconic label, such an iconic brand, really speaks to me. It's the dream job.

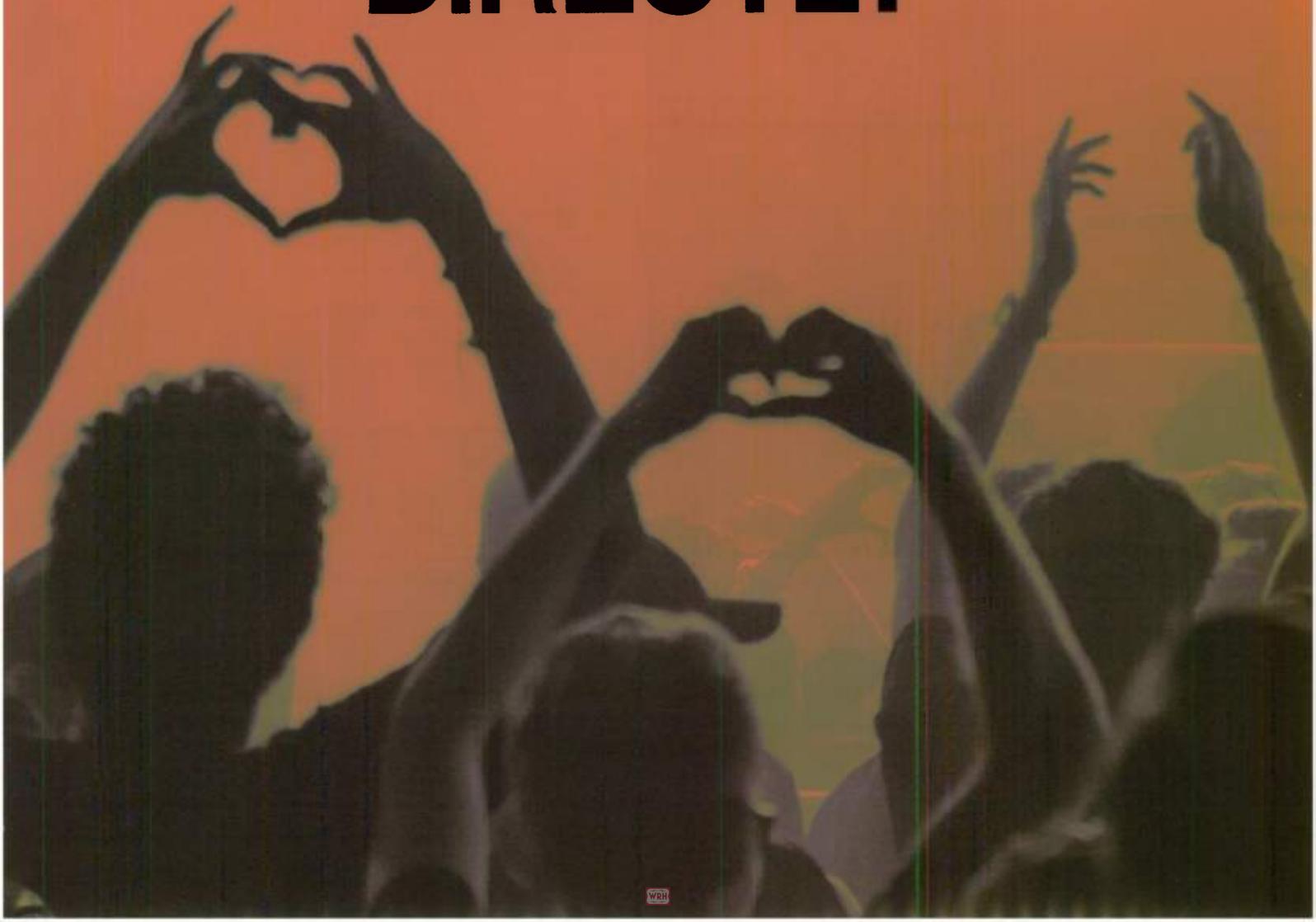


From top: With Jadakiss; with Carl Chery

“When [Sir Lucian Grainge] brought up the Def Jam job, I was like, ‘Oh shit, for real? Okay, let me think about it.’ It was a tough decision, because I was really loving the work I was doing at RCA. I had my own label, and a ton of artists who were doing really well. But the opportunity to help refresh such an iconic label, such an iconic brand, really speaks to me. It’s the dream job.”



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From top: With DJ Khaled and LaTrice Burnette; with Armani White

Still, in recent years, Def Jam has undergone a lot of turnover at the top and an erosion of market share. What do you think went amiss?

With all due respect to everyone who sat in the seat and did the job, I come from Interscope under Jimmy and then John, and RCA under Peter. I'm a student of seeing a company that's led by a creative vision. If I could call out anything that maybe changes the energy, it's that Def Jam hadn't been led by a creative for a while, someone who could reach into the artist community and speak to artists on their level. That's not to say that the people who had the job before me couldn't do it, but it's more that I live and breathe that. Because this job is really about bringing in new talent and new artists. Obviously honoring and sustaining the legacy, but also bringing in new pieces for the next 40 years of the label. For me, that's the opportunity. I know how to identify and cultivate new talent. That's the thing that I'm most passionate about. So my view is that as long as I have the space and the time to develop and cultivate new talent, I can do this.

Also, there aren't a lot of Black people that get an opportunity like this. And particularly not a lot of young Black people. This is much bigger than just me and my career. Because if this is successful, it changes who gets the next call, right? It's extremely important that representation is felt at all levels, from the intern to the CEO. And not just in creative roles, but in logistical, functional roles as well. Representation behind the scenes is crucial. Our voices need to be in the room. So I'm trying to do my part to carry that, and to create opportunities for the next generation of executives. Because this is not an easy industry to break into. And it's important for people with power to create opportunities for that next generation, not only because it's the right thing to do, but because it's the way that you remain connected to the culture.

I just became a dad. I'm not outside the way I was 10 years ago. I have to have a network of people who have more time than me. I want Def Jam to be a reflection of the culture. I want it to be really diverse. I want the people whose voices traditionally have the lowest volume to have a loud voice in the room.

When you got the gig, did you hear from any of the former CEOs?

I already had good relationships with Paul Rosenberg and Jeff Harleston, so I heard from them. Going back to the mentor question, Jeff has been one of my mentors, for sure. I didn't know Steve Bartels, so I reached out to him, and we had a good conversation.

"I know how to identify and cultivate new talent. That's the thing that I'm most passionate about. So my view is that as long as I have the space and the time to develop and cultivate new talent, I can do this."

What about the OGs? Rick Rubin, Russell Simmons, Lyor Cohen?

Yeah, they all reached out to me. I've known Russell since Def Jam Mobile. Same with Kevin Liles.

You obviously know JAY-Z...

No, I don't.

Really?

I'm his biggest fan. I've met him. I've been around

him. But I don't have a relationship with him. And I haven't heard from him. Give me a call, HOV!

Not long ago I interviewed Warner's Tom Corson and Aaron Bay-Schuck, and they said that when they got hired by Max Lousada, they mapped out a five-year plan. Is that the kind of runway that you're more or less operating on?

Yes. I talked to Lucian about a five-year plan. And even since the restructure, working with Monte

"It's extremely important that representation is felt at all levels, from the intern to the CEO. And not just in creative roles, but in logistical, functional roles as well. Representation behind the scenes is crucial. Our voices need to be in the room."



PHOTO: RO LEXX

Clockwise from top left: With Archie Davis and J Dot; with Wale at the 2023 BET Awards; with Steven Victor and Pusha T

Lipman and the team at Republic, it's still the same five-year plan. I'm an artist-development person at my core. We're in an era where everyone is looking at the same data. But I'm always going to go after artists who make me feel like a fan again. And sometimes those artists take time to break. I learned that at RCA. RCA is a very patient label. H.E.R. was signed when she was 13 years old. And they allowed her to grow and figure out who she was. Doja Cat is another. I met her in 2013, when she started bubbling on SoundCloud. She didn't break for five, six years. Being at RCA gave me that perspective of, if you find something amazing, give them the space and the grace so that they can step into their greatness.

Let's talk about the restructuring in day-to-day terms. When it comes to, say, Coco Jones' "Here We Go," who's working it from the Def Jam side? Who's working it from the REPUBLIC CORPS side?

Creative, marketing, digital, those are still native to Def Jam. Radio promotion, publicity and international are now shared, but we always shared certain functions with Republic and Island, like business affairs, legal, clearances. The relationship was always strong. You know, I started talking to Monte the minute I got into UMG. I always had a friendly relationship with him and Avery [Lipman]. And the Island guys, Imran [Majid] and Justin [Eshak], were Universal guys who went to Sony and we all came back at the same time. We were all really good friends. Same with the Mercury guys. Tyler [Arnold] is a good friend, and I've known Ben [Adelson] forever. So, the transition has been pretty seamless.

What have been the pain points of the restructuring?

The pain point is having to let go a lot of great people, people who worked hard and who cared deeply for the artists. It's never easy to do that.

And what's a success you can point to since the restructuring that maybe wouldn't have happened prior?

I think the best example is the Muni Long song, "Made for Me." It's our biggest song of the year. Our Def Jam Urban radio team, led by Natina Nimene, started working it at the end of last year at R&B radio, then took it to Urban Mainstream and it went to #1 in both formats. Then Gary Spangler's team took it to Rhythm and it went #1 there. Now they're working it at Top 40.

And going back to my love of lyrics and nerdy obsession with songcrafting, Muni is one of the most



With Coco Jones at the 2024 Grammys

talented—I won't even call her a songwriter. She's like a magician, the way that she reflects her life through the music.

So what's the next step for her?

A classic album. She has a core fanbase that loves the songs. But there's a more casual fan that she needs to connect with. She's doing this Chris Brown tour now, which will help tremendously. Her album will come this fall. It's really amazing.

Any sign of new music from Bleber?

He's *always* working on music. He's an amazing artist. I think he's at a point in his career where he's sort of

"I'm an artist-development person at my core. We're in an era where everyone is looking at the same data. But I'm always going to go after artists who make me feel like a fan again. And sometimes those artists take time to break."

“I was one of those kids who was downloading everything because I didn’t have money to go buy albums. I was part of the whole Napster generation... I’m surprised I didn’t get hit with a lawsuit.”

stepping back and reassessing. When he comes back with something new, it’ll be really special. And it’ll show his growth. He’s experiencing some new stuff in his personal life. And all of that will be reflected in this new music. But it’s on his terms, when he’s ready.

Tell me about the next six to 12 months. What are you excited about?

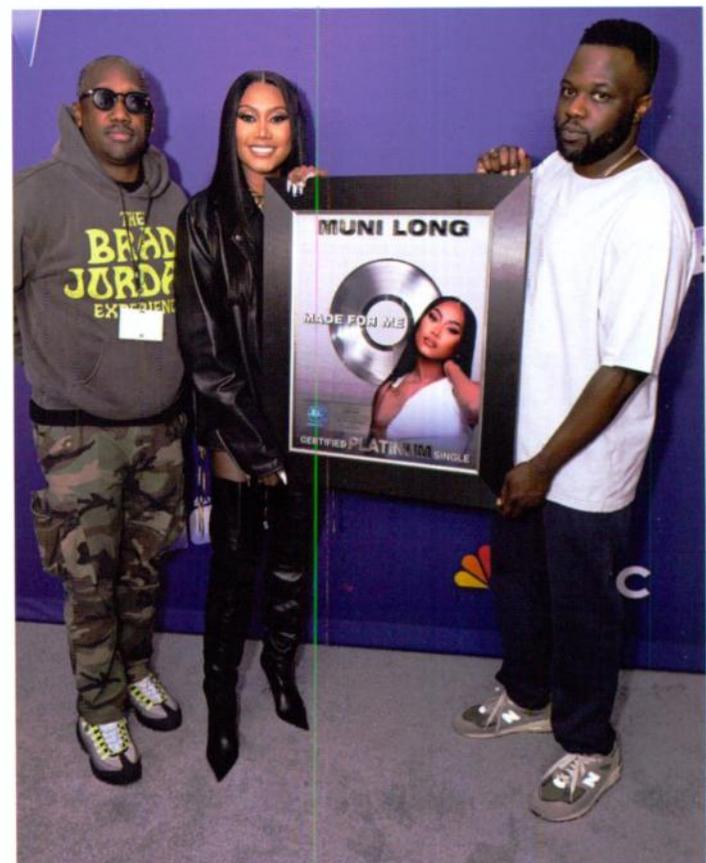
There’s Muni, which I talked about. There’s Fridayy. He’s an amazing example of what I’m trying to do at Def Jam. He’s a Haitian American from Philadelphia. He’s an R&B act at his core, but his music incorporates damn near every element of the patchwork of Black music globally. You’ll hear gospel in the way he arranges his vocals. He incorporates dancehall rhythms; he incorporates Afrobeats rhythms. He collaborates with Afrobeats artists, dancehall artists, R&B artists, hip-hop artists. He has such a powerful voice. He’s going to be a superstar. All of the ingredients that I’ve seen in artists I’ve worked with who became superstars are present with Fridayy.

There’s a Big Sean album coming, his first in four years. It’s him stepping into the best version of himself. We’ll have new Alessia Cara in the fall. As an A&R, I was really excited to work with her when I came in. I’ve been working on it with [Sr. Director of A&R and Marketing] Caitlin Harriford on our team. I know I’ve said this a lot, but I think Alessia is sitting on her best album. It’s a step forward. And then we’re gonna go back to where it all started with LL COOL J, who has a new album coming in September, produced by Q-Tip. LL is the first artist who blew up on the label, so it just ties together the whole Def Jam story. And he’s still hungry, like it’s his first project. He’s just a ball of energy. And we’ll have a Coco Jones album in the fall. Grammy winner, super talent, superwoman. Oh, and we can talk about this, since they already did: We’ll have a new Clipse album this year.

What are some of the Def Jam 40 plans that you can share?

We’re doing a bunch of stuff. We’re doing a lot of vinyl reissues celebrating the catalog, we’re doing a doing a boxed set with Vinyl Me, Please. There was a New York City declaration of Def Jam Day, and now there’s been a New York State declaration. And this LL album is a central piece. I always tell people, if we’re the Disney of hip-hop, he’s the Mickey Mouse.

Most of all, there’s just a lot of great music, from the legacy acts, the current stars and the next generation of stars.■



From top: With LL Cool J; with Chaka Zulu and Muni Long



AARON BAY-SCHUCK

AND

TOM CORSON

THE HITS INTERVIEW BY CRAIG MARKS

The last time Warner Records (formerly Warner Bros.) had three different acts with Top 10 songs in the same week, Zach Bryan's family hadn't yet moved to Oklahoma, Benson Boone was in nursery school and Teddy Swims had a full head of hair.

That last occurred back in 2006, with singles from Daniel Powter, Fort Minor and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Today, led by its two co-chairmen, CEO Aaron Bay-Schuck and COO Tom Corson, the storied West Coast label counts Bryan, Boone and Swims with hit songs that have simultaneously lodged in the Top 10, a remarkable achievement for any label, but one that is especially eye-popping for a company that had been struggling for chart relevancy.

Bay-Schuck and Corson came to Warner in 2018, taking over from Cameron Strang at the behest of then newly installed Warner Music Group CEO of Recorded Music Max Lousada. "An arranged marriage" is how Bay-Schuck and Corson both describe it, with Corson leaving a top executive post at RCA Records and Bay-Schuck coming over after running A&R at Interscope.

The label, once without equal under Mo Ostin and Lenny Waronker for fostering great art while hoovering up obscure marketshare, had fallen on hard times, as its roster aged and hip-hop and pop supplanted rock on the charts. Leadership failed to keep pace, and while WMG's East Coast label, Atlantic, enjoyed sustained success, Warner Bros. became more-or-less an afterthought in the industry, still with a blue-chip catalog (Prince, Fleetwood Mac, Neil Young,

Madonna, the Chili Peppers, Green Day, Gary Clark Jr. and many more) but unable to consistently break new artists.

"We were a last-place team," says Corson about the state of the Bunny when he and Bay-Schuck arrived. "We were the 0 and 16 Cleveland Browns." Since then, they've streamlined the label name and moved its headquarters from the Burbank chateaus to a 240k-square-foot building in downtown Los Angeles, but neither of those rebrandings has been as galvanizing as discovering and developing the likes of Bryan, Boone and Swims. Omar Apollo, fresh off a Best New Artist Grammy nomination, has a much-anticipated sophomore album coming this summer, and the revitalized label has scored an impressive seven Best New Artist Grammy noms to date. Add a resurgent Linkin Park—whose hot new single has ignited its whole catalog—plus rising stars Michael Marcagi, Warren Zeiders, Kenya Grace, Nessa Barrett, Veeze and NLE Choppa, as well as newer signings like viral country phenom Dasha and buzzing teen Maddox Batson, and Warner Records is finally holding its own not just in today's ultra-competitive marketplace, but perhaps even with the ghosts of Warner's fabled past. Notably, as with that prior era, they are doing so primarily with singer-songwriters.

"Few iconic labels have been able to reinvent themselves with the passion, originality, and tenacity that Warner Records has displayed over the past five years," insists Lousada. "Tom and Aaron have taken the long view—building a fresh, entrepreneurial company that's artist-focused, close to culture and bursting with energy and creativity. This team and these artists are on an amazing journey, and there's much more to come."

Corson and Bay-Schuck spoke with us over Zoom. Hey, it was better than having to be in the same room with us.



"ZACH BRYAN WAS A KEY MOMENT IN OUR SUCCESS. UP UNTIL THAT POINT, WE'D HAD PLENTY OF HIT SINGLES, BUT WE HADN'T REALLY BROKEN AN ARTIST. WHEN ZACH STARTED TO GO, IT SENT A MESSAGE TO OUR COMPANY, AND TO THE BUSINESS, THAT WE HAVE A SUPERSTAR HERE. ZACH CHANGED THE NARRATIVE."

—AARON BAY-SCHUCK

Front row (l-r): Hannah Bay-Schuck, Zach Bryan, Warner's Miles Gersh, Corson, manager Danny Kang; back row: Warner's Rick Gershon, Bay-Schuck, Presley Nardella, manager Stefan Max

After five years of pretty dramatic course correction, Warner is on a tremendous roll right now. Does the air smell sweeter? Does food taste better?

AARON BAY-SCHUCK: I would definitely say that there is a newfound confidence in the way that everyone's rolling at Warner Records. But we are still nowhere near where we want to be. We like to talk about the run we're on right now as a new baseline, not the peak.

Tom always says that "pressure is a privilege," and that's totally correct. But it's wonderful to have had the pressure shift from "Jesus, when's this run ever going to begin?" to "How do we keep it going?" I *much* prefer the latter.

Was there a tipping point when things really started to feel like they were on their way to a sustained level of success?

BAY-SCHUCK: Zach Bryan was a key moment in our success. Up until that point, we'd had plenty of hit singles, but we hadn't really broken an artist. When Zach started to go, it sent a message to our company, and to the business, that we have a superstar here. Zach changed the narrative.

TOM CORSON: There were different skill sets we developed during COVID and different opportunities that arose, because everything became so digital and so viral. We also saw a shift in tastes towards the kind of artists Aaron and his team had been carefully crafting and developing, and we were prepared.

And there were things that Zach's success taught us that we weren't doing, that we needed to be open to. We pivoted really quickly into a new digital team, a new viral team, a new head of marketing, new A&R people.

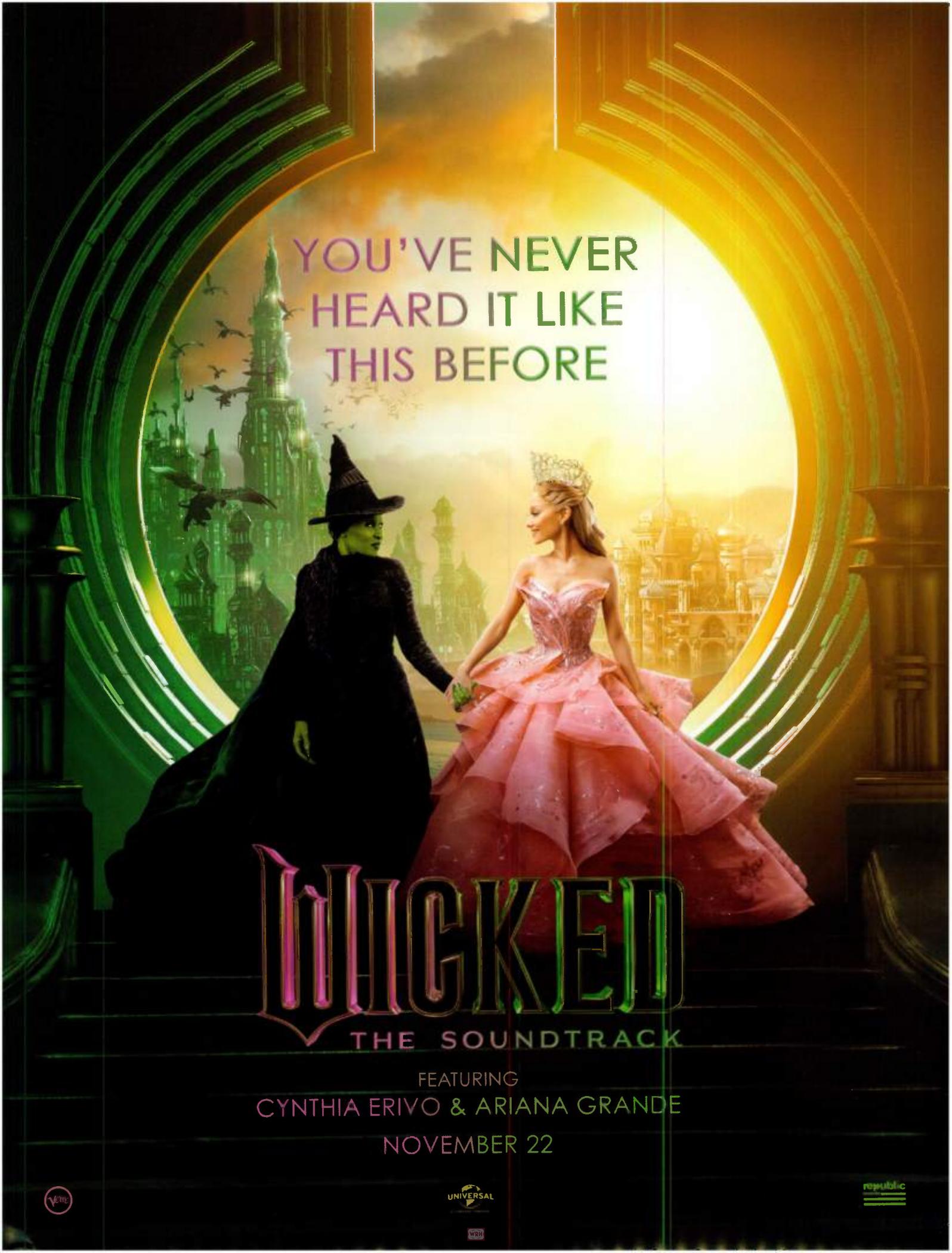
Who are some of the people you're alluding to?

CORSON: First, we had a really stable core: Our CFO, Michele Nadelman. Our EVP, Head of Business and Legal Affairs, Julian Petty. Our EVP, Promotion and Commerce, Mike Chester, has grown into a top executive. Laura Swanson, our EVP Media and Strategic Development, was the first hire I made when I came to the label, and she's been a great sidekick ever since.

And then there are the people who have joined us in the past couple of years. Our EVP of marketing, Dionnee Harper, came from Atlantic, and has really locked down our process. Our SVP of digital marketing, Dalia Ganz, who we found at Disney, has brought a real rigor to the job, and she's re-staffed incredibly well. Part of that is Will Morrow, who is a young star running our viral marketing team.

BAY-SCHUCK: It's made such a difference having Karen Kwak and Steve Carless as my co-heads of A&R. Karen brings a wealth of knowledge, incredible relationships, a fantastic balance of record-making and operational experience. And Steve-O comes from the world of promotion and management as well as working at labels, so he brings a different expertise.

I've worked in A&R departments at Atlantic, Interscope and Warner. Normally, there's one or two A&R people on a team who are carrying the success of the company at any given time. Now, I look around and I can point to five or six different people who are winning at the same time. It's very unusual.



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NOVEMBER 22





From left, above: Managers Coulter Reynolds and Jeff Burns, Corson, Benson Boone, Bay-Schuck, Warner's Jeff Sosnow, manager Mac Reynolds, Warner's Jon Chen; below: Corson, WMG Head of Recorded Music Max Lousada, Mark Ronson, Teddy Swims and Bay-Schuck

Miles Gersh was the A&R who flagged Zach Bryan for us. Jeff Sosnow is a legendary A&R man who's been at Warner for the better part of the last decade and helped keep the lights on before Tom and I arrived. His taste and musical acumen have delivered incredible results for us, from Benson to Rūfūs Du Sol to Nessa. Chris Morris and Sam Mobarek are having a real breakthrough with Kenya Grace and our dance label, Major Recordings. Sean Stevens started as a research A&R for us and is now spearheading our day-to-day A&R efforts on Teddy Swims. The A&R team needs to continue to evolve, but I feel like it's finally working.

Let's go back to when you first signed on as co-heads of Warner. You've mentioned that there was a five-year plan. Was there actually a five-year plan, or is that just biz-speak for having a long rope?

CORSON: No, it was a big part of our conversation with Max before we joined up to do this. Aaron and I were presented with one of the greatest opportunities around. But make no mistake, the company was in crisis. It was ripe for reinvention, but the job wasn't for the faint of heart. There were days when we looked at each other and we were like, "You still good?" Speaking for myself, there were days when I thought, "I left a pretty good company for this?"

We had a roster with iconic artists like Michael Bublé, Josh Groban, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Green Day and Linkin Park, but there wasn't a lot after that. We had to make some hard decisions. We flipped most of the roster, and we had to re-craft our team. We still hit or exceeded our financial targets every year since we've been here, by the way. We punched above our weight class, which bought us time to do what we really want to do, which is to become the premier artist-development label in the business. We'll take quick hits, of course, and we've had a bunch of them. But we want iconic artists. We want to take the DNA of this company and pay it forward.



**"TEDDY SWIMS HAS A TATTOO OVER HIS EYE THAT SAYS 'PATIENCE,' WHICH SEEMS LIKE A GOOD BUZZ-WORD NOT JUST FOR HIS JOURNEY, BUT FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS AT WARNERS."
—TOM CORSON**

**History
is always
being
written.**



**SONY MUSIC
PUBLISHING**



Clockwise from top: Warner's Mike Chester, Michele Nadelman, Laura Swanson and Corson, Kenya Grace, Bay-Schuck, Major Recordings/Warner's Sam Mobarek, manager Nick Shymansky, Ceri Roberts, Karen Kwak, Dionnee Harper and Steve Carless; Bay-Schuck, NLE Choppa and Corson; Corson, Dasha and Bay-Schuck; Corson, Bay-Schuck, Warren Zeiders, Charly Salvatore and Warner's Isaac Green

BAY-SCHUCK: To add to what Tom just said: We were always going to be an artist-development label. We did not believe we could go after highly competitive signings that were going to require massive checks. So we had to sign acts early. We always believed that patience and commitment were going to be the keys to long-term success for this label. And we've never wavered from that.

You have three artists in the Top 10 right now: Zach, Benson Boone and Teddy Swims. Do you see them on a continuum with the quote-unquote golden age of Warner and Reprise?

BAY-SCHUCK: Absolutely. Look at the artists that Mo, Lenny and that world-class team signed and developed, from Fleetwood Mac to Prince to Madonna to Tom

Petty to Green Day to the Chili Peppers. The through-line with all of those acts was fearlessness, risk-taking and a refusal to compromise. And the label knew when to lean in, and when to get out of the way and give the artist space.

When I look at Teddy and Benson and Zach, every one of them was signed early and then earned their hits. Sure, virality has played a part in their success, but they've done the work. They didn't have their wins too early in their careers, where they ran the risk of songs becoming bigger than they were. And that's why we think we're in such a privileged position with not just those acts, but with Warren Zeiders, Kenya Grace, Nessa Barrett, NLE Choppa. They're real stars with real vision, and that's what all of Mo and Lenny's true breakthroughs had.

Does the success of Zach, Teddy and Benson represent a shift in consumer taste, as well? Are listeners looking more for a kind of singer-songwriter sincerity than in the recent past?

BAY-SCHUCK: When social media really first exploded, it was about theater. It was about putting out a fake reality. That's what people wanted to see. But as that has evolved and TikTok has taken over in terms of discovery, you've started to see authenticity and vulnerability being the keys to connecting with an audience. Teddy, Benson and Zach aren't afraid to be the truest version of themselves when they're marketing and promoting their music.

CORSON: Also, the community behind the alt-country/AAA/Americana movement has become super-powered after COVID. They were late to the digital thing. Same with country listeners. They were more comfortable on Facebook than they were moving through the virality of TikTok and Instagram. But not anymore.

Are there lessons from Zach's success that are applicable to other artists that you're trying to develop, or is his hip-hop-esque pace and volume of releases sul generis?

BAY-SCHUCK: It's certainly taught us that more is more when the quality is there. Zach has proven that if your fanbase is very real and they are there for you, and not just for the hit song, then there really isn't such a thing as too much. But very few artists have the committed fan base that Zach has. And the speed with which he's built it is once in a generation. When we signed Zach three years ago, he'd never done a show. He's now on a stadium tour. It's just remarkable.

Walk us through the artist development story on Benson.

BAY-SCHUCK: When we came across Benson, he was gaining some traction on TikTok by teasing a song called "Ghost Town." We felt he was an incredibly high-potential individual. He showed great aptitude for songwriting, he had a great voice. He was also 19, and this was a whole new world for him.

It came to our attention that Benson had been doing some early writing with Dan Reynolds from Imagine Dragons and Dan's brother and manager, Mac Reynolds, which was exciting to me because I had a wonderful relationship with those two from my time at Interscope. I called them and said, "I'm really intrigued by this Benson kid, but it wouldn't be right to do this without you guys. Let's go after this together." And over the last four years, we haven't skipped any steps in the process of breaking Benson. We've put out a considerable amount of music, and we've changed musical directions a few times in an effort to discover not only what felt right for Benson, but what his fans wanted to hear.

When you say change musical directions, does that

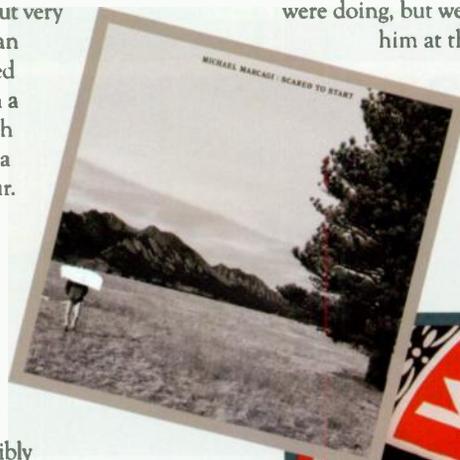
stem from Benson wanting something different? Or is the label making suggestions?

BAY-SCHUCK: It's both. It's all part of a dialogue with Benson, spearheaded by Jeff Sosnow. Benson's done the speed-dating of working with a hundred different writers and producers, and we've ultimately settled on a process where we know who his creative family is.

CORSON: Benson had never performed, had never toured. He was discovering his voice. In another era, this would've been a gut signing that would've been developed for two years before you put anything out. But that's not the era we're in. The first market that he broke in was Norway, where he had a massive hit with "Ghost Town." And then France had a massive hit with "In the Stars." Meanwhile, we were chipping away here, doing a lot of streams and developing a fan base. And then when we leaned into "Beautiful Things," we knew we had something. Now it's the #1 song in the world on Spotify for the second or third week in a row. To those outside the company, Benson may seem like an overnight hit. But it's been two and a half years of artist development in conjunction with his manager, Jeff Burns.

Teddy Swims has a tattoo over his eye that says "PATIENCE," which seems like a good buzzword not just for his journey, but for the past five years at Warners.

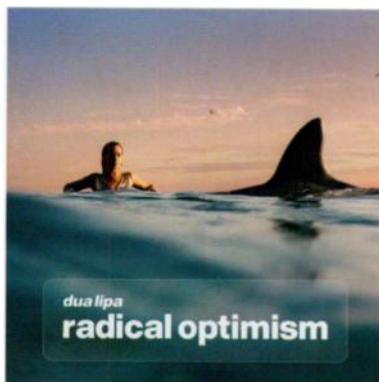
BAY-SCHUCK: We could have taken Benson's "Ghost Town" to Top 40 based on the streaming numbers they were doing, but we didn't feel it was the right thing for him at that point in his career. Same with Zach Bryan. We didn't campaign to take "Something in the Orange" to radio. When Warren Zeiders started to break with "Ride the Lightning," we didn't take it to Country radio. Teddy Swims has had other records stream, but we've never impacted one at radio until



From left: Corson, Michael Marcagi and Bay-Schuck



“THERE WERE DIFFERENT SKILL SETS WE DEVELOPED DURING COVID AND DIFFERENT OPPORTUNITIES THAT AROSE, BECAUSE EVERYTHING BECAME SO DIGITAL AND SO VIRAL. WE ALSO SAW A SHIFT IN TASTES, TOWARDS THE KIND OF ARTISTS AARON AND HIS TEAM HAD BEEN CAREFULLY CRAFTING AND DEVELOPING, AND WE WERE PREPARED.”
—TOM CORSON



From left, top: Bay-Schuck, Omar Apollo, Dua Lipa, Lousada and Corson; bottom: Bay-Schuck, Dua Lipa and Corson

“Lose Control.” That’s what I mean when I say we don’t skip steps.

How did the Teddy hit come about?

CORSON: We signed Teddy in December 2019. We had a great base to work from. He has this huggable personality, a great look, an incredible voice. He’d go to Australia and sell out. He’d go to the U.K. and sell out. We would have this frustrating conversation every month or two with Max: “When are we going to get the right song?”

BAY-SCHUCK: “Lose Control” came out of a writing camp that we put together for Teddy in Palm Springs. Collaborating was a new thing for Teddy, so we tried to find the right creative partners for him. Now there is a

crew—Julian Bunetta, John Ryan, Ammo, Mikky Ekko and a few others—who bring the best out of him. We put out “Lose Control” in June, and it’s still growing.

CORSON: We always felt this could be his “Rolling in the Deep.” And now, nine months later, “Lose Control” is going to be a #1. This one is an all-timer. He’s going to be able to make a living off of this record. But I think if we got caught speeding on “Lose Control,” we might’ve blown it. This feels real. Hopefully it sets Teddy up for a Best New Artist Grammy nomination.

BAY-SCHUCK: To that point, Teddy’s manager, Luke Conway, has been a brilliant partner. He’s not only a very savvy digital strategist, but he’s helped us have Teddy do all of the unsexy things that an artist has to do before they start to break.

To my ears, Michael Marcagli seems to split the difference between Zach and Benson. How did that signing come about, and what are the plans for “Scared to Start?”

BAY-SCHUCK: We learned about Michael and “Scared to Start” because of the great pre-release traction he garnered from his teasing campaign, and we already knew his manager, Alex Brahl, from our success with The

Walters. We fell in love with “Scared to Start” instantly and felt that it was the kind of copyright that would last long after virality was over. But the great surprise was finding out how strong Michael was as an artist and the depth that lived on his then-unreleased debut EP. Michael’s obvious potential, and our incredibly positive experiences with Alex, made this a no-brainer signing. In the immediate future, the development process with Michael will continue as he tours the world, records new music, and continues to reinforce the artist proposition alongside the global growth of “Scared to Start.”

Let’s talk Warren Zelders. What’s it like signing an artist on the West Coast and then trying to break them in Nashville? Was there a reluctance

or skepticism from Music Row and Country radio?

BAY-SCHUCK: I think it's fair to say there was, but just because they didn't know him. There are certain traditions in country music that most artists have to subscribe to, and he just hadn't done that. But between our efforts and the work done by Cris Lacy and Ben Kline at Warner Nashville, we have meaningfully and with integrity migrated Warren into that community. He is doing all of the right things. And look what's happened with "Pretty Little Poison." He's achieved a #1 record at the format.

You just announced a release date for Dua Lipa's forthcoming album, *Radical Optimism*. If Zach is the new king of Warner, Dua must be the queen.

CORSON: It's so exciting to work with her. She's such a pro—and we work closely alongside [Warner U.K. President] Joe Kentish and the U.K. team. I always go back to COVID with her. *Future Nostalgia* was about to drop, the record leaked—and the world shut down. We all sort of stared at each other on a Zoom, like, "What are we going to do?" And she just leaned in and took charge. *Radical*

Optimism reflects her ability to be resilient, to be flexible, to move in spite of obstacles, and it's a great message for the world and for her fans.

BAY-SCHUCK: She's got such a clear A&R vision for herself. On the new album, she took an already sophisticated approach to pop music and pushed that envelope without losing any of the commerciality of it. It's a very fine line to walk, but that's what you're going to get when you're working with such skilled musicians as Kevin Parker, Andrew Wyatt and Tobias Jesso. They've delivered a project with incredible sonic and conceptual consistency. It's going to be one of the biggest albums of the year, no doubt.

Tom, describe your relationship with your work husband, Aaron.

CORSON: Work husband. Hmm [laughs]. I never quite thought of him that way, but it's been a wonderful partnership. It's been great grinding it out together through the lean years. And now that things are going well, it's even sweeter.



Bay-Schuck, Corson, Cher, Alexander Edwards, Lousada and WMG CEO Robert Kyncl

"WE'LL TAKE QUICK HITS, OF COURSE, AND WE'VE HAD A BUNCH OF THEM. BUT WE WANT ICONIC ARTISTS. WE WANT TO TAKE THE DNA OF THIS COMPANY AND PAY IT FORWARD." —TOM CORSON



"TOM AND I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW EACH OTHER WHEN WE WALKED IN HERE.

BUT AS EXCITED AS I WAS ABOUT THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE THE CEO OF WARNER RECORDS, I DON'T THINK I WOULD HAVE ACCEPTED THE JOB IF MAX WASN'T ALSO WORKING TO GIVE ME A PARTNER. THIS JOB IS FAR TOO BIG, IN TERMS OF THE NUMBER OF THINGS YOU HAVE TO BE EXPERT IN, TO EFFECTIVELY DO IT SOLO."

—AARON BAY-SCHUCK

BAY-SCHUCK: Tom and I didn't even know each other when we walked in here. But as excited as I was about the opportunity to be the CEO of Warner Records, I don't think I would have accepted the job if Max wasn't also working to give me a partner. This job is far too big, in terms of the number of things you have to be expert in, to effectively do it solo.

Are you two friends outside the office?

BAY-SCHUCK: Absolutely. And that's played a role in our success. We both love golf, and we're both members of the same club. There have been so many moments during these last five years where we just needed to have therapy sessions with one another. And to be able to do that outside of the traditional workspace has been invaluable. We're real friends.

CORSON: That's been the bonus part about it, because you don't always share things in common outside of work. It's been great having a new friend.



Clockwise from left: Corson and Bay-Schuck; Bay-Schuck, Saweetie, Kyncl, Bebe Rexha and Corson; Sosnow, Corson, Orville Peck, Bay-Schuck, managers Brandon Creed, Dani Russin and Anika Capozza

Finally, how has your relationship with Max evolved?

CORSON: We've got a great partner and boss in Max. In the dark moments he was there for us; in the high moments, he pushed us to go higher. His energy level is awesome. We're both grateful for having such a supportive boss.

BAY-SCHUCK: Max said to me early on, "I'm going to be tougher on you in times of success and easier on you in times of failure." And I really appreciate that. Don't get me wrong. He's always tough. We have very difficult conversations about what he sees us doing incorrectly. We challenge each other and debate and argue, but he always knows when to say, "I'm going to let this unfold the way that it needs to."

Warner Music Group bets on entrepreneurship, it bets on real talent and real stars, both on the executive side and the artist side. I don't think the story that we're seeing unfold at Warner Records would be repeatable at a different label group. ■

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iven her longtime role as Adele's agent, WME's Lucy Dickins already had a sizable profile before she was upped to global head of contemporary music and touring at the agency. Since the ridiculously charming Brit (who joined WME in 2019) stepped into the post in 2022 and moved her family across the pond to L.A., however, she's made a massive impression on the biz.

The scion of an influential U.K. showbiz family, Dickins

Rolling in the Deep With Lucy Dickins

by Simon Glickman

built a powerful roster at **ITB**—which was, of course, co-founded by her dad, **Barry**—that included not only Adele but **Mumford & Sons**, **Laura Marling** and **James Blake**. Most recently, the agency added superstar **Billie Eilish** to the fold. Adele's recent sold-out Vegas residency and run of Munich shows, meanwhile, have seen the inimitable diva hit new heights.

Dickins has, in the last two years, become fairly acclimated to La-La Land. Though talking to us probably didn't help much.



From top: With brother (and Adele manager) Jonathan Dickins at the U.K.'s MITS Awards; With Spotify's Sulinna Ong

A lot has happened since our last conversation.

Since we last spoke, several clients have had some massive wins: Adele currently has a sold-out residency taking place in Munich, Germany, featuring a bespoke stadium and one-of-a-kind production; she's also completed 68 of her sold-out Las Vegas shows and sold-out an additional 32 upcoming dates. Olivia Rodrigo's sold-out GUTS world tour continues through October, Zach Bryan's sold-out Quittin Time North American tour continues through December, and René Rapp is on a hot streak with appearances at major summer festivals like Coachella, Lollapalooza and Outside Lands. Our breakthrough acts are dominating the scene as well: Benson Boone has the #1 most streamed song of 2024 so far, Victoria Monét took home Best New Artist at the Grammys, Little Simz garnered widespread praise for her Glastonbury performance and Teddy Swims completed his sold-out tour of Australia, New Zealand, and Asia; he's already sold out his upcoming North American tour, and just secured 4 VMA nominations.

When we interviewed you last June, you had been there about a year at the time. How would you compare this year and last year, on both a personal and business level?

On a personal level, it's taken me two years to settle here. January was the turning point for me where this felt like home, I'm comfortable and I'm having a nice time. I've got my whole crew surrounding me. I moved from London; I had no setup. I didn't know anyone. Now I've spent so much time going out, badgering people and finding people that I've got friends, people I need around to make my everyday life easier.

And your children have acclimated?

My son didn't at first, but he now likes living in L.A. My daughters always loved it, and my husband is working out here, so it suddenly turned a corner.

You bought a new house, right?

We're renting a house, just around the corner from here. We love the house; it's been a game-changer. I've got a setup now. I know where I am, what I'm doing, who I'm seeing, who I like, who I don't like. The kids are settled, which makes me more settled. It's the same in the company as well—I've noticed a difference. I was doing my self-assessment, and I looked back at what I'd written the last time and I could see the clear changes in the company. But we're working much more collaboratively. It's real teamwork there now. Everyone's helping each other out.

And you've built relationships?

I've built great relationships, and they're going to be lifelong friendships. It's been great to have a different perspective, especially being a Brit coming into an American office. Everyone likes each other, which is the most important thing. Everything feels lighter; I'm enjoying it. It's a job—don't get me wrong. It's hard work, but I enjoy it.

You can tell that you enjoy it.

I love being an agent, but I also like doing it with the people I'm working with, which makes a difference.



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What's your travel like this year?

Insane. I went to Australia once. I'm going back to Australia again because I'm doing a panel for South by Southwest. I went to the Splendour in the Grass festival, which sadly has now come down due to poor ticket sales.

Why are some festivals not doing as well?

There are several reasons. A lot of bigger artists would rather do their own stadium shows because they can have their own production and make more money. It's trying to get lineups together. There were so many bands doing the same festivals. Ticket pricing has become extortionately high. People have only got so much money. They choose what they want to go to, and sometimes they want to see one particular artist.

How often do you go to London?

I've tried to go less. The last few months I've been more, because I went back for Glastonbury Festival. The London office was *dominating* Glastonbury. We had the Friday and Saturday headline and penultimates. Our electronic stages were heaving. We had a massive turnout, and I didn't want to miss that. Also, I went to go and see my acts. I flew in for Glastonbury and flew straight back. The week before that, I went to the new Manchester arena [Co-op Live] and then went to the Adele site in Munich.

What about the football team? Are you going to watch the game here?

I was going to watch the game here and then I asked if I could get some tickets from my promoter in Germany. Then I realized the cost of the flights and how difficult it was to get to Berlin. Now my son and I are flying in and out to go to the final. British culture, mate—I can't miss the football. It's just the experience, and I want him to see it. There's a big group of us going. It's going to be fun. Yet again another transatlantic flight.

Artists at WME have had either breakout years or important years. Who are some of the people that had great years?

USHER, Justin Timberlake, Adele. That was at the door in January. But from Bruno Mars to USHER to Backstreet Boys to the Adele residencies—she's going to have done a hundred shows plus the Munich residencies. Zach Bryan has been phenomenal. Olivia Rodrigo has been phenomenal. It's been the strongest year we've had. Business has been insane. The number of shows we've booked has gone through the roof.

What was it like growing up in a music-business family?

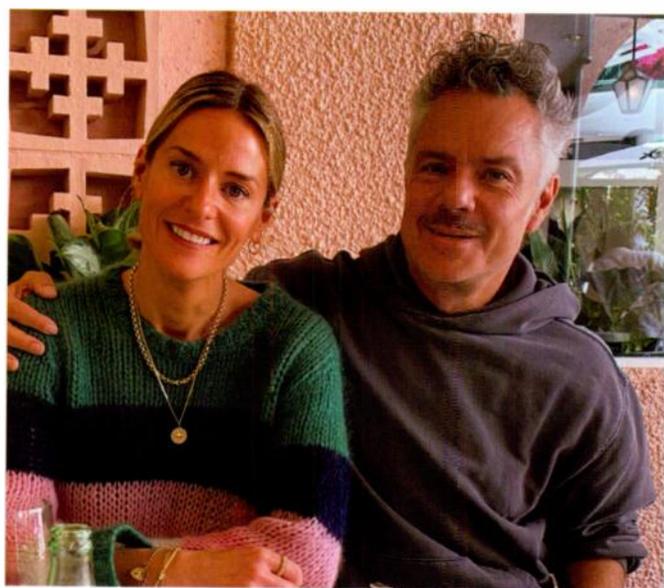
I don't think as a child I really took on board what it was. You get to go to these amazing shows, and you get to meet amazing people. For us, it was the norm. It wasn't unusual for people we represented to call or come by the house. They never made it feel like it was anything different. I can remember Diana Ross calling our house—that's just not normal, is it?

Diana Ross definitely never called my house.

I mean—she is Ms. Ross, but I don't think I ever really took much notice of it. I look back at it now and think



“I love being an agent, but I also like doing it with the people I'm working with, which makes a difference.”



From top: With WME Partner/Global Co-Head, Contemporary Music & Touring Kirk Sommer; at Australia's Laneway Festival with co-founder Danny Rogers

BILLIE EILISH

GRAMMY AWARDS® NOMINEE



BIRDS OF A FEATHER

RECORD OF THE YEAR

SONG OF THE YEAR

BEST POP SOLO PERFORMANCE

HIT ME HARD AND SOFT

ALBUM OF THE YEAR

BEST POP VOCAL ALBUM

BEST POP DUO/
GROUP PERFORMANCE

CHARLI XCX & BILLIE EILISH - GUESS

BEST DANCE
POP RECORDING

L'AMOUR DE MA VIE
[OVER NOW EXTENDED EDIT]

it was quite crazy. It took a while to realize that what was “normal” for me was not everybody’s normal.

Do you recall the point at which you decided you wanted to work in the music industry?

Initially, I didn’t want to go into music; I wanted to go into film. Coming from a music family can be a blessing or a curse. In those times, the expectation for my brother was, there was [Dickins’ grandfather] Percy, there was Barry, there was [uncle] Rob and then it was going to be Jonathan. He was like a pedigreed racehorse. When he

was a young A&R scout, I remember all this added pressure from people speculating about whether his signings were going to be successful or not. I always loved music, but those kinds of expectations made me steer away.

When did you start to come around to the idea of a career in music?

I think I had two days after finishing my exams and my dad’s words to me were, “What are you doing about getting a job? Because you’re not sitting around here on your arse.” So I started going for interviews and I kept

“It’s been the strongest year we’ve had. Business has been insane. The number of shows we’ve booked has gone through the roof.”



WME’s Sara Williams, Dvora Englefield, Stephanie LaFera, Dickins and Becky Gardenhire



WME's Stephanie LeFera, UMPG boss Jody Gerson, Dickins and former Capitol Music Group chief Michelle Jubelirer

“I’m one of those people who’s always pushing myself for a challenge. I never sit comfortably. I’m never satisfied. I can always be better.”

getting hired, but I wouldn’t accept the jobs. It was really funny because I kept feeling like the jobs weren’t right for me, or it wasn’t what I wanted to do, or it was about the money. That went on for a while before my dad wasn’t having it anymore. So I went to work in his office. And when I tell you I started working at the bottom, I mean the very bottom.

What did you like about it?

I liked the business of it. I loved live music, and I loved being part of the conversation from the beginning to the end. I knew I loved the music side, but I still wasn’t convinced that live was necessarily it for me. So I went for a job at a record company [U.K. indie PWL] as a junior product manager. I went through an employment agency, and when I went in for the interview, they gave me this sheet of paper with all these questions they wanted me to answer. I had no idea what any of it meant. I didn’t even know what a product manager was at the time! I suppose that was the moment I proved I would be a good agent because I completely blagged my way through that interview and landed the job. I went in as a junior product manager and left as head of international.

Do you think the role of product manager can be a launchpad for a variety of different careers?

Totally. You’d be there from the A&R process of the product being made to it going out to the show. There were so many things it tapped into. I think it probably contributed to my going into more of the live side. I ended up going back to work at my dad’s not knowing what I wanted to do. I said to him, “I’ve got all these A levels and I’m sitting here not being utilized and I’m really bored.” And he was, like, “Well, if you think you’re that great, here’s a map. Here’s Alanis Morissette—now have a go at routing her tour.” I sat there with a pad of paper and a map of Europe and had no idea, but I wasn’t going to ask for help. So I took a stab at it, and he looked it over and said, “You’re not bad at this.” That’s how it started.

What did you learn after routing?

You make relationships, right? You speak to different promoters, learn how different markets work and learn about costings, riders, different productions and so forth—all the basics. It took me a while, but by the time Savage Garden took off I was pretty much doing



Comedian-actor Stephen Merchant, film producer/Rick Astley spouse Lene Bausager, Astley, WME's Richard Weitz, artist Mika, Dickins, DJ Cassidy and fellow ABBA fans, 2023

most of it myself. Then I started getting into the settlement side, and eventually I decided I wanted to start signing my own artists.

Had you hung up your own shingle by this point?

I was still doing bits and bobs and working on stuff from my dad, but I had started to build my own roster of clients. I remember Hot Chip being the one that I wanted to go for. I did so much homework on it and really thought about the strategy of where I wanted to take them. I was up against all these agents who've been doing this longer than me. I was sure I was never going to get it. They asked me to go to a pub and meet the band, and they were all sitting there in a line looking at me and asking me questions. I was terrified. Then I had a call from [the group's] Alexis [Taylor], who said, "We've decided we'd love to come with you." I just remember thanking him for taking a chance on me and his responding, "Thank you for taking a chance on me." That was 15 years ago, and they've been playing to 15,000+ in London ever since. Everyone told me I was just taking on a college band. *Right.*

It sounds like this was something of an object lesson in the power of passion and preparation.

To this day, if I'm going for an absolute baby band—and I still sign baby bands—I do the exact same amount of work and preparation with the same passion I did then. I think artists appreciate that, and it doesn't happen enough. I get personally connected to my clients and I just don't ever wanna let them down—or let *myself* down.

What came next?

Things went insane after Hot Chip. I signed Jaime T, who was this really hip kid putting on this show called *Panic Prevention Disco* at a club in London. People still talk about it. It was basically his own residency, and I ran and promoted it. We started bringing in all these up-and-coming artists, and that's how I ended up signing Laura Marling, who was 16 at the time. My next signing was Johnny Flynn. After that was Jack Peñate, Adele, Mumford & Sons and James Blake—it just kept going.

What was your initial impression of Adele?

I was going to see Hot Chip at a club in London and I asked Jack Peñate if he wanted to come down. He said yes and asked me to put him on the list plus one, because he wanted to bring his friend who he said was this amazing singer. So I'm at the venue, and Jack's there with this girl and she says, "Hi, I'm Adele." She was just the most hilariously funny, warm, lovable character. I told her that I'd heard she was a singer and asked if she had any music. She said, "Hold on a minute" and tapped this guy next to us to whom she'd just given a CD. She made him give it straight back to her so she could give it to me! The next day I'm home doing housework, and I popped her hand-written demo into my little JVC stereo system. The first track that came on was "Daydreamer," followed by "Hometown Glory" and "My Same"—it was the most insane thing I'd ever heard.

How did all this ultimately lead to your current role at WME?

Adele was doing Wembley Stadium and Mumford & Sons were doing multiple arenas across the world. It's pretty rare to have two artists break on both sides of the pond, but even though I had accomplished a lot, it still felt like I had to keep proving who I was. I'd been working in live for 20 years, and I was still dealing with a mentality from some people that I'd only gotten where I was because I'm Barry's daughter or Jonathan's sister. When I started taking meetings and all these agents and agencies were coming out of the woodwork, I realized that if I wanted to put an end to it I needed to stand on my own two feet. I still deal with that mentality, but the truth is, I've gotten what I got because I've worked bloody hard and I'm good at what I do. When [former head of WME's music division] Marc Geiger came along, he was, like, "You don't realize how good you are." He saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. I also thought the agents at WME were the best I'd come across. That's why I ended up choosing WME.

Did it feel like a bigger challenge?

It was a huge challenge. It was scary. You walk out on your dad's company with your roster of clients after 20 years with all eyes on you and people saying, "Wow! She's left her dad's place." I'm also one of those people who's always pushing myself for a challenge. I never sit comfortably. I'm never satisfied. I can always be better. If I was able to leave my dad's company, go somewhere completely alien to me and set something up, I'm not afraid to do anything. ■

**CONGRATULATIONS TOM & AARON
ON ANOTHER RECORD-BREAKING YEAR!**



**WITH LOVE FROM YOUR SQUAD
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ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF TDE UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

TOP DAWG

THE HITS INTERVIEW BY KEITH MURPHY

SZA

stood triumphantly before a packed audience inside the Crypto.com Arena in Los Angeles for the 66th Annual Grammys. She had just been named Best R&B Song winner for “Snooze,” one of three gramophones she took home that night. Amid a standing ovation, a teary-eyed SZA, who led all Grammy nominees with nine nods, including an Album of the Year nom for the highly acclaimed release *SOS* (2022), was just trying to keep it together as she thanked her family and team.

But there was one shout-out that especially resonated: Anthony “Top Dawg” Tiffith, founder and owner of SZA’s recording home, Top Dawg Entertainment (TDE). “I feel like it’s an important moment for us as a label,” says the 49-year-old native of L.A.’s Watts neighborhood from his 13,000-square-foot mansion in Calabasas, California. “It’s powerful when you hear Beyoncé and other big stars say, ‘Hey, SZA deserves this.’”

Tiffith, who coined the Top Dawg label after his around-the-way nickname, has garnered a reputation in the biz for making the improbable happen. He gave his brilliant, sensitive artist and Terrence “Punch” Henderson, TDE’s gregarious president and SZA’s manager, ample space and time to retool her genre-defying TDE/RCA set *SOS*.

The five-year odyssey was well worth the wait. The powerfully candid collection has sold more than 10m globally. *SOS* now holds the record for the longest-running #1 in R&B Album chart history at an unprecedented 41 weeks. The album’s biggest single, “Kill Bill,” has racked up about 1.7b global Spotify streams, while “Snooze” has amassed nearly 800m.

Tiffith, however, is too busy to bask in the glow of it all. There’s nothing remotely flashy about him. He rocks a trademark red cap and a T-shirt. This is a low-key dude who rarely grants interviews and avoids glitzy hobnobbing.



With SZA



Eminem, 50 Cent, Top Dawg and Dr Dre



Tiffith's journey from storied street hustler to multimillion-dollar music mogul is the stuff of legend on the West Coast. Having watched many of his friends die or get locked up in prison, he knew it was only a matter of time before he would share the same fate. So in 1997 Tiffith turned his attention to the music game, building a recording studio in the back of his home in Carson, California.

By 2004 he had established **Top Dawg Entertainment**. Tiffith recruited younger cousin and budding MC Henderson to help build TDE, which soon became a safe haven for young local rappers and producers desperately looking for an alternative to the Crips-and-Bloods gang violence that engulfed so many neighborhoods in his beloved inner-city Los Angeles.

Tiffith is a relentless force. He once literally chased down local troublemaker **Jay Rock**—he was from the same Nickerson Gardens projects in L.A. where Top grew up—who thought he'd run afoul of the imposing six-foot-one 'hood legend. Tiffith made the two-fisted orator TDE's first signing. Tiffith next landed a gifted kid out of Compton who called himself **K.Dot**, later known to the world as celebrated hip-hop visionary **Kendrick Lamar**. Lyrically witty Carson native **Ab-Soul** and South Central's charismatic **Schoolboy Q** rounded out TDE's foundational **Black Hippy** crew.

After a string of underground classics, the meticulous Tiffith, known for his hands-on approach, executive-produced Lamar's peerless three-album run of *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* (2012), *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015), and *Damn* (2017), for which the lyricist extraordinaire was awarded hip-hop's first **Pulitzer Prize**. When TDE made the jump to R&B with SZA's bold 2017 debut, *Ctrl*, it became a hit with both critics and fans, eventually going triple platinum.

By 2020, hip-hop and R&B had become the dominant genres in the U.S. marketplace. At its peak, Top Dawg Entertainment's artists accounted for nearly 5% of domestic activity in these genres. Yet when Lamar left TDE to start his own independent music and media hub, **pgLang**, observers were all too ready to give the company its last rites.

Tiffith, however, wasn't trying to hear any epitaphs. He and his team ignored the chatter and launched SZA's transformation into a major global pop headliner. Her current arena-packing *SOS Tour* has so far raked in north of \$95 million.

When Henderson pulled SZA from a scheduled 2023 performance at the **MTV Video Music Awards** after she was snubbed in the Artist of the Year category, the fiercely protective Tiffith called the producers out. (The incident recalled another headscratcher of an awards-show moment for TDE, when overwhelming favorite Kendrick Lamar lost out to white pop-rapper Macklemore in all three rap categories at the 2014 Grammys.)

"I stand behind Punch and the decision to pull out of the VMAs 100%," Tiffith told *HITS* in September of last year. "MTV wasn't even willing to discuss why SZA wasn't nominated for Artist of Year. If we aren't even worth talking to about it, we don't need to be there. She gave the world a great body of work and we will not allow any disrespect."

"Our studio became the home for everybody around the neighborhood... I just wanted to show all of them a better way. If we had more outlets, there would be more things for these kids to do instead of getting involved with the streets."



Clockwise from top left: With Snoop Dogg; with Doechii; with Kendrick Lamar and JAY-Z; with Pierre "P" Thomas of Quality Control and Cash Money's Birdman

"He's not just an owner of a label," Henderson says of his boss. "Top will come in the studio and will fire off ideas. He shows respect and everybody respects him in return. He's never been on that tough guy, rah-rah stuff. He treats the label like a real business."

With a SZA deluxe rumored, the buzz-heavy Doechii having dropped her hotly anticipated new mixtape and Grammy-nominated SiR making noise, plus long-awaited albums from Jay Rock, Ab-Soul and ScHoolboy Q, Tiffith is ready to lead TDE into its next major chapter.

And in point of fact, Top remains a vital figure in Kendrick's circle, as evidenced by his presence in the video for the rap giant's 2024 smash "Not Like Us."

Here's the indomitable man in his own words.

How gratifying is it to see an out-the-box R&B artist like SZA elevated to a full-blown megastar?

You know what? We saw SZA's success early. She had all the potential in the world, it's just now everyone is getting a chance to see her talent. That's the exciting part.

We're hearing from a lot of people that SZA wasn't properly rewarded by the Grammys, and many feel she should've won Album of the Year. What are your thoughts

on all that, and on the Grammys generally?

This Grammy BS is nothing new to me. I watched Macklemore beat out my guy Kendrick, Drake, Kanye and JAY-Z for Best Rap Album. It's been a lot of bad moments with the Grammys, and this is another one. I definitely think SZA should have won AOTY, and that's no disrespect to anyone else. It's obvious the system needs to be fixed. Like my guy Hov said, referencing Beyoncé, "There is a young lady who has more Grammys than everyone and has never won AOTY." I need somebody to make that make sense before next year's voting starts.

It has to be surreal witnessing SZA, who started out as a cult artist in 2013, performing in front of 20,000-plus people on one of the most talked about international tours.

It is. You gotta think about it: On SZA's first tour we were doing rooms of 2,000 people. The SOS Tour came right after Ctrl. We went from that to doing arenas. That speaks to just how in-demand she is and how much people have connected with her music.

Do you see SZA creating a blueprint for other TDE artists looking to merge R&B, hip-hop, alternative soul, and pop?

She's carrying the torch for the label. But there's no blueprint, because each artist is different.

“When we signed our first major deal, we thought that that was it. We got a deal—we’ve made it! But the truth is that’s when the real grind starts.”



PHOTO: LESTER COHEN



Top: At the Tower with TDE’s Manny Smith, erstwhile Capitol Music Group boss Michelle Jubelirer, artist Doechii, CMG’s Chris Turner and TDE President Anthony “Moosa” Tiffith; bottom from left: with Interscope’s Steve Berman, Dr. Dre and former Interscope boss Jimmy Iovine; with hip-hop trailblazer Steve Rifkind

TDE also found success with the development of newcomer singer-rapper Doechii and singer-songwriter SIR. What did you see in those two particular artists that gave you the confidence that they could carry the flag for TDE?

I thought they had all the talent in the world to go as far as they wanted to go. We look for all our artists to be original... to say something.

Doechii has earned comparisons to hip-hop legend Missy Elliott, who rhymes as well as she sings, and SIR is a throwback to the neo-soul vocalists of the past yet has a quirky feel to his presentation.

I would venture to say that those two are not your run-of-the-mill A&R sessions.

You can’t put them in a box. SIR represents that traditional R&B that we all know and love and grew up on. He has that soulful voice but the stuff he sings about is real—it’s raw, different. And Doechii is an all-around artist and entertainer. I’m very excited about what the future holds for them.

UMG recently removed its entire music catalogue from TikTok. What’s your take on the current battle brewing?

Everybody is still trying to figure it out, but we hope whatever they do is best for the artists. Streaming deals are still new, so we’re all scrambling. It used to be simple: You’d go

to a record store and give them your \$10 for an album. Now you're paying for a music subscription. For \$10, you get access to nearly every song that was ever made.

We're in a brave new world.

Right. The terminology has to change. Because I don't even think we are selling records anymore.

Take us back to the days before the founding of TDE in 2004. You set up a recording studio in your family home in 1997. Was music something that you always considered a viable career path?

To tell you the truth, I wasn't into making music like that in the beginning. I was too heavy in the streets trying to get rich. I knew the hustle game wouldn't last forever, and after getting the type of money I was getting from the streets I knew a 9-to-5 job wouldn't work for me. I built the studio as my backup plan for whenever the time came for me to get out of the streets. I must say, music was the best backup plan ever. It changed my life and many other lives.

So you got into the music business on a whim?

Naw, my uncle Mike Concepcion was heavy in the music business. I watched him have a lot of success with artists like Blackstreet, MC Hammer, Rome and others. He also produced The West Coast Rap All-Stars' peace record, "We're All in the Same Gang." He's the one who sparked the idea of me getting into the music business.

Punch told me that no one on the team knew how to work the mixing board. That's pretty hilarious.

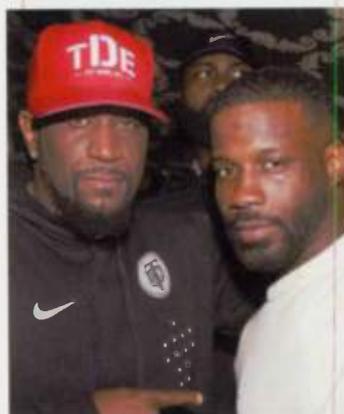
Yeah, man. I used to come in the studio and watch this guy Co-T mess around on the board for hours. After he left, I would go in and mess around. It got to the point where I actually learned how to record and mix a little bit. After that, I taught Punch and we were on our way.

That studio also kept a lot of kids like Jay Rock, Kendrick Lamar, Ab-Soul and Schoolboy Q off the streets. Did you see a lot of yourself in them?

I did, especially Jay Rock. Our studio became the home for everybody around the neighborhood. I can't tell you the first song I worked on, but Jay was the first to officially sign with TDE. What drove me to him was just the first time I heard his voice. You would have thought he was six-nine, 300 pounds. But here was this little skinny dude walking out of the booth! I just wanted to show all of them a better way. If we had more outlets, there would be more things for these kids to do instead of getting involved with the streets.

You mentioned that you were not necessarily serious about recording early on even when you built your studio. Was there a moment that made you say, "Okay, it's time for me to leave the game behind for a better life and get serious about this music thing"?

Man, when the Feds came knocking on my door, I knew it was time to get up out of there. On top of that, I never felt like hustling was a forever thing for me. I knew that I was doing it as a means to better myself and my situation. I think about where I've come from all the time. There were many situations on the streets that could have caused me not to be here today, but we made it through.



Middle row: With Jay Rock; with producer-writer-artist Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds; bottom: with Punch



“There’s always been a deeper relationship than just music. That’s where it still is today with Kendrick... He’s stepping out as a man and building his own company, just how he watched me build mine.”

How would you describe your relationship with the majors today?

We have great partnerships with the majors. They know what we bring to the table. It’s an unspoken thing: We are going to do what we do, and you do what you do, and we will all flourish.

You mentioned TDE’s goal early on was birthing superstars. One superstar who graduated from the label is Kendrick, arguably the most celebrated hip-hop artist of his generation. What are your fondest memories of working with Kendrick on his final TDE album, *Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers*?

To be honest, the whole process of making that final TDE album was sad for me. After all these years together with great success, I’m about to watch my son pack up and leave. These kids were eating at my house. They were using my house as if it were theirs and would come in, record and feel free, like they were home. There’s always been a deeper relationship than just music. That’s where it still is today with Kendrick. It’s just that now he is doing his own thing. He’s stepping out as a man and building his own company, just how he watched me build mine.

I find it interesting that as soon as Kendrick left TDE all you heard from the critics and fans was that the label wouldn’t survive without its franchise superstar. How gratifying was it for you personally that you were able to silence the doubters?

We are always confident in what we are doing in terms

Clockwise from top left: With Kendrick Lamar; with JAY-Z, with LeBron James

So by 2008, Jay, Kendrick, Q, and Ab are all signed, setting the foundation for TDE, and you signed a label partnership with Asylum/WMG. But there were some stumbles early; more specifically, the rollout for Jay Rock’s debut *Follow Me Home* was abruptly shut down following a regime change at the label. What did that experience teach you?

That experience was terrible when we were going through it. But looking back at it, that’s what got us focused on our hustle. When we signed our first major deal, we thought that that was it. We got a deal—we’ve made it! But the truth is that’s when the real grind starts. We didn’t know that back then. It was all trial and error. Our whole goal was to get signed and make these kids superstars.



Celebrating SZA with, among others, TDE President Terrence "Punch" Henderson, Sony Music boss Rob Stringer and RCA chief Peter Edge, COO John Fleckenstein, President Mark Pitts, EVP Carolyn Williams and President of A&R Keith Naftaly

of our vision. But yeah, we heard a lot of that talk. It's a lot quieter now. But we are a real record company. It doesn't fall on the shoulders of just one person. We are going to keep turning these records out and keep going.

TDE is known for taking an old-school, hands-on approach when it comes to developing artists. How do you view the state of the A&R in today's business?

There are a few good A&R people still out there, but labels hurt their position by relying too much on analytics and not seeing the talent in the artist. TDE came in doing everything from top to bottom. As far as A&R-ing, we have been doing that since the beginning. We just didn't know what we were doing was called A&R.

Artist branding has become a huge part of the business. Do you advise your talent on their branding choices?

We give our artists the freedom to make their own branding decisions.

TDE also prides itself on being a very tight, family-oriented company. Can you speak about some of the people behind the scenes who have contributed heavily to the label's success?

On the executive side, of course, there's myself and Punch. Then we have Moosa [Top's son, Anthony "Moosa" Tiffith], who is also a President at TDE. Moosa discovered Doechii. Josh Binder, our attorney. Just the whole TDE staff in general: Manny Smith, Keaton Smith, Brandon Tiffith, Matt Miller... there are too many people to name. I don't want to leave anybody out.

Punch said that during your hustling days you sported a Jheri curl, an L.A. Raiders cap, looking

like a member of N.W.A.

Punch was my favorite little cousin. I used to go to all his football and basketball games. I did everything with him. When I was a kid and he was a baby, I used to push him around in the stroller. Everybody mixes us up, but we look nothing alike.

Last December, Jay Rock had fans rushing to social media when he announced on New York's Power 105.1 that Black Hippy would have its long-awaited reunion on TDE's forthcoming compilation album. Are we finally going to witness Jay, Kendrick, ScHoolboy Q and Ab-Soul together again?

I don't know. It's really up to them at this point. That's something I would love to see—and of course it's something that the fans would love to see. The issue has always been getting everybody in the same space at the same time. They all have their separate careers and are moving differently. But it's really up to them.

TDE has a flood of releases set for 2024. What releases are you most excited about?

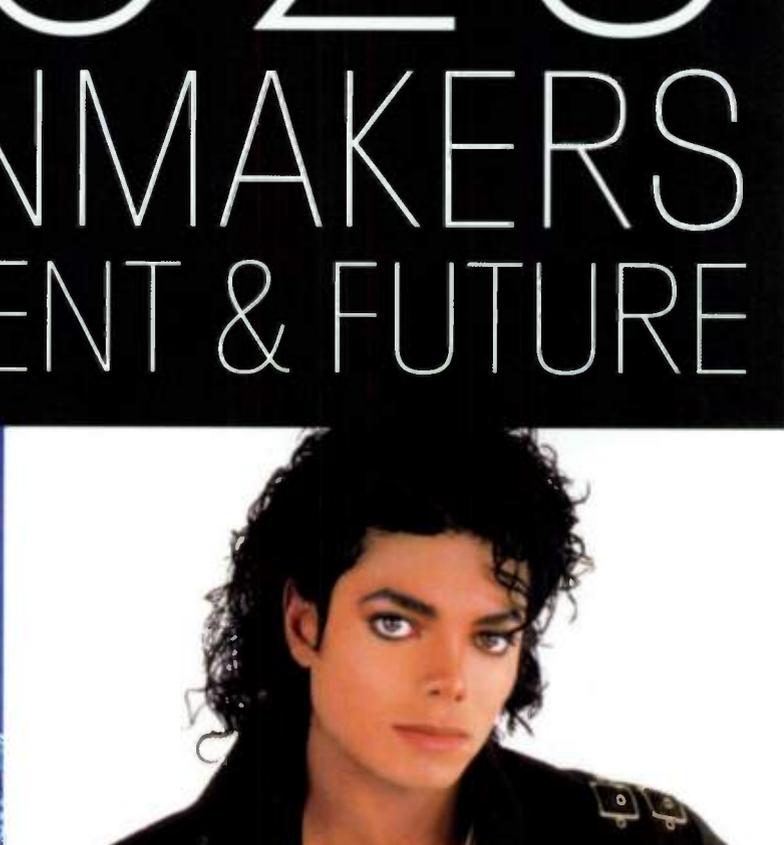
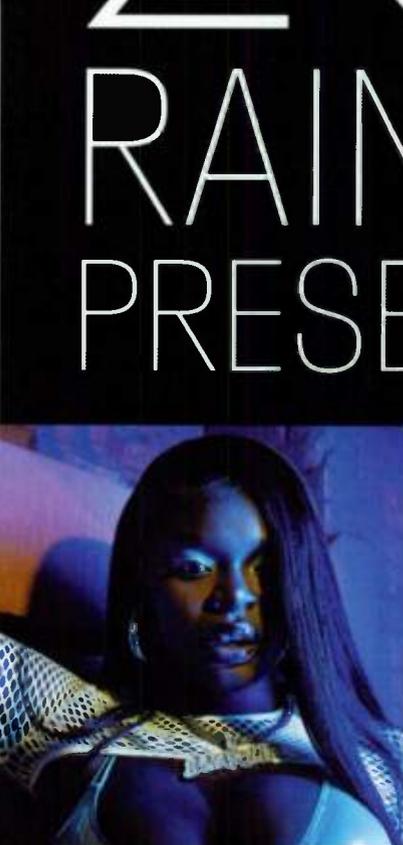
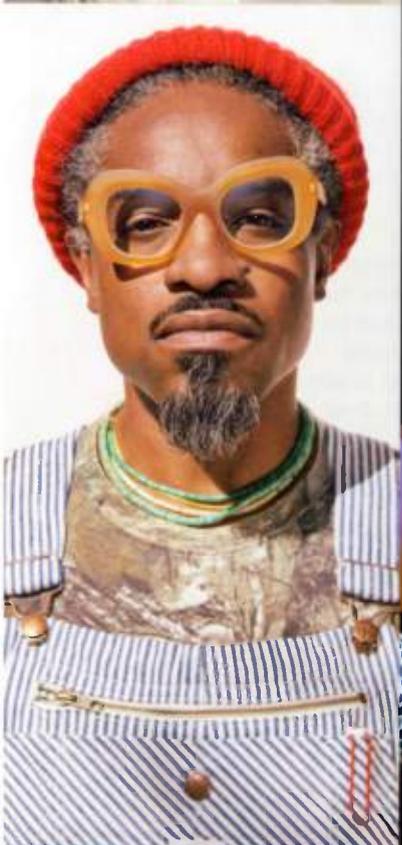
Everything. 2024 marks the 20th anniversary of TDE. We got SZA coming with a deluxe album soon. We have Jay Rock and Ray Vaughn gearing up. We got ScHoolboy Q and Ab-Soul coming, SiR coming, Doechii coming. I'm excited.

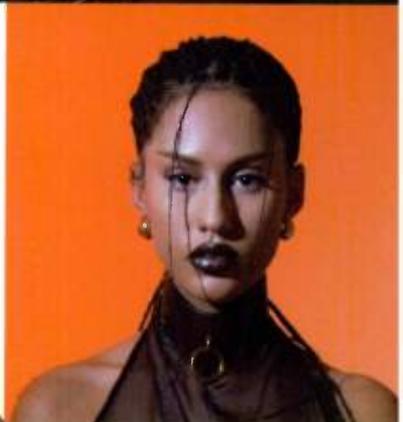
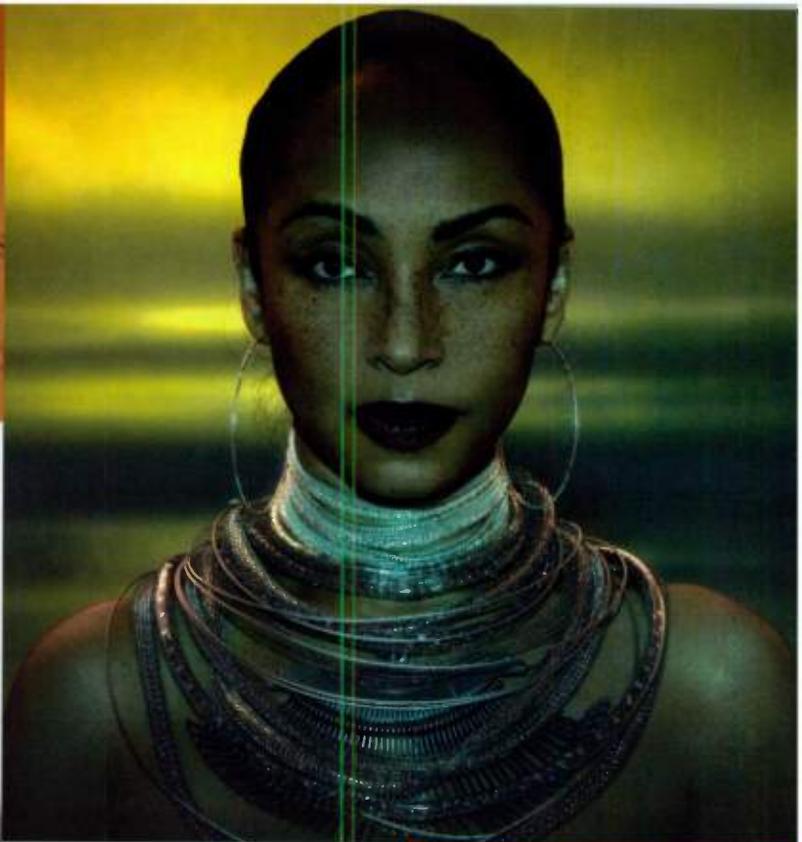
What's the best advice you would give to aspiring executives looking to break into the music business?

The best advice I could give to someone following in my footsteps is to hustle like you are broke. That's the TDE motto. Even when you reach a certain level of success, you have to keep going like you don't have nothing. ■



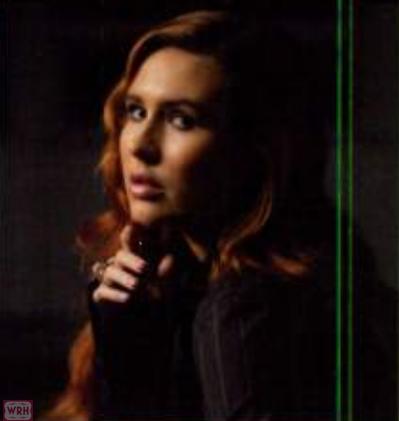
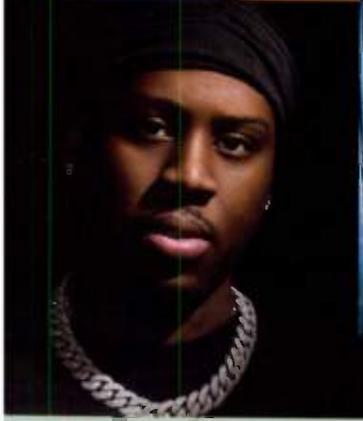
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CAA'S

DARRYL EATON, RICK ROSKIN AND EMMA BANKS

THE HITS INTERVIEW BY CRAIG MARKS

“

This is the first time that the three of us have ever done this,” says CAA’s Darryl Eaton.

He’s referring to a joint interview with fellow longtime CAA execs Rick Roskin and Emma Banks, but that’s merely in service to a seismic change in the live entertainment business: Eaton, Roskin and Banks have been named co-heads of global touring, as industry icon Rob Light assumes the role of CAA managing director, where he’ll help guide the agency’s overall strategic direction.

Under Light’s 25-plus years

of leadership, CAA became the dominant live-music and comedy agency, with more than double the number of Top 25 highest-grossing 2023 tours than the closest agency, according to one published report.

“For years, Darryl, Rick and Emma have been extraordinary partners to me in leading our touring group in North America and London, respectively,” said Light. “I am immensely proud of all that we have achieved to date and look forward to what they will create in the years ahead. Along with my new strategic



responsibilities, I look forward to continuing to sign and empower great artists, creatively build long-term careers and mentor young executives.”

“Rick, Darryl and Emma have long been among the most talented and widely admired leaders in the industry, not to mention three of the best agents in the world,” said CAA Co-Chairman/CEO Bryan Lourd. “The leadership role they each already play at CAA has earned them deep respect and trust among our colleagues across all departments.”

Eaton got his start in CAA’s storied mailroom in 1991. Roskin has been part of the touring de-

partment for 35 years, and they became co-heads of contemporary music for North America in 2015. Meanwhile, relative CAA newbie Banks has co-led the agency’s now-60-strong London music office since joining the company in 2006.

Among many others, CAA’s touring clients include Bruce Springsteen, the Weeknd, Harry Styles, Peso Pluma, Jelly Roll, Lady Gaga, blink-182, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Janet Jackson, David Guetta, Trevor Noah, Kelsea Ballerini, The 1975, Katy Perry and Kelly Clarkson.

Why they agreed to talk to us remains a mystery.



Florence Welch and Banks; Tom DeLonge and Mark Hoppus of blink-182, Eaton with Arcade Fire’s Win Butler and Regine Chassagne; Roskin and Jonathan Eshak

Congratulations on being named co-heads of global touring. Tell us about the new arrangement.

RICK ROSKIN: First, Rob, who has been an incredibly generous leader for all of us throughout our careers, is not going anywhere. He has accepted a position to be a managing director at CAA, to help guide the strategic growth of the company. He is still a music agent, he still sits with us, he’s still going to be involved. This new structure enables Rob to do what he does his best, which is signing, servicing and assisting every other agent within this department.

This is a very natural transition for us. The three of us have been in various positions of leadership within the department for many years, but that doesn’t make this any less exciting. It’s an incredible moment of change for our group that we don’t take lightly.

DARRYL EATON: I think it’s important for our colleagues and younger agents to be able to see that there is a succession plan, and we want to continue to mentor and develop people and push them into roles of leadership, to come and take this job away from us in the future. Demonstrating that kind of opportunity is an important part of our growth strategy.

What’s the division of labor going to be as co-heads of global touring?

EMMA BANKS: What’s important is that the three of us are doing this together. It’s not that one person’s head of catering and the other’s head of transportation; it’s three global heads of the department, and we will talk about everything. While there are obviously geographic differences, a lot of what we’re going to be doing is about the entire world.

EATON: Rick and I have worked together for over 30 years now, and we’ve been working with Emma for 18 years. Emma’s expertise is obviously international. She’s been instrumental in guiding the strategic growth in international. And Rick and I will run North America. But this is very much a global business. When I talk about Rick and I running North America, that’s more of an administrative distinction, and for our teams. For our clients, we approach everything globally.

How long has this change been in the works?

BANKS: 18 years as far as I’m concerned [laughs].

ROSKIN: I would say that it’s been in the works since we’ve been empowered to be part of the management

team. I think the intention for Rob was always to have a plan for transition, and it felt like this was the right moment to do it as the company is changing their management structure as well. So it all just fell into line.

The three of us are fortunate to be surrounded by people who've mentored us, and to be surrounded by exceptional agents. And as we take this next step, what CAA is about is our culture. The motto is, take good care of each other and good things happen.

BANKS: That's so true and it comes from the top: Bryan Lourd, Kevin Huvane, Richard Lovett. I go back to when I first met those guys 18 years ago and was blown away by how they worked together, they cared about each other, they cared about everybody at the company. We all want good things for each other.

Do you have a sense yet of what responsibilities you might have to give up because of your new responsibilities?

EATON: Well, job one is still servicing our clients and doing the best possible job as music agents. This change is going to give us the opportunity to riff off of and utilize each other's skill sets to approach things with three brains of one mind.

BANKS: We are also lucky that we have people like Mitch Rose, Mike Greek and Katie Anderson, who are 100% part of the management structure of the global touring department. And they'll be stepping up in different ways as well.

ROSKIN: The senior leadership of CAA touring has been the most consistent and steadiest ship in the business, and that makes this a natural and smooth transition.

Since Rob's not here, let's talk about him behind his back. What's the secret sauce that he brought, and continues to bring, to the job?

ROSKIN: Rob has an unparalleled work ethic. He is the first person in, he is the last one to leave. He covers more shows than any person in this industry. His work ethic applies not only towards clients but to everybody who works within this department. Watching him for 30-plus years is a lesson in leadership.

BANKS: With Rob, you get someone who thinks very deeply about things. There are no immediate fireworks or gut reactions. He's not throwing telephones around; he's not shouting at everybody. He's so respectful of our clients, of his colleagues. He's the first person to try and draw other people from the company into a team. He's not somebody who wants all the glory; he wants to share it. That's how I want to behave as well.

EATON: Our company prides itself on building a culture of supporting one another. Rob exemplifies that.

We're nearly midway through 2024. What's the temperature of the touring business right now? What are the tailwinds, what are the headwinds?

EATON: We came out of the COVID era guns a-blazing. There were a ton of tours and an appetite among fans to

be together and to be at all the shows. And we had unparalleled growth. But as the economy has stayed a little stagnant and inflation has carried on, there is some reticence among fans about paying the highest possible ticket prices. We feel like there's a little pushback coming. As agents, we have to pay attention to ticket price, and we have to pay attention to marketing and how we're differentiating our clients from the pack.

BANKS: This is a generalization, but some festivals have had a tough time in various markets because of changing customer requirements. After COVID, I don't think anyone wants to use a port-a-potty anymore.



Roskin with Michael Rubel



"ROB HAS AN UNPARALLELED WORK ETHIC. HE IS THE FIRST PERSON IN, HE IS THE LAST ONE TO LEAVE. HE COVERS MORE SHOWS THAN ANY PERSON IN THIS INDUSTRY. HIS WORK ETHIC APPLIES NOT ONLY TOWARDS CLIENTS BUT TO EVERYBODY WHO WORKS WITHIN THIS DEPARTMENT. WATCHING HIM FOR 30-PLUS YEARS IS A LESSON IN LEADERSHIP." —RICK ROSKIN



Top: Roskin, Eaton and CAA's Jeff Krones and Jared Martin; bottom: CAA's Dustin Turner and John Huie, Kelsea Ballerini and Roskin

Did they really want to use it before COVID?

BANKS: Fair enough, but they didn't know any other way. We've all gotten used to having a more pleasant experience all of the time.

Also, festivals have changed musically. Ten years ago, for example, The Chainsmokers, A\$AP Rocky and The Last Dinner Party would be playing at three separate festivals. Now, they're all on the same bill. People want to see a huge range of music. But there is more to a festival than just the artists on it. The artists are obviously

hugely important, but you also need to have an identity for your festival. You need to stand for something.

ROSKIN: A genre-specific festival like When We Were Young in Vegas hits a very targeted audience, and it's incredibly successful. But it's exciting that an 18-year-old could be a fan of Harry Styles and a fan of Morgan Wallen. That creates incredible opportunity for the live industry. The business of live has been incredibly robust post-COVID, and when I say the business of live, I mean sports, comedy, music, Broadway. Because at the end of the day, no one can replicate that emotion. And what we learned during COVID is that virtual didn't work. You can't snap a selfie in front of your computer screen and send it out to your friends. Being there matters. The exclusivity of a show, the exclusivity of a festival, of just being there, is what separates us from what's happening in motion pictures.

It's also interesting to see what the big streamers like Amazon and Netflix are investing in. They're investing in live entertainment, in sports. It goes back to the strength of a live audience.

BANKS: As Rick said, people want to go out and see stuff. I look at our podcast touring business even, and it's doing huge business, touring just everywhere. And what's interesting is the spoken-word touring—comedy, podcasts—they're going to countries where the first language is not English and they're still selling out.

Darryl, you brought up ticket prices. I know each client is different, but what's the general tenor of your conversations with artists and their managers about ticket prices?

EATON: Most artists want to do the right thing. After the rush back post-COVID, we started to see a ceiling. Fans' appetites hit a bit of a wall. We need to make sure that artists and managers are cognizant that a wall exists. Of course, certain things are through the roof and will probably remain there because of demand.

ROSKIN: When you're developing artists, the fundamentals don't change. You can't skip steps. You have to be patient; you have to pass the brass ring a couple of times before you grab it. We have Melanie Martinez, Maggie Rogers, Charli XCX and Troye Sivan all playing arenas for the first time. Those are longtime clients, and a lot of preparation and discussion has gone on between artist, management and the agent to build and develop them over a period of time and then make the step into the bigger play.

EATON: Conan Gray is playing arenas.

ROSKIN: Lizzy McAlpine is playing two nights at the Greek. IDLES are playing two nights at the Palladium. The growth is coming at all different levels.

BANKS: What's really exciting is that some years ago you'd have artists who would be enormous in one market, one country, and meaningless everywhere else. And over the last years everyone understands that if you



“I THINK IT’S IMPORTANT FOR OUR COLLEAGUES AND YOUNGER AGENTS TO BE ABLE TO SEE THAT THERE IS A SUCCESSION PLAN, AND WE WANT TO CONTINUE TO MENTOR AND DEVELOP PEOPLE AND PUSH THEM INTO ROLES OF LEADERSHIP, TO COME AND TAKE THIS JOB AWAY FROM US IN THE FUTURE. DEMONSTRATING THAT KIND OF OPPORTUNITY IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR GROWTH STRATEGY.”
—DARRYL EATON

want a career that keeps you going for a long time, you have to pay attention to all the markets, or as many as you can get to. Darryl mentioned Conan Gray, who’s not just selling out arenas in the U.S., he’s doing it in Europe, he’s doing it in Australia.

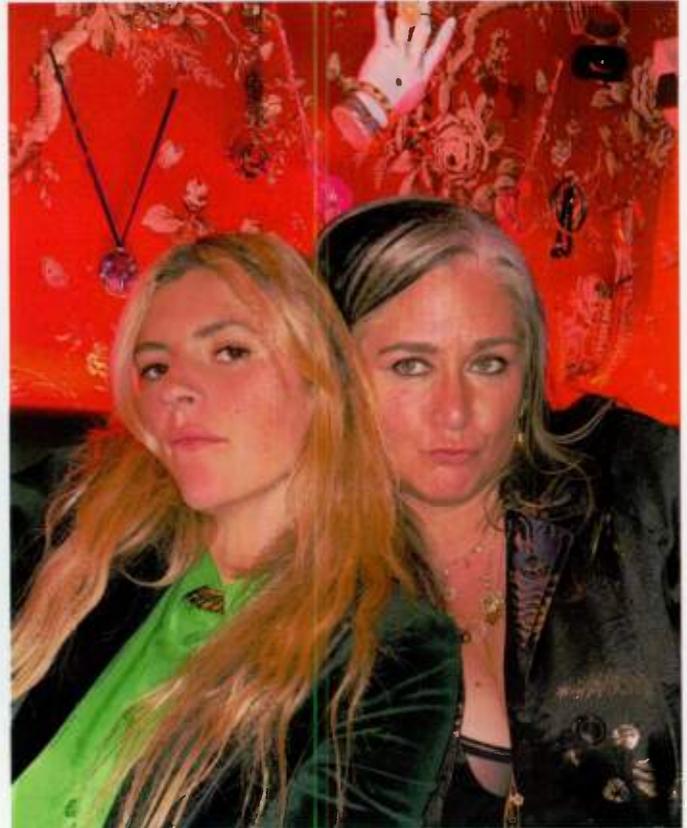
And obviously, at CAA we’re well placed to help build artists’ careers outside of touring. So while Ariana Grande hasn’t been touring, she hasn’t been sitting at home twiddling her thumbs—she’s been making *Wicked*. Halle Bailey starred in *The Little Mermaid*. Look at Katy Perry on *American Idol* or Kelly Clarkson’s TV chat show. Muse is a client, and Matt Bellamy just did all of the music for the Audible version of *1984*. And that’s all coming through the links that we have with the different departments at CAA. Because you can’t just keep touring all the time, you have to have a little bit of creative space.

Which territories do you see as real opportunities for growth?

BANKS: China is building more and more venues. There are a lot of hoops to jump through. But for an artist like Troye Sivan, who is really big there, we’re looking at a significant amount of shows there, if we can get them across the line.

What about Saudi Arabia?

BANKS: As for other territories, the Gulf region is growing. You’ve seen in the last three or four years where the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has put a lot of



Top: Roskin and Eaton; bottom: Abel and Banks

effort in and obviously it divides opinion, but there are more and more artists going to Saudi. There are venues being built daily, literally. The infrastructure there is becoming incredible. I mean, you can go to a festival now in Saudi and they’ve got marble toilets. They don’t do the port-a-potty. Back to my favorite topic... But what’s fascinating about Saudi is it has a relatively large population, and a huge amount of them are under the age of 35.

Between Taylor’s Eras Tour and Beyoncé’s RENAISSANCE Tour, we’re living through peak stadium concert experience. I wonder where you



“WHAT’S IMPORTANT IS THAT THE THREE OF US ARE DOING THIS TOGETHER. IT’S NOT THAT ONE PERSON’S HEAD OF CATERING AND THE OTHER’S HEAD OF TRANSPORTATION; IT’S THREE GLOBAL HEADS OF THE DEPARTMENT, AND WE WILL TALK ABOUT EVERYTHING. WHILE THERE ARE OBVIOUSLY GEOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES, A LOT OF WHAT WE’RE GOING TO BE DOING IS ABOUT THE ENTIRE WORLD.” —EMMA BANKS



Clockwise from top right: Banks with Muse at Rock am Ring festival, 2018; with Bryony Frost; with Frankie Dettori

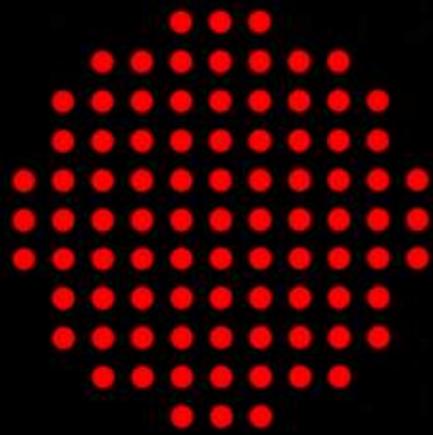
think things can go from here. Where does your imagination take you?

ROSKIN: We’re in a production arms race, as you talk about these giant superstars and those shows that you mentioned. I mean, they were mind-blowing productions. Imagination-wise, the Sphere has captured that.

BANKS: As well, though, I would point not just to everything getting bigger and more spectacular, but look at how successful Bruce Springsteen was on Broadway. There is something very special still about being in a small, intimate space. We must never let go of that. Sometimes the finances are harder to deal with, but, back to the ticket-price conversation, if you are giving somebody a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, people are prepared to pay a bit more. And the smart agents, the smart managers, the smart artists, are constantly thinking about all of those things.

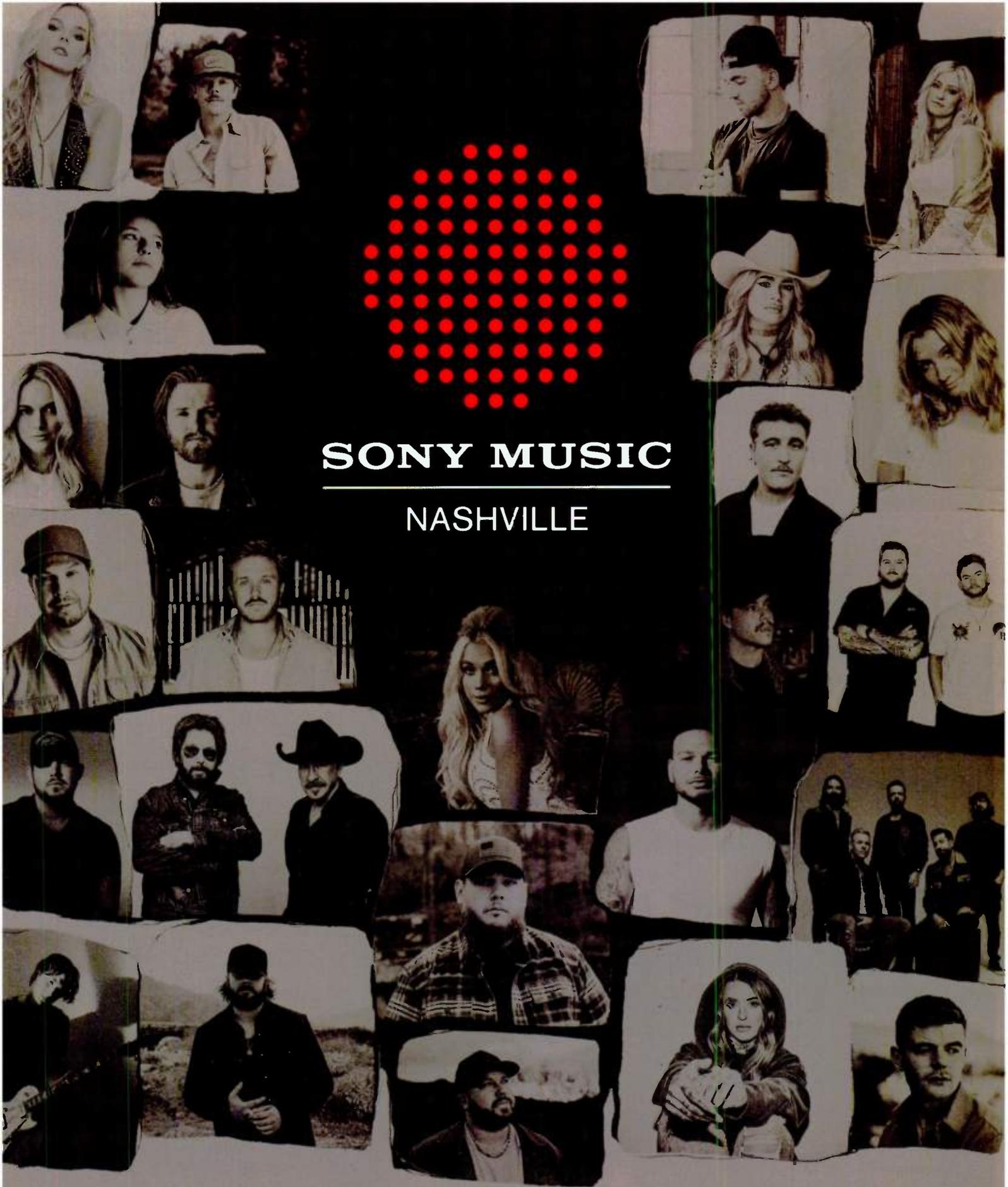
And I’m lucky that I only work with smart agents, smart managers, smart artists. So these are conversations that we’re having all the time. We all sit together in this office and people are just chucking ideas around. So you say, what’s the next big thing? At some point we’ll do a gig on the moon. We’ll be the first. And Darryl will cover it. No man travels as much as Darryl Eaton. He’ll be the first agent on the moon.

EATON: We were talking about this before our interview. We all got into this because of our love of music. At nearly the same time in our lives, when I was 19, I was interning at Def Jam/Columbia. Meanwhile, Rick was playing lead guitar in his college band and Emma was already promoting shows around London. We all came from this place of intense passion for music. That’s still what drives our success, and what makes this job so incredibly fun and rewarding all these years later. ■



SONY MUSIC

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RUSTY GASTON

SONGS THAT CHANGE THE WORLD

INTERVIEW BY SIMON GLICKMAN

In 2020, Rusty Gaston was tapped by Sony Music Publishing boss Jon Platt to run the company's Nashville office, and he has since closed deals and/or extensions with the likes of Ashley Gorley, Cole Swindell, Lainey Wilson, Miranda Lambert, Kane Brown, Luke Bryan, Gabby Barrett, Chris Young and Dolly Parton—and played a key role in signing and championing hot talents like Nate Smith and Megan Moroney. The Texas native had earned a stellar reputation as the co-founder and chief of esteemed boutique pubbery THiS Music, and he brings the same work ethic and palpable enthusiasm that informed that reputation to his SMP perch.

Let's begin with the macro. In what ways has the role of the publisher changed or evolved over the last decade or so, during the streaming era?

From a Nashville perspective, the role of the publisher has always been about service. It's our job to manage the career of a songwriter, just as an artist manager does for an artist. It's our role as a publisher to create opportunities, craft a story and build a brand for a songwriter. I think that's become the norm in Nashville, service-wise, over the last 10 years. Because in our town, songwriters still come in and write songs in publishing offices. That may not happen in every other territory, but it makes Nashville and our community special,



“COUNTRY MUSIC HAS LONG BEEN RESPECTED AS THE GREATEST STORYTELLING FORMAT OUT THERE. AND COUNTRY SONGWRITERS ARE WIDELY REGARDED AS CRAFTSPEOPLE WHOSE STORIES TOUCH DIRECTLY ON FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN EMOTIONS. I OFTEN SAY SNOOP DOGG AND GEORGE STRAIT SING ABOUT THE SAME THING; THEY JUST USE DIFFERENT LANGUAGE TO DO IT.”

Gaston with Anna Weisband and Kelsea Ballerini at the Sony Grammy party, 2023

because we see the majority of the songwriters on our roster face-to-face every single day.

And people write together in rooms.

That’s correct—in rooms, in studios. And they see their A&R person every single day.

I believe it’s our mission here to promote and encourage and motivate songwriters to do their best work. Because I believe songs have the power to change the world, and we have the ability to encourage and motivate our writers daily, because we see each other every day. We’re able to help keep each other accountable.

What might be an element of a writer’s story you’d use to pitch that writer?

In Nashville we still do a lot of old-school pitching of songs. And I like to say that when we do that, it’s only half about the song we’re pitching at that moment. The other half is about the setup we’re making for the next meeting. We’re planting those seeds of their names so that when an artist or a label meets with us the second time, they say, “Hey, who is that guy you were telling me about who had all that activity? We need that guy.” That’s what I mean by telling a story.

Is this one of the things you look for when you’re looking at writers? What are the qualities beyond the ability to write a great chorus or a lyric that might make someone a good fit for you?

We’re looking for drive, initiative, determination. We’re looking for an absolute unwillingness to stop, and for who they are as a person: Is this someone we want to be investing in? We’re looking for somebody we can link arms with and chase their dream together.

Once you sign an artist, writer or producer, what are the first steps?

We sit down with their individual A&R and put a plan together with our targets, our dream scenario. We’re assessing how to get them to this place—achieving the cuts, creating the relationships, getting the singles out. It may be about introducing them to new collaborators—and they might have to write with a lot of collaborators to find the handful who will be their core. Then we can really go to work with that core group to bring out the very best in them.

If we set up a couple of songwriters and on their first meeting, they get something that’s really good? I call it finding oil on top of the ground. If you find oil on top of the ground, there’s usually a lot more oil as you start digging deep.

That’s some Texas wisdom.

Yeah. If they dig in and they write 15 songs, we might really strike something special.

Country has long been a thriving genre, but on its own in a way. It’s now really become mainstream and broken out of that silo. How has that affected your work, if at all?

Country music has long been respected as the greatest storytelling format out there. And country songwriters are widely regarded as craftspeople whose stories touch directly on fundamental human emotions. I often say Snoop Dogg and

ISLAND



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Clockwise from top: With his team at the ASCAP 2023 Country Publisher of the Year Awards; with Cole Swindell; with Ashley Gorley and Nate Smith

George Strait sing about the same thing; they just use different language to do it. But it's still those core emotions that resonate with listeners. In country music, the foundational part of the songs is the idea, the story.

I believe it's correct to say during the pandemic, country was the genre that increased its streaming base the most, or at least one of the top two. More people started discovering it on a global basis, because of that emotional connection.

The stigma that once existed in Nashville is completely gone today. All genres of music have always been created in Nashville. A few years ago, when Meghan Trainor or Kings of Leon were exploding out of Nashville, they were viewed as anomalies. But we knew that they weren't, that there were more creators like that here. Another result of the pandemic as we were shut down is that so many other creators moved here to Nashville to be part of the creative community—but not

to make country or Christian music. They moved here to make whatever type of music they make.

Tell me about being at Sony, the company culture and working for Jon.

It was not my plan to come to Sony. This is an example of God's plan being bigger than my plan. Jon called me and said, "Hey, I've watched you build a culture that songwriters want to be a part of, and I've watched you create a destination that songwriters want to come to. And that's what I would like for us to have at Sony in Nashville." From the get-go, Jon's whole thing to me was, "I don't want you to do your business differently than what you've been doing. I'm just going to provide you the resources so you can scale up. I don't want you to come here and change what you do as a publisher."

And for me, being a 24-year independent publisher in Nashville, that was really the only way I knew how

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Top: Josh Van Valkenburg, Kenley Flynn, Gaston, Lindsay Rimes, Smith, Jim Catino and Russell Sutton, 2023; bottom: Joey Russ, Kent Earls, Dylan Schneider, Kane Brown, Martha Earls and Gaston, 2023

to do it. It was about purely focusing on relationships and service for songwriters. And what Jon ushered into Sony was a global shift for the entire company to focus on service to songwriters.

We can motivate songwriters to feel this could be the day that they write a song that changes the world. When you talk to songwriters in any genre about the biggest hit of their career, more often than not, they'll tell you, "It was just another Tuesday, and we got together like we always had before. And that day, the magic happened."

What were the first songs that gave you that magical feeling?

I grew up in a little town called Van, Texas. I spent all the time I could in the record store, or sitting in my room, reading liner notes. But I figured out that the songs I was attracted to on these records were the songs that eventu-

ally got played on the radio. I realized there must be a job where somebody picks which songs should be played. That led me to publishing.

Wait, what were some of those records?

Man, it's such a variety. My mother was an enormous George Strait fan. But also there was [Guns N' Roses'] *Appetite for Destruction*, [Beastie Boys'] *Licensed to Ill* and Alan Jackson...

So you realized that there was such a thing as the music business and that there was such a thing as the job that you described, picking the hits.

Yep, but I didn't know how to get there. I'd never met anybody in the music business. I ended up getting into choir and drama in school, just to learn something about music, and I randomly auditioned for a job as a

performer at **Six Flags** in Arlington, Texas. I ended up getting this job and left high school a few months early; I moved two and a half hours away from home to go singing, dancing and playing at this **Six Flags** show. But I had zero interest in being a performer. I was trying to figure out how to get into the music business.

Around that time, I saw an interview with **Trisha Yearwood**. She said she'd attended **Belmont University** and had interned at a record label. Once I knew that was an option, I cold-called this production company that produced my show at **Six Flags**, **Wow Entertainment** in Dallas—it still exists—and asked if I could intern in their office. And so I started learning about live production shows; I learned about working in the recording studio; and I learned about print publishing, because the owner of that company was one of the biggest print arrangers.

So you touched the first version of publishing before you touched the modern version.

Through working for **Six Flags** I met **Jerry Smith**, who had a publishing joint venture with **Sony Tree** here in Nashville called **Fire Hall Music**. He'd sign singer-songwriters to publishing deals, develop them and get them record deals. And the first three people he signed were [**Thomas Rhett's** dad and hit artist-writer] **Rhett Akins**, **Terry Clark** and **Lonestar**. And in the '90s, all three of them became platinum-selling country stars. Jerry was the first music publisher I'd ever met, and he explained to me what he did. It was as if the clouds parted and God showed himself—like, oh my gosh, this is it. This is what I'm supposed to do. And I moved to Nashville on August 17, 1996, and started interning for this guy. I enrolled at Belmont. I worked full-time and took classes as early in the morning and as late in the evening as possible, so I could work all day during the day. And it has worked out beyond my wildest dreams.

What was your actual job there?

I was his assistant; I didn't really have a title. But what was so great about that role is he just let me sit in his office while he made phone calls, and he showed me in the back of his office, "Hey, here's the filing cabinet. It has every contract that I've ever worked on. You have free reign to look at whatever you want to look at, and I'll answer any questions you have."

I started pitching songs and getting some songs recorded. As I formed more relationships with songwriters, I ended up meeting an artist, **Jeff Bates**, through a songwriter and got him a record deal at **RCA**. He went on to sell a lot of records. It was a great learning experience.

How long were you there?

I worked with **Jerry Smith** for five years. We had several artists and songwriters that we had signed and developed, and several got record deals. Some had hits; some didn't. One day, I got a cold call from a producer named **Byron Gallimore**, who was the hottest producer in Nashville at the time. He was producing **Tim McGraw** and **Faith Hill** when they were both hot as a firecracker, around 2000.

Byron said, "I've got this publishing company, and everybody tells me you're the guy who needs to run it. Would you like to talk about that?" I did not know him



"FROM THE GET-GO, JON'S WHOLE THING TO ME WAS, 'I DON'T WANT YOU TO DO YOUR BUSINESS DIFFERENTLY THAN WHAT YOU'VE BEEN DOING. I'M JUST GOING TO PROVIDE YOU THE RESOURCES SO YOU CAN SCALE UP. I DON'T WANT YOU TO COME HERE AND CHANGE WHAT YOU DO AS A PUBLISHER.'"

From top: With Natalie Grant, Bernie Herms, Weisband and Jon Platt, with Ketch Secor



PHOTO: SARAH ELIZABETH

PHOTO: SARAH ELIZABETH



"I BELIEVE SONGS HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE THE WORLD, AND WE HAVE THE ABILITY TO ENCOURAGE AND MOTIVATE OUR WRITERS DAILY."

Top, back row: Dale Bobo, Weisband, Tom Luteran, Charly Salvatore. Bruce Phillips and Van Valkenburg; front row: O'Neil, Gaston, Dalton Dover, Catino and Flynn; bottom: Mike Harris, PJ George, Gaston, Live Nation Nashville's Sally Williams, Secor, Morgan Juhnig, Cory Younts and Critter Fuqua

at all, but I said, "Absolutely." He said, "Great. I'm at Waffle House. Come meet me right now." I was actually in the studio with an artist. I looked at the engineer and I said, "I'm sorry, but you have to take over. I'm leaving." So I drove over to Waffle House and sat with him for a couple hours, and I ended up running his publishing company, Song Garden Music. I did that for five years.

You had been working in the sector for about five years, but you felt ready to run a company.

Well, it was the independent company in Nashville. It had five songwriters. I was the song plugger and head creative of the company. I jumped into the trenches with those writers. We signed some more people, had some hits. Both of these companies, Song Garden and Jerry Smith's company, were joint ventures with Warner Chappell. And even though both of these companies were having hits on paper, they were set up wrong from the get-go.

After about five years at Song Garden, I approached Warner Chappell and said, "I've generated a lot of money for you guys over the last eight to 10 years, but these companies just aren't successful. I don't have a family yet. I can do exactly what I've been doing for you for about a decade—for about 15% of what you spend on these other companies." And to my absolute surprise, they said, "That's actually a good idea."

Coincidentally, at the same time, songwriter Tim Nichols, who was signed with Warner Chappell, was in the process of discussing the creation of his own publishing company with them. I ended up connecting with him and a songwriter that I was then working with, Connie Harrington, and the three of us started a joint venture with Warner Chappell called THIS Music.

I put the business plan on paper. And no business ever goes better than the business plan, but in this case it did. The very first songwriter I signed was Ben Hayslip, who I'd had a long relationship with but who had never

committed to being a songwriter full-time. He said, "I'm gonna give this about 18 more months, and if it doesn't work out, I'm gonna move my family back to Georgia." I told him, "I think if you commit full-time to this, you could be songwriter of the year. Four years later, he became the ASCAP songwriter of the year; two years later, it happened again. THiS Music went on to have more than 60 ASCAP and BMI award-winning songs and had songs that won Grammys and CMA awards and ACM awards. We started out with three writers, and we slowly grew to six, and then eventually we grew to about a dozen. But it grew very organically and naturally.

But it was totally built on the concept of service for songwriters. I live by like a philosophy that I call "love plus fun equals success." If you love what you do and the people you do it with, and you add in a lot of fun, I believe the only possible outcome is success. That's how we operated THiS Music every single day.

And we did that for 14 years. We sold THiS Music to Sony when I came over here, and all the employees and songwriters transitioned to Sony as well.

To the extent that it's possible, take me through a typical day.

Most days I'll wake up and send out an inspirational message to all the employees in our building. And I try to do that just about every day of the week. As often as I can, I will also send out an inspirational message via text to every songwriter on our roster—again, trying to help start their day with a mindset that can help them do their best work.

Another thing that's unique for our group is that we start every day with a listening meeting of our entire A&R team, me included. And we listen to every single song that came in the day before. That's important, because our A&R team isn't then working in silos of their individual rosters; they're actually hearing what every creator signed to the company is doing. And nine people are now throwing out ideas for these songs or ideas for future collaborations, or ideas for songs that could be pitched to that artist. No other major company does that in Nashville.

Songwriters usually start arriving about 10:30, 11 in the morning; we try to encourage writers as they're coming in. Then it's a day full of meetings trying to do all we can to support our A&R team. What ideas can we make happen? How can we turn water into wine today?

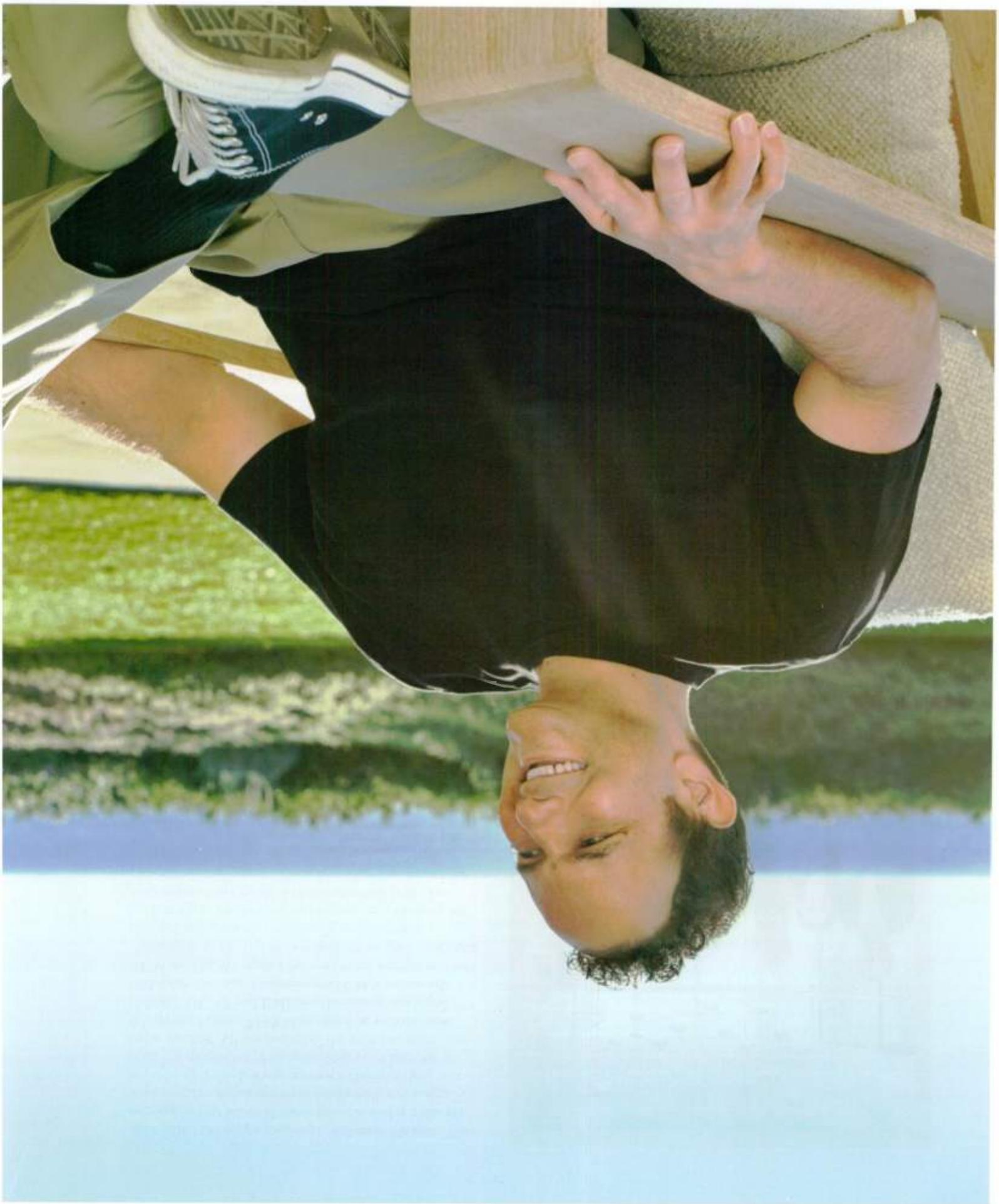
But something else that's great about this place is that when I came to Nashville in '96, I mean, Sony Tree was by far the crown jewel of music publishing in all of Nashville. For me, as a diehard country music fan, all of the history of country music is here. And that is such a special thing for all of us. We're constantly talking about what we can do to honor and grow the legacy of this catalog. How do we bring new ears to this stuff? That's why it's exciting that country has really embraced interpolations. That's a way we're providing a service to those legacy songwriters, by helping create new songs that involve their catalog.

Sony's been the core company in Nashville for so long and, and we represent the legendary Acuff-Rose catalog. That was the very first publisher started in Nashville. So, all the way back to Hank Williams. All of his songs are here. But people like Dolly Parton and Willie Nelson, they're active signed writers today. How insanely cool is that? ■



"WHEN YOU TALK TO SONGWRITERS IN ANY GENRE ABOUT THE BIGGEST HIT OF THEIR CAREER, MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, THEY'LL TELL YOU, 'IT WAS JUST ANOTHER TUESDAY, AND WE GOT TOGETHER LIKE WE ALWAYS HAD BEFORE. AND THAT DAY, THE MAGIC HAPPENED.'"

Back row: Morgan Barnes, Becky Harris, Trisha McClanahan and xGaston; front row: Carole-Ann Mobley, Ryan Larkins and Aubrey Landon





JOHN JANICK

THE HITS INTERVIEW
BY SIMON GLICKMAN

John Janick has had a sizzling 2024, capped by his stepping into an elevated role as the head of the combined Interscope Capitol Labels Group, which enjoys industry-leading overall market share. Once again, IGA enjoyed sizzling success as the company's remarkable strength in artist development continued to pay off. **Billie Eilish** dropped another huge release and began the next chapter in her extraordinary career; chart-dominating acts such as **Olivia Rodrigo**, **Kendrick Lamar**, **Eminem**, **KAROL G** and a returning **Lady Gaga** went from strength to strength; **Hanumankind** took off for the newly incorporated **Capitol**; and the company's global growth—thanks in large part to its canny **HYBE** deal and the rapid growth of Interscope's Miami division—leveled up.

“THE IDEA OF COMING TO IGA WAS: HOW DO WE BUILD THE MUSIC COMPANY OF THE FUTURE, BUILD AN AMAZING TEAM AND WORK WITH GREAT ARTISTS? BUT ALSO: WHAT SHOULD A MUSIC COMPANY LOOK LIKE IN THE FUTURE?”



(l-r) Darkroom's Justin Lubliner, Billie Eilish, Janick, FINNEAS and Vice Chairman Steve Berman

"HOW DO WE AVOID PUTTING BOXES OR WALLS AROUND WHAT WE COULD DREAM UP AND, IF THEY'RE GREAT IDEAS, GO EXECUTE THEM?"

First of all, congratulations on an incredible year. Thank you.

I thought we'd start the macro of where we are now in terms of A&R. I'm hearing a lot about how, post-pandemic, the emphasis has changed somewhat in that the role of analytics has shifted. How is this affecting your direction and perspective on A&R?

I think that we have the same approach that we've always had—investing in artists that we feel are going to move culture and have long careers. But for the business, I think it's good that there's been a bit of a reset. Compared to when streaming really started to take hold, and then going into the pandemic, it felt like there were some shortcuts. We've always paid attention to the data, but tried to find acts we could really develop for the long term and build into career artists. For a while, there were artists or songs that you could jump on that were moving, and the data would show that. But even during that time, we didn't want to sign artists or songs for the moment. We always want to find career artists.

But we continue to do what IGA has always done, which is real artist development: having vision, working with the right artists and building for the future.

So where, in your view, do analytics fit into the equation?

I think you need the analytics and data to spot the right artists sometimes. After all, there's always been data. Early on, I was finding artists who were drawing kids to shows and that kids cared about. But whether it was radio research, record-store research or show research, you always had to be able to look at that data and then figure out what was right. That's where the real A&R comes in, and good executives are able to sort through all the information, make the right bets on the right artists and then help guide them through their careers. There are multiple levels to being a great A&R executive—spotting the talent, signing, making records, guiding artists through their careers. We try to make sure that we're able to do all of those things.

Some artists are just great artists and should be successful no matter what. But the right team can add a lot more to their career. So how can we be the best in class at helping artists build their careers and brands globally? Obviously, music is at the center of everything that we do. It's the most important piece; you can't screw that up, and you have to have long-term vision there. But also, how are you helping them execute their visuals? How are you helping them make sure their per-

performances and touring are right? How do you approach merchandise and other opportunities, whether it's making films or doing interesting and exciting things in gaming? Or doing the right brand deals? How are we creating an infrastructure that's going to help an artist build their brand?

You seem to be enumerating the ways in which the notion of a record company has been completely transformed over the last decade or so. Which is why I took this job. When I was in Florida running my own music company, we were doing mail order. That was a big business for us. We started making the merchandise, selling shirts at retail, fulfilling artists' touring merch. The company grew over time, and eventually I'd sold my company and had more resources, but the idea of coming to IGA was: How do we build the music company of the future, build an amazing team and work with great artists? But also: What should a music company look like in the future? That was the key. And I think we're constantly trying to evolve that in the right way, making sure that we're ahead of the curve.

And it seems that in some respects, the record company of the future is, at its core, not dissimilar from the record company out of one's trunk.

One hundred percent. So how do we create an infrastructure that can super-serve the artist and their team? We have hundreds of people in the U.S. and thousands internationally, so how do we act as a small, nimble company that's entrepreneurial, but with all the resources you could possibly want and need from relationships to money to ideas, being able to execute on everything and dream up anything? That's what we talk about a lot at the company: It's good that we want to be the best at checking the boxes and doing all the things that you want a music company to do traditionally, but we have the ability to dream up any idea, whether it's a business or a marketing idea or just something super-creative and surprising. How do we avoid putting boxes or walls around what we could dream up and, if they're great ideas, go execute them?

Because I think of you as the leading edge of artist development, I wonder if you can walk me through a couple of artists' careers that you have been developing

over the past five years or so and how you've gone from discovery to domination with them. Can you talk about the path you took with Billie?

Well, first you have to find the great artists. I try not to play Monday-morning quarterback and say you knew something would be successful from the start, but with Billie, I knew when I sat with her that she was special and that we had to sign her. You can't claim to have known exactly what an artist was going to be and how big they'd become. But meeting Billie when she was 13, having a great partner in Darkroom and Justin [Lubliner], everything was about the long term and not



From top: (l-r) Sir Lucian Grainge, KAROL G, Janick, Interscope EVP Nir Seroussi; with Olivia Rodrigo and Lana Del Rey

“YOU ALWAYS HAD TO BE ABLE TO LOOK AT THAT DATA AND THEN FIGURE OUT WHAT WAS RIGHT. THAT’S WHERE THE REAL A&R COMES IN, AND GOOD EXECUTIVES ARE ABLE TO SORT THROUGH ALL THE INFORMATION, MAKE THE RIGHT BETS ON THE RIGHT ARTISTS AND THEN HELP GUIDE THEM THROUGH THEIR CAREERS.”

taking shortcuts. She and FINNEAS were so young at the time, so giving them the time and space to create the music and figure out visually what they wanted to do was essential. Billie and Finn's parents also understood the long-term vision and were on board. They've instilled such great values into their kids, and they've been an integral part of the team from day one.

It all came from Billie and Finn, with us providing the right guidance and serving as a sounding board as we moved along. But they were driving the ship; we were just trying to figure out how to support them the right way. And again, thinking long-term. Because there are lots of shortcuts to take, whether it's going to radio really early or pushing the artist to do too much too quickly. We tried to be measured, and to make sure we were building fan by fan.

At the end of the day, it's all about finding great artists who have vision, supporting them and helping them build their foundation and their fan base—to attract fans who will be there no matter what gatekeeper opens or shuts the door for them. And ideally you get the support of the gatekeepers, the platforms and so on, but the artists' careers aren't going to live or die based

on that. We want to make sure that artists can communicate directly with their fans and put out their music and get to them.

I think we did that over the long term with Billie, along with her managers Danny Rukasin and Brandon Goodman and Darkroom, building up the shows and putting out visuals and music regularly, finding the right partnerships along the way and really taking that three-year approach to doing the real artist development. And then when she put out her debut album, obviously she did tremendously well and the shows got bigger and she won the Grammys and then we positioned them for the Oscars and all those other pieces. But again, it's important that it's all from them—we can help *amplify* what they do, globally—and that we're measured in everything that we do.

You've also had such great global success with Olivia, whom you and your team signed and who has become a superstar. How did she characterize what she wanted to do when you first met her?

The first time I met Olivia it was really clear. I remember her sitting in my office. We talked, and she had such strong vision. She was so determined and she was a star.

Her main emphasis was that she is a songwriter first. And from the very beginning I recognized that was true.

She originally wrote "drivers license" and all these great songs for an EP. We knew "drivers license" was an amazing song but thought it was going to take time to develop because it was a ballad. But obviously it exploded as soon as it came out. Olivia decided right away she wanted to make an album rather than an EP, because she felt—and we agreed—that she's an album artist. She wrote a handful of additional songs while she was finishing high school and also filming *High School Musical* at the time. We made the "drivers license" video in Salt Lake City, where she was filming. She was so driven and focused and she really set the tone for all of us.

Olivia knew what it should all turn into. She's a brilliant artist and has a clear vision for herself.

It's also about having the right team around the artists. With Olivia we have the pleasure of working alongside her managers, Aleen Keshishian and Zack Morgenroth of Lighthouse Management + Media, who are so strategic and are so forward-thinking. They're great partners who think big.

A very important element

"IT'S ALL ABOUT FINDING GREAT ARTISTS WHO HAVE VISION, SUPPORTING THEM AND HELPING THEM BUILD THEIR FOUNDATION AND THEIR FAN BASE—TO ATTRACT FANS WHO WILL BE THERE NO MATTER WHAT GATEKEEPER OPENS OR SHUTS THE DOOR FOR THEM."



(l-r) Yo Gotti, Interscope President, A&R Nicole Wyszkoarko, GloRilla, Janick and Berman

with all of our artists—and you’ve seen it many times throughout the history of Interscope—is what we call world-building. Music is always at the center, but all the other pieces that come with it, the videos, photos, performances, production, touring, merch, all of it, should fit together the right way. Our mission is to help an artist and management team connect all those dots.

You’ve always been adamant about the importance of partnerships and working with artists’ teams. Tell us about what’s happening with Playboi Carti and his Opium label and your partnership with Yo Gotti’s CMG.

Again, with Billie, we have a great partner in Darkroom. That’s certainly also true with CMG and Yo Gotti, and what he’s built with GloRilla, Moneybagg Yo, EST Gee and all of his artists. We’re working with Playboi Carti on his music, and we work closely with Erin Larsen, the COO of his Opium label, which has Ken Carson, Destroy Lonely and Homicide Gvng. Carti is one of the most culturally important artists, and we’re lucky to be able to work with him and his team on those artists and help them execute their vision. The foundation of this company has always been built on partnerships with artists, entrepreneurs and other creative people. Both Carti with his Opium brand and Yo Gotti with CMG continue to push music and culture forward in powerful ways.

I may be the one doing these interviews, but there are hundreds of people at IGA and then there are our artists and their teams. It’s hard work, what we do, and crazy at times, but we live it.

Why was Olivia the best choice for the relaunch of Geffen?

We were trying to build a team of great people at Geffen, which is what we aim for in everything we do. We wanted to form a tight team that could be super-focused on artist development, and in the time before “driver’s license,” it felt like a good opportunity for Olivia. We’ve assembled these great people who can be hyper-focused, from A&R to marketing to digital and all the other pieces, and we felt like it would give her even more attention and focus.

The idea when we started Geffen was, How do we build another multi-genre label brand that has resources, but feels bespoke? Between Olivia, Kali Uchis, Yeat and doing the deal with HYBE and putting it through Geffen—as well as a bunch of other great things—I feel like it encapsulates what is exciting about music right now. And we built it from the ground up, in a very entrepreneurial way.

Tom March came over from Polydor to oversee Geffen. He’s been at the company for almost two years now. Bringing him over was a great move, because Polydor was our sister company in the U.K., so he knew how we worked and had worked with several of our artists. He’s very thoughtful while also being aggressive in how he moves.

It’s pretty remarkable what everybody’s been able to do in connection with the wider IGA team. The whole idea was we have the people whose sole focus is Geffen, but we all still work as a team, and we share much of the same support infrastructure.



With Selena Gomez

So you have that efficiency of structure, but you still have that boutique kind of energy.

Exactly. So everybody works together and we figure out what goes where and how we do it and find the balance between Interscope and Geffen. And we’ve been able to attain a kind of seamless collaboration between the two label brands.

It strikes me that in some ways there is a through-line from Fueled by Ramen to this moment with Olivia and boygenius, which seems to suggest that rock is somewhat resurgent—and also that its future is female. As someone whose roots are in that world, do you feel rock music, guitar music, is on the verge of a big revival?

I do pay attention to rock music and guitars. But growing up in a small town in Florida, I listened to music that I thought was moving culture, though I wouldn’t have expressed it that way at the time. I listened to punk rock and hip-hop because those felt underground. In this small town, with no Internet, I somehow just latched onto these things. And obviously I liked exposing people to something new. I feel like Fueled by Ramen evolved over time into different sounds. I think there was always a rock element to it, but I didn’t ever want to be boxed in creatively.

Interscope was always about moving culture, and that’s part of our ethos to this day. It usually starts with youth culture, and then it can age up and down from there. So when I look at the artists I’ve worked with at Interscope so far, a lot of them are artists that, if I’d had a blank canvas, I would’ve evolved Fueled by Ramen to become that. I would’ve loved to have signed Billie, Playboi Carti, Juice WRLD, Olivia. All of those artists are rock stars to me, but I don’t think it has to do with guitars; to me, it’s just about individuality.



(l-r) WME's Richard Lom, Seroussi, Ivan Cornejo, manager Pamela Cornejo, Janick and WME's Richard Vega

Hate Machine very early on. I got *Alternative Press* when it was the paper magazine that was shipped to my house in Florida. I would tape *120 Minutes* to try to discover new artists and then I would drive to the local indie record store, which was an hour from my house, just to go through the bins and find it. But Interscope artists like Nine Inch Nails, No Doubt, Dr. Dre and Eminem were what I was into from high school through college. It was all different genres of music, but it was culture.

Culture is now hyperglobal. And streaming, social media and other elements of digital culture have expanded the influence of music from all over the world. I wanted to speak to your involvement in both Latin and K-pop and how transformative the rise of those forms has been. I also see certain structural changes happening as a result of the growing influence of those forms; Can you speak to that?

We've been lucky enough to work on the K-pop side with some great companies. As you know, we formed a joint venture with HYBE and we've been developing a global girl group, KATSEYE, for the last two and a half years. So much thought, care and creativity goes into the whole development of the

artist. And it's very much like what I've always tried to do with our artists, and it's so impressive what the Korean labels have achieved with their artist development and operational approach.

Obviously we can learn a lot from their system and working with HYBE, with BLACKPINK's label, YG Entertainment, and with The Black Label have been both inspirational and instructive for us at IGA.

Since you've looked under the hood, what is it about the system that has not existed in our world?

Our approach at IGA is to make sure that we're both left-brained and right-brained. We try to be the most creative company, but also to run a good business and have process, because when you can put both of those pieces together, they actually help one another and you make the company much better. Which sounds great, but the problem is that most companies are either very creative and can't run a good business or run a good business but aren't so creative. But if you can strike that balance, then I think it's the recipe for something longer-lasting—and great.

"A VERY IMPORTANT ELEMENT WITH ALL OF OUR ARTISTS—AND YOU'VE SEEN IT MANY TIMES THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF INTERSCOPE—IS WHAT WE CALL WORLD-BUILDING. MUSIC IS ALWAYS AT THE CENTER, BUT ALL THE OTHER PIECES THAT COME WITH IT, THE VIDEOS, PHOTOS, PERFORMANCES, PRODUCTION, TOURING, MERCH, ALL OF IT, SHOULD FIT TOGETHER THE RIGHT WAY. OUR MISSION IS TO HELP AN ARTIST AND MANAGEMENT TEAM CONNECT ALL THOSE DOTS."

When I was a kid, it was about your group and your formats; the gatekeepers delivered music to you based on whatever box you ticked. And that was a big part of your cultural self-definition. That has completely been flipped on its head in the streaming era, which has of course changed the nature of the music business.

Yes, for sure. That's how I grew up too. But at the same time, I didn't care—I was into everything. But when I was building a label, I tried not to be stuck in a certain genre. At first, Fueled by Ramen was a ska-punk label. Then it was an emo label, then it was a pop-punk label. I saw other indie labels that had a very specific sound, and it could be hot for a couple years and then it would burn out. And I didn't want that to happen to my company.

A label that has a sensibility and a connection to culture, as you say, is one that has longevity. And certainly the legacy of Interscope, from Nine Inch Nails to Tupac all the way to the present, has never been about genre.

Exactly. I grew up listening to Nine Inch Nails. I had *Pretty*

Do you think of yourself as more one than the other? Do you need more people with expertise in one direction or another, or do you just feel like you're in the center and have big teams of both?

I think I'm lucky and have worked hard to make sure I have a great team of people that can do all of those things. Traditionally, most labels are led by a creative person and then an operational person. They're usually, to a greater or lesser degree, co-heads. Jimmy [Iovine] wasn't that. Understanding the importance of and the balance between operations and creativity came out of necessity for me as a young entrepreneur. When you start your own company, you have to do everything. So I had the best schooling in the sense that I did everything for the first 10 years of my company, from signing the acts to being involved in trying to put the records together to marketing, to...

Putting stuff in envelopes?

I put stuff in envelopes. I've printed the T-shirts. I've written handwritten notes in the D2C. I'd have to shut down the company for two days every six months to hand-write the royalty checks. I always wanted the artists to get paid; I was determined *not* to be the label that didn't pay its artists. So every shitty job you could possibly do—as well as the fun stuff—I've done.

I also wanted to ask you about Interscope Miami and how that has very quickly become a force.

We started about five years ago. We saw that the music was really exciting, and we saw the culture around it. And then I was fortunate enough that the guy we kept bumping into all the time in doing deals, Nir Seroussi, had parted ways with Sony. He had been instrumental in bringing Bad Bunny to Sony and had signed other great artists. I met with him and we did a deal in a week, because I just liked his vibe. He had great musical taste and seemed to be winning out there—and was a great guy with strong values and vision.

For us it was, how do we help ensure that Latin music and artists are not put in a box? How are we making sure that we would treat Latin artists the same way that we would treat a Billie or a Kendrick or a Gaga or an Olivia? We specifically called it Miami because we didn't want to say it was necessarily just Latin. I think you have to have the right people and understand the culture. Because so often when music execs see Latin or country or K-pop music doing well, it becomes, "I have to have that too." But there's something to be said

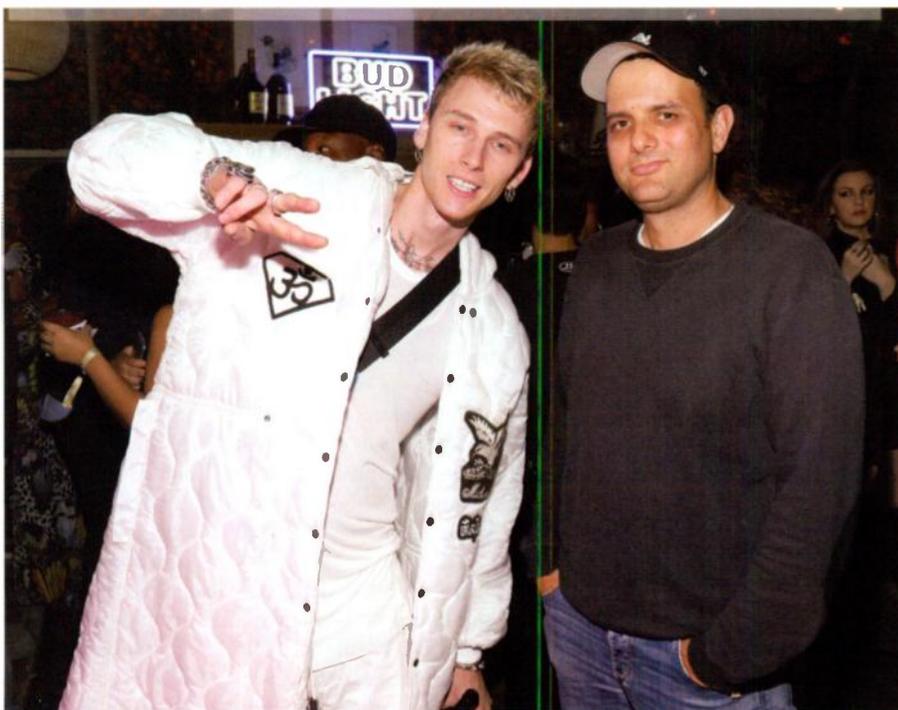
for thinking outside the box. You need to be mindful of where the artist and the music comes from and you need to build the right team of people who live and breathe the culture.

Nir built that great team of people based in Miami—but with a strong connection to L.A.—and we had artists like Selena Gomez and Kali Uchis who wanted to do Spanish-language projects. The question became: How do we support them in what they want to do creatively, but then also market it, set it up and do the right things to make sure that the project was successful? We did music with DJ Snake and we signed artists along the way. But it's really hitting its stride now after forming our partnership with KAROL G this year and then Ivan Cornejo, and now we have Xavi, who's exploding. First he had the #1 and #2 songs in Mexico, and then the #1 song globally on Spotify and another three in the Top 10. We have the Los CT label with Natanael Cano and Gabito Ballesteros; we've got Chino Pacas music coming out on Geffen. People are impatient, but to build something meaningful in the music business, it usually takes three to five years, because you have to develop the artists, plant seeds and let things grow over time.

This division, too, seems very Interscope somehow—seamlessly part of the same vibe, even though it's so different musically.

Again, culture and taste are not things that people can

"PEOPLE ARE IMPATIENT, BUT TO BUILD SOMETHING MEANINGFUL IN THE MUSIC BUSINESS, IT USUALLY TAKES THREE TO FIVE YEARS, BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO DEVELOP THE ARTISTS, PLANT SEEDS AND LET THINGS GROW OVER TIME."



With MGK

just learn. I think it comes over time, and when you're building something new, it's really hard to do.

It took years of investment and commitment to make Interscope Miami work. And it's the same with Geffen. It takes a lot of foundational work to be successful. At the core, we're trying to make sure it's always about the music and supporting the artists and their teams. It's always about building careers and building real fans; it's about super-serving the artists in everything that they need: merchandising, branding, films, all of it. But they shouldn't be carbon copies of one another. Miami should *feel* like Interscope but have its own twist on that. The same goes for Geffen.

Historically, you could never predict what Interscope was going to do next. I think that's going to hold true over the next 30 years, but whatever the company does next is likely to move culture and be what other people will try to replicate. When you look at the history, at the artists that were signed or the moves that the company made, it always felt like it was ahead of the curve.

I'd like you to say something about D2C, which has been a part of the larger picture for a while but appears to be in a new phase.

As a kid in Florida, I had to buy records I wanted through mail order. And soon after I started Fueled by Ramen, we had a web store. We were always trying to figure out how to connect directly with fans. I remember, when I bought by mail order, getting those handwritten notes and feeling good that people were paying attention to who I was as a kid who was supporting the music.

Today, again, having that direct connection is crucial. I'm just thinking about all the things that came from Billie when she did *Barbie*. I remember when she and Finn played us "What Was I Made For?" right after they wrote it in Finn's studio. We said, "It would be really cool to do some Barbie merch." And Billie literally pointed to the coffee table and said, "John, look at my sketchbooks." She sketched the Barbie "B" for "Billie," and we said, "We should be doing this."

Olivia was super-excited when she was on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, and talked about how we could make posters and merch off the back of that. We always look at ways of building the momentum with an artist and what fans would want to enhance that connection. No other partner or company can do what we do, because

we're usually first in with an artist, along with the manager and a few other team members. The music, as I said, is the most important piece. And then we're involved in doing all these marketing pieces, whether it is the cover of *Rolling Stone* or working with Warner Bros. Pictures and Mattel on the *Barbie* song. Sometimes the connection is more indirect, as with Gaga's "Bloody Mary" going off on TikTok thanks to *Wednesday*. Because we had the relationship with Netflix, we got them to move quickly to use that song in their promotions and trailers, and we did a merch collaboration with them.

We're on the pulse of everything that's happening with the artist.

We work closely with the manager and the artist and ensure that it all works the right way: their D2C, their brand deals, their touring and the rest, with music always at the center. If you think about the whole chessboard, it creates more synergy and momentum for all the different parts of the artist's business. Now, how can we be the best in class at executing that while also being highly creative and understanding

what makes sense for the artist over the long term?

What opportunity do the social short-form video platforms present?

We try to embrace the platforms that are driven by a passionate audience, and again, we always think about what the artist's core creative mission is and how to surround it the right way. For instance, with Gaga and "Bloody Mary" on TikTok, it was an opportunity to give a spark to a song that's been out for a very long time. And working alongside her manager, Bobby Campbell, we capitalized on that, took the song to radio, did the merchandise, did other creative marketing, and it went from being a track on an album to being a bigger song in her catalog.

JID's "Surround Sound" is having a moment right now on short-form video platforms. All the teams at Interscope and Dreamville have put strategies in place to spread the excitement and build upon the momentum around JID as an artist.

But we see it in many different ways, whether it's a sync in a TV show, a film or something happening with an artist in, say, France and then spreading. That's the crazy thing about the music business: Something can



(l-r) Berman, Olivia Rodrigo, Janick, Interscope President of Creative Strategy Michelle An and President of A&R Sam Riback

happen at any point that you didn't even plan for—and completely changes the course of everything. And I want us to be better than anybody else at taking it to a whole other level and maximizing it—tastefully, the right way. But also, how do we go out and create those moments so that we not only get lucky but also create our own luck?

You guys have made big strides this year in gaming. Your partnership with Epic Games and Eminem is a good recent example.

We've had a dedicated team in video games and sports for many years now. When we look at where fandom is strongest, a platform like Fortnite really stands out as a cultural phenomenon that has built a true global base of fans. Working together with Paul Rosenberg, who really understands this space and its importance, we were able to work with Eminem to tap into that in a very powerful way, including reaching a new audience of highly engaged fans, and sell them products and experiences along the way. Forward-thinking companies like Epic Games see the value of music and are going to be increasingly important to our strategy for the future. We have some exciting plans in this space for 2024.

Steve Berman has always had his finger on the pulse of emerging platforms, and it's been no exception with gaming. It's really hard to overstate the value of an executive like Steve, who has been at the company pretty much since the beginning and continues to play such a pivotal role as Vice Chairman across all aspects of the company.

You've been super successful lately with Interscope Films, both commercially and critically. Could you talk a bit about your strategy there?

We work so closely with our artists and their teams on their creative presentation, often from the very beginnings of their careers. Our work together goes far beyond just artwork and music videos. There is a level of trust there that would really be impossible to achieve with an outside film company. So Interscope Films represents a way for us to have deeper relationships with our artists, bringing to life their vision in new and exciting ways, and being their partners for the entire thing. We're the leader in this space and have been working for years with highly respected, visionary filmmakers to tell these stories in powerful ways. Michelle An has played a pivotal role here. Interscope Films has achieved a level of success both from a commercial standpoint and via awards recognition that we're all very proud of with multiple projects with Billie, Olivia, MGK, Selena Gomez. Our Tupac project, *Dear Mama*, is up for a Grammy this year. We have a television project with HYBE about KATSEYE, which will air on Netflix. We've had a lot of important partners like Darkroom,

Lighthouse Media + Management and others who have been crucial to our success. It's been a really exciting area for us and one which we continue to develop in a meaningful way.

And of course, we continue to have a lot of success in the motion picture soundtrack area with the *Hunger Games* series, *Black Panther*, James Bond, *A Star Is Born* and so many others.

Can you talk a minute about the team you've built at IGA?

We have an amazing team. Obviously, Steve Berman has been amazing in guiding so many things. But it's really impossible to give you a list of all the people who are integral to our success, because everyone at the company plays a role in making IGA great.

We spend a lot of time ensuring that we have the right people in the right positions, and we empower them to do their jobs. So many of our people have spent the bulk of their careers at IGA, which I am very proud of. I honestly feel that IGA is our artists and our people, and we have the best of both.

Insofar as there as a typical day, can you kind of walk me through what a day for you is like?

I'm a creature of habit and I like structure, but I also don't like "typical" days. On Mondays we start off with a team meeting, which is usually two to two and a half hours in the morning, and then the calendar can be open after that. Certain meetings happen throughout the day, and Fridays are generally reserved for brainstorming and organizational recapping about where we sit in the company. Usually it's a mix, ideally a balance of left-brain and right-brain activity. Some days are more about the organizational process, and some days are just highly creative, whether it's sitting with artists, having marketing conversations, going into the studio, talking with Netflix about our girl-group show and how we're going to roll it out. And then there are the crazy days where everything feels like it's going to explode, and the things that should be simple require a thousand conversations. So I don't know if there is a typical day.

How do you unplug and refocus?

Mostly spending time with family, or something that involves exercise. Obviously I hold my work at the highest importance because there's a lot of responsibility for artists and the people that work at the company, making sure that everyone is as happy as possible and enjoying what they do and being taken care of. But family is the most important thing. I need to make sure that my kids and my wife are happy and that I get to be in the moment with them every moment I can, before the kids grow up and they're not at home anymore. ■

"GROWING UP IN A SMALL TOWN IN FLORIDA, I LISTENED TO MUSIC THAT I THOUGHT WAS MOVING CULTURE, THOUGH I WOULDN'T HAVE EXPRESSED IT THAT WAY AT THE TIME. I LISTENED TO PUNK ROCK AND HIP-HOP BECAUSE THOSE FELT UNDERGROUND. IN THIS SMALL TOWN, WITH NO INTERNET, I SOMEHOW JUST LATCHED ONTO THESE THINGS."

James King

A WALK IN THE PARK AND A BROADER CHURCH OF MUSIC

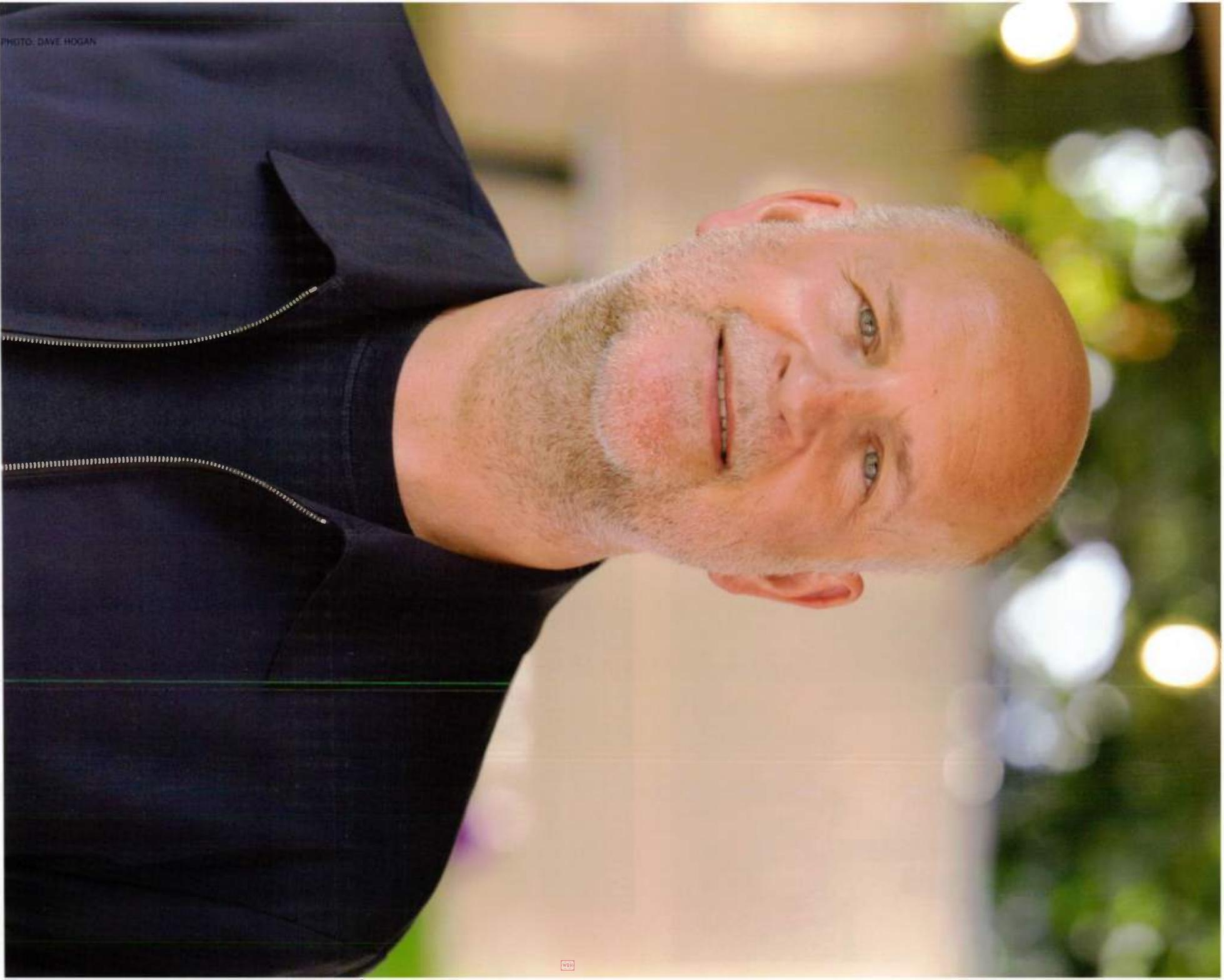
INTERVIEW BY CRAIG MARKS

“

It's been a crazy busy week,” says AEG Presents' CEO of European Festivals James King, apologetically. Yesterday, in the midst of frantically firming up the final headliner for this summer's BST Hyde Park Festival, he tried keeping our interview appointment. “I scheduled time for us between meetings, but I was having to call you from a shopping center in London, and I couldn't get on the fucking Wi-Fi. It was one of those days.”

For U.K. concertgoers, the last-minute machinations will be well worth it, as chart behemoth Morgan Wallen rounds out the 2024 Hyde Park lineup, taking his place alongside Stevie Nicks, SZA, Kylie Minogue, Andrea Bocelli, Kings of Leon, Shania Twain, Robbie Williams and K-poppers Stray Kids. Following a wildly successful 2023 festival that featured Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, P!nk, BLACKPINK and Lana Del Rey, 2024's star-studded lineup proved a trickier puzzle to piece together. We're knackered just thinking about it.

PHOTO: DAVE HOGAN





King surrounded by dozens of AEG Presents staffers at All Points East in London

PHOTO: TOM HANCOCK

"We spend a great deal of time on the customer experience. Everything we do is about that. It's about trying to understand the fans: what they want, what we hope that they'll want, and trying to marry those up."

How did booking the 2024 Hyde Park lineup differ from previous editions?

First, let's look at 2022 and 2023. 2022 was the first year back after 2020 and 2021 were canceled due to COVID. There was huge pent-up demand in the industry; people wanted to go back out and embrace live music again. Artists had not been touring for two years, so everyone was out. And we came back with a massive lineup: The Rolling Stones, Elton John, the Eagles, Pearl Jam. After speaking with Adele's team for years about how it'd be amazing if she could come play Hyde Park, she did two shows. It was the biggest year we'd ever had.

And then in 2023, we topped it: Two P!nk shows, two Springsteen shows—everybody wanted to come and play. Everybody wanted tickets. We sold every ticket that we could possibly sell, 555,000 across the nine shows. We pushed the boundaries. We had BLACKPINK, the first K-pop band ever to headline an outdoor show of this nature in the U.K. Hyde Park 2023 was beyond big: huge sponsorship metrics, huge average net ticket price.

2024 has been a different year generally in the market. Fewer artists coming through, fewer stadium shows, fewer major tours. These things tend to be cyclical. This is one of those catch-up years. Fewer headliner

acts touring, particularly American acts, brings greater demand for those artists, and in turn they have more choices than usual, which leads to a delayed process and delayed announcements.

And presumably, when there are fewer acts to choose from, that drives up the price of these artists?

Well, most talent buyers will say it's impossible for the prices to go any higher.

How are 2024 sales thus far?

Kylie Minogue's doing the show as a one-off; it sold out almost immediately. Robbie Williams, again, a one-off, show is already sold out. Stevie Nicks will sell out this week. Shania Twain, who often comes to Hyde Park as a fan, is playing this year, and we'll sell it out. Morgan Wallen is a pivotal moment for us, the first true country act to headline Hyde Park, on July 4th, no less. It's come about later in the booking cycle than we originally planned, but that's been the '24 season.

I imagine that Hyde Park will be the only festival with SZA and Morgan Wallen as headliners.

The event is for all artists and all music fans, and there are many people for whom BST Hyde Park is the only live-music experience on their calendar. Something

magical happens when huge artists play their music in the middle of London in the summer in Hyde Park. I think that's why we have this very broad church of artists who want to play, and a very broad church of fans who want to experience those moments with them.

How did Hyde Park become the crown jewel (no pun intended) in your festival portfolio?

Hyde Park had been a Live Nation contract for many, many years, and it was coming up for renewal. This is 2011, '12. And I said to [AEG Presents chief] Jay Marciano, "If we're serious about being in the music industry in London, we should be operating serious events, and there's nothing more serious than operating and producing the outdoor series in Hyde Park." And he said, "Great, let's get some time and tell me what your vision is for it." Which I duly did, and I remember it very clearly to this day: I did a short presentation deck, and we were idly chitchatting through the first two slides, and then my computer froze. It just froze up, and Jay could see me increasingly and aggressively trying to push the button, over and over again, to no avail. Finally he just said, "Okay, okay, forget the deck, just pitch it to me."

So what had Hyde Park been, and what was on your vision board for Jay?

Well, ever since the Stones played there in '69, it had been the home of some amazing concerts—Pink Floyd and Queen and everybody in between. But I just felt that the time was right for a re-imagination of what live music in London could be. I wanted there to be unbelievable hospitality, great food and beverage. But more than anything, I wanted it to be an amazing production. I did some very basic sketches for Jay that eventually evolved into the Great Oak Stage. Glastonbury had the Pyramid Stage, and I've always been inspired by the environment at Coachella. I felt strongly that London deserved nothing less.

I'll never forget the first time I presented it. Jay said, "I think it's great, but I think it could be better here and here and here." Jay is one of those people who sees the big picture and helps you realize your own vision.

And then [artist and stage designer] Es Devlin took my very rudimentary sketch and turned it into something far more impressive than I ever envisaged it could be.

How did you get into the concert business in the first place?

I grew up in North London. It was a pretty average middle-class upbringing. But I was very fortunate that my older brother was really into the club scene. And I—annoyingly for him, no doubt—tagged along wherever I could, just as there was an explosion of electronic music in the U.K. in the late '80s. So I went from sitting around my friends' houses on a Friday night watching



The Who's *The Kids Are Alright* or the Woodstock documentary for the 5,000th time, to going out to see my brother's friend DJ, which led me to running some parties when I was 16 or 17, still at the English equivalent of high school.

The first show I ever promoted was at the **Palmers Green Athletic Social Club**. Sold tickets at school, three pounds a ticket. At the end of the night we counted out; I think we had about 300 pounds on my mum's kitchen table, all in coins. We thought we were the richest people in the world!

I then went to university in Liverpool, and within a couple of months there I met one of my great friends to this day, **James Barton**. James was a DJ and club promoter. We were all going to the **Hacienda Club** in Manchester and were inspired by what **Tony Wilson** and everybody was doing there. In Liverpool, there were a lot of empty garages, empty warehouses, and you could put things on for cheap. James started a club called **Cream** in 1992, and because we were friends and because I was doing a business studies degree at university, I was tapped to run the guest list, the coaches, the memberships. Anything to do with computers. And Cream, and the club scene in the U.K., was really taking off. Soon, on a Saturday, there'd literally be 3,000 people trying to get into a

600-cap club. It was groundbreaking. It was our punk.

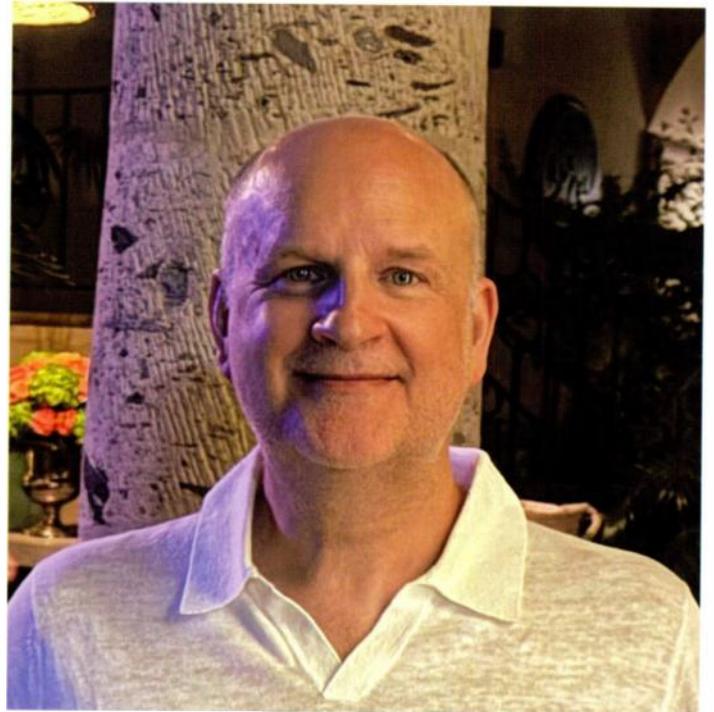
We were very hungry and very driven, very naive as well. But we were fearless of making mistakes. It didn't matter to us. We were writing our own narrative of what we wanted this industry to be. And **Creamfields** came from that mindset. We were asked to do the very first Creamfields, in 1998, by a big festival organizer, **Mean Fiddler**, which became **Festival Republic**. We didn't really organize it—we kind of booked it and did a lot of the marketing—but I fell in love with that whole concept. We'd done arena-size shows before, but nothing of that scale. It was 28-30,000 people. But the relationship with Mean Fiddler didn't work out. And to James's credit, he said, "We should just do this ourselves." We got a site in Liverpool, which was the famous old airfield where **The Beatles** landed after conquering America. At that point it was derelict. So 1999 was the very first year that we ran Creamfields, and the first year I ran a major festival. It was the single most terrifying experience I'd ever had.

When did AEG enter the picture?

I worked with Cream until about 2004. And even after that, I still produced Creamfields for a number of years through my own company, Loud Sound. I began to



Jim King with Carole Kinzel of CAA



"The first show I ever promoted was at the Palmers Green Athletic Social Club. Sold tickets at school, three pounds a ticket. At the end of the night we counted out; I think we had about 300 pounds on my mum's kitchen table, all in coins. We thought we were the richest people in the world!"

produce other festivals, including **Bestival** on the Isle of Wight and **RockNess** in Scotland, with **Fatboy Slim**. I eventually sold **RockNess** to **AEG**, and that started my relationship with them. And here I am, 14 years or so later.

Describe a typical day for you and your team.

We have 17 or 18 people who work in the European festival division. It's not that many people for the volume of activity that we do. At this moment we're in launch mode, so we spend a great deal of time reviewing our sales counts because we want to know if our pricing is right. We have a variety of different ticket types—standing, VIP, hospitality—and we want to make sure that we're managing the inventory to suit the fan demand. So every morning, we're monitoring our sales data, and we're also doing a great deal of marketing analysis to make sure that our messaging is working effectively.

We do as much data analytics as we can, to allow the team to make good decisions. We want them to have the right information so that they're confident to go out and be creative, to take risks, to be entrepreneurial.

And we spend a great deal of time on the customer experience. Everything we do is about that. It's about trying to understand the fans: what they want, what we hope that they'll want, and trying to marry those up.

There was a lot of talk in 2023 about the rising costs of putting on a festival, and the difficulty in staffing tours and fests. What's the forecast for '24?

Again, let's first go back to 2022 and '23. Following the COVID shutdown, there was a dramatic scarcity of human resources in our business: security, crew, the rigging industry, casual labor for the bar operators, cleaning contractors and so on. Many people got used to working from home, or at a steady job for a film or TV studio. We were also competing with the rise of the gig economy: flexible, part-time, delivery-based jobs with, say, **Amazon** or **Uber**. Being on the road can be very stressful. Exciting, but stressful. So a lot of people left the touring industry, and we had to bring new people in, often younger. It's taken us a few years, but most of those roles have been repopulated by new entrants into the marketplace.

On top of all that, anything that required steel in its fabrication or required fuel to transport it—which is everything—was hugely impacted by the global crisis on the supply chain. And obviously the cost of fuel...

Is that correlated with the Russian Invasion of Ukraine?

Certainly the situation in Ukraine caused a tremendous increase on fuel prices, which then increased the cost of manufacturing, delivery, distribution and transportation. Our cost base is still incredibly high. Some of that has been absorbed with ticket-price increases, which we've seen generally across the industry, but it can only go so far.

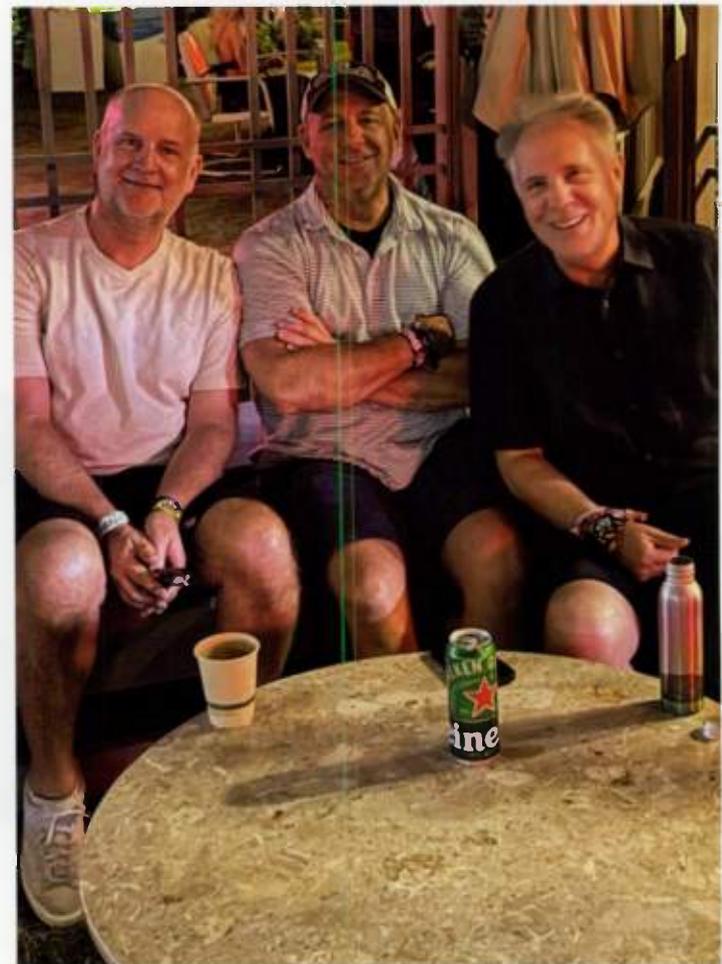
Is there a fear that too many people are being priced out of concerts and festivals, or do the numbers suggest otherwise?

I think most fans are currently not being priced out. Some obviously are, but it's no different from any



With AEG Presents SVP Global Touring Brett Williams and President Global Touring Rich Schaefer

"Morgan Wallen is a pivotal moment for us, the first true country act to headline Hyde Park, on July 4th, no less."



With AEG Presents EVP Shawn Trell and AEG Presents Chairman Jay Marciano

other cultural sector, be it sports or otherwise. Still, the concern is that some fans are being priced out of their second, third and fourth experience, not their primary experience.

Meaning that there's one festival that they won't miss no matter what, but then they're not going to the second or the third fest on the calendar?

Yes. They're certainly going to their top two festivals, but I think it's likely they're missing the third or fourth one. That data is still coming through. Obviously, we've got to see how what the impact is in '24.

Of course, there's a lot of talk about the price of tickets. That's understandable. But I hate that. I really do. I hate it when people talk about the price of tickets.

Why do you hate it?

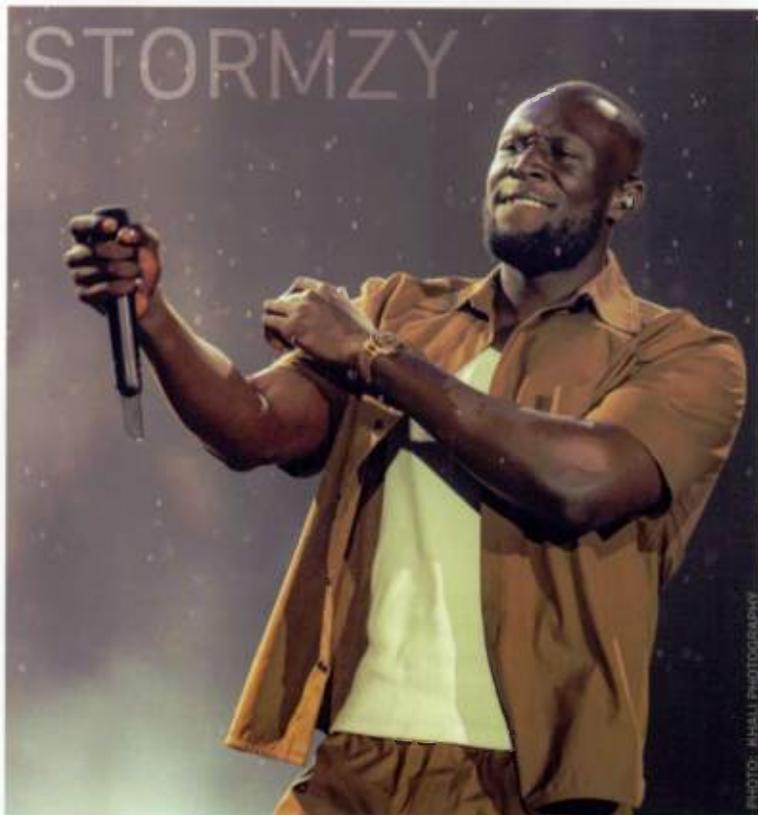
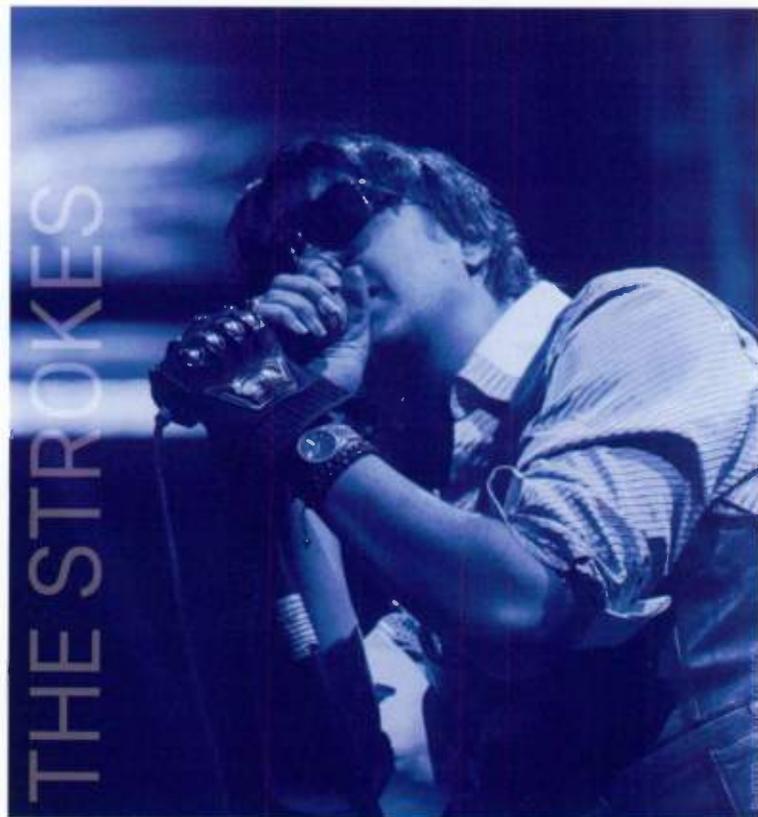
Because it's the value of the ticket that's important, not the price. If the value of the ticket is what it should be, the price is irrelevant. Whether it's a £59 ticket or an £89 ticket or £129 ticket, the question is, is it worth it? If a ticket is £129, and people walk out going, "I cannot wait to come back and do that again," then we got the value point right. We're always trying to make sure that we drive value in the experience for everyone: fans, stakeholders, artists, sponsors. Everything we do is trying to drive that value point as high as we can for everyone who's involved.

In addition to Hyde Park, you oversee Paris' Rock en Seine and London's All Points East festivals. How are those shaping up for 2024?

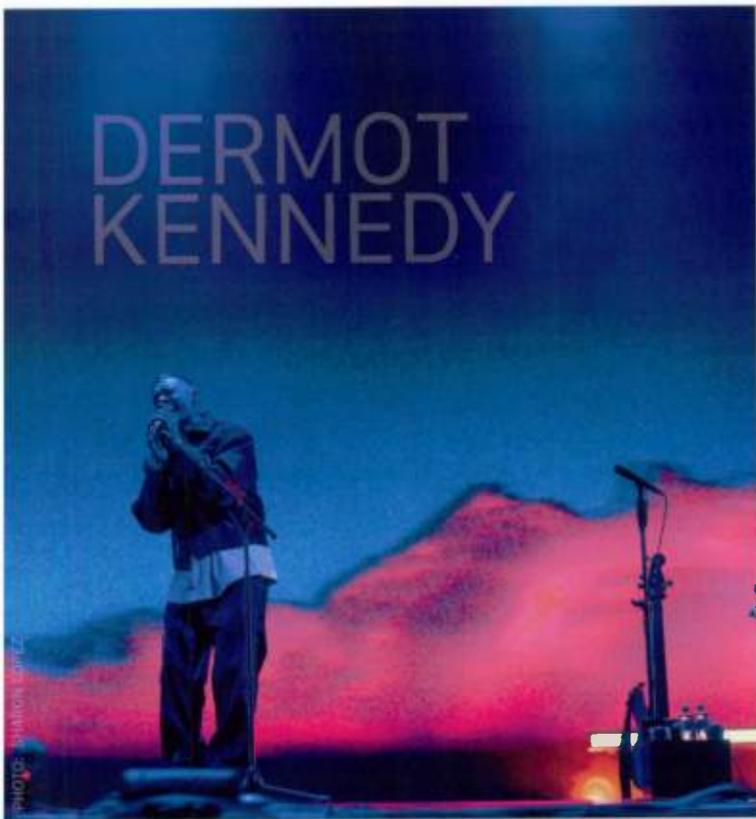
When AEG was brought into Rock en Seine five years ago, it was one of Europe's best-known festivals, but it needed updating. And the pause for COVID allowed that team to re-focus on what Rock en Seine 2.0 needed to be. I can't compliment them enough for the work they've done, and for being open to the changes that we wanted to make. We've increased the number of days. It's a broader church of music, to appeal to all

"Something magical happens when huge artists play their music in the middle of London in the summer in Hyde Park. I think that's why we have this very broad church of artists who want to play, and a very broad church of fans who want to experience those moments with them."

demographics. The original Rock en Seine fans are still very passionate about what takes place there, but there's also a new generation of fans coming through, which we saw last year with **Billie Eilish**. And we're seeing that again in 2024 with **Lana Del Rey** and **Fred**



Again.. But we also have **Massive Attack** headlining, who've played the festival three times prior. These events have to grow and evolve, but at the same time, we need to respect where they've come from and respect those fan groups who've stayed with them.



"We joke loosely that [Hyde Park is] the royal family's back garden. But it's really all of London's back garden."

Bristol, All Points East in London, Rock en Seine in Paris, Cala Mijas Festival in Spain and Kalorama Festival in Lisbon. This allowed those five events to become a coordinated booking opportunity for the artist community. It's helped the bookers, and it's also helped the agents, managers and artists route through a well-created run of important shows, which all speak to one another musically.

What role does environmental sustainability play in the planning of your festivals?

Sustainability is everything for us. Sustainability isn't a marketing criterion; it's a means of survival. The first rule of business is surviving, and running a sustainable business is the only way to do so.

For BST Hyde Park, we are the custodians of the event for the Royal Parks. It's their event. We produce it according to their criteria, to their beliefs and their vision. We joke loosely that it's the royal family's back garden. But it's really all of London's back garden. The very essence of what the Royal Parks stand for is the environmental protection of the park itself, and doing that in the most sustainable way possible. So how we operate as an event has to align with the core principles and beliefs of the Royal Parks as an organization.

Does the royal family ever pop in for a gig?

They've been known to, yeah.

Maybe they're big Morgan Wallen fans.

I mean, who isn't?

We've talked about so many brilliant acts that have performed at Hyde Park and across the AEG portfolio of festivals. Is there a white whale out there for you? An artist that you dream about one day being able to work with?

All promoters and bookers have a list. You tend to keep them secret.

Give me initials. How about initials, Jim?

No, no, I'll jinx it. Honestly, the great what-ifs aren't so much those who have yet to perform, but those who never did. We look back with such despair and disappointment that Prince never played BST Hyde Park, nor did George Michael or David Bowie. But we're blessed with the unbelievable array of performers who have played and will continue to. If you'd have asked me in 1989, standing at the door of Palmers Green Athletic Social Club, whether I would be working with artists of the likes of SZA and Morgan Wallen and Stevie Nicks, I certainly would never have believed it. ■



How has All Points East evolved?

When we first launched it, it took place in May. But now we've moved it to the same August weekend as Rock en Seine, which allowed us to create what we call the Camino run, which aligned Forwards in

Jennifer Knoepfle



The Top Publishers Department

BY CRAIG MARKS



he biggest album of 2024 is largely a UMPG affair.

On April 19, Taylor Swift, a Universal Music Publishing Group songwriter, released her 11th LP, *THE TORTURED POETS DEPARTMENT*.

As was the case with Swift's Grammy-winning *Midnights* album, her chief collaborator on *TORTURED POETS* is songwriter-producer Jack Antonoff, who, like Swift, is now a UMPG client, having followed his longtime publishing exec, Jennifer Knoepfle, when she left Sony Music Publishing to join UMPG as the pubco's co-head of U.S. A&R.

Knoepfle reunited with UMPG Chairperson/CEO Jody Gerson in 2022 after spending 13 years at Sony, with Gerson serving as her boss and mentor for about half of that tenure. At Sony, Knoepfle signed or developed such artists, writers and producers as Antonoff, Noah Kahan, Aaron Dessner, Daniel Nigro (Olivia Rodrigo), Tate McRae, Leon Bridges, Ariel Rechtshaid, BloodPop, WILLOW, King Princess, Lord Huron, Wallows and Maggie Rogers.

Since joining UMPG, a number of Knoepfle's songwriters, producers and artists followed her to the pubco, including Antonoff and his band, Bleachers, Rogers, Lord Huron and Wallows. She has also signed a number of major stars to UMPG like boygenius' Lucy Dacus and Dan Wilson (Adele, Chris Stapleton).

In addition to the Swift/Antonoff blockbuster, Knoepfle's UMPG spring slate included the new album from Rogers, the latest LP from Grammy Best New Artist nominee Gracie Abrams, a new David Kushner song, and Knoepfle and erstwhile UMPG A&R Co-Head David Gray's signing Danny L. Harle, a key producer on Dua Lipa's *Radical Optimism*.

After Gray was tapped to lead the pubco's U.K. office, Knoepfle earned

PHOTO: COURTESY UMPG



JENN KNOEPFLE AND JODY GERSON

a new title: head of U.S. A&R.

“As far as I am concerned,” says Gerson, “Jenn Knoepfle is one of the best music executives I have ever known. She has impeccable taste in music and deep belief in the songwriters and artists she signs. She commits to them and knows how to support and amplify their talents. She is also a tremendous leader, mentor and role model. I am so happy she is leading our A&R team in the U.S.”

I can't remember where I parked my car, but I can still remember every word to the songs I grew up

“In 2009, I went to Sony Music Publishing and worked with Jody for the first time. I was senior director of A&R. **My job at the time was to bring in bands that wrote everything themselves, 100%. And that felt great, because that's what I loved. But then as time went on, the music business was shifting dramatically, and so I had to learn how to diversify my skill set.**”

on. What were your jams when you were a teenager?

I grew up in Houston, but my parents moved to Orange County when I was 10. The two records I listened to pretty much nonstop as a teen were Red Hot Chili Peppers' *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* and the Beastie Boys' *Check Your Head*. Pearl Jam's *Ten* and Nirvana's *Nevermind* came out when I was 14, so grunge was a massive part of my life. And Guns N' Roses' *Use Your Illusion I and II* too. I also went to see tons of live music and was big into the OC ska and punk scenes. So in '92, I was definitely listening to *40 oz. to Freedom* by Sublime and the first No Doubt album. And then throw in Tori Amos' *Little Earthquakes*.

What was your path to turning that fandom into a career?

It was completely by chance. I had transferred from UC Santa Cruz to UCLA and was living in Orange County, about to graduate. I had a boyfriend who was in a band. He had just been signed to a label and he said, “I did this ASCAP showcase. They're looking to hire someone as a receptionist.” And I was like, “What's the ASCAP?” He's like, “It's a nonprofit organization and it basically helps bands get signed.” I thought that sounded cool because it was on the side of advocacy. This was 1999. It was only once I got into the job that I realized there could be a career path—before that, I'd always wanted to work in the movie business.



PHOTO: JESSE GRANT, GETTY IMAGES



Clockwise from top left: With Jack Antonoff; with ASCAP CEO Elizabeth Matthews and Gerson; with Nicholas Britell

And where did it lead?

I was a receptionist there for about a year, answering phones, probably 400 calls a day, plus greeting people coming in off the street. ASCAP was open to everyone. It was the first place a lot of songwriters went. After about nine months, two executives there, Wade Metzler and Jackey Simms, took a liking to me. We'd talked a lot about music. Their assistant left, so they hired me. They had really great taste in music, and they were bringing me

in on Black Rebel Motorcycle Club and The Strokes and The Hives, a lot of the bands that were starting to come out around 2001. They took me to shows, introduced me to a bunch of people. And I started to really feel like, "Hey, I can talk to these people. I'm into this. This is a dream." The idea that I could talk about music every single day was thrilling beyond belief. That's when it started to seem like maybe this could be an actual career.

A couple years later, Tom DeSavia started working there. Tom had been at Elektra. He became my boss and one of my first mentors. I worked with him for about eight years, and he was super-instrumental in my career. He was an early believer in my ability to connect with artists, and he felt I had the taste that could maybe cross into something pretty big. He saw things in me that I really couldn't see in myself.

What was it about your taste that he appreciated?

He knew I was a music lover and I embraced music of all kinds. He appreciated that he could talk to me about Brian Eno, about X, about The Go-Go's. And he knew that I just really cared.

And then from ASCAP, you went to Sony?

Yes, in 2009, I went to Sony Music Publishing and worked with Jody for the first time. I was senior director of A&R. My job at the time was to bring in bands that wrote everything themselves, 100%. And that felt great, because that's what I loved. But then as time went on, the music business was shifting dramatically, and so I had to learn how to diversify my skill set.

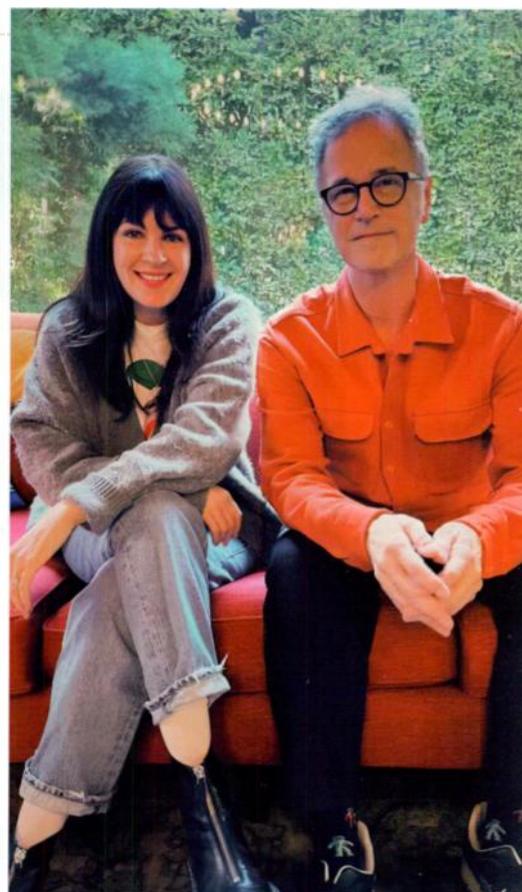
What did that entail?

Working with producers was really the thing that changed my trajectory. Understanding how to work with a producer versus an artist who's writing everything and doesn't collaborate. And what I was most interested in, from the production side, were people who had been in bands and were able to do the whole thing. They could write a topline, they could produce an album, they could play an instrument. It was exciting to think about how



PHOTO: COURTESY OF UMG

From left: With Alexandra Lioutikoff, David Gray, Elena Rose and Gerson; with Dan Wilson



“Market share is important, of course. We have to keep it in mind. But I don’t want that to be my driving factor. Because if we’re looking at things quarter to quarter, it’s very difficult to make good decisions about being in business with people over the long term.”

those people could work in more of a pop setting, because I wasn’t terribly interested in being niche. I wanted to have big success, but back then, I knew I couldn’t put together a session with, say, five people.

I presume you can do that now.

Yeah, now I can. But I don’t necessarily want to. I can certainly do it for artists who want that, but I wouldn’t say that’s what makes me happy.

How long were you with Sony?

From 2009 to 2022. By the time I left, I was SVP of A&R. I had been the head of A&R, I’d been the co-head of A&R, then there was no head of A&R. The leadership changed multiple times when I was there. Marty Bandier ran the company for much of the time

I worked there. Then Jody was my boss for six years. Then Rick Krim was my boss for a minute, and then Jon Platt became my boss. Along the way, a lot of things shifted.

How would you compare the culture at Sony to that of Universal?

At Universal, A&R is at the center of every decision. Everything we do is centered around, “Do we feel this artist or this songwriter is going to be important for a long time? Are we the people who are going to be able to help this person get to where they want to be? Are we the right fit?” And Jody has built one of the best rosters in the entire business. Even when I was at Sony, I was looking at Universal and like, “Oh my God, this artist roster is absolutely insane.”

I mean, Billie Eilish, Taylor Swift, Lana Del Rey, Ariana Grande, Drake, Metro Boomin, Kendrick Lamar, Harry Styles, Rosalia, SZA. The most important artists of the last 10 years are at this company.

When I was at Sony, we were always trying to figure out how to get our writers and producers on to those projects. I had a great experience at Sony, but when we merged with EMI, we went from being a small company to a very, very large company. What does it mean to be part of this company? What is our focus?

The difference I see here is that there is a lot of focus around “What are we trying to achieve? What are the things that are going to be meaningful in the next 10 or 20 years?” It’s quite deliberate in terms of how we approach A&R, which I think is a very good strategy, because it doesn’t really burn your A&R team to the ground.

When we were at Sony, Jody used to say, “Everything we do here has to count. You can’t hide anything under the rug. Everything has to work.” Now, obviously, everything is not going to work. But I think that’s an important intention when you approach something, especially now where we don’t really have a lot of metrics guiding us into who’s going to be meaningful for 10 years. You have to lean into your A&R skills and your gut, to be like, “I see something in this person. I see what my place could be in helping them achieve their goals and we can take action

on those things.”

When I got here, I really liked that we had conversations about A&R, versus, like, “Oh, that person has a piece of a song. We should get that because we have to maintain market share.” Now, market share is important, of course. We have to keep it in mind. But I don’t want that to be my driving factor. Because if we’re looking at things quarter to quarter, it’s very difficult to make good decisions about being in business with people over the long term.

Is there a particular artist who exemplifies the values you’re talking about?

I always talk about Jack Antonoff, because he and I have had a really long-term relationship. He was at Sony and then came over to UMPG a few months back. We worked together from a very early part of his life, particularly in his production phase. I saw qualities in him that made me think, “I want to be on a journey with this person. I feel like he is going to be relevant in 10 years.”

How’d you first come to work with him?

Through Fun. I was a big fan. I wanted to sign them on the first record, but it wasn’t the right time. But it actually turned out fantastic, because when I sat with Jack, he was like, “Fun is a really important part of my life,



LESTER COHEN

With Emily Kennedy, Gray, Stephen Sanchez, Gerson and Richard Cohen at the 2023 UMG Artist Showcase; Sony/ATV days with Rick Krim, songwriter Joel Little and manager Ashley Page

“At Universal. **A&R is at the center of every decision.** Everything we do is centered around. Do we feel this artist or this songwriter is going to be important for a long time? Are we the people who are going to be able to help this person get to where they want to be? Are we the right fit? And Jody has built one of the best rosters in the entire business.”



PHOTO: MEGAN CHAN

Top: Gerson, Braeden Lemasters, Dylan Minnette, Knoepfle, Andrew Friedman and Cole Preston during Wallows signing, 2024; bottom: with Gerson, Deeba Abrishamchi, Anna Miller, Gene Gaffney, Nevin Sanitsky and Alessia Cusumano

but I have all these other aspirations. And what I would really love to do is produce and write for other people.”

Was there an inkling that he was going to become arguably the premier producer of his generation?
I don't even think I could have conceptualized something so amazing. But he was so committed to what he wanted to do that I just felt like he was going to do it. Beyond his talent, he also had the personality. He was great with people. He was great at making relationships. And he was great at *keeping* relationships.

What's the secret sauce Jack brings to a session?
He's just so passionate about music and exploration, and he approaches it in almost a childlike way. He brings so much optimism to the studio. And he's truly collaborative as a partner. I think people really respond to that. They don't feel like there's an agenda being pushed. It's just a joyous collaboration. He's also just great with people. He's really thoughtful, and he's really disarming. And he loves to chat. He would come into a room, and everybody would always be like, "Oh my God, Jack's here, I love talking to him." He always has great insights.

You were at an A&R conference in Nashville a few weeks ago. What was the gist of that?
We do them every year. I think it's important to set the table for the current year, but also get people on

the same page. I'm big on creating culture around the company and within the team. This is an extremely collaborative business. And in order to be as good as we can be, we have to support each other. Our writers sign with one person, but I want to build a community here for them. Publishing is a team sport. A win for someone else on your team is going to be a win for you. It's a win for me.

What are the musical trends that you're seeing right now that are interesting to you, even outside of your own roster?
I'm excited to see fans engaging with the whole picture.

How do you mean?
COVID put us in a really weird place: You couldn't physically interact with the artists that you loved. You couldn't see them at an in-store, you couldn't go to a show. You could engage with them through a digital platform, but that only goes so far. Because what draws people together on top of the music is being part of a community. You might have an online community, of course. But it cannot replace going to a live show and seeing all your friends there, that whole communal experience that comes with music. People are really coming back to that.

And I think that's why we're seeing artists like Noah Kahan or boygenius winning right now. They're quite intimate in how they're sharing themselves and their lives, and at the same time, they're creating community and friendships. I work with Maggie Rogers, and for her, the live thing is incredible. Going to her shows is almost a spiritual experience for her fans.

Since you mentioned Noah Kahan and boygenius, do you think there's been a resurgence of "singer-songwriter" music?
For sure. Zach Bryan too; people are really gravitating to him. I would say that people are excited by artists who are able to translate their story to fans. Even Miley Cyrus—she's obviously a huge pop star, but "Flowers" seemed like it told her story. Fans want to be a part of people's stories, and they want to see themselves in those stories. After COVID and lockdowns and masks, there's a desire for connection. We had three years where there was a wall between fans and artists.

Let's talk about TikTok as an A&R tool. Compared to the role it played in A&R a few years ago, has TikTok peaked?
It's still where the action is, the place to discover new artists and songs. But what's different is that the industry is looking beyond the virality of one record. There has to be something more behind it. For a while it was, "Let's just pick up this viral record from TikTok and hope for the best."

Was that really the mindset?
I think so. Certainly during COVID, when you really had no other metrics to go by. Now you can see if artists are selling tickets, you can see if they actually have fans. You can also go see them: Can they sing? Can they per-



With Nick Bral, Will Skalmoski, Thomas Krottinger, Sam Drake, Jon Platt and Katie Welle

form? And you can meet them. Do they have charisma? Do they have ambition?

What are your conversations like with your songwriters and producers regarding AI? How scared are they?

A lot of them aren't scared. Maybe they should be! I think we're all learning in real time what the repercussions or benefits of AI can be. I don't get a lot of people panicking or being super-excited. It's more of a wait-and-see attitude, to figure out the negatives and positives.

Do you see positives?

Hmmm. I haven't seen a demonstration of AI where I felt really positive, let's put it that way. I was not stoked by the fake Drake and The Weeknd song. Broadly, in our culture, I don't love the erosion of trust in what is real versus what is not, whether it's a song or a photograph.

Since you talk a lot to young songwriters and producers, how are their perspectives different from those of the young songwriters or producers you talked to just four or five years ago? Are they just so immersed in technology and so online that it's hard to relate to them, or do they still value the

same bedrock qualities of craft and emotion that have always informed a good song?

The producers I work with want to have a place in the culture, be relevant for a long period of time and do things that they feel matter.

What do you value most in your boss and co-workers: Jody, COO Mark Cimino and co-head of A&R David Gray in particular?

Obviously, Jody and I have had a long relationship. Eight years had passed between us working together. She'd gone on to become the chief executive of a company. I went on to be a head of A&R. Each of us was doing our thing. So coming to UMPG, I was really excited to see how our relationship had grown. And she's delivered on absolutely everything that she'd said this would be.

Mark is like the North Star—he's just steady. He's a family man. He's really caring and collaborative. We share a similar musical background, so we align on a lot of artists that we love: the Chili Peppers, Wilco, Tom Petty, artists like that.

And then David is just the best partner I could have in terms of a co-head of A&R, because he and I do very different things musically. He would say, "I do



"I'd never worked at a woman-led company, and towards the end of my tenure at Sony, I started to feel that that was very important to me. It's so hard for women to get into positions of power in the business, and I wanted to put my money where my mouth is. I wanted to work with a woman."

the most commercial music on Earth, and you do the cool kid stuff,” and we would both laugh. We actually did our first signing together this year with an amazing producer named **Danny L Harle**, who worked on the upcoming **Dua Lipa** record and has worked with **Caroline Polachek**. David had been here eight years when I arrived, and I could have come into a situation where I was met with a lot of resistance. David was the absolute opposite. He was like, “I’m so happy you’re here. Let’s work together. Let’s be a team.” And that’s how it’s been ever since. We talk multiple times a day. But I love that the CFO, the COO, the head of admin, the chairman, are all in this building together. I love that. It’s really great to have access to all those people literally across the hall. I want to learn from the best people in business.

Do you think there’s a difference working at a woman-led company?

Yes. It’s subtle. I think the best way to put it is that there’s a shared understanding. I’d never worked at a woman-led company, and towards the end of my tenure at Sony, I started to feel that that was very important to me. It’s so hard for women to get into positions of power in the business, and I wanted to put my money where my mouth is. I wanted to work with a woman. I wanted to work at a place where not only do we have a chairwoman, but where the head of Latin is a woman [**Alexandra Lioutikoff**] and where our head of sync is a woman [**Marni Condro**].

I don’t want to generalize, but I do feel that a more collaborative spirit exists here. And I also think that women can multitask better than men.

I am a parent to an eight-year-old boy, and I’ve always worked for family-friendly bosses. Certainly, no one has ever asked me to put my child aside to do my job. But you start to become very cognizant when you look at the lives of people at the top of the companies and think, “That’s not my situation. I don’t have a partner who stays at home and raises my children. I have a husband who has an equally demanding job. I have to balance family and work.” I don’t know that you can really explain that to someone who’s never had that experience.

Do you think a lot about work-life balance?

All the time. I have to make sure that I can take good care of myself and my family. Which then helps me be of greater service to the artists, writers and producers who are trying to realize their dreams.

Is it fair to say that the publishing business may be more female-friendly than the label side?

Definitely.

At the risk of sounding reductionist, is there something about being a woman that meshes well with the part of your gig where you’re nurturing young talent?

It’s really difficult to talk about it without generalizing. But yes, I think you’re correct that there are some attributes of womanhood that lend themselves more to caring for others.

Which doesn’t mean you’re not just as aggressive or fiercely committed...

Absolutely. I think the qualities that women carry are actually our superpowers. I learned along the way that those “female” attributes were powerful, and they could be harnessed and make you incredible at your job. When I had my baby, I realized I could do anything. I’m like, “I’ll hire any mom. They can do literally anything.” I came out of it feeling empowered to take on anything. And I’m a competitive person. I’ve always played sports.

Do you still?

Yep. I play tennis. My husband’s always like, “You should meditate.” I’m like, “I don’t meditate, I play tennis.” Because it’s the same thing. It’s the ability to focus on one thing for a period of time, free of distractions.

How often do you go out after work to see shows, to meet artists? Do you try to keep it all within the context of your day, or is that just impossible?

That’s impossible. I would say that I’m probably out a few nights a week. It’s still a really important part of the business. It’s a great networking thing. Last night, for example, I went to see **Maggie Rogers** and then to the **Justin Timberlake** underplay at the **Wiltern**.

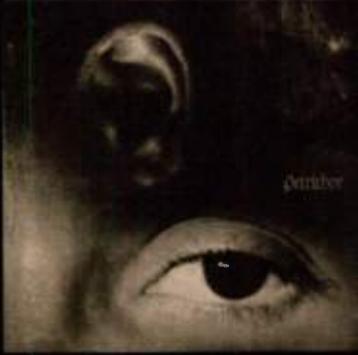
My days are long, but this is the lifestyle business and I love it. Most of the time it doesn’t feel like work. ■



Top: With **Krim**, **Amanda Berman** and **Marty Bandier**; bottom: with **Mike Mills**, **Gerson**, **Marc Cimino** and **Evan Lamberg**

PHOTO: COURTESY OF UMPQUA

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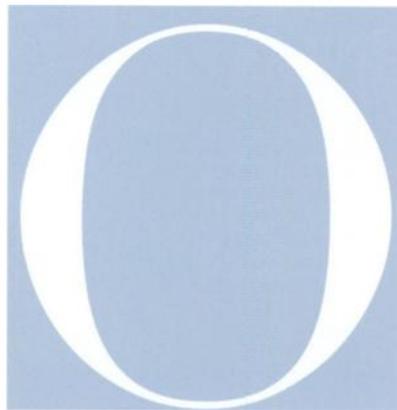
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Stem's Milana Lewis and Kristin Graziani

Unfucking the Music Industry

BY SIMON GLICKMAN



nce upon a time, distribution wasn't even remotely sexy. It was the province of guys named Morty and the subject of dry-as-dust articles in the back of *Billboard*. But times have changed, and the new ecosystem has foregrounded the importance of distro companies not only as avenues for game-changing indie acts but as primary discovery engines for the entire biz. It's hard to think of two players who exemplify the dynamic new phase of the sector more than Stem CEO Milana Lewis and President Kristin Graziani, who have, along with

KRISTIN CRAZIANI AND MILANA LEWIS



their nimble team, played a key role in helping to break several acts, including Veeze, Chappell Roan, HARDY, Mk.gee, bbno\$ and Justine Skye—and remain on the cutting edge of what's next in the biz. Meanwhile, the company's new product, Tone, is streamlining royalty and accounting processes, further bolstering artists' teams regardless of their resources.

You've stated that one of your company's goals was to "unfuck the music industry." What in particular needed to be unfucked?

MILANA LEWIS: We started out by asking people, both internally and externally, "Why are people so frustrated with the music business? What are the things that create the sense of unfairness that exists between artists and labels? What is the crux of all the drama?" We believe it comes down to the fact that no one really knows what they're worth. People have no idea how much money their music makes, how much money is being invested in them, what the return is.

So how do we get people looking at the same information? How do we give people access to earnings data faster, and make sure that not just the label has that data but that the artist, the manager, the songwriter and the producer all see what their share is? That information is really important, because it determines not only how much money they're making but how much you can advance to them, how much they can draw down, how much they can continue to reinvest. And later, when it comes to building their business and deciding if they want to sell their catalog, they can make the right decisions based on knowing what that catalog is and what their share of it is worth. So just having that information on both sides makes conversations fairer and allows for more stability.

You have two businesses, Tone and Stem. Can you explain the differences?

KRISTIN GRAZIANI: Stem pioneered the splits feature, and pre-2019 no one else was offering a way to autopay collaborators, though that has changed now. This attracted all types of artists to the platform—we had literally tens of thousands of artists using Stem. But we weren't working hard enough for our fee, and we had to make a decision: Do we want to service the long tail and create tools for everyone, or do we want to double down

"We built Stem because big-name independent artists didn't have a place where they could get their music up and get someone on the phone to help them." —Milana Lewis



Lewis and Graziani

on these career artists, over-deliver and drive more value than the points that we're taking? We knew that we wanted to make splits and other payment tools available to anyone, but you can't scale distribution services and provide a premium experience to the top talent, you have to be exclusive there. So it made the most sense to separate the offerings and brand them individually.

LEWIS: Tone also came out of labels and artists who can't distribute with Stem—because they are tied up in existing deals—coming to us because they wanted to offer the Stem dashboard experience to their artists: the monthly payments, clear reporting and insights. So we imagined and built a royalty platform that can handle any type of complex royalty deals, taking the splits product we built for Stem much further and making it accessible to anyone. Stem is, by design, a very curated distribution offering. We built Stem because big-name independent artists and managers didn't have a place where they could get their music up and get someone on the phone to help them.

Can you explain the upside of being a curated distributor and how that has allowed you to structure the business?

GRAZIANI: Once we pared down our artist base for the distribution business and chose those career artists with strong management teams, we started assembling the right services around them. First, we put into place our artist-servicing team, a team of artist reps whose role is to shepherd the artists and their teams through the Stem experience. The second function we built was our editorial and commerce team. We see a lot of the success here because we're super-curated, and the platforms look at us as tastemakers. It's a no-brainer for them to plug our artists into their playlists. The third piece we layered on came as a result of us losing some amazing artists to major labels and major-label-distributed businesses. Obviously artists need money to fund their career. And we needed a way to fund them. So in 2020, we launched our first advance facility, which enabled us to give artists advances—in some cases seven-digit advances.

To make sure we deployed that money effectively, we brought on Seth Faber from Primary Wave, who's now our GM. He spent decades in the marketing space and essentially defined what artist market-



Clockwise from top left: Sheila DeMoura of Right Click Culture, Graziani, Stem's Natalie Sellers, Colture's Kylie Everitt, bbno\$ and Stem's Lexi Roney; Drew Baldridge and Stem's Alison Junker; Colture's Paris Kirk and Sellers, Everitt, Nixon Peabody's Carron Joan Mitchell, Pulse's Ashley Calhoun, Brent Faiyaz, Lewis, Colture's Jayne Andrew and Ty Baisden

ing is for Stem. We weren't going to do it the same way that everyone else did it.

LEWIS: One thing here that we haven't mentioned yet is that when Kristin and I thought about who we were actually servicing as our client, we decided that managers were our core customers. We saw that most A&R was being driven by managers, because major labels and the label subsidiaries weren't placing as much early investment in artists. Noah Assad was the manager for Bad Bunny and started a label around him. Seth England started Big Loud for all the music that Joey Moi and Craig Wiseman were creating, which led to Morgan Wallen and HARDY and ERNEST.

If I'm a manager coming to you with my act and looking at various services that you're providing—distribution, data, marketing, etc.—what are the fees like?

GRAZIANI: We're starting at 10% for front-line. In many cases, when we're winning label business or really big catalog business, we can discount further. And then, when an artist wants to take money, they might come to us and say, "I want the largest check possible," and that 10% rate could go up to upwards of 50%. It really depends on how much they're drawing down.

You described the advances as more like a line of credit. How is it different

from the kind of advance that artists would get in the old days?

GRAZIANI: Generally speaking, we can't write the biggest check, and we're aware of that. It's probably our weakest spot—and potentially our biggest area for growth as well. So we have to get really creative in terms of how we make deals, and the facility we have in place allows for that. So, for instance, instead of saying we're going to sign the next three albums, we might say, "Hey, we want to get into business with you, so we're going to sign one EP or a few singles here and there just to get started". And then we'll re-up on projects. And a lot of the business we get on the advance side is artists coming to us drawing down a certain amount of money, and we then over-deliver, and they have the ability to draw down more money even before it's recouped.

It's not one and done, and deals can re-up accordingly, and we're constantly rewarding artists for that as well.

LEWIS: I describe it as us being at war for the best talent, but we have a water gun and everyone else has a machine gun. We will get more ammo, but for now we are very crafty with our water gun and still win at times.

Everyone has access to the same data and A&R, but you guys have a great track record in picking artists right before they blow up. What's the secret?

LEWIS: We actually make the bet on the manager or label owner. We've been really grateful to have become the go-to platform for a number of early successful ventures that have launched global superstars founded by managers. Turns out when you give smart people great tools and surround them with other strategic thinkers that can augment their existing relationships, you create the right ecosystem for growth. Our flexibility, agility and fast feedback allows them to make the right moves. It's why we were the early home

of Rimas, R&R Digital, Keel, Big Loud, Hundred Days, SOTA and Lost Kids.

Do any recent examples of artists who have utilized the data and put Stem's tools into practice to create breakout moments stand out?

GRAZIANI: Many of our partners—managers, labels and artists—leverage our custom data visualizations to make decisions. Additionally, our team of artist-marketing strategists works with them to ensure we are acting accordingly on specific passion indicators. We were there, for instance, to help Justine Skye capture the moment on "Collide" when it became clear the track was having a TikTok revival. We worked with her team across digital marketing and commerce to eventually generate TikTok's most used song of 2023 in the U.S. As Brent Faiyaz and Ty Baisden were creatively and strategically building their artist and label profiles, they were able to utilize Stem's splits

"We had literally thousands of artists using Stem. But we weren't working hard enough for our points, and we had to make a decision: Do we want to service the long tail and create tools for everyone, or do we want to double down on these career artists, over-deliver and drive more value than the points that we're taking?" — Kristin Graziani



Clockwise from left: Graziani and Lewis with Stem's Seth Faber; Lewis with Black Coffee; Graziani and Lewis with artist Justine Skye



Clockwise from top left: Team Stem at Spotify's Best New Artist 2024 event: Faber, Graziani, Didi Purcell, Lewis, Nima Khalilian, Sellers and Everitt; artist Sinead Harnett with Khalilian; Stem's Robert Davin and Jeremy Rice with artist Duckwrth; Graziani, Stem's Matt Stroud, Rice, Bre Harper, Sellers, London Hamilton, Lewis and Roney with the Recording Academy's Len Brown and Veeze and pals

“We decided that managers were our core customers. We saw that most A&R was being driven by managers, because major labels and the label subsidiaries weren’t placing as much investment in early artists.” — Milana Lewis

to provide creative deal structures that allowed Brent to engage with collaborators, from producers like No I.D. to artists like Drake and Tyler, The Creator.

LEWIS: It’s been incredibly rewarding to hear from people like Dion (No ID) Wilson about how he’s made more money from Stem on his share of the songs he worked on with Brent than any other collaboration—and this man has worked with JAY-Z. We know other collaborators were able to buy houses and get approved for mortgages because they could show consistent monthly earnings from Stem. It’s changing people’s lives like this that fuels us.

Over the last nine years, Stem has been a launchpad for some huge art-

ists: Bad Bunny, Justine Skye, Brent Falyaz, Morgan Wallen, Chappell Roan, to name some. Can you speak to how Stem’s approach to distribution empowered these artists to develop into stars?

GRAZIANI: We start with a diagnostic approach to each artist and identify where we think the points of audience connection are or can be and action accordingly. Here are a few very tactical examples: With bbno\$, we’ve ensured we are maximizing gaming and Internet-culture editorial and influencer marketing. With Chappell Roan we directed our energy toward evangelizing to gatekeepers in the LGBTQ community, securing her early looks like Spotify’s Out Now (now Glow). We partnered with Rachel Platten to

host an intimate dinner for influential industry moms who, upon learning of and relating to Rachel’s own experience balancing motherhood, music, and mental health, have committed to supporting her forthcoming album. We leveraged early TikTok passion indicators to secure a significant marketing commitment for Tucker Wetmore from the TikTok music team. We warmed up Pop radio for Charlotte Lawrence with our partners at Lakeside Entertainment to boost her touring value as she plots a new project for the fall. The list goes on, but the strategy is the same: Understand which tactics will expand an artist’s audience or further engage the existing fan base in a way that authentically and intrinsically embodies that artist.

Regarding Tone, walk us through the royalty process.

LEWIS: Most royalty software, like Curve or SR1 or Music Maestro, handles the calculations, but there's a lot of work that happens before and after that. And that's really where we're differentiated: We've built the before-and-after.

The before piece, which we call pre-calculations, is the gathering of legal, expense and revenue data. Chasing this down is gruesome and feels like navigating a hellish maze, but you can't do any calculations without it. We see a huge opportunity in making Tone the one place that houses not only this data but facilitates all of the workflows between managers, lawyers, project managers, finance, marketing—the whole team.

And then what has gotten us a lot of praise is that we enable post-calculations. We have a simple interface for statements to be reviewed and edited. Once they are approved, Tone sends them out to every payee and invites them into a dashboard to review the statements in any format, including very easy-to-read charts and graphs. Tone also sends the funds and manages all the banking and tax information of the payees for the label. We've heard from clients how much time we save them and how we enable them to get rid of two or three other software apps they were previously using to manage all three steps of the royalty process.

What's the response been like?

The part that we get the most praise for is the data and insights. The label can see the status of each contract, how close it is to being recouped. So if that artist comes back and says, "Hey, I need money for tour support," they can very quickly see how far into debt they are, and if they can give them more money relative to what they're making. The artists, producers and songwriters can see when they're going to get paid back, proximity to recoupment, how a song is tracking in different territories across different platforms. They see all of the marketing insights as well. If you're making an investment in one project and then you have another release that's somewhat similar, you can look back and see: What did we spend? How did it work? Which vendors did we use? Should we use them again? And all of that information can be accessed by people outside of the finance team.

What were you doing prior to Stem, Milana?



Tone execs and Brad Bennett and Brendan Kao

"A lot of the success we have today is because we're super-curated, and the platforms look at us as tastemakers. It's a no-brainer for them to plug our artists into their playlists." — Kristin Graziani

LEWIS: I was a talent agent at UTA, the first person hired on the digital-media side, when people had no idea what that role meant in 2010. I would identify new platforms that our clients should be using to better connect with their fans, and how to leverage Instagram and Twitter to market their movies and TV shows.

As people became more comfortable with these digital platforms and wanted to go more direct to their fans, I focused on, well, if a client wanted to do something outside of a studio or a network or a label, how would they do it? And that's really where I discovered how fucked up the music business was, because so many clients wanted to self-release and couldn't. There weren't great services to self-release through. There were software players like Tunecore and DistroKid, which were fine, but if you're releasing

music on behalf of a huge artist, you need someone on the phone, right?

There wasn't anything in the middle. And that's when I thought, there should be an app that not only distributes the content but can also split the payments, because the artists I'm working with need to pay songwriters and producers. And that's how we came up with the initial concept for Stem.

When Kristin spoke earlier about making sure that we were always adding more value than the points that we were taking, that really speaks to her understanding of how you price things correctly relative to what it costs you to serve, relative to what the customer's expectations are, so that everyone's happy.

And that's why we win. It's not that we're the cheapest option. But we are the fairest and the most right-sized, relative to what we're contributing. ■

WARNER MUSIC NASHVILLE
CONGRATULATES
CODY JOHNSON



2024 CMA ALBUM OF THE YEAR

LEATHER



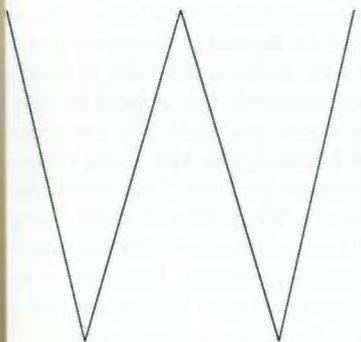




MONTE AND AVERY LIPMAN

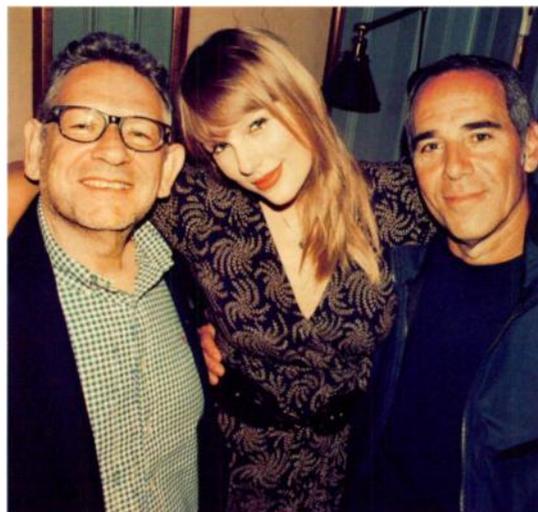
CORPS Values

BY SIMON GLICKMAN



e conducted the following interview with Monte and Avery Lipman after their Republic label's blockbuster 2023. Since then, they've expanded their reach as the heads of UMG's REPUBLIC CORPS, the label group that includes their own label and affiliated Mercury, Imperial and other imprints as well as Island (which itself has had a stunningly great year) and Def Jam. Since this conversation, Taylor Swift has dropped the juggernaut album *THE TORTURED POETS DEPARTMENT* and Post Malone delivered his country monster *F-1 Trillion*, while Jelly Roll—thanks to a pact with Jon Loba's Broken Bow—turned in his first set for the company; meanwhile, Morgan Wallen (via Seth England's Big Loud), The Weeknd, Ariana Grande, Nicki Minaj, Noah Kahan, Metro Boomin's projects with Future and Swift's catalog have continued to put big points on the board and Island stars Sabrina Carpenter and Chappell Roan have run the table. As the opening of the company's new Nashville office underscores, Republic has quickly become a force in Music City with country music at its hot test. All of which has given the CORPS a commanding lead in current label market share. Indeed, a recent *HITS* Top 50 with seven titles in Top 10 under the Lipmans' umbrella was not terribly unusual.

The Lipmans, as students of the biz are aware, started the label in 1995, drawing up plans at the dining-room table of their tiny apartment on NYC's Upper East Side. We asked the brothers about the secret sauce of their success, the state of the biz, streaming, radio, fan focus and more. They asked us if we would ever stop making Chumbavamba jokes. The answer was no.



Clockwise from top left: Monte, Morgan Wallen, Big Loud chief Seth England, Avery and Mercury's Tyler Arnold; Monte with Sir Lucian Grainge and Taylor Swift; Avery, Republic Co-Presidents Wendy Goldstein and Jim Roppo and Monte

What's your assessment of where things are at the company right now?

MONTE: We're incredibly grateful for the artists and executives we get to work with every day. This past year was definitely gratifying, but we're never satisfied; it's our strength and our curse that we're never satisfied. We're already thinking about what's next and how we continue to grow and go even bigger. We've never done a very good job of taking a victory lap. That's not our *ethos*, to use a word Lenny likes to tease me about. It's really just about the focus and the determination. But most importantly, we are inspired by the incredible artists we work with and the music they create.

Let's start with Taylor Swift.

The success of Taylor Swift is absolutely unprecedented. The impact she's made on the music industry, the touring industry, the film industry is unparalleled. From my perspective and experience with Taylor, her focus, determination and pursuit of excellence inspires the people who work with her. The imagination and discipline, as we go into every campaign, every initiative, starts and ends with Taylor's vision, plain and simple.

She's been delivering content at a staggering pace. How do you approach that?

When we get the call, we're ready to mobilize. There's a tremendous sense of flexibility going into every campaign, and no detail is too small in terms of our discussions.

Another of the giant acts you've fielded in the last couple of years is Morgan Wallen. What can you say about him, as well as Big Loud and Mercury?

You've gotta start with Big Loud, because it's a strategic alliance. They are fiercely



independent and operate with tremendous autonomy. And over the last couple of years with Tyler Arnold at Mercury, we've forged this relationship and are able to provide premium services to help expand Morgan's audience around the world. The credit goes to Seth England, Joey Moi, Craig Wiseman and the team at Big Loud. They are the outliers of Nashville. When you talk about changing the paradigm of a business, the way they operate is incredibly inspiring. Because they have a fresh perspective on the marketplace and it's clearly had a tremendous impact.

Do you see American country music gaining a foothold outside the U.S.?

AVERY: I think for Morgan, in particular, you have to strip away the genres. I mean, he's just *popular*—one of the most popular artists in America. It's been really great to see a lot of the traditional markets—Canada, the U.K., Australia—step up in a pretty significant way. But we're committed to growing Morgan around the world. It's gonna take some time.



TEXAS

Blake Shelton

BIGGEST RADIO ADD DAY OF HIS CAREER
156 FIRST-WEEK STATIONS

3RD BIGGEST
RADIO ADD DATE IN THIS DECADE

LARGEST RADIO ADD WEEK
IN BBR MUSIC GROUP / BMG NASHVILLE HISTORY

"SONICALLY, 'TEXAS' BREAKS NEW GROUND FOR SHELTON,
REDEFINING HIS SOUND BY EXPLORING FRESH CREATIVE BOUNDARIES."

COUNTRY
-NOW-

HEADLINING FRIENDS & HEROES TOUR IN 2025
"LIVE IN LAS VEGAS" RESIDENCY FEB 2025

BBR
MUSIC GROUP

WHEELHOUSE
RECORDS

BMG

WR

"IT'S OUR STRENGTH AND OUR CURSE THAT WE'RE NEVER SATISFIED." —MONTE LIPMAN

But to say he's simply a country artist? Again, he's just a popular artist.

The genre distinctions certainly seem less significant to a worldwide audience driven by streaming.

MONTE: One thing we've always taken tremendous pride in is that, when you look at our roster, we will never pigeonhole an act in terms of genre. It's so antiquated to even think in those terms. Acts on our roster touch so many different formats.

We've all been conditioned by traditional terrestrial radio, and that was always niche programming. When you look at some of the streaming charts, none of it makes any sense through that lens—there's no continuity, even in terms of language; you've got songs in Korean, Spanish... It's all over the map.

While we're on the subject, let's talk about the K-pop phenomenon and your ventures into it. What sorts of things have you had to reassess as you've approached working in this sector?

We've got amazing long-standing relationships with the companies in the forefront of K-pop. These strategic alliances, including with HYBE and JYP, operate with complete independence. The way they've approached the market is different from anything we've done in America.

Their bespoke strategies are wildly successful because they go way beyond just recorded music and sales. You can see this with fan engagement, tours and merchandise, which has forced us to think differently in the American marketplace. We're creating similar programs to incite fan engagement,

which is very refreshing. I'm always a student of the game, and I'm fascinated by how these companies have made such an impact on the paradigm of our business.

What are fans engaging with if hit songs aren't leading the process?

For lack of a better description, it's like group chats—online communities come together and they're completely invested in these artists, in their every move. There's some similarity to *Tiger Beat* and magazines like that when we were growing up—talking about who's the most popular, those watercooler moments. But the technology is much more sophisticated and the reach is much greater. It's not just one region; it's become a global phenomenon. The ability to find those like-minded individuals and come together in groups—that loyalty and support is critical, so it's part of our conversations.



Top: Avery and the inimitable Nicki Minaj; Kahan-do spirit (l-r): Avery, managers Ryan Langlois and Drew Simmons, Mercury's Ben Adelson, Kahan, Republic/Mercury's Alex Coslov, Mercury's Tyler Arnold, Republic's Jim Roppo and Monte

**WHERE SONGWRITERS
ARE HEARD.**



What are you seeing in terms of how audiences are discovering music?

AVERY: Discovery is definitely evolving to be more personalized. I think the infrastructure of the business has gotten a lot more accurate, so we don't necessarily have to cast the widest net anymore; we can be more focused and still reach those core fans. Right now, it feels very much about the narrative, storytelling, making a connection. Streaming has done wonders for the industry, of course, but there's more—what else is there besides a stream? A stream is great, but there's a whole lot more an artist can provide to a fan. You see this in the resurgence of vinyl, which has continued to perform and grow, and obviously in touring and live experiences, which are resonating more strongly now.

Let's talk about streaming. What's your perspective on some of the recent developments regarding Spotify and other DSPs' reevaluation not only of monetization but of what music is going to be prioritized and how that's navigated?

Streaming has been around for over 10 years, so it feels like it's time for the business and economics to evolve; the business is different

now from when streaming first started, so it's certainly time to reevaluate. Innovating the way artists are compensated is just one example, and obviously, there's a lot of discussion about that right now. My own sense is that there's definitely room for improvement. But in terms of discovery, without question, you're seeing—on a global level—a lot more localized, personalized activity and artist discovery.

Our job is to find the greatest-possible audiences for our artists. Through the years, there have always been disruptions, innovations and challenges, including the limitations of technology. So we'll continue to evolve, no matter what the landscape might look like.

Where do you feel radio fits into the overall picture at this moment?

MONTE: I started in radio promotion, and they were talking about the death of radio at the beginning of my career! Radio is still a key component in all of this for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, there's still discovery, a sense of excitement. And there's also relevance, which comes by way of terrestrial radio because it's part of your culture and your community. Having disc jockeys in and out of the music is still incredibly valuable.

From left: An empowering moment with Kim Petras; Avery, Mercury's Tyler Arnold, manager Emily Kennedy, Stephen Sanchez, manager Rich Cohen, Mercury's Ben Adelson and Monte



“THE K-POP MODEL IS LIKE GROUP CHATS—ONLINE COMMUNITIES COME TOGETHER AND THEY’RE COMPLETELY INVESTED IN THESE ARTISTS, IN THEIR EVERY MOVE. THERE’S SOME SIMILARITY TO TIGER BEAT AND MAGAZINES LIKE THAT WHEN WE WERE GROWING UP. BUT THE TECHNOLOGY IS MUCH MORE SOPHISTICATED AND THE REACH IS MUCH GREATER.” —MONTE LIPMAN

What's the number one catalyst to selling music? That question has become more difficult than ever; there are so many different factors and so much more niche programming—not just on radio but through the DSPs and social media.

Are you seeing any change in the influence of TikTok on the landscape?

AVERY: TikTok is a tool, a platform like many others, and we use it accordingly. It can't feel forced—that's something we've learned. Artists have to find their voice on every platform; it's not one size fits all. But there's no question that when something flies on TikTok, it's a real runner.

I'm hearing a lot of ambivalence from biz people about the relationship the platform has with the business.

MONTE: We don't wanna get political here and go down that rabbit hole. Our focus and our attention is always on the artist community.

Do you think there's a change in the air with respect to how big a role data should play in A&R?

A good example is **Noah Kahan**, who was signed by **Ben Adelson** at Mercury. That was

nearly eight years ago, and Noah's development has been good old-fashioned A&R at its best: identifying an amazingly talented songwriter, a storyteller, bringing him into the studio, working with the producers and curating EPs and singles and ultimately albums. And now you've got a candidate for Best New Artist.

And a huge record.

We're proud of it. And again, when you talk about some of those third-party platforms, do they help make a difference? They make a contribution, no doubt, but there's no one catalyst in that respect. The number one catalyst is that Noah Kahan makes great music.

You're seeing a storytelling narrative—real life, relatability—resonating now. I think the trend-driven signings that occurred during the pandemic—when none of us could get out and nobody was touring and some kid in their bedroom would make a novel record and find a trend and then get a lot of money—are fewer now. If something pops up, sure, we'll always look at it. But this moment feels very much like a return to basics. If you look at our roster, you see the

Clockwise from top left: Buddying up: Davey D, Lucas Romeo, Monte, Avery and Gary Spangler; with Republic's Danielle Price; Monte with Ariana Grande; Commemorating Lorde's big bling; Avery, UMG EVP Michele Anthony, Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder and Monte



"I STARTED IN RADIO PROMOTION, AND THEY WERE TALKING ABOUT THE DEATH OF RADIO AT THE BEGINNING OF MY CAREER! RADIO IS STILL A KEY COMPONENT FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS. THERE'S STILL DISCOVERY, A SENSE OF EXCITEMENT. AND THERE'S ALSO RELEVANCE BECAUSE IT'S PART OF YOUR CULTURE AND YOUR COMMUNITY. HAVING DISC JOCKEYS IN AND OUT OF THE MUSIC IS STILL INCREDIBLY VALUABLE." —MONTE LIPMAN



From left: Monte and Mercury's Tyler Arnold with Post Malone; with Anitta; with The Weeknd



artistry and what these artists put into their craft, and again, I think that's starting to resonate in a very strong way.

Let's talk a bit about some of the other acts on the roster.

The one common thread, I suppose, is this tremendous sense of resourcefulness. Obviously, it starts with incredible music and creative vision, but there is that resourcefulness, which can also involve independence and autonomy. Superstar acts like Drake, The Weeknd, Post Malone, Pearl Jam, Ariana Grande, Lil Wayne, Nicki Minaj, Metro Boomin and the other acts on the label are the epitome of that. It's our job to constantly mobilize, be incredibly flexible and move like the wind on behalf of any campaign. We're honored to be part of their careers and very proud of our contributions, but at the end of the day, it's always about the artists.

As far as the new and developing acts, in addition to Noah Kahan—and also by way of Mercury—there's Stephen Sanchez, who's also having a breakout moment. He's captured the imagination of the industry; Elton John has been wildly supportive of him. Stephen is a

tremendous talent and, to me, there's nothing standing between someone like him and 10 million albums sold other than time and patience. We'll get there.

Tell me something about your team.

There's a collective pursuit of excellence. We set incredibly high expectations, with a sense of accountability. The Republic staff, led by [co-Presidents] Jim Roppo and Wendy Goldstein, competes at the highest level. Kevin Lipson leads our global commerce initiatives and has delivered a record-breaking year. Glenn Mendlinger runs Imperial, and he's done an extraordinary job specifically with our partners in South Korea.

Gary Spangler, who's been with us quite some time, is the best in the game. Another essential player in the radio space is Mike Horton, who oversees hip-hop and R&B. Joe Carozza is absolutely key for messaging, as you well know. And we have some very strong executives who have recently joined the company, including Danielle Price, our executive vice president, who's done an incredible job in a very short period of time and continues to help us sail into uncharted waters.

We also want to recognize the work of department heads Steve Gawley [biz and legal], Joe Schmidt [finance], Dana Sano [film & TV], Kerri Mackar [brands & ventures], Duro [A&R] and Donna Gryn [marketing], who work relentlessly to support the artist community.

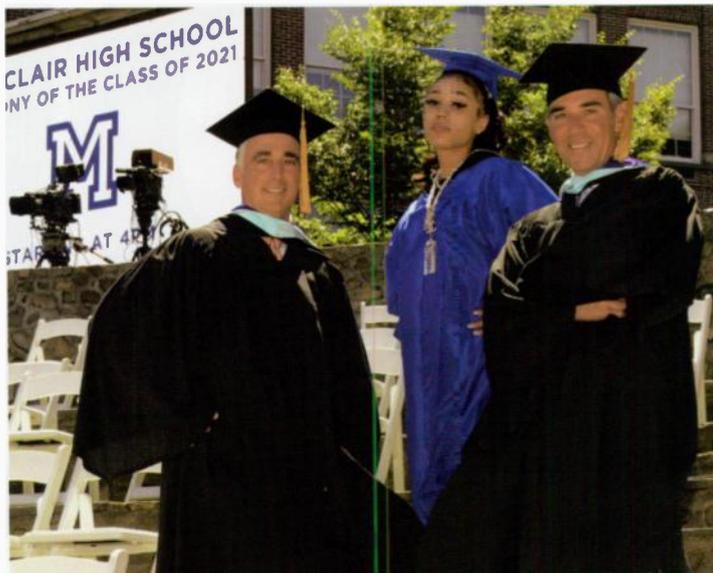
It's not lost on us that there are so many people we're not mentioning who keep the trains running on time and are so important to the respective ecosystems they work in; it's truly a group effort.

We must also mention the support of UMG around the world, their incredible roster of executives who work on behalf of Republic Records. [CFO & EVP] Boyd Muir continues to be an invaluable resource for us. And I'd be remiss if I didn't mention [EVP] Michele Anthony. She's a big sister and we lean on her constantly—we're very fortunate that she's based here in New York. Very rarely will you come across a situation where Michele doesn't have some experience or relationship she can draw from. She's definitely a critical factor in our success and we love her.

But above all there's Sir Lucian Grainge. Lucian has allowed us to operate with tremendous entrepreneurial spirit—he encourages us to take risks and not be preoccupied about making a mistake or overextending ourselves. For that alone we are incredibly grateful and indebted. He knows how to get the best out of the Lipman brothers in that respect, because we come from the independent-label community; we started Republic when we didn't have a pot to piss in and found a way to scratch up the resources and live to see another day.

In 2011 Lucian took over UMG and allowed us to operate as Republic Records. We've never looked back.

And as I said earlier, it's about that pursuit of excellence and never being satisfied but also having that autonomy and support to roll as we see fit. It's a formula that works really well for us. ■



From top: Dropping science with artist Coi Leray; Monte and Avery celebrate yet another milestone with Metro Boomin

“DISCOVERY IS DEFINITELY EVOLVING TO BE MORE PERSONALIZED. STREAMING HAS DONE WONDERS FOR THE INDUSTRY, OF COURSE, BUT WHAT ELSE IS THERE BESIDES A STREAM? A STREAM IS GREAT, BUT THERE'S A WHOLE LOT MORE AN ARTIST CAN PROVIDE TO A FAN. YOU SEE THIS IN THE RESURGENCE OF VINYL AND OBVIOUSLY IN TOURING AND LIVE EXPERIENCES, WHICH ARE RESONATING MORE STRONGLY NOW.” —AVERY LIPMAN

JON LOBA

MEET THE INDIE-LABEL TASTEMAKER WHO'S SHIFTING THE MAINSTREAM

When **Jon Loba** made the move to **Broken Bow**, independent labels weren't considered "in the game." But the kid raised in Southern California and on a Michigan dairy farm liked the idea of coloring outside the lines and calibrating to see small wins as real victories. Through his passion for music and work ethic, he took the indie and created a label group that stands toe-to-toe with any of the majors, leading to his being named **BMG** president of frontline recordings, first for North America and then across the Americas.

Lainey Wilson and **Jelly Roll** have loomed large in the

musical conversation with their massive hits and certifications. She took the coveted **Country Music Association** Entertainer of the Year trophy among her four-award haul; he won New Artist of the Year. Jelly was nominated for Best New Artist at this year's **Grammys**, while Lainey won Best Country Album. Wilson is speaking up for women's place in the world; he testified before Congress on the impact of fentanyl abuse in America. A major new JV between **BBR** and **Republic** promises to take Jelly to a whole new level.

Meanwhile, the recent signings of producer-artist **Mustard** (who'll be part of **Kendrick Lamar's Super Bowl** halftime performance) and **YG** have further expanded **BMG's**—and **Loba's**—portfolio.

INTERVIEW BY TODD HENSLEY AND HOLLY GLEASON

“I’M A MAD
SCIENTIST.
I’VE ALWAYS
BEEN
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SO YOU
START AT A
DISADVANTAGE.
I WANT TO
PROVE
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WRONG
THE RIGHT
WAY, SO
I TAKE
MORE RISKS.”





"I FELL IN LOVE WITH EVERYBODY [AT BMG]. THE CULTURE WAS THE SAME: ARTIST FIRST. RESPECT ARTISTS' FREEDOM; FOLLOW THEIR LEAD. THEY NEEDED OUR STAFF, SO I KNEW OUR PEOPLE WERE PROTECTED BEYOND TWO YEARS IF WE PROVED WE WERE CAPABLE. AT THE 11TH HOUR, EVERYBODY WAS THROWING MONEY AT US, SIGNIFICANTLY MORE THAN WHAT BMG WAS OFFERING, BUT BMG FELT LIKE THE BEST FIT TO TAKE THE NEXT STEP FOR OUR ARTISTS."

Loba with Jason Aldean

Let's start with the basics.

I was born in the San Fernando Valley and lived there until I was 10. Mom married a dairy farmer on 1,200 acres in Western Michigan, about the time of *Footloose*. I was living real-life *Footloose*. My dad still lived in Southern California; I'd spend summers and vacations in the Valley, then back to reality and work in Michigan. It helped me understand and appreciate two different worlds. In Michigan I developed my work ethic. When you're unfreezing stock tanks at five in the morning, then rushing inside to take a shower and be ready for school, coming back and milking until eight, doing your homework after? Everything I've done since is a piece of cake.

I went to **Central Michigan University**, because they had a good finance program and no social temptations. It was in the middle of a cornfield. Went for a couple of years, then back to California to CSUN for a year. Budget cuts in California meant it was going to take too long to finish, so I finished at Central Michigan. I planned to go to New York to get into an investment-banking training program.

A gentleman we thought was a close family friend turned out to be my grandfather; I realized that during my senior year of college, so I came to Nashville after I graduated to meet that entire side of the family in Cookeville, Tennessee. I fell in love with Tennessee, Nashville, specifically Music Row. I thought, "I don't know what this business is about, but I'll play around for a few years, and then I'll get a real job."

The playing around for a few years turned into a real job, though it's never felt like it once. I was at **BMI** for six months, then **Warner Bros.** as a promotion coordinator. The general manager at the time, **Eddie Reeves**, **Jim Ed Norman** and I were all on an elevator; I was going on about a bunch of things that were happening, Eddie smiled and said, "That's why we hire young kids." I said, "Why?" He said, "To remind us how great this business is." I said, "You have to be

reminded how great this business is?" He said, "Give it 10 years; you'll understand." Eddie got off on the second floor. Jim Ed and I rode up to the third floor. Jim Ed shook his head. He goes, "Don't listen to him. If you love music, people and creating musical memories, you'll love this business forever." Every day when I leave for work, I think, "I love it now more than ever."

How did you get to BBR?

I was a coordinator for Warner Bros. for three years, then Southeast regional for **Atlantic Records** for a year and a half. When I made the Atlantic move, everybody said, "What are you doing? They're going to close Atlantic down with all the consolidation going on in Warner." I thought, "If I can get six months on the phones, I can build relationships and be okay." We made it a year and a half. **Scott Borchetta's** dad, **Mike Borchetta**, was general manager at Broken Bow; he kept calling me.

Independent labels hadn't had success in decades in Nashville. I thought, "I'm not doing that. That'll be a graveyard. I'm going to wait it out." He kept calling, so I threw out a ridiculous number. Five minutes later, he got off the phone with **Benny Brown** and said, "Congratulations, you're with Broken Bow." That was Friday. He goes, "I need you to start Monday." I came in Monday, said, "Where do I sit?" He said, "Over there," where the guy who was the only promotion guy sat. I said, "Where's he sitting?" Borchetta said, "We had to fire him to afford you." I said, "All I know is 50 stations that matter, there's another 100-plus out there." He said, "Kid, you'll be fine."

We stumbled through with a **Craig Morgan** hit, then a **Joe Diffie** hit, then a **Sherrie Austin** hit. I was trying to keep everything small and focused as we built. We had the first indie success in a long time. Then Benny said, "I need you to go to a showcase with me; some guy



From left, Ken Tucker, Katie Kerkhover, Kerri Edwards, Elissa Felman, Chayce Beckham, Loba, Kendra Whitehead, Matt Vieira and Layna Bunt

“IF YOU’RE PAINTING OUTSIDE THE LINES AND COULDN’T EASILY CLASSIFY AS A COUNTRY ACT, IF YOU WANT A LABEL HOME, BBR GIVES YOU CONFIDENCE: ‘THESE GUYS KNOW HOW TO DO IT AND WILL FIGHT FOR YOU.’ WE’VE HAD SUCCESS WITH ACTS THAT AREN’T OBVIOUS; OUR PARTNERS TRUST US. NO GREATER EXAMPLE THAN JELLY ROLL. MOST OF THAT CREDIT’S JELLY TELLING HIS STORY. WE ARE NOW THE HOME OF ‘IF I DON’T FIT IN A BOX, I’M GOING TO SEE IF THEY’RE INTERESTED.’ THERE’S A CAST OF CHARACTERS THAT COMES WALKING THROUGH THE DOORS NOW BECAUSE THEY FEEL, ‘THAT’S A HOME I COULD SUCCEED IN. THOSE ARE PEOPLE THAT WILL APPRECIATE MY QUIRKINESS.’”

who’s been dropped from two labels—and he’s going home tomorrow if he doesn’t get a deal.” I thought, “Nobody else wants him; what are we doing.” We went to the Wildhorse Saloon. I said, “Nobody in the industry goes there.” He goes, “You’re right, I want to see how real fans react.” That was Jason Aldean. We sat there; he said, “I’ve seen enough, let’s go sign him. I think Jason’s going to explode.”

Off we went. He said, “Don’t you like the music?” I said, “I love it. It’s not country, it’s metallic country.” He goes, “You’ll figure out how to get this on the air.” I thought, “I can’t get that played.” It was a matter of survival. At a Clear Channel showcase, I was so nervous introducing him I was shaking. My introduction was so bad, no matter what, he’d look good. Gregg Swedberg said, “He’s pitchy as hell, but he’s got something.” There were 10 guys in those early days I could count on when they had no reason. Doug Montgomery was another one. We were hanging on by our fingernails. Benny’s stubbornness to not give up; most guys with money that came to Nashville tap out at about \$5 million. Benny lost seven or eight, and I don’t think he made a profit until he’d spent \$11 million. He was going to hang in there one way or the other.

When did Benny step aside and you take the helm?

Every year a major wanted to buy us. I’d say, “Benny’s not in this for money, he’s in this for artist and staff dreams. Unless there’s a strategic partnership, he won’t sell.” In 2016, Roc Nation called. I said, “I gave them the speech.” A couple days later he said, “Would you come into my office?” I thought, We’re doing well. We’ve got all



With Jon-Dustin Lynch

kinds of success. I can’t imagine he’s going to fire me. He said, “My wife’s health is not good. Even though the team’s taking the lead with everything, if I don’t sell this company I’ll be coming in every day and not giving her the time she deserves.” He said, “I think it’s time. I want \$100 million dollars to protect the staff for two years and the roster for a year. If you can find that, whoever you think is best.” I went to visit Roc Nation; culturally, I didn’t feel it was a great fit. I was intimidated by them. Sony had the first right of refusal; what they valued us at wasn’t \$100 million.

BMG came. It’s when they were entering back into recorded music. I thought, “Don’t they do publishing, or are they a distributor?” I fell in love with everybody there. The culture was the same: artist first. Respect artists’ freedom, follow their lead. They needed our staff, so I knew our people were protected beyond two years if we proved we were capable. At the 11th hour, everybody was throwing money at us, significantly more than what BMG was offering, but BMG felt like the best fit to take the next step for our artists. The deal was closed in 2017; Benny stepped back.

What was the state of BBR? The 2017 perception?

We developed a reputation as a company that cared, didn’t have a lot of bureaucracy and treated partners fairly. A lot of people from the outside thought this was a great place to work. But it was still this indie mentality. It would’ve been difficult to sign an A-level act. We had no international presence whatsoever. We didn’t have any ability to cross music into other genres. The competitors could say, “You

want an international career? BBR is not the place.” “Do you want to cross your records? You’re never going to get that at BBR.” Our facilities, while not horrible, were much different than walking into Warner, Sony or Universal. When we moved into the building we’re in, it felt like the major leagues.

Clearly the perception changed. What did you do?

It was our staff. Our core has been together for a long time. We dreamed together, fought alongside each other and took care of each other. Now we had an international presence. Number two, we could access promotion teams in other genres because we were ADA-distributed. Blanco Brown’s “The Git Up” did better on the Top 40 charts than on the country charts thanks to Warner Bros. pop promotion.

One thing was critical in our development: We had the reputation of signing a certain type of act, usually solo male, with a certain sound and only engaging a small number of producers. You cannot argue with Benny’s recipe for success. He felt he had to have a strong hand and guide the ship. Where we were at the time, it was needed. Once I took over, I’d say, “Things are different. We want to be more inclusive. We want a spectrum of artists and artistry in sound, gender and ethnicity.”

My goal was to be the first place managers thought of because we were collaborative; we had our shit together and we’d treat them as true partners, even let managers and artists lead. With Aldean, we learned, through being independent with not many resources or reputation or leverage, to be fighters. I’ve always been attracted to artists on the fringes, who aren’t stereotypical country acts. It’s easy to sign those, then preach you’re diverse. It’s a different deal showing that those artists have a place in this genre. The number-one ingredient: We fight for things that aren’t right down the middle.

Being independent, you signed artists outside the box. Is that a superpower or secret weapon?

If you’re painting outside the lines and couldn’t easily classify as a country act, if you want a label home, BBR gives you confidence: “These guys know how to do it and will fight for you.” We’ve had success with acts that aren’t obvious; our partners trust us. No greater example than Jelly Roll. Most of that credit’s Jelly telling his story. We are now the home of “If I don’t fit in a box, I’m going to see if they’re interested.” There’s a cast of characters that comes walking through the doors now because they feel, “That’s a home I could succeed in. Those are people that will appreciate my quirkiness.”

Jelly said, “BBR is like a halfway house for artists and everybody’s successful, so I felt comfortable there. Nobody was going to judge me.”

You play into those things. Somebody else would’ve put Lainey Wilson in a push-up bra, or said to Dustin Lynch, “Do you have to be such a cowboy?”

I love those examples. People thinking about things outside the lines that we’ve done, they’re thinking things that aren’t organically country. When Dustin Lynch came out, the genre was pop-leaning, polished, and we came with this four-minute ballad with a guy in a cowboy hat. I heard, “That’s like grandpa. All the country acts now have baseball caps; there’s too much steel. You’re going to start with that?” I said yes.

Lainey, same thing. Female acts were pop-leaning, beautiful but had a glamour bent. Several people thought, “She’s too country for this genre.” People forget that was a disadvantage.

You flipped it.

You can be different, but if the artistry isn’t there, if you don’t have a strong identity, none of it matters. We’re not looking for the next whoever. We want the originals. I’m trying to look and say, “Sonically and thematically, where’s the genre right now?” If that’s



Loba, Brooke Eden, Jolamie Hahr

identifiable, we don’t need to play there. We need to look forward. It might be a Jelly Roll, but something organic and stripped down.

Blanco Brown wasn’t doing, “I’m a Black guy in country music.”

Zach Katz was president at the time. We both saw the potential. I think we were the only two in the world. I wanted to take him to creatives around Music Row because “They’re going to get it. They might not think it’s country, but they’re gonna get him.” I was surprised at the pushback, but I give the streaming companies credit because when we took him in and played them the music and they met Blanco, every single platform was there for us.

TikTok had the viralness. That was the early days. TikTok had come to town; we had a ByteDance relationship. They said, “We’re looking for a label without bureaucracy to dig in with.” We had a breakfast; at the end I said, “Do you guys have 15 minutes?” Blanco did his thing; they immediately got it. They weren’t algorithmically tripping anything but giving us guidance as things were lighting up. “You got something.” That gave us the fuel to wave the flag.

You guys dominated awards this year.

Once you’re on the field and your chance to be in the game is there, you practiced all week and the critics are telling you, “You’ve got a chance to win this game,” or even if they’re not, then there’s strategy and plans put into place.

We knew #1 records, important publications, award nominations and wins were important markers. We don’t go to work thinking, “How do we get there?” That’s the result of work put in. We’ve strung together five or six good years, especially since the acquisition. I told the staff, “We have a unique opportunity to build a dynasty, but it’s going to require operating how we have so far. We need to stay humble, hungry and curious. Let’s please not get caught up in our success and what others say.” You see it in business, art, sports teams: When you start believing your own press and forget the work it took and forget your partners who gave you that chance, things go south.

When was the moment you knew Jelly was a lot more than anybody thought?

Our first meeting. He thought he didn’t want a label deal. I was asking him, “Who’s told your story?” He said, “Nobody.” I got excited.

I said, "It's all there. You just need somebody to tell it. You need somebody to be your advocate." He said, "Jon, the main thing I need you guys for is your amazing relationships in the industry. Get me in those rooms; I promise when you do, I'll win. And I'll never embarrass you. You can put me in any room, a boardroom or a cafeteria, and if the lunch lady is part of a music decision, I'm going to connect with her and form a relationship."

On a commercial level, where it hit was the CMT Awards last year. Outside of socials, it was too early to have that performance. It was a last-minute decision. I knew his performance would be a win. When the trophies came, I thought, "Wow, we're further along than I thought." We knew he had a big audience; the debate was, "Who are they?" In that moment. I went, "All right, country's our home." Our ability to tell his story connected.

You kept the growth slow and steady.

When things get too hot too fast, it doesn't end in a great place—and it's not a long-term sustainable career. It was calculated. There were many opportunities we didn't feel ready for. It's the artist-first mentality. I trust Jelly. Whenever we're at a crossroads or if we're in disagreement, I follow him and we win.

What about Lainey?

I heard her independent EP and [was impressed by] the quality of the writing, her fearlessness. To hear her story of being here for 10 years, I'm like, "How have you not been given the chance?" She lived in a camper and was a farm kid; we bonded on that—the accent and purity of heart. Without hearing her sing a word, I would've signed her. Then she played acoustic; her pitch and vocal control were perfect. I thought, "She may be too country in themes, production and accent, but I'd rather go down swinging for the fences with her."

She had another big deal on the table, and it was far down the road. I thought, "I'm going to have a broken heart." A few hours after the meeting, the manager called, "She felt a connection to you and appreciation by you. We want to be with you guys."

Beyond empowering artists, what are your strengths? Where do your teams excel?

I'm a mad scientist. I've always been smaller in stature, so you start at a disadvantage. I want to prove people wrong the right way, so I take more risks.

We had kickoff meetings in January; I was in the heat trying to decide if I'm going to take this role of president for North America. The last couple years I pushed against it because I didn't want to dilute what was happening in Nashville. With the influx of the coasts and the success of Jelly and Parmalee in other genres, I thought, "I can strengthen what we're doing in Nashville by doing this."

[EVP Recorded Music] JoJ amie Hahr planned our kickoff meetings, and they were the most productive/inspiring meetings we've ever had. What hit me was the growth our staff has gone through over the last two,

three years. They were putting process to strategy. They had that fire, which gave me the greatest comfort level. I'm like, "Okay they're going to be better because they have more room to spread their wings."

Other places have that tight family culture, but our staff has something special. They look out for each other. They live and breathe it. JoJ amie and I hired people with hearts like ours. Mark Logsdon is a perfect example. Looking for that VP of publicity, a number of people talked about his heart. If you're dreaming, taking care of each other and your partners, success will follow. Get up, suit up and do the right thing in actions, not words.

What are Nashville and country music's biggest challenges?

Not to get caught up in the hype. We're hot as a genre right now, but business is cyclical. I remember *Urban Cowboy*, when "country & western" was the thing. There's a balance to being open to others but protective of what makes this genre special, that caretaker mentality of the art. I grew up in radio promotion; radio promotion execs from other genres wanted to end up in country because of the relationships we have with artists and artists have with radio.

It's beyond that now. It's streaming, bigger TV looks. When country acts come in, they're not prima donnas. They're going to be decent to deal with. We have the biggest music producers in the world wanting to engage our artists/genre, moving here. Hartwig Masuch, the CEO of BMG when we were acquired, said, "I believe Nashville can be the epicenter of North American music. Christian and country are there. Many acts come from Nashville and transcendent genres. You have the history, work ethic, and awareness of mainstream American tastes." He says, "I think Nashville will grow larger as a cultural center of significance and influence." That's going to keep growing, and I'm lucky to interact in those worlds, both in Nashville and on the coasts. ■

"YOU SEE IT IN BUSINESS, ART, SPORTS TEAMS:
WHEN YOU START BELIEVING YOUR OWN PRESS
AND FORGET THE WORK IT TOOK AND FORGET
YOUR PARTNERS WHO GAVE YOU THAT CHANCE,
THINGS GO SOUTH."



Back row, (l-r): Loba, Round Hill's Mike Whelan, ASCAP's Mike Sistad, Sony Music Publishing's Rusty Gaston, Reservoir's John Ozier, Tape Room's Blain Rhodes and BMI's Josh Tomlinson; middle row: Parmalee's Josh McSwain, Barry Knox, Matt Thomas and Scott Thomas; front row: ASCAP songwriter Ashley Gorley, and BMI songwriters Ben Johnson and producer David Fanning.



PHOTO: JONATHAN WEINER

GUY MOOT AND CARIANNE MARSHALL

COLLABORATION,
COMMITMENT
AND CURIOSITY

WARNER CHAPPELL'S

ruling tandem of Guy Moot and Carianne Marshall took over the leadership of the pubbery in 2019, and since then have punched considerably above the company's weight in terms of signings, market share and new initiatives. They and their team have inked Dua Lipa, Zach Bryan, Benson Boone and writer-producer Salaam Remi (Doja Cat, Amy Winehouse), among many others, and done big catalog deals with the estates of Tom Petty and David Bowie. Despite their very different backgrounds, the two execs have found a unique synergy—and they still claim to like each other. We didn't bother asking what they thought of us.

INTERVIEW BY SIMON GLICKMAN



WCM's Chris White and Rich Robinson, EA's Steve Schnur, Marshall and Moot

"WE CAME UP WITH THE VALUES THAT ARE REALLY IMPORTANT TO US: COLLABORATION, COMMITMENT AND CURIOSITY. BECAUSE THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO CAN BE INCREDIBLY TALENTED, BUT IF THEY'RE NOT EMBODYING THOSE THREE PRINCIPLES, THIS IS PROBABLY NOT THE RIGHT PLACE FOR THEM." —CARIANNE MARSHALL

Say a bit about WCM's place in the present market-place and how it got there.

GUY MOOT: April 1 marked the five-year anniversary of Carianne and my joining forces. When we got here, it was a company with great catalog, but needed a revamped strategy. When Carianne and I first came together, it was like one of those blind dates. But we immediately saw eye-to-eye on what we loved about publishing and what we wanted to do.

It's simple, actually: We want to sign culturally relevant artists, songwriters who we feel proud of, who stand for something and resonate.

CARIANNE MARSHALL: We knew exactly what we wanted to do, what we wanted it to feel like. And then we had to think about how to do that. One of the things that makes us different from our competitors is our structure. We have global leads across business, finance, administration, creative services, synchronization and digital. And of course we have MDs in every territory. The MDs are responsible for their territories, but they also have to make sure that they're aligned with the broader global business goals. And so we came up with a new company strategy.

MOOT: And we involved everybody in the strategy.

MARSHALL: Including songwriters. We came up with values that are really important to us: collaboration, commitment and curiosity. Because there are people who can be incredibly talented, but if they're not embodying those three principles, this is probably not the right place for them.

Talk about your place in the larger Warner edifice and the one Warner philosophy.

MARSHALL: Obviously it's evolved. We both came here initially under Steve Cooper and Len Blavatnik. And of course, Len was—and is—very influential. It's clear Robert Kyncl really understands publishing. He respects what we do.

MOOT: Robert believes in the potential and growth of publishing. He has been very supportive.

MARSHALL: And the board has been really supportive too. Of course, we've had the opportunity to interact

with them, discuss our strategy. And we've helped them understand the true value of publishing.

What do you look for as you determine whether to pursue or sign a writer or encourage your team to do so, and to what extent have your criteria changed, if at all?

MOOT: I use the phrase “culturally relevant.” That type of writer and artist creates other opportunities around them. Whether it's IP, films or musicals, it attracts other artists. It's not just about market share during a quarter. It's much more of a long-term game. We want to sign some great stuff and take some shots. The development process is gonna take maybe three to five years.

The days of having a hit and fast tracking at radio and selling a million albums, those days might have passed. So we encourage our teams to think through different levels. Of course we'll be in on some big deals. But we can create a lot of opportunities for those in the mid-tier too.

MARSHALL: We don't go after everything. We go after the things that our teams care about, and we think we can add value to.

MOOT: That's true with picking catalogs as well. There's lots of people selling, but what can we add, and how can we grow that catalog?

MARSHALL: We don't view our departments as front end and back end. Even administration has a front-and-center role in our business. Because we need to do right by our songwriters. We have a new global match system that we worked on with our technology team to make sure we're finding every penny.

MOOT: Last, everybody thinks they've got the best A&R team. I think we have the best A&R team, but I think we've also trained some of those people to be leaders.

MARSHALL: [Head of International A&R/U.K. MD] Shani Gonzales and [Germany MD] Natascha Augustin and [France MD] Matthieu Tessier—there are so many people that we've promoted internally who come from the creative side.

WMG has been going through a lot of change, not so much on the publishing side but on the recorded-music side. How is that affecting things?

MOOT: Music companies often experience change—we're not unique in that. During my time at EMI, we navigated many shifts in ownership, from private equity to sovereign wealth funds. So, by comparison, Warner's solid, stable ownership situation is a big strength.

I've been close with Max [Lousada, outgoing Recorded Music chief] for many years, since well before my time at Warner, and we're lifelong friends. I think he's exceptional at what he does: creating an environment where both artists and execs can do their best work. Julie [Greenwald, outgoing Atlantic Music Group CEO] has always been very good to me too; she's set the gold standard in artist development, leading an incredible era at Atlantic.

MARSHALL: It speaks to who Max and Julie are that the news was felt around the industry. They've both been such



From top: Moot and President, North America, Ryan Press flank Cardi B to celebrate her signing; Press, Marshall, Coco Jones, Moot and Coco's mom, Javonda, at the Grammys; WCM's Rachel Jacobson, Marshall, Margo Dorfman and Rose Betts at a mixer co-hosted by the pubco and Women in Film

important figures at WMG for more than two decades.

We're only a week into the transition, and everyone is making sure the focus stays on the music, our songwriters, and our artists. This is what we do as a music company, and what we always do at Warner Chappell. We know there's a lot of great new music coming, and everyone is committed to setting up the artists and their teams for success.

MOOT: I've known Elliot [Grainge, new Atlantic Music Group CEO] for a while too, and I respect everything he's built with 10K. They've discovered talent across different genres, very early, and they've pioneered new ways of getting the music heard. We look forward to partnering with him more closely.

What has it been like working with your recorded-music counterparts? What do you expect will change with this leadership transition?

MOOT: There's a lot we're already doing together. The foundation is strong, and it's something that Robert's

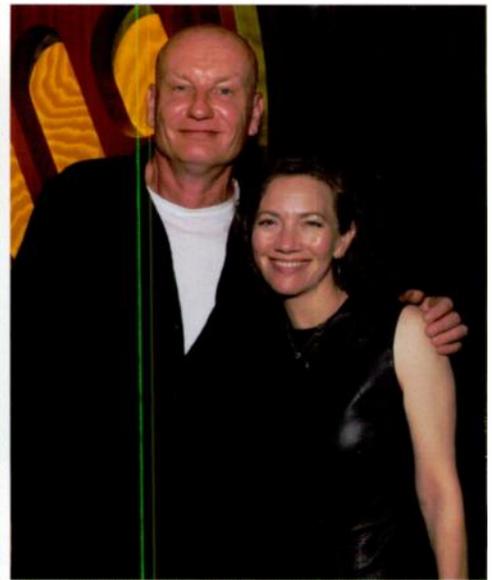
been passionate about. We have great synergy; we're signing artists and songwriters on both sides of the business. We recently partnered with ADA and 300, and also did a deal with 10K to sign new writers together and administer their existing publishing deals. Benelux is a market where there are unique dynamics, and there we brought in Niels Walboomers. He's running both records and publishing and doing brilliantly.

MARSHALL: There's also crossover with our catalogs. [SVP Creative Services, WCM] Ashley Winton and her team have been working closely with [President Global Catalog, WMG] Kevin Gore for some time to unlock different opportunities and collaborate on new projects. There's a lot of excitement there. Recently, they partnered on Madonna's 40th anniversary campaign as well as the David Bowie *Moonage Daydream* Grammy campaign. It's all part of what differentiates WMG.

You spoke about songwriters becoming savvier about the larger picture of their careers and about



Clockwise from top left: Press, artist-writer Maeta, Moot and Marshall; with WCM's Chuck Gamble and Patrice Rushen; Marshall, WCM's Rich Robinson, singer-songwriter Evan Bartels, manager Rico Csabai, WCM's Chris White and Moot



WCM's Gabz Landman, singer-songwriter Laufey, Moot and manager Max Greninger

"IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT MARKET SHARE DURING A QUARTER. IT'S MUCH MORE OF A **LONG-TERM GAME**. WE WANT TO SIGN SOME GREAT STUFF AND TAKE SOME SHOTS." —GUY MOOT

the involvement of these other departments. What is being done and can be done to improve their economic outlook, given how unbalanced things have been for writers in the biz?

MARSHALL: It's always a fight. We partner in the U.S. with David Israelite and the NMPA; they've been incredible advocates, especially with what's going on right now with Spotify, which is so disappointing. I think education is power. We're trying to make sure that our writers understand what they can do and how they can advocate.

MOOT: We can talk about streaming rates, but it's also how quickly you get paid. Why is there so much delay in getting writers paid? It's also how much commission is coming off along the way. We're pretty vocal about trying to drive down costs and commissions at the PRO level.

MARSHALL: Another one of our goals this year is to get more songs earning. We want to make sure that our writers aren't just making money off that one big song, that there is more depth there.

At the other end of the value chain, we've seen catalogs balloon in value. And that seems to be in part a product of a change in terms of the players on that landscape.

MOOT: It's great that people see the value in catalogs and songwriters. We're lucky to be in a group that's quite entrepreneurial in its investment. And we brought in a younger catalog team because it's really important to look through catalog not just through my age group, but through generations below.

I understand why people would want to sell. I mean, these aren't dumb people. And yes, we are active in that space. But we only look to acquire catalogs where we can

actively manage them and grow their value. We want to have fun working on these projects.

I also believe there's a moral obligation to the music and the people we work with, to the catalogs we buy.

MARSHALL: To us, it's not a good investment if our teams around the world don't want to work on it.

MOOT: So we just got Patrice Rushen; we're so happy about that. I mean, "Forget Me Nots." She's amazing.

MARSHALL: We just signed Liz Phair, The Guess Who...

MOOT: We signed Foreigner. I was after them for 10 years.

MARSHALL: This isn't specific to catalog, but it reminds me, we want to be a destination for writers because they want to be partners with us. And that is really starting to happen. It's exciting. We signed Sharon Van Etten a while ago. There's no way she would've considered Warner Chappell a handful of years ago it wouldn't have been the right place for her. So we're feeling really excited about being a company that can satisfy writers and catalog managers who are interested in that proposition, in adding value and having a partnership and really connecting with our teams around the world.

Please say a little bit about the team, and maybe you can start by talking about the A&R people.

MOOT: Ryan Press is president of North America. He's a publisher through and through. There are people in the business who talk a lot and don't do much. He's the other end of that. He's an incredible executive. He's built a great U.S. team. We've recently promoted and extended David Goldsen; obviously he's signed Zach Bryan; he's signed



Manager Luke Conway, WCM's David Goldsen, Press, Moot, Teddy Swims, WCM's Katy Wolaver and Marshall

"ONE OF OUR GOALS THIS YEAR IS TO GET MORE SONGS EARNING. WE WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT OUR WRITERS AREN'T JUST MAKING MONEY OFF THAT ONE BIG SONG, THAT THERE IS MORE DEPTH THERE." —CARIANNE MARSHALL

Mitski. We've got Gabz Landman; she signed Amy Allen. They're both building incredible rosters.

MARSHALL: It's been really fun to see our teams develop too. What Ben Vaughn's doing in Nashville and Gustav Menéndez in Miami and Latin America.

MOOT: And Shani Gonzales in Europe, who is running international A&R.

MARSHALL: It's important to mention, when we talk about the broader team, some of the folks we have in senior positions, they've done a bunch of different jobs before. We think it's really interesting to hire people with different types of backgrounds as long as they're super-passionate about music. Ashley Winton, who runs creative services, was previously a music supervisor. She ran the music team at Nat Geo. Claire McAuley, who runs the administration team for us globally, worked at an ad agency and worked in legal at a publishing company. Jenni Pfaff runs our strategy and operations team, and comes from HR. Rich Robinson, who runs sync, came from the advertising world, and so on.

Guy and I have been publishers our entire careers, pretty much, so that means there are also some blind spots. So you hire people from outside the business or who come from different places, and it really rounds it off very well.

I'd like to get into your backstories now. Carianne, tell me a little bit about your first contact with music and when you first became aware of what publishing was.

MARSHALL: My parents were civilians. I didn't grow up with anybody in the music business. I was really close friends with the guy who was the keyboard player in a local band. He came to my house and sat down at the piano; I don't even remember what he played, but it was so good. And I asked Steve, how many years have you taken piano lessons?

And he goes, "I've never taken a lesson in my life."

And I swear to God, it was like that moment where I was like, people can just do that? And somewhere in my head I was like, how do I somehow help people who do that? And so I started working with their manager and doing local production and promotion. And I got an internship at Elektra Records, which turned into a job. I didn't know what publishing was, though, until I was looking for a job in 1999 because my gig was going away. I ran into my friend Betsy Anthony, who now works with us at Warner Chappell, at an X show at the Palladium.

I had snuck into the VIP area with my wristbands that I kept in my car. Betsy was running the West Coast department A&R department for Universal Publishing, and there was an assistant job open in A&R. She's like, "I'll pass along your resume, but only if you really care about it." I was like, "Eh, publishing sounds so boring." And she says, "Let me tell you why it's not. Let me tell you what I love about songwriters." She schooled me. And I ended up getting a job as an A&R assistant at Universal Publishing. I've been in publishing ever since. That was 1999.

That's right. God, we've known each other for a quarter century. Tell me about Chuck Kaye and how he served as a mentor to you.

MARSHALL: I wrote something with a little bit of help after he passed away. Chuck was like my music-business dad or something. He promoted me to my first executive job. I was an A&R coordinator. At the time, people were kind of caring about sync, but not really. And Chuck decided that we should have a dedicated sync person, and I should be it. And I said, "I don't know what I'm doing." And he goes, "We'll figure it out; otherwise I'll fire you. But I believe you can do it."

He was always very matter of fact, no mincing words. He was the one who helped me decide to leave Universal and go to SONGS. He was always so encouraging. He was

the first person I called to tell about this job because he had bought Chappell Music. He was the chairman of Warner Publishing and bought Chappell. He was a really wonderful guy.

And do you want to say a word or two about SONGS?

MARSHALL: Well, everyone knows we had The Weeknd, Lorde and Diplo. But you probably haven't heard of most of our writers, many of whom were able to make a living writing songs. It's something I'm really proud of and has been foundational for the work that we're doing here. It was a great 12 years. A handful of the SONGS folks are here now, which is fun. It was a special place.

Guy, we've chatted before about your background. But let's revisit your earliest involvement in music.

MOOT: I was sort of pummeled with standards and mainstream jazz by my parents in the car. It was Radio 1, Radio Luxembourg. Radio was a big ally to me growing up. I didn't have the most distinguished school career. I was eager to get out into the world. And the school was quite happy to usher me into the world. It was by mutual benefit. I did some nine-to-five work at building sites.

But then I applied to get a job in a record shop and eventually started managing record shops and started going to gigs, I'd write gig reviews and send them off to people. My brother-in-law at the time was working for CBS Songs or April Music at the time. And I really learned about publishing there and I started applying for A&R jobs. One came up at ATV Music, which was still pre-Michael Jackson. I was in an office in Mayfair in London, and I had an empty contact book. I started phoning studios, just anybody I could make an introduction to. It was like, "Do you know any good talent? Do you know any good songwriters?" And that was the beginning.

I was there for about nine months until Jackson bought the company and made everybody redundant. Then I had a very brief stint at Chrysalis Records. That was the only time I did records. Pete Edge was working next door to me. There was an incredible bunch of people there, but I decided publishing gave you a lot more options. So I phoned

my old boss, and she said, "There's a role at SBK, but I need you to meet Marty Bandier; he likes to meet all of our new A&R people." So I met Marty, who had his feet up on his desk, smoking a cigar, wearing a white shirt with his initials on it and wearing those fancy braces...

MARSHALL: We call them suspenders over here.

MOOT: That's lingerie.

MARSHALL: Oh, my God, I learn so much every day.

We'll include an Anglo-American glossary at the end of the interview. But back to Marty...

MOOT: When I first met him, he was intimidating. He exuded power, the smell of money, but he's got such a common touch with people and such a warmth about him. There's no reason why he should have listened to some kid who was going through every phase of club culture. But he always gave me time.

I'd always get him to approve my deals and as I walked out of the office, he'd say, "Guy, one last thing: Don't fuck this up." It was with a subtle humor, but also with a slight menace. But we had an incredible time together.

And then you were running the U.K. office of the company. Can you say a bit about coming to the U.S., making that move?

MOOT: I was coming to the U.S. a lot when I was U.K. MD, then I was also doing European creative. There was a lot of music that was coming from the U.S. that resonated in Europe, like hip-hop. All of the big dance records that came out in New York at the time were huge in Europe. So I always had this thing, I'd just go wherever the music was.

Being in the U.S. has been great. People definitely work harder here. So it made me up my game. Carianne and I are really lucky. We still like each other five-plus years later. That's a good sign, right? We joke about it, but we are really lucky that we have such a good partnership. We want the same things. We're moving in the same direction. That's how it started, and that's where we still are. ■



Manager Nick Shymansky, Moot, Kenya Grace, Marshall, WCM's Gabz Landman and Xavier Champagne; Moot, Coco Jones, Press and Champagne



SULINNA ONG

WORLD-BUILDING,
MACHINE LEARNING AND
HORROR

BY SIMON GLICKMAN

Spotify Global Head of Editorial Sulinna Ong has quickly emerged as one of the most influential execs in the streaming space, deftly combining intellectual rigor and an emphasis on the human connection that technology can facilitate. Most of Ong's career—and indeed, much of her life—has been about the quest to effectively marry music and tech. We asked her to elaborate and did our best to keep up; along the way, we also delved into her fascinating backstory and her deep interest in horror, sci-fi and related genres.

In the world of Spotify, what does “editorial” signify?

Editorial at Spotify refers to the curation and programming of content—namely music, in this instance. Our focus is to provide the best and most culturally relevant music experience for users with a focus on new music and discovery. The editorial teams at Spotify are deep music and culture experts. We work very closely with product teams to infuse this human music expertise and cultural intelligence into the products and features that we build for users.



"WITH STREAMING, I REALLY FELT, LIKE, I GET IT NOW. ALL OF MY EXPERIENCE HAD PANNED OUT IN TERMS OF TECHNOLOGY, LABELS, LIVE AND MANAGEMENT. THAT WAS ALL PREPARING ME FOR STREAMING."

Clockwise from top left: With Anitta; with Spotify's Jeremy Erlich; with Erlich, Noah Kahan and Spotify's Madeleine Bennett

I think most people know and understand that editors curate playlists, and that's certainly a core pillar of the discipline, but it's actually much broader and more diverse; our skills and expertise are applied to many surfaces in the Spotify app and experience—as well as outside of it.

What sorts of indicators do you look for in determining if an artist, song or trend is going to be significant?

Every week we meet as an editorial team; editors around the world discuss what's happening in their local markets. And then we start to test outside of the original domestic market and introduce the music in very strategic ways. So it's a combination of gut and data. We're looking at things like people listening to the song and engaging with it in a variety of ways. They might add it to their

playlist. They might come back to it at a later time. They might explore the catalog of that particular artist—that's a particularly encouraging action. Another high-quality signal we examine is the performance of tracks within Spotify's owned and operated playlists. Each playlist has an audience of its own with particular behavioral nuances. We analyze how a track performs in each playlist to get a view on how it reacts with a certain audience group and how they correlate—or don't—with one another. These are just *some* of the many indicators we look at. We also take into consideration what is happening outside of Spotify.

Where do human curation and machine learning intersect?

Human curation was never about manually curating a playlist for each and every individual user, as that is



Clockwise from top left: With Netflix exec (and Spotify alumna) Marian Dicus, Erlich, Columbia chief Ron Perry and Bennett; with Arlo Parks; with Spotify's Joe Hadley, Coi Leray and Spotify's Carl Chery; with WME's Lucy Dickens

"THE EFFORT IS TO CONNECT WITH LISTENERS ON A HUMAN AND EMOTIONAL LEVEL, EVEN THOUGH WE'RE USING STATE-OF-THE-ART TECHNOLOGY. THAT HUMAN CONNECTION AND HOW PEOPLE LISTEN TO MUSIC CAN NEVER BE SEPARATED."

simply not scalable. No matter how much time I put into it, I can't curate a playlist for 600 million users. We use technology to scale our expertise as editors and get it to as many people as possible. Around 2018, our editors and product teams made their first attempts to bridge human curation with our personalization engines. That was largely due to technological innovation with personalization and machine learning. This collaboration resulted in personalized editorial playlists, where tracks fit an

overall mood or moment, which is set and curated by our editors, but personalized [by tech] for each *individual* listener. These personalized editorial playlists sit alongside our purely editorial playlists as well as fully algorithmic playlists. We consider them a holistic listening ecosystem and we see that users want to interact with different sets/experiences depending on their mood, lifestyle, tastes, time of day, etc. We also work with our product teams on new features like DJ, Daylist and AI playlists too.

What do you think are the key differentiators between Spotify and other DSPs?

There are three things:

It's the global scale of Spotify, but it's not a monolith forcing everyone to listen to a small subset of the same songs or playlists. We have huge global reach and scale, but local nuance and local relevance are really important to us. It's why we've invested in having editors and editorial teams in local markets very early on, because what feels authentic in India as a listening experience is very different from what feels authentic and is desired in the United States.

The next step on from that is taking local sounds and artists to the rest of the world, and that's done via our Global Curation Groups (or GCGs, as we refer to them internally), where editors meet regularly from



With Billy Porter

around the world to discuss local listening trends, important/bubbling artists, tracks and genres from across the globe and how we introduce them to new markets and more audiences worldwide.

The third is the fusion: the investment that we've made in human editorial intelligence and music and cultural expertise, and scaling that with technology. The effort is to connect with listeners on a human and emotional level, even though we're using state-of-the-art technology. That human connection and how people listen to music can never be separated.

These are the core ways that Spotify is set apart from other DSPs.

So you might have the tech, but you need a soul.

Yeah. And the editors are the soul.

You told me that you religiously listened to about three hours of music per day on average. How do you approach that, and what are the key benefits of doing it?

When you think about a professional athlete, they have

to go to the gym to maintain their body in order to perform at a certain level. It is not unlike that for me, in that I am the global head of editorial. At any point, I'm having conversations with many different people about thousands of tracks, artists, genres, and I need to speak intelligently and be informed about it. To function at that level—and lead a team of 130 or so of the world's biggest (and most passionate) music nerds and experts—requires a certain level of understanding and a breadth of knowledge; it's imperative to succeed in the role. I think everyone understands that we get an enormous amount of music every day at Spotify. It's over 150,000 tracks daily. But the three hours allows me a structured listening to really get up to speed with new releases and listen more deeply—when I get an album from an artist, I will really listen to an album three, four, five times straight through.

It's not just superficial listening. And then there's also what I call "digital digging in the crates" where I'm hunting for unearthed gems that artists have submitted via our Spotify for Artists pitch tool.

Let's talk about your backstory. Spotify was the first place you worked in the U.S., correct?

Yes, that's right.

What informed the decision to make that move?

I was initially head of music for the U.K. and Ireland at Spotify overseeing editorial, artist and label partnerships and music marketing teams for the region. [Global Head of Music] Jeremy Erlich approached me about taking on extra duties and leading editorial teams globally as an interim measure while he thought about the best structure for the music team at Spotify. An important requirement for success in this new role was a relocation to the U.S., which I thought long and hard about—uprooting to a new country is no small undertaking. But the opportunity to work in the biggest music market in the world was one I felt I couldn't turn down... and here we are.

Say a bit about your early life, which is unlike anyone else's story I've ever heard.

I am the child of immigrants. My father is Chinese and my mother is Persian. They met in London as students, and when I was a baby, they moved back to Tehran, which is where my mother is from, because they thought that was where they wanted to settle and raise their family. But fate had other plans; the Iranian Revolution happened, and we fled Iran. My mother's family made arrangements for us to leave as soon as possible, given that my mother was married to a foreigner and had a mixed-race child. That was the last time my mother saw her parents alive, and we lost family members.

Jesus.

And then what followed was a very nomadic childhood in many different countries. I went to 11 schools during my high school and primary years. We were never in one place for very long, largely because my father worked in the hotel business. What that taught me was adaptability and self-sufficiency.



THIS IS Sulinna



"AT AGE 11, I BOUGHT SONIC YOUTH'S GOO ON CASSETTE... LYING ON MY BED, IN A HAZE OF PRETEEN EXISTENTIAL ANGST, I CAN STILL REMEMBER CHUCK D'S LINE: 'TELL HIM ABOUT IT, HIT HIM WHERE IT HURTS.' AND THEN KIM GORDON PURRING, 'ARE YOU GONNA LIBERATE US GIRLS FROM MALE WHITE CORPORATE OPPRESSION?'"

So what were you interested in?

The two things that really gave me joy and self-confidence were music and technology—and they continue to. The technology side manifested early on as a love of video games, which I still have to this day. I'm still a heavy gamer.

What was the first game that really captured your imagination?

I think they were *Wonder Boy* and *Frogger*. My brother and I had an Atari, which, to our amazement, our parents let us have in my brother's bedroom. We would sit in his bedroom and play for *hours*. It blossomed from there, and we went on to discover and play more sophisticated games.

What was the first music that really resonated with you? Was there music in your household growing up?

My brother and I are both in creative fields—he's in the visual arts—but my parents weren't creatives at all. So it's interesting that their two children really gravitated towards the arts. My parents *liked* music, but they weren't full-on music people.

So when I was 10 years old, I had what was really, truly an epiphany in the purest sense. I had just bought Sonic Youth's album *Goo* on cassette. I saved up my money from doing chores around the house and also would go around and knock on neighbor's doors to see if they wanted anything done, to earn a little extra money. I bought *Goo*, and the song "Kool Thing" started

playing. Lying on my bed, in a haze of preteen existential angst, I can still remember Chuck D's line: "Tell him about it, hit him where it hurts." And then Kim Gordon purring, "Are you gonna liberate us girls from male white corporate oppression?"

And in that precise moment, I knew that music was *everything*; I had to make sure music was my life. 10-year-old me didn't know how or even where to start, but I knew with absolute conviction that music was a real force that articulated all of these complex feelings that I had inside, things that I didn't even know the name of yet but was already experiencing—sexism and racism.

At this stage, I was also playing music. The classical-recital life was not for me. So in my 10-year-old wisdom, I thought the way to work in music and to live it day in and day out was to become an artist. So I begged my father for an electric guitar. I was desperate to fulfill my Kim Gordon-esque Riot Grrrl, distortion-soaked wet dreams.

Those dreams die hard.

I eventually wore him down and he bought me a secondhand Ibanez guitar and a Peavey amp. And hearing Nirvana covers at volume 11 was never part of my father's plan for me. But in my bedroom, I was the half-Chinese, half-Persian version of Kim Gordon!

So now you had to form a band.

Absolutely. By 16, we were arguing over where I was going to study at university. The parent-approved paths of lawyer, doctor and engineer were not for me. I just wanted to



“THE REASON OUR INTEREST IN THE DARK SIDE PREVAILS, AND YOU SEE THAT CONSISTENTLY THROUGH VARIOUS CULTURES, RELIGIONS AND ERAS, IS BECAUSE IT REALLY SPEAKS TO A PRIMAL UNIVERSAL FASCINATION WITH THE UNKNOWN AND DEATH.”

play music, play video games and tear down the patriarchy. He just couldn't comprehend that. And he would say to me, "How are you gonna make money?" And I said, "I'm going to start a band and get signed." And my father encouraged me the only way Asian parents can: with brutal, unflinching honesty. He said, "Darling, I've heard you play, and you're not that talented."

That was a loving gesture.

It was, and he was right. We found ourselves glaring at each other again. Then he said, "You may not be a talented musician, but you're smart. You like music, you like video games. How about music technology?" So I ended up studying music at university and getting really interested in the early stages of music technology. He gave me a good steer.

He recognized your passion.

You have to understand that my parents had lost everything and made a lot of sacrifices in hopes of giving their children stability and a better opportunity. I absolutely understand their concern when their daughter is, like, "I'm gonna start a band."

And overthrow the patriarchy. But here you are on this path of music and technology; what aspect of all this particularly captivated you at this point?

I was told constantly that I had to decide whether I was going to focus on tech or music. I never bought that. I believed these two things were going to converge. Music-creation software and peer-to-peer file sharing had already happened. I ignored everyone and

followed my gut instinct. And I'm glad I did because we know how it transpired.

What was your degree in?

It was a music degree. I got first-class honors at Western Sydney University, and my first job out of college was actually in AI, with Sony Electronics. From there I went to the entertainment side of Sony, specifically Sony Music, in the international music department, and that's how I ventured down a more music-focused lane.

What were your duties?

I started off as an international marketing assistant. It was my introduction to working with artists and really thinking about how to break them internationally. And then I went into artist management. I was on the management team for a U.K. band called Kasabian for albums one and two. It was at the height of the second wave of Brit Rock. It was a cultural moment.

This was before the streaming revolution. The business as a whole was still in the doldrums of the post-P2P disaster.

People were talking about it like it was the end. I understood the fear, but to me this was not the end. It was actually the beginning. I moved into Live Nation Artists, which was set up by Michael Cohl and Bob Ezrin. It was back when the whole 360-degree model was a new concept. It was a great experience, but I was feeling like the technology-music convergence had really begun and I wanted to be involved in it.

So I took a calculated risk: I looked for a startup

experience. I wanted to know how to raise money with a VC and how to work with engineers to make a product that lives on several different platforms or operating systems. So I moved to Dublin and joined a very early-stage startup, **Whole World Band**. It was a music-video app, not unlike TikTok. I felt like I crammed in 10 years of experience into my three years there. It was a pressure cooker, extremely stressful, but my gosh, it was such a good experience.

And that set me up to move into a smaller streaming service, **Deezer**. I was the VP of artist marketing. With streaming, I really felt, like, *I get it now*. All of my experience had panned out in terms of technology, labels, live and management. That was all preparing me for streaming. All of that experience was so applicable to how I do my job now. **Deezer** was a great training ground for then coming into **Spotify** as the biggest streaming platform in the world, and being as fully formed as I could be to handle the job, but also the scale of what we do at **Spotify**.

How do you recharge when you're not at work?

Gaming is still a big part of my life. It's one of the things that I do where I can truly get out of my own head. I might be thinking too much about work but playing a game with others—I play **MMOS** (Massive Multiplayer Online Games)—you have interactions with people that you would never usually come across in your day-to-day life, and I find that experience enriching.

I really love getting into nature as well. My work is so cerebral, and I'm in front of a lot of screens. Being in nature, being able to just turn everything off for a bit, go for a walk and just have that space and that time is how I recharge as well. I also love to cook when I have time, and I love martial arts—another good way to get myself out of my own head. It's very hard to think about work when you're trying not to get punched in the face.

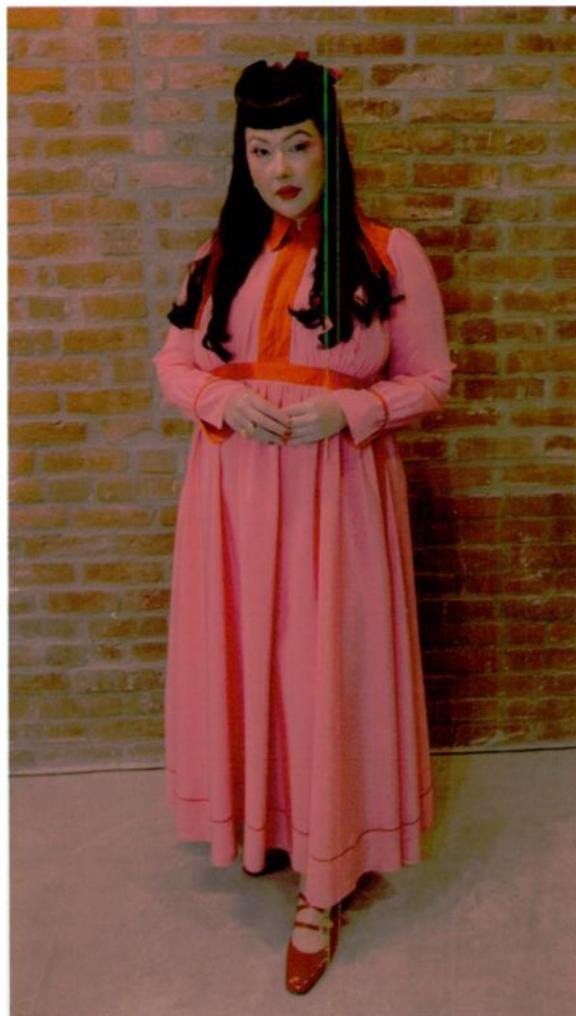
Finally, I wanted to ask you about a shared affinity of ours. You're a big fan of horror, science fiction and fantasy. How do these genres inspire you or enhance your creative impulses?

I was a big reader as a child, and I still am. I read voraciously, and I've always loved science fiction—which is linked to my love of technology—as well as fantasy and horror. Science fiction fascinated me because I didn't think it was fiction. A lot of these things are coming to pass. Unfortunately, I think we're in the early stages of the dystopian sci-fi future that we've read about in books. Not to get too dark.

People think that it's macabre, but the reason our interest in the dark side prevails, and you see that consistently through various cultures, religions and eras, is

because it really speaks to a primal universal fascination with the unknown and death. Humans repress a lot of emotions and particularly fear of the unknown, the supernatural and death. And exploring these themes through art is a way of processing those concepts that might, on a day-to-day basis, feel difficult to talk about, but it's incredibly important.

I remind myself that I'm mortal, and for whatever time that I have on this earth, I'm going to make it count. Life is chaos. I don't believe in karma or heaven and hell. Good things happen to bad people; bad things happen to good people. The world is pure chaos, but there are moments of beauty. And when those moments of beauty and joy *do* happen, you have to grab them and appreciate them when you can. That's all there is to it, and I find that realization liberating. ■



"I WAS TOLD CONSTANTLY THAT I HAD TO DECIDE WHETHER I WAS GOING TO FOCUS ON TECH OR MUSIC. I NEVER BOUGHT THAT. I BELIEVED THESE TWO THINGS WERE GOING TO CONVERGE. MUSIC-CREATION SOFTWARE AND PEER-TO-PEER FILE SHARING HAD ALREADY HAPPENED. I IGNORED EVERYONE AND FOLLOWED MY GUT INSTINCT. AND I'M GLAD I DID BECAUSE WE KNOW HOW IT TRANSPIRED."



George Prajin

Punching His Way to the Top

By Michael Dominguez

F

or music-biz lifers, it often begins with family. That's how manager, label boss, attorney, fierce negotiator and música Mexicana champion **George Prajin** got his start—he was born into it. Working at his family's retail stores and one-stop in Southern California, Prajin became not only an expert in retail, wholesale and distribution

but also an expert in the urban audience. Customers, many of them Latino, who frequented Prajin's retail stores consistently requested both hip-hop and regional Mexican music.

Two decades later, Prajin launched a label, nearly exited music before spending a considerable amount of time in the MMA world, became an attorney, re-entered the music biz and noticed an uptick in royalties from his work as a publisher and rights-holder. The timing of that royalty increase coincided with the

“Peso was the answer to the puzzle I had from the beginning—how do I mix these two genres together? And he answered it overwhelmingly. He always maintained that you don’t try to mix them, you find someone who can do it all. He’s that guy.”



PESO PLUMA

streaming boom ushered in by Spotify and Apple Music.

Through his decades of relationships within the Mexican music community, Prajin eventually met, managed and partnered with Guadalajara-based singer-songwriter Peso Pluma, the most groundbreaking artist to come out of Mexico in this century, just before his meteoric rise.

Prajin guided Pluma (born **Hassan Emilio Kabande Laija**) through his breakthrough year of 2023, which included all-time streaming records for a Mexican artist as well as a sold-out U.S. tour. With a run of features on such smashes as “Ella Baila Sola,” “La Bebe” and “PRC,” capped by his milestone debut LP, *GÉNESIS*—which made history as the highest-charting regional Mexican album of all time—Peso Pluma became a household name in both the U.S. and Mexico, leading *música Mexicana*’s growth across the globe.

Following the launch of Double P Records in partnership with Pluma, **Prajin Parlay** expanded its management division, label services and studios. Prajin has created one of the most powerful independent operations in the Latin music space, one that encompasses recording, publishing and touring. Along with Pluma, the firm recently signed Mexican acts like **Santa Fe Klan**, **Código FN**, **Jasiel Nuñez** and **Los Dareyes de la Sierra**.

We caught up with Prajin following a Grammy win for Best Regional Mexican Album and ahead of Team Peso's campaign for the artist's sophomore album, *ÉXODO*, which included a headlining slot at Coachella, an arena tour produced by Live Nation and expanded support from CAA. The veteran sports and music entrepreneur recounts his winding path to becoming a Mexican music mogul, and why fighters and artists want Prajin in their corners.

Let's start with the family business. What was your upbringing like?

My dad began selling music—specifically Spanish music—around the time I was born. He and my mom would drive into Tijuana and sell music at flea markets. They eventually opened a retail shop in Huntington Park in 1972. His motto was, if he didn't have it, it didn't exist.

I grew up in the store. I did everything from cleaning the floors to helping customers, all while learning as much as I could about the different genres, artists, composers—I love the history of music. Even today, I like to show off that I'm an encyclopedia.

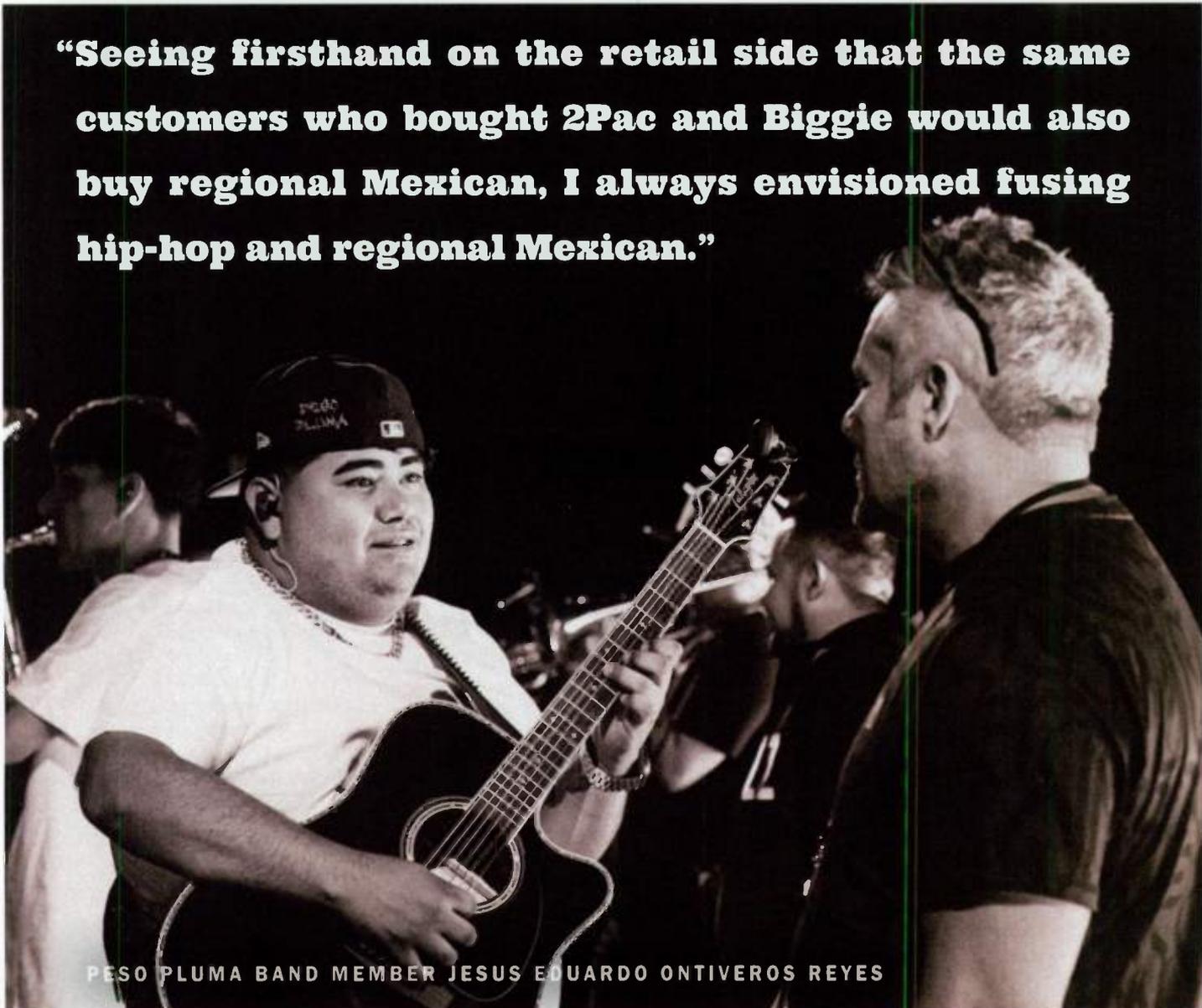
How did your time at the shop shape your music and business acumen?

The store cranked. We only had four feet of frontage, so we would put a huge speaker out in front on Pacific Boulevard and blast music to get people's attention. The music choices became extremely vital to our business—the right song would attract more customers. That was our research. You start evaluating and absorbing that data, you start training your ear to what is commercial. I think that was crucial to my education in identifying a commercial song.

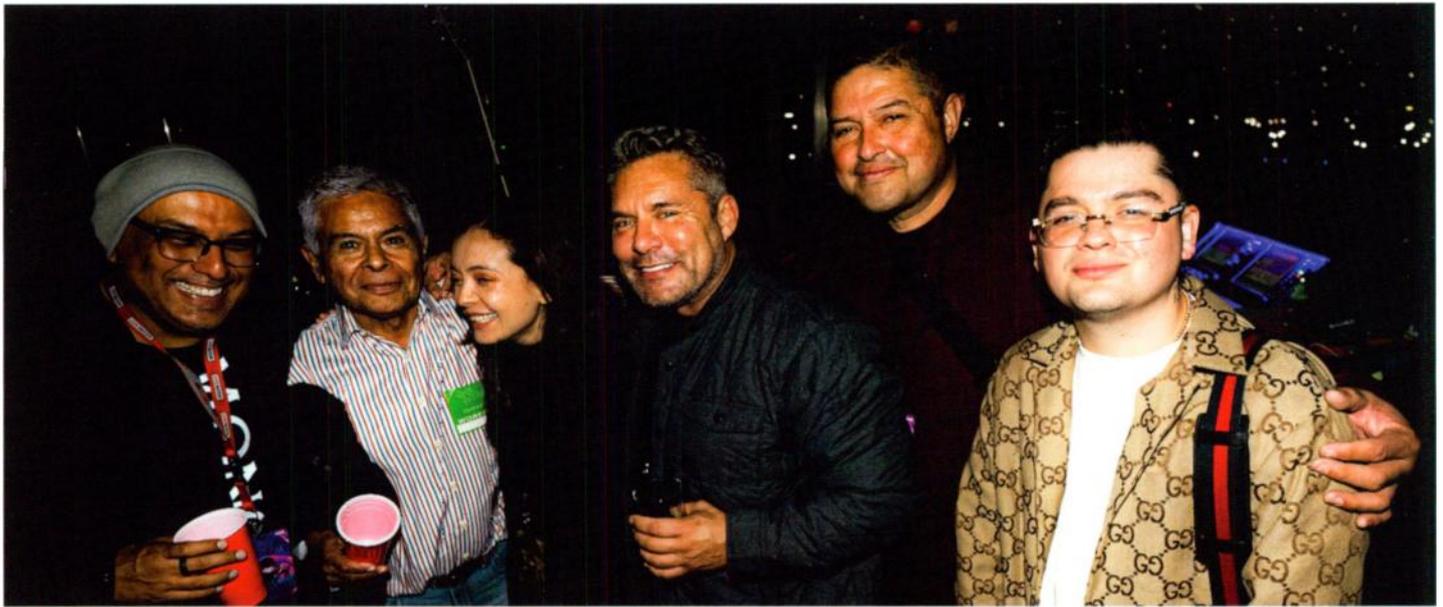
The store gradually turned into wholesale, and we became **Prajin 1 Stop**. And with that we started a retail chain. At one point we had 26 retail stores in SoCal under **Latin Music Warehouse**. I ran the retail division, so I would meet a lot of artists—that made us unique. We had access to many indie acts before major distributors. They would come directly to us to sell their cassettes or CDs.

My dad was the first person to sell [corridos legend] Chalino Sanchez cassettes. We had a huge Sinaloa clientele—**Broncos Sinaloa, Los Tucanes de Tijuana**—these guys came to the store and asked if we would sell their cassettes. The relationships we

“Seeing firsthand on the retail side that the same customers who bought 2Pac and Biggie would also buy regional Mexican, I always envisioned fusing hip-hop and regional Mexican.”



PESO PLUMA BAND MEMBER JESUS EDUARDO ONTIVEROS REYES



Top: Prajin with Live Nation's Jorge Garcia, Mr. Trujano, Prajin Parlay's Marcela Murillo Trujano, Herminio Morales and Jasiel Nuñez; bottom: with Omar "Omi" Rivera, Peso Pluma and Arcángel

built with these Mexican artists—our store was like a newsstand to them. They would ask, "What else do you have?" and without even looking just buy a stack of 20 cassettes.

So what was the next step?

Seeing my dad connect Chalino to [regional Mexican labels] Cintas Acuario or Musart, I started thinking, why are we finding these acts, developing their distribution and handing them over to major labels? So I thought we needed to open a label. My dad was against it. He thought, Why would we put up money for these artists? They're already bringing their music to us; we're making our distribution fee plus retail markup on their releases.

I wanted to be hands-on on the musical side. So when I was 23, I took a chance and signed a kid that I thought was a good prospect. He agreed to let me produce an

album for him, so we hired a band, went into the studio and made an album, all with no distribution, because I was doing it behind my dad's back. It didn't end up doing well because I was trying to keep it hush-hush and sell it at the same time. But it did lead me to an amazing artist that I would eventually work with, Jessie Morales. After hearing him in a random studio and learning he was only 14, I set myself on signing him. Luckily, I was able to convince him to sign with me. The kid was so good that I actually did tell my dad about it.

What was his reaction?

Actually, the way I told him was by playing one of the songs we recorded in the store, and six people came up in a matter of 10 minutes to ask who it was. My dad was like, "Who is that?" And I said, "Oh, it's this new kid."

And he goes, “Wow, that’s going to be a big seller.” I said, “Thank you. I signed him.” And he kind of just smirked, and then he never said anything after that.

The kid ended up having multiple platinum albums. I think he really revolutionized the urban and regional Mexican movement. This was around 1999. We did the first two albums independently through my label Z Records and eventually signed a deal with Univision Music. His first release through them debuted at #1 on the Latin sales chart. He had an impressive run. Seeing firsthand on the retail side that the same customers who bought 2Pac and Biggie would also buy regional Mexican, I always envisioned fusing hip-hop and regional Mexican. We really pushed the limit with Jessie.

It sounds like a foreshadowing of what happened in 2023 with música Mexicana.

We integrated 808s and had extra bass with banda. He ended up with a more urban sound. We even did crazy things like putting “Extreme Bass: Caution” on the album cover, “Explicit Lyrics.” He was on a trajectory to do great things—he performed to half a million people at festivals. But then the music industry at the time started to crater. It became nearly impossible to monetize anything.

How did this impact the family retail operation?

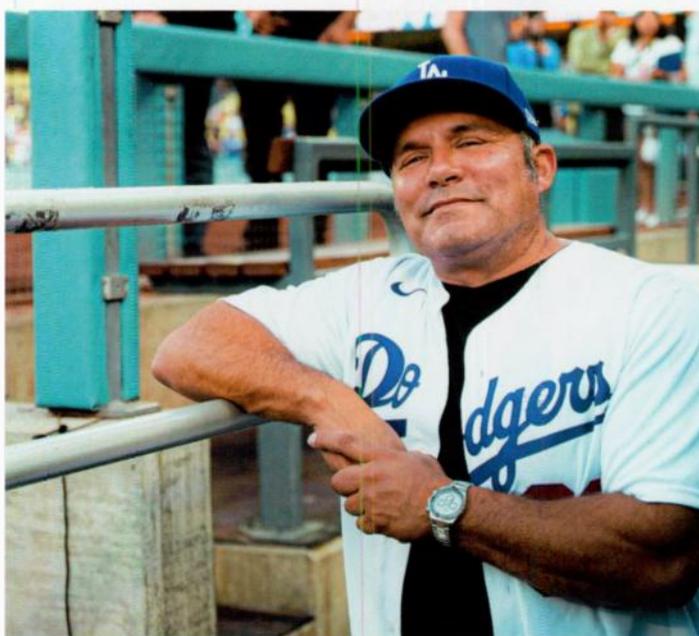
It was sad. Artists that moved hundreds of thousands of units were suddenly moving like 10-15k. I tried to lower prices, but there was no salvation. It was heartbreaking because not only did we have to shut down but we had people that worked for us for many years that we were no longer able to employ.

After that I moved to the desert for a couple of years to take care of my dad, who was sick. Meanwhile, I was always associated with MMA. I used to train and have many friends who are fighters. When I got back to L.A., one of my best friends, Tito Ortiz, essentially became the face of the UFC. He was going through changes in his career and needed someone to help negotiate. I had some background in law and contracts, so I represented him, and he said, “Wow. I have never gotten anything near that amount.” And I was like, “Yeah, this is pretty fun.”

Word spread amongst the fighters that “George is negotiating all these great deals for Tito.” So then I ended up representing some of the top-tier names in the sport—[legendary female MMA fighter Cris] Cyborg, then Alistair [Overeem] and [UFC Hall of Famer] BJ [Penn]. I built really good relationships with the owners of the UFC. I did that from 2008 until around 2020.

Why did you stop?

The entire time I was also representing labels and artists as an attorney. I also never got rid of my catalog. My friend was administering Z Records and started noticing that the minimal money that it normally accrued was beginning to multiply. My law partner also noticed the resurgence of the music biz and suggested I relaunch Z Records. I found myself in the studio every day, wanting to produce and create new music. I realized that I had to give 100% to the music—and so that’s when I stopped representing artists in sports and also started tapering out of providing legal services to other record labels.



With Peso at Chavez Ravine

The streaming boom brought you back.

At first my idea was to come in and just be like a sub-distributor for a lot of these acts. I partnered with a label, Grand Records, that had a relationship with Junior H—he was our first signing when I came back. That’s a massive, massive signing for your first artist on a new venture.

Everything changed when everyone adopted streaming. It’s still tough to make a profit on streaming—you have to put up numbers in the millions to make money. Fortunately for us, we do billions of streams now.

Independently, no less.

It takes a lot to get to that point, a lot of investment and amazing artists. I’m fortunate to work with Peso Pluma, Tito Double P, Jasiel Nuñez, Dareyes and now Santa Fe Klan and Código FN. And, of course, Peso is a gamechanger. Everything I envisioned, he fulfilled it. He’s always quick to say “Thank

you” for what we’ve done for him. But I always tell him “Thank you for making me love music again.” He was the answer to the puzzle I had from the beginning—how do I mix these two genres together? And he answered it overwhelmingly. He always maintained that you don’t try to mix them, you find someone who can do it all. He’s that guy.

So let’s go back to how you met Peso.

It goes back to Jessie Morales—I’ve known him since he was 14. We sort of drifted apart when I took a break from music, but around 2019 he said, “GP, you need to come back—we need you.” He was the one who connected me to Grand and Junior H. Jessie started doing A&R work, and he discovered Peso on Instagram. At that particular moment, we weren’t on the best of terms, so I didn’t take action when he tried to show me Peso.

Peso ended up signing with Jessie’s brother, Herminio Morales, for management. They signed with me on the label side. We worked well together, but in 2022 Herminio got very sick—thank goodness he is okay now, but at the time it was so bad that he had to focus on the battle ahead of him and couldn’t fulfill his obligations as a manager. So Peso signed with me for management as well. I would’ve

done anything to help Herminio regardless, but I also saw how different and special Peso was. I remember meeting him for the first time, just a few months before that conversation with Herminio, and he was just hanging in the studio. I thought, he doesn’t look like a regional Mexican singer. But then he started playing guitar, and I quickly realized that he’s super-talented.

When did you first realize Peso Pluma was the truth?

I was focused on doing big productions, with multiple acts collaborating on one big record. We also had two or three artists that were promising, and they were releasing five to seven tracks a month. When Peso turned in his record, me and my engineer made some tweaks, and we ended up with “El Belicón.” That just had a spark—I knew it and felt it. I told everyone, “We’re going all in on Peso Pluma.”

So “El Belicón” was when things changed?

It was more than that. I knew the kid trusted me. With music and in sports, when you put your heart into a project, you just want your team to be loyal and faithful. Sometimes, with athletes and artists, outside players can get into their heads. I knew Peso had 100% faith in me, so I felt really good about this.

What was the strategy to really break through?

We changed the strategy of releases. We stopped trying to focus so much on one big album. Peso became a priority, and we invested in every way. I made it my personal project with him to go out and secure the collabs—that was the strategy, to go global.

I noticed that in the beginning Worms Music was attached to Peso’s releases.

Once Herminio got better, I brought him back in. He is Worms Music.

What ignited Peso’s hot start in 2023? “AMG,” “PRC” and “La Bebe,” were all blowing up simultaneously right before “Ella Baila Sola” dropped.

Peso always wanted to rap, do reggaeton, other genres. I reminded him that our foundation was Mexicana. We had an agreement that for every reggaeton track, we’re going to drop five corridos. Let’s go out there and do everything we can to be successful in that space, and from there we can go into other genres. We sold out our U.S. tour based on our core audience within música Mexicana.

And globally?

The plan was to continue to roll out corridos but be strategic with collaborations. Let’s find a major artist in Colombia to do a reggaeton song with. Let’s connect with a major artist to have a presence in all these different countries—and follow it up with infrastructure.

If there’s one thing I learned from the music business, especially the physical world, it’s that you can have a hit song, but if you don’t have your products available in the market, you lose your opportunity. We hired PR in Chile, Spain, all over the world and made sure that we had a presence in each country independently of the artist we collaborated with.



Top: Peso with Santa Fe Klan; bottom: Prajin with Jorge Garcia

“Peso always wanted to rap, do reggaeton, other genres. I reminded him that our foundation was Mexicana. We had an agreement that for every reggaeton track, we’re going to drop five corridos. Let’s go out there and do everything we can to be successful in that space, and from there we can go into other genres. We sold out our U.S. tour based on our core audience within música Mexicana.”



At what moment last year did it hit you that this run was going from hot to historic?

It hit me pretty quick. When we were reaching out to artists to collaborate, Peso had his own wish list, and we hit that quickly. What was really cool is I realized when these artists wanted to jump on a corrido, that we had the ability to bring our sound to that country as well. Now we had name recognition because of the affiliation with that major artist, but we allowed our music to speak for itself. Then, suddenly, all of these songs started charting all over the world. “Ella Baila Sola” was our first global #1; “La Bebe” came next. Of course the #1s solidified it for me.

Also, a good chunk of the fans and artists who love Peso and corridos don’t even speak English. Rappers will come to shows, show us what they’re listening to and want to jump on a corrido. Joaquin Phoenix came to a show last year—it was in San Bernadino at this venue where you can get stuck in the parking lot for hours after the show. Joaquin was like, “I’ve heard about that nightmare; I think I’m gonna leave early. What’s left on the set list?” I told him what was left. He said, “I can’t leave—I love those songs.” He’s a real fan. Peso loves that story. It makes us all so proud, because you’re reaching so many different people and expanding an audience that—with all due respect—no Mexican artist has ever achieved before.

How did demand factor into his first U.S. tour?

We came to the U.S. in April of last year, and we didn’t know what his value was. We could have made some big mistakes. We could have sold 10% of what he ended up making per show for the whole calendar. I always say

there’s some luck in it, but there’s also strategy.

We decided to do a show at Toyota Arena in Ontario with [indie promoter] Bobby Dee, who took a chance on us, and we ended up selling that place out in two hours. That helped me then negotiate a massive deal with Live Nation, which transformed it into a bigger tour halfway through the original routing, because we just kept seeing the momentum that we were creating.

We’ve been fortunate to work with Live Nation. They allowed us to change the tour midway. Sometimes people don’t want to take those risks. “Do we really need to add more dates or move to bigger venues?” They were good partners throughout the tour. Obviously, it was to their benefit as well, but they always supported us in every decision we wanted to make. I think that’s a big reason why Peso chose to do [the *ÉXODO*] tour with them as well.

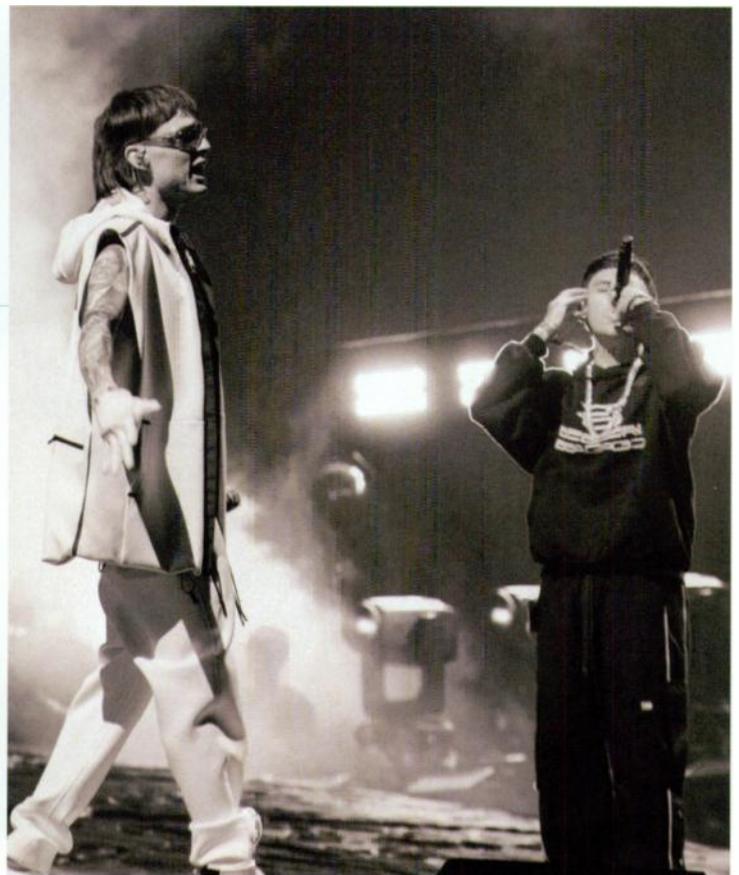
You started the year with a Grammy win and you had a top Coachella billing. What are your expectations for the rest of the year?

I feel that *ÉXODO* is going to be a massive album; we’re seeing really strong numbers and engagement. I think we should land some big nominations again. Last year was amazing—obviously, the goal is to top last year. But I feel very confident that this will be another strong year.

How have you expanded Prajin Parlay?

We’ve been aggressive in signing artists and building our team. We’re hiring the best in the industry to offer services for our artists and their labels.

We’re working with Santa Fe Klan now. I’ve known Angel [Quezada] since he was 21. He’s an amazing artist. We’re working on his new album right now, and we’re



From left: With Herminio Morales; Peso with Junior H

“Joaquin Phoenix came to a show last year—it was in San Bernadino at this venue where you can get stuck in the parking lot for hours after the show. Joaquin was like, ‘I’ve heard about that nightmare; I think I’m gonna leave early. What’s left on the set list?’ I told him what was left. He said, ‘I can’t leave—I love those songs.’ He’s a real fan. Peso loves that story.”

working on expanding his footprint in the U.S. Código FN and Dareyes have both been successful for a long time but have recently started to peak.

Tito Double P is developing strong. He just got his visa, so there’s a plan for a U.S. tour. He’s a big contributor to Peso’s work and one of our top songwriters. Jasiel Nuñez is another growing artist and top writer. We’ve got more artists we’ve signed that will be announced soon. We’re excited about the model we’ve built for our acts and creating with them.

How would you describe your role in the studio?

I don’t want to compare myself to him, but I sort of play the Rick Rubin role in our studios. He’s a legend and has such a great ear. That’s what I aim for—I give input when needed. Peso doesn’t require an actual producer to be in there guiding him because he’s so in line with his audience. That’s why I made him a partner in Double P. He’s got an amazing ear and he’s an amazing A&R.

Considering all the hats you’ve worn, what’s your

favorite part of the biz?

I love negotiating—I’ve done it for a long time in sports. I also love producing, being hands-on, building a team. I really love being in the studio and the A&R process.

You’re building a dynasty.

It’s been a lot of work, and it’s been a lot of failure too. Not every project has been successful. And the fact that now we’re getting all these accolades and respect—it’s very cool. But at the end of the day, it’s not about me, it’s about the artists I represent, and I feel the job isn’t done.

What am I going to do? Sell out? Then who’s going to come and finish the job? Who’s going to make sure that Peso is going to be financially stable for the rest of his life? Who’s going to make sure that he doesn’t have a sophomore jinx or a junior jinx? I made these promises to these artists, not someone else, and I intend to fulfill my obligation. So that’s something in the back of my mind. Everybody’s like, “Oh, is he going to take the money and run?” But I don’t look at it that way. I look at it like, who’s going to come in and fulfill my promise? ■

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"Alligator Bites Never Heal"

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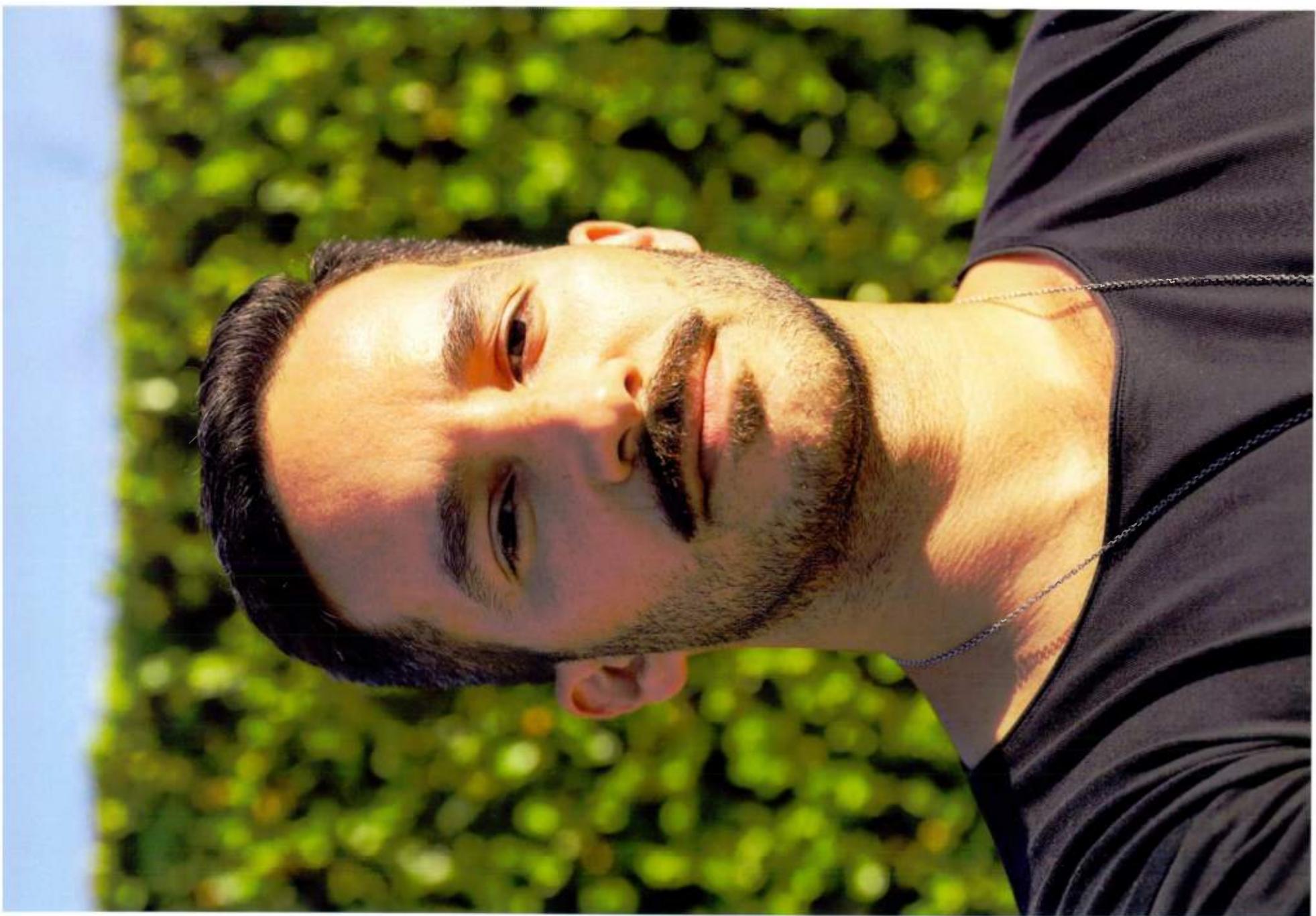
"Alligator Bites makes Doechii's stance clear: Nobody puts Doechii in a corner." - Pitchfork

"Doechii Reigns Supreme on Alligator Bites Never Heal... one of the year's most fully-realized breakout album[s] [and] one of the year's very best."
- Rolling Stone

"Alligator Bites Never Heal is a rap odyssey"
- THE FACE

"Thrilling experience" - NPR

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Hans Schafer

Building a Bridge Between Two Worlds

By Jorge Hernandez

Hans Schafer has been at the forefront of Latino recording artists' ascension to global powerhouses. The second-generation music-biz exec—his stepfather is Jesús López, the chairman/CEO of Universal Music Latin America & Iberian Peninsula, while his mother was once a label manager at BMG Latin—is in a unique position: He understands this musical phenomenon not only as a music-business trailblazer but also as a prototypical Hispanic-music fan who straddles two distinct cultures. Schafer's career is marked by his ability to foster strong relationships with artists, managers and industry stakeholders, which has been crucial in securing high-profile tours and enhancing Live Nation's global footprint. As the company's SVP of global touring, Schafer continues to drive its mission to connect artists with their fans worldwide, solidifying his status as a key influencer in the live-music sector.



Schafer (third from left) joins Los Bukis for their 2021 reunion-tour announcement at SoFi Stadium

“I always thought it was important to have a strong foundation of understanding the industry from a lot of different areas. For example, you’re a better promoter if you think like a marketer, and you’re a better marketer if you think like a promoter.”

You were born into a music business family. Did you always know this was something you wanted to do as well, or did you come around to the business later in your life?

From a really young age, I’d do things like hang out at the warehouse and put CDs together. My family always had artists coming in and out of the house, and I was constantly going to concerts. I always knew that music was where I ultimately wanted to be.

What music moved you during your formative years?

I was born in Miami and raised between Miami and Spain. Consequently, I had a wide appreciation for different styles of music. Even in high school, my tastes didn’t fall into a box where there was only one genre of music that I enjoyed. I listened to rock, flamenco and hip-hop, as well as a lot of jazz. But when I was about 15, I first heard Paco De Lucía and Al Di Meola play “Mediterranean Sundance,” and that was a pivotal song for me. It really caused a shift in the kind of music I was listening to.

What was your first job in the music business?

I did an internship at Universal, and I spent some time with the press and publicity department, the marketing

department and the radio-promotions department. I always thought it was important to have a strong foundation of understanding the industry from a lot of different areas. For example, you’re a better promoter if you think like a marketer, and you’re a better marketer if you think like a promoter.

Where did you end up after your internship?

Once I graduated college, I went to Spain for a few months during the summer and traveled a bit before coming back, and then I started working at Mun2.

Mun2 was probably the first major media outlet to recognize kids who were equally at home listening to music in Spanish and mainstream pop and rock. What was it like building a network around this burgeoning Latino youth culture?

Mun2 was this bilingual, bicultural, music-lifestyle channel, which is something I related to. It was an interesting space because nobody was in it at that moment. There were no radio stations that were programming English and Spanish; everything was single format. Mun2 was really the precursor to the world we live in today, and I was passionate speaking about what we were doing at the

channel. We would go and sit with non-Latin labels and try to explain this opportunity, and the immediate sort of reaction was, "But you're a Latin channel." It really hit me to my core. I thought, Wait a minute, if you don't understand, then let me explain to you who I am so that you can understand what the channel is."

During your five years at Mun2, what were your roles?

When I started, it was 24 hours a day of music blocks. I was working in talent and artist relations, and I was initially tasked with establishing a relationship between the labels and Mun2 to ensure that we received video content. That eventually lead to bringing in artists as we developed original programs. That was a great time, because the edict was to do what you think is cool and don't worry about the ratings.

At one point I was asked if I wanted to book the regional Mexican show *Reventon*. The answer was absolutely, and I jumped in headfirst. In the beginning I had a basic sort of understanding of the groups, the music, the different subgenres. I leaned hard on the team to take me through the evolution of the music. Those were some beautiful years of music discovery.

Your time at Mun2 definitely sounds like it gave you the freedom to try a lot of things, since there wasn't a defined playbook. What was the big takeaway from your time there?

The audience is always the most important conversation.

Whether we are talking about Mun2 or about the labels, we're constantly looking to reach the target audience and to become the experts in knowing everything about them. This has always been my ethos. You have to understand where the audience is, how they consume music and who they are. I was able to take that expertise with me into a brand-partnerships role with Universal where you needed to be the expert on the artist and understand how to reach the audiences the brands are targeting.

How did the opportunity arise to work with brand partnerships at UMG?

I was familiar with a lot of that team that early on was into sponsorship and endorsements. Back then, this was a transitional period for the labels—the business models were changing. This was the beginning of singles on iTunes, and ringtones were a big part of that business as well. There was a big push across the industry to find other business models and sources of revenue. Brand partnerships was one of those areas and I thought it was interesting, even though I didn't come from a sales background. I liked the idea of working hand in hand with the other departments, the label managers and the IP owners.

What were some of your career highlights during your tenure at UMG?

We did some deals with MasterCard that were special. One of those deals ended up being the bridge to the



PHOTO: GUSTAVO CABALLERO/BILLBOARD VIA GETTY IMAGES

Fuerza Regida's Jesus Ortiz Paz, Schafer and Live Nation's Jorge Garcia

"The big thing in our world with live is understanding that people are reaching into their pockets because there is no replacement for live. You have to go to the show to get the full experience. It's an emotional experience that transcends listening to the song at home. It's where a fan cements their love for the artist."

“Latin is not a genre. That is the key element to get across to people. You don’t have to get any more complicated than that.”



PHOTO: @CHRISCORNEJO

Universal Music Latino's Noel Rodriguez, Team Feid's Luis Villamizar, Universal Music Latino's Max Cacciotti and Angel Kaminsky, Schafer and Team Feid's Veronica Velez; with attorney Oswaldo Rossi at KAROL G's 2024 Madrid show

next iteration of my career. We did a priceless experience with Juanes, who at that time had just finished his MTV *Unplugged* album. We did an album launch with a private performance for about 400 winners in Puerto Rico. One of the reasons I loved that deal is because it brought all of the priorities together. It was great for MasterCard, great for the label, great for the artist and great for the manager.

At the time, Juanes was managed by Rebeca León, who was also at AEG. The MasterCard campaign brought me face to face with her and she got to see me work. That deal included a lot of moving parts, and it had a huge impact on all the participants. Rebeca and I sat down, and she thought I'd be someone that would work well in the live business. She asked if I had ever considered making the move. I was definitely interested. I stayed on with Universal for about another year until the time was right for me to make the move to Goldenvoice/AEG.

What was your transition like pivoting into the world of touring and becoming a talent buyer?

Initially I was figuring out how the business worked, and I got into it very quickly. I was going out to settle shows, getting deeper into finance, buying shows and putting

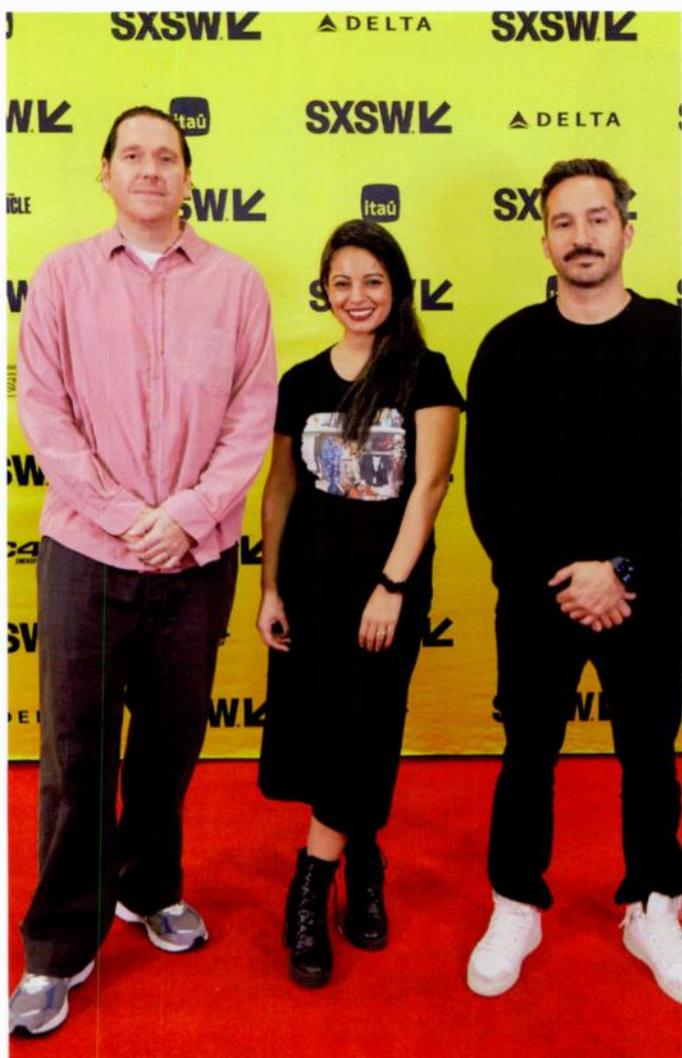
offers together. I needed to understand what Rebeca had been building and then figure out, how do we build on top of that foundation? How do I come in and add value to that growth?

The first show I ended settling was Romeo Santos. Going to shows became an extra layer of understanding who the audience is. Something that I started learning about and looking at closer were ticket prices. The big thing in our world with live is understanding that people are reaching into their pockets because there is no replacement for live. You have to go to the show to get the full experience. It's an emotional experience that transcends listening to the song at home. It's where a fan cements their love for the artist.

This was a huge lesson for me in understanding you have to find fans at all different price levels. It is something that has become core to my principles as a promoter. You need to have accessible pricing in order to reach the broadest audience.

In your four years at Goldenvoice/AEG, what were the tours that really stood out to you?

The J Balvin tour was spectacular because that was right



Baron Management's Jon Lieberberg, Rolling Stone's Julysa Lopez and Schafer

when things were taking off. We did Gloria Trevi and Alejandra Guzmán together. That was a huge win. You could only understand that was going to be a success if you understood who Gloria and Alejandra were as artists and what they represented. Were you Team Guzmán or were you Team Trevi? We also worked with Zoé, Café Tacvba, Tigres Del Norte, La Arrolladora Banda El Limón de René Camacho, Juanes, Aventura and Romeo Santos. It's a very wide spectrum of artists where the key has always been understanding who the audience is.

When you arrived at Goldenvoice/AEG, the entire Latin Team was only six to 10 people. Today, Latin music is a juggernaut, a seemingly overnight sensation but in reality, something that was years in the making. What made you realize that Latin music was well on its way to achieving ubiquity?

I'm glad you mentioned this because it is a constant conversation. Today people say, "Wow, Latin music has exploded!" Everybody wants to get in now. I've been seeing the momentum and growth for over 15 years, and I'm also the product of that music. I am the audience. The other conversation that comes to mind is that Latin is

crossing over. That's not actually true. Latin isn't crossing over. There's still singing in Spanish; the artists are still doing what they've always been doing. It's quite the opposite. It's the audience that is crossing over.

Latin artists are not releasing English-language albums to appeal to a broader audience. Latin artists are releasing their music the same way that they've been doing it for years. Now, the audience has grown and, of course, part of that is our core audience has grown. There's more purchasing power, the economy has gotten better for us Latinos over the last 30 to 40 years. We've changed what it looks like to be a Latino.

In previous years we had inflection points like "Macarena." That song was everywhere; it was a phenomenon. That was the audience crossing over back then. Today we're seeing more and more instances of those moments at multiple levels. It's not necessarily that everything is as big as "Macarena" was, but you're seeing it at a much larger aggregate.

What led you to your current role at Live Nation?

Live Nation approached me, and they had very ambitious goals that were aligned with what I ultimately wanted to do. The company has as an incredible global platform and reach. It was just the right relationship, and I thought there were some great things to be done using the platform the company had built over the years. Emily Simonitsch had already been with the company for many years, and she is an incredible promoter with very deep relationships. We were building a team around that foundation, and when I came in it became a bit more official in terms of a growth strategy that we wanted to execute.

What were some of things you did to grow the business?

We quickly expanded the team, and in short order we expanded our market share too. Our growth exploded. We hit many more markets, went deeper into places where we were already doing business and grew at every level of artist we were promoting.

When I started in 2018, we did the first Luis Miguel tour. That was his first tour in nine years. We also worked with artists like Hombres G, Los Enanitos Verdes, Gloria Trevi, Alejandra Guzmán and Mon Laferte. Then we started achieving success at stadiums, which up to that point was not something we had ever really seen. The company gave us the full support to be able to do something like Los Bukis, which really became the first Latin stadium act. After that we had artists like Bad Bunny and KAROL G doing stadiums. It was also important for us to invest in artist development as much as the large-scale shows. Whether you are talking about an artist like Duki from Argentina doing his first run all the way up to those big established artists like Bad Bunny and everything in between, the scope is very wide.

What are you most proud of in your present-day role?

When I think about the accomplishments in my career, I'm proud of the team we've built. They are my unsung heroes. It's not necessarily because we are a large team, it's that we are a large Hispanic team. It's a team that contributes to the diversity in a company as big as Live Nation. Our growth



PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER POLK/BILLBOARD VIA GETTY IMAGES



Clockwise from top: LAST TOUR's Marc Ventosa, artists Yandel and Wisin, Lionfish Entertainment's Rebeca Leon and Schafer; SXSW panel 2023; with J Balvin and Jesús López

isn't treated separately or independently from the rest of the company; quite the opposite. We are a part of the foundation. Our integration into Live Nation and having the support of the company on a global basis is incredibly fulfilling.

Looking back over the course of your career and the many artists you've worked with, you've managed to create live experiences that speak to the totality of what Latinos are listening to, which is challenging. Because whether you're Cuban, Mexican, Colombian, or whatever your country of origin is, the music that appeals to all of these different fans isn't necessarily the same. How do you convey

this idea that while Latin music is a force within the industry, it's very much siloed and splintered by the experiences of all these different cultures?

You start by saying Latin is not a genre. That is the key element to get across to people. You don't have to get any more complicated than that. Latin music is an overarching categorization of music that is performed in Spanish, and that's it. Beyond that, how far down the rabbit hole do you want to go? We can be here for hours talking about this, but that is the main point to get across: Stop treating Latin as a genre. When you stop treating it like a genre, then you start to understand how multifaceted it is—and it's the first step of understanding the music and who we are. ■



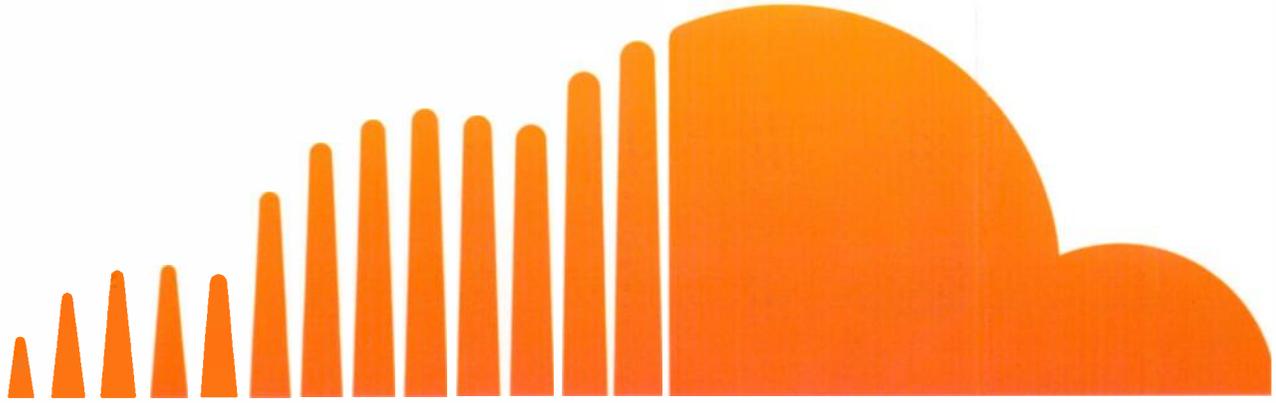
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"[SOUNDCLOUD IS] A 17-YEAR-OLD STARTUP THAT
HAS LIVED MANY LIVES, AND EVERYBODY'S GOT
THEIR PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS."



E L I A H

S E T O N

SEEDING THE CLOUD

INTERVIEW BY SIMON GLICKMAN

S

oundCloud CEO Eliah Seton is very much in the process of transforming the highly influential DSP, which was a key factor in music discovery during the dawning days of the streaming revolution, for the present ecosystem. Now, the exec—who served a significant tenure on the label side as a Warner Music Group exec—and his team are also laser-focused on amplifying the role of fans.

A number of artists who first blew up on SoundCloud went on to big success at major labels, including Post Malone, Billie Eilish, Shaboozey, Lainey Wilson and Zach Bryan. Now Seton and company are hoping for a similarly big arc for a slew of new acts, such as teen R&B/hip-hop phenom Laila!, whose early SoundCloud action has translated to big activity at TikTok and inroads at Spotify.



"WE ARE THE ONLY PLACE EXCLUSIVE TO MUSIC THAT CONNECTS ARTISTS AND FANS DIRECTLY. SO YOU'VE GOT THOSE HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF FANS COMING TO FIND WHAT'S NEXT IN MUSIC. YOU'VE GOT THOSE MILLIONS OF CREATORS COMING TO FIND THOSE FANS."



From top: Seton with wolfacejoey; with WMG's Howard Corner

What's top of mind for you at this point in your tenure?

I'm 15-ish months in as CEO, and SoundCloud is the healthiest it's ever been. We needed to put ourselves in the driver's seat of where this company was going and really put SoundCloud's destiny in our own hands. It's a 17-year-old startup that has lived many lives, and everybody's got their preconceived notions. Those first six, nine months were about getting the business as healthy as possible, and that meant getting profitable. We got there for the full year of 2023. Being able to step back and take a clean sheet of paper to how this business is structured, how we're organized, how we work and really integrate music and tech was a major opportunity to get us healthy, and we're a profitable growth company for the first time.

What was key to getting you there?

The most important was putting ourselves in a position where the operating metrics could really flourish. We are breaking records at every metric—record fan subscribers, record ad sales, record creators, subscribers, record usage, record engagement metrics and obviously record revenues and record profits. That is really an output of this inte-

grated music-and-tech approach that has changed the way we operate.

The healthy outlook extends beyond just the P&L and the operating metrics to the product. Our usage for a long time was retained because of brand loyalty—folks who were passionate SoundCloud users, who kept coming back to the platform and the app. But for a long time, that app and that platform were not as active and were somewhat dormant. The last two years, that's totally changed and our product leadership, led by Rohit Agarwal, our chief product officer, has been totally turned around. We now have a world-class product team that is shipping product at a world-class clip and that is delighting fans and creators.

We think of the business in two different commercial segments: our fan business and our creator business. Our fan business looks like a DSP would look. It has ad-supported and paid subscribers. That's what drives the revenues—hundreds of millions of fans coming to the platform to discover what's next in music, to find the remix they heard in the club, to find the next great hip-hop artist, to be the first follower of the next Billie Eilish or Post Malone. That fan business has as much of the world's music as any platform you'll find on the planet.

We've got 400 million tracks on the platform. A traditional DSP has about 100 million tracks. We've got all those through our content licenses and we've got another 300 million user-generated content tracks by unsigned artists. Those are creators who are looking to be discovered and find their fans. It's this massive universe. Those creators are paying a subscription for access to products, tools and services to begin and advance their careers. That's our flywheel—our virtuous circle of fans and creators coming to the platform to find one another and engage with one another in a unique way. That virtuous circle forms the foundation for everything we're trying to do in the business.

Let me ask you about these creator tools—what are they and how do they benefit creators more than what's available elsewhere?

The place I would start is to articulate SoundCloud's point of differentiation, as we are the only place exclusive to music that connects artists and fans directly. So you've got those



From left: WMG days with Niko Nordstrom, Jeremy Marsh, Emma Marsh, Seton and Tom Corson; with WMG colleague and future TikTok music boss Ole Obermann

“THERE ARE 46 MILLION TRACKS ON STREAMING PLATFORMS THAT DON’T GET ANY LISTENS, [AND] MOST OF THEM ARE BY REAL LIVE ARTISTS WHO ARE UNABLE TO FIND FANS, ENGAGE WITH FANS AND EARN INCOME FROM STREAMING. BY VIRTUE OF THE FACT THAT WE CAN ACCESS FANS DIRECTLY, WE CAN GET THOSE ARTISTS HEARD.”

hundreds of millions of fans coming to find what’s next in music. You’ve got those millions of creators coming to find those fans. When I was at Warner Music Group and working for Steve Cooper, the then-CEO, he had been the CEO of companies across probably a dozen different industries, and his great frustration in music and at the major-label side was that they would spend a billion dollars in A&R and marketing and promotion and have no access directly to the end user, the fan. It seemed completely crazy to spend so much of your cost structure against delighting a fan or a customer that you couldn’t access.

At the same time, traditional DSPs like Spotify knew that in order to make their business models work, they needed to start working directly with artists, because the cost structure of content licenses was so penal and so challenging. They sought a path to work directly with artists, but the labels wouldn’t have it and didn’t permit that sort of direct engagement. For us, [engagement] in our DNA.

As the only creator platform in music that has direct access to audiences, a big part of that value proposition for creators is to get them heard. Internally, we call this “Get heard, get fans, get paid.” There are 46 million tracks on streaming platforms that don’t get any listens, and some of those may be bots or noise or rain on a tin roof, but most of them are real live artists who are unable to find fans, engage with fans and earn income from streaming. By virtue of the fact that we can access fans directly, we can get those artists heard. We’re solving what is known as the “zero plays problem,” and we do that through our creator product.

We use our AI and machine learning-based tools to put

those artists and tracks in front of fans who might like it. It might have a similar beats-per-minute or similar genre, or the fan may be listening to artists who might follow that other artist, and that’s what we call First Fans. We get an artist their first hundred fans. From that pool, we look at the results and for the high performers, the folks who are getting repeat listens and fewer skips and save to library, comments on tracks and lots of engagement, we will graduate those artists to what we call P1000. That’s your first thousand fans. It’s a broader cohort.

So the expanded funnel for this tier involves expanded criteria for possible affinity.

Yeah, exactly. Three years ago we bought an AI music-tech company called Musiio, based in Singapore and London. We integrated Musiio into SoundCloud and it brought with it these fantastic, incisive AI and machine-learning-based tools and capabilities that allow us to understand the real DNA of a song and do so utilizing AI engineering talent.

When those tracks do well with those first hundred fans, we graduate them to the next 1,000. For the cohort that do well in their first thousand fans, we’ll start to playlist those artists and tracks on what we call Buzzing playlists across hip-hop, R&B, EDM and pop. These are artists and tracks who just a few weeks ago had never gotten their first listens but are proving, based on the consumption patterns, that there’s something real. We’re starting to see some of those acts get picked up and discovered by the A&Rs who scour the platform. So that, I think, is a good example of how we’re using



"WE KNOW THAT STREAMING IS NOT ENOUGH FOR THE VAST MAJORITY OF ARTISTS THAT AREN'T A HOUSEHOLD NAME. THERE ARE SO MANY OTHER THINGS YOU NEED TO DO TO MAKE ENOUGH INCOME TO PAY THE RENT AND FEED YOUR FAMILY AS AN ARTIST."

From left: With SoundCloud's Tricia Tranquillo, Caroline Adley and Maggie Lindemann; with artist Cash Cobain.

our point of differentiation: We connect artists and fans together directly on our platform to give a value to creators that they can't find anywhere else.

I also wanted to talk to you about SoundCloud's role not only in breaking acts that have been bubbling under but also assisting established acts.

SoundCloud has a rich history of breaking artists and of being a day one for big artists who continue to come back to the platform to find those super fans and re-engage them. That's been true with remixes and in the DJ community and EDM. It's obviously been true with SoundCloud rap—there's a whole subgenre named after the platform.

That's right.

And being a day-one for the likes of Post Malone or Lil Nas X or Billie Eilish. What I would think of as maybe the crown jewel of the platform is what we call our Creator Network map. Imagine a map of the world—except it's not, as there's no relation to geographic proximity. What look like continents are clusters of creators on the platform, made up of individual bubbles. Each bubble is an individual creator on the platform. The size of the bubble corresponds to listenership. Billie Eilish will be a massive bubble on the platform; my niece, with her first hundred listens, will be a tiny dot. Their proximity to one another is how similar the music is and how engaged with one another those artists and those fans are. When you have these clusters of bubbles, you're seeing subgenres.

Ten years ago, had we had the Creator Network map, we would have come into the office one day and seen this pulsing heat map in the corner, and that would have been SoundCloud rap. We would have seen each of those big artists popping off by the hour. Now, we see these clusters developing, and they're from all over the world.

Presumably country and Americana too, right?

Absolutely. For artists who are already homegrown talent, we tried to retain that kind of day-one status and allow the platform to serve artists who want to come back and find their day-one fans. That happens organically all the time. Lil Nas X dropped three consecutive exclusives this spring as part of a marketing and promotion effort—on his own, without his label and without his management. But Lil Nas X knows that his most engaged fans can be found on SoundCloud. Lil Yachty did the same. So did The Kid LAROI. We've seen exclusives from a lot of artists who are signed to traditional deals and yet are coming to our platform to engage with their fans in a unique and differentiated way.

SZA did this with her last album. She took two tracks that were not part of the album and dropped them from her original user profile under a different name. Her most fervent fans found this right away and it contributed amazingly to the marketing and promotion campaign. This all comes back around to a really exciting campaign we were able to contribute to this spring and summer with Billie. We had a great opportunity to partner very closely with her whole team and with Darkroom and Interscope, and

they were willing to push the envelope with us.

We did a couple things that were pretty unprecedented. She credited SoundCloud with her start from the stage when she won her first Grammy. We were able to identify her first fans on the platform dating all the way back to the beginning, and to create a dedicated page celebrating those fans and giving them an exclusive look at the music with Billie's blessing and permission—and a message from her. To be able to do that for every artist on the platform, ultimately, is one of our goals. I love the idea that every person who comes to listen to music on SoundCloud may have been one of the first fans of the next Billie Eilish. To be able to have a badge or some sort of status on the platform that identifies that fandom is really exciting to us.

Since you worked at a major label and understand how one operates, give me your sense of how the majors fit into the present ecosystem.

That's a great question and one that is close to my heart and mind because, as you pointed out, I did spend a good chunk of time in the major-label system. What's clear is that the history of commercial music has lived with content owners, rightsholders and the major labels. The future of music, we believe, will live with global, scaled platforms that connect artists and fans directly. That is

our founding DNA and ultimately underpins a lot of why I ended up taking the leap to come to SoundCloud. Because if you were starting a new company in music and tech today, the first two things you'd want to have are direct access to artists and fans at scale and the ability to connect artists and fans without anything in between on the platform. That's what SoundCloud has been doing for 17 years, and I think now the industry is finally ripe for that. What it comes down to is a premise that both incumbent labels and traditional streaming platforms find somewhat challenging: that streaming is not enough.

Can you elaborate?

We know that streaming is not enough for the vast majority of artists who aren't household names. There are so many other things you need to do to make enough income to pay the rent and feed your family as an artist. Streaming is also not enough for fans. There are some fans who are more passive listeners and for whom putting on a Top Hits playlist in the background might be sufficient, but certainly for the fans we care about on our platform, streaming is insufficient. If you are a rabid Lil Yachty fan and you are streaming a track or an album 24/7, you're paying the same subscription dollars that somebody who forgot that they're even subscribed to that service is paying.



Clockwise from top: Fred Davis, Troy Carter and Seton; With Jax Jones at Web Summit, 2023; with SoundCloud's Chris Milo, Tyrone Scott and Antonious Ponch

PHOTO: COURTESY OF SOUNDCLOUD



Seton, Carianne Marshall and Jon Platt attend the 2018 City Of Hope Gala

Streaming is not enough for the fans who are looking to actually spend money, and, from their business model, I think we know streaming is not enough for streamers. For us, that's an underlying premise, because we're the one platform exclusive to music that actually connects artists and fans to be able to monetize the engagement between them. And rather than dividing the

streaming pie into thinner and thinner slices in what inevitably is a zero-sum game with decelerating growth, we're talking about putting new pies on the table—new sources of income that will allow more artists to get paid more from different forms of monetization beyond streaming, and for fans to express their fandom on the platform and create new formats for monetization beyond what exists today. I think we're uniquely positioned to do that in a way that incumbent labels and streaming platforms are not.

How does the monetization part manifest in terms of the actual user experience?

As a baseline, having artists and fans engage in ways beyond streaming allows us to start running experiments. A fan might come to the platform to stream a track, but they'll stay on the platform to engage in some other way. They'll comment on the track, they'll repost it, they'll share it, they'll DM with another fan, they'll DM with an artist, or they'll react to comments.

Starting to experiment with these forms of engagements is a big part of our current roadmap, so we've done that, for example, with private links. We have 100 million tracks on the platform that are not yet published. The creators have decided to hold them private for the moment. The notion of a private link is endemic to SoundCloud. Giving an artist the ability to monetize that as a form of exclusive content is a major opportunity for us.

As far as integrating merchandise, we've run a few experiments where we've bundled a track with a T-shirt. We've sold exclusive vinyl to artists on an experimental basis. Ultimately, what these experiments are showing us is that the latent willingness to pay is there. Fans want to express their fandom monetarily, and artists are jumping at the opportunity to find ways to make income on the platform.

This is not new in music, but it's new to Western markets. If you look at **Tencent Music**, **Cloud Music**, owned by **NetEase** and **Weverse**, owned by **HYBE**, on these platforms in greater China and Korea, we're seeing these forms of non-streaming income really take off. The streaming ARPU (the average revenue per user) on streaming for Tencent Music is about \$1 U.S. equivalent. The non-streaming ARPU for all these other forms of monetization that fans are spending money on the platform is \$25. So it's 25 times. I mean, can you imagine if Spotify's ARPU were increased by 25 times? It would be an unbelievable, seismic...

"I LOVE THE IDEA THAT EVERY PERSON WHO COMES TO LISTEN TO MUSIC ON SOUNDCLOUD MAY HAVE BEEN ONE OF THE FIRST FANS OF THE NEXT BILLIE EILISH. TO BE ABLE TO HAVE A BADGE OR SOME SORT OF STATUS ON THE PLATFORM THAT IDENTIFIES THAT FANDOM IS REALLY EXCITING TO US."

...revolution.

Yeah, totally. We know that not all of these consumption patterns and behaviors will translate to all different markets, but some of them will, and we know that there's a willingness to pay by super fans. It's one of the key components for what's next at SoundCloud.

Speaking of humans, let's talk about you. I really wanted to talk to you about your early life, and notably how music first became prominent in the picture for you.

Be careful what you wish for, because I will share. My grandmother was an opera singer and one of the first women to matriculate at Curtis Institute, the famous conservatory. She became a vocal coach on Broadway who would teach Hollywood actors and actresses for stage voice. She taught Katherine Hepburn and Audrey Hepburn and Johnny Carson and Barbra Streisand out of my grandparents' apartment in Hell's Kitchen, where they raised my father.

I sang in lots of different groups growing up, one of which was, I'm embarrassed to admit, an a cappella singing group in college. It really transformed my life for two reasons. One, I met my husband in that group. We sang in it together, and 20 years later here we are married, with two children and a dog. In that group, I served as its general manager as well as performing in it. We recorded two albums that year and toured the globe. I had never been out of the country, and I went to over 50 countries singing with that group. It was like managing a business, and I had recognized by this point that I was unlikely to succeed as an artist and a performer in my life. But it taught me at the age of 21 that I wanted to run a creative enterprise. I needed to go get a business education, so I did.

When I got out of my MBA program in 2009, what better place to go to when the world was totally upside down during the global financial crisis than an industry that was even more upside down than that? I got my first gig in music that fall of 2009, and I suppose the rest is history. ■

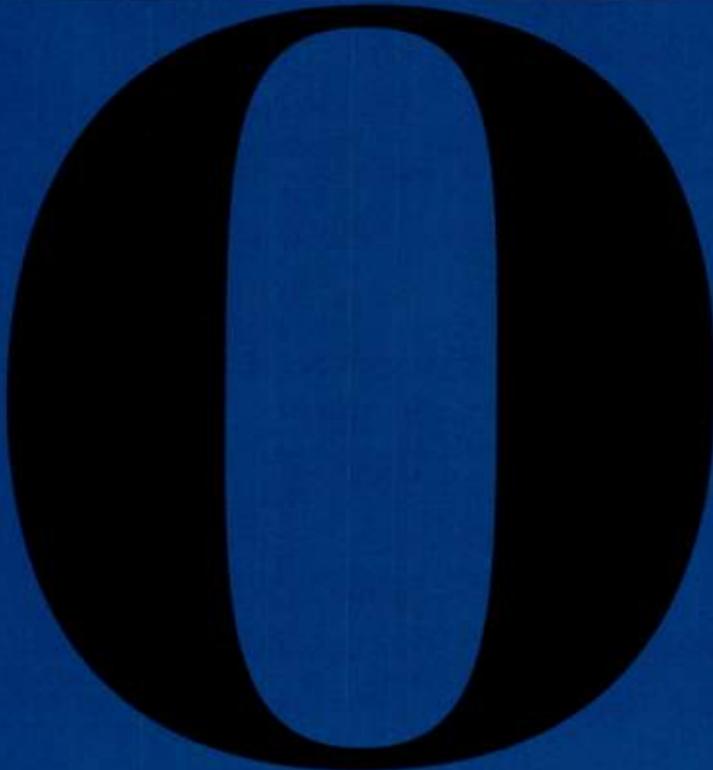
“RATHER THAN DIVIDING THE STREAMING PIE INTO THINNER AND THINNER SLICES IN WHAT INEVITABLY IS A ZERO-SUM GAME WITH DECELERATING GROWTH, WE’RE TALKING ABOUT PUTTING NEW PIES ON THE TABLE.”



SoundCloud Cares Team

Nir Seroussi

The *HITS* Interview By Jorge Hernandez



ver the last two plus decades, **Nir Seroussi** has been one of Latin music's most influential executives. During his tenures at **EMI Latin** and **Sony Music Latin**, Seroussi helped catapult artists—who before his arrival were treated as purveyors of niche genres—into critical-mass phenomena. In his current role as Executive Vice President, **Interscope Capitol Labels Group** (formerly **Interscope Geffen A&M**), Seroussi has redefined how Latin music is developed and marketed in the U.S., creating an innovative organizational and operational business model within the major-label ecosystem.





Lucian Grainge, KAROL G, John Janick and Seroussi

“I saw a hole in the market to bridge the gap between the Latin and the general markets, and I didn’t see anybody in the position to create that solution. This idea excited me and occupied my mind right up until the point in early 2019 when I left Sony. Just two days later, John Janick called me. I gave him my elevator pitch, and without hesitation he said, ‘I got it—let’s do it.’”

What were your earliest experiences connecting with music?

I was born in Israel, and when I was 11, in 1986, my family moved to Venezuela. I was attending an American school and was listening to more American-based music, starting with hip-hop and then metal, which is how I got into playing guitar. I was the first metalhead and first kid to rock long hair in my school. Soon, other kids started approaching me, curious about the music. Not only did I introduce them to metal, I also convinced them to pick up instruments themselves. I started sourcing instruments from the most random and nastiest places to supply my new business as the local instrument dealer to my classmates. If someone showed too much enthusiasm, I’d persuade them to invest in a drum set, of course, for the higher margin.

How do you make the seemingly huge leap from living in Venezuela to attending the Berklee College of Music?

My mother was thinking, “What do I do with this kid? He likes music, but he’s got a knack for business.” During a trip to Israel, she spent a few days at the U.S. embassy browsing through hundreds of college brochures. When she finished, she handed me a booklet of the recently inaugurated Music Business and Management Program at

Berklee College of Music and said, “This is it.” From my perspective, there was no resistance. Makes sense, combining music and business, I thought. Why not?

What were your Berklee years like?

It was the best experience. I met so many amazing people, many of whom are still in my life. I recently met up with Jay Fialkov, who still teaches the most impactful class I’ve ever taken, “Legal Aspects of the Music Industry.” Back then, he started a label called *Dakota Arts*. As soon as I heard about it, I would bug him incessantly, and I eventually convinced him to let me work at the label. That was my first experience in the business.

What did you do after you graduated from Berklee?

After graduation, while everyone else was heading to L.A., New York or Nashville, I wanted to go somewhere different. I had read about Ricky Martin having a global hit, and I thought, “I speak Spanish. Maybe I should give Miami a shot.” Once I graduated, I drove down and landed an internship at *WEA Latina* (now *Warner Music Latina*). I was the first one in and the last one to leave every day. I worked there for a few months, but I wasn’t feeling Miami at the time. One day I came in and told my boss, “Thank you, but I’m leaving,” then packed up my half-dead car and drove cross-country to L.A. without a plan.

The day KAROL G came in to sign with us, we were all sitting in a big conference room. She wanted to be at a place that not only understood her roots but also knew how to take her where she wanted to go next. Sitting there in that conference room with the team, I turned to KAROL and said, 'You know, we built this for you.'"

What was your first break in L.A.?

I connected with Tomás Cookman, a veteran manager and entrepreneur, and a fantastic guy. He didn't even know me, but just from a phone conversation, he said, "I'm gonna send your resume to my friend K.C. Porter," who at the time was one of the biggest producers in Latin music. K.C. had just closed a joint venture with Universal Music Publishing and was looking for someone to run it. He basically said to me, "Here are the keys; go and figure it out." That was my initiation into working at Insignia Music with K.C.

Up to this point did you know anything about music publishing?

I knew about publishing from school, but, of course, I had never actually done it. I was at Insignia for three years, and on so many levels, it was a life-changing experience. I got to see K.C. in action, and I inevitably ended up learning about publishing, working with writers and understanding the hustle of pitching. That kind of experience at Insignia ignited my passion to develop and work with creatives.

How did you get into songwriting?

I have both a curious and an impatient mind. I spent a lot of time pitching songs, and there was one instance when I knew exactly what this producer wanted. I tried to get the staff writers to come up with the song, but all day long I kept saying no to all their ideas. I finally decided to sit down and do it myself. At the time, I'd befriended a wonderful writer who eventually went on to become the Diane Warren of Latin music, Claudia Brant. We sat down to write this song together, and we got it cut. That's when I caught the songwriting bug.

Why did you decide to make the leap of faith and leave the relative comfort of a steady paycheck to strike out on your own as a songwriter?

After I left Insignia, I received job offers from major publishers, but I didn't want to commit to the corporate world. Instead, I partnered up with my good friend and college roommate, Chuy Flores, who is a phenomenal producer and engineer. We joined forces and worked together as independents for a couple of years. That experience taught me about the real hustle. I mean, try predicting your royalty checks every quarter. Good luck. I have a genuine appreciation for and serious empathy with creatives and what they go through, including all the rejection.

EMI Latin eventually came calling, accelerating your growth and understanding of the Latin music market. How did that opportunity materialize for you?



KAROL G AND XAVI ONSTAGE AT ESTADIO AZTECA, MEXICO CITY

“The key is we can’t be living on an island. We could never call it Interscope Latin, because that’s exactly when it becomes a satellite, and even worse, like a stepchild. We built a team of experts in the Latin space who are seamlessly integrated into the Interscope Capitol team. The only thing that separates us is geography.”

I used to pitch projects to a great executive named Miguel Trujillo, who was running EMI Latin’s West Coast office. One day he asked, “Would you ever consider working for a label?” I didn’t really think about it too much, and I answered him intuitively: “The only way I would do it is if I can oversee marketing and A&R.” My logic was if you’re the marketing guy, you have no control over the product that’s being handed to you, and if you’re the A&R, you have no control over what happens with the product you’re handing over. A year later, he called and said, “I have good news and bad news. The good news is that I have two job openings: head of marketing and head of A&R of regional Mexican. The bad news is that I can only pay for one, so you’d have to do both.” I didn’t blink.

Had you worked much with regional Mexican music?

At the time, I knew very little about regional Mexican, but I developed a very deep passion for it, and I spent a lot of time immersing myself in the culture. I had incredible mentors in icons like A.B. Quintanilla and Abraham Quintanilla, as well as Ricky Muñoz from Intocable. They brought me in and made it known, “You’re one of us now.” It was a beautiful exchange of ideas. They taught me the connection between culture and music. That’s the most important takeaway from that experience. You can apply that to pretty much any space, genre or country.

Also, back then, regional Mexican music was undervalued by the industry and treated as a second-class citizen. It didn’t receive the same media attention as other Latin artists nor recognition at important award shows, even though it had made up more than half of the market for years. We worked hard to tear down the walls, and with acts like the Kumbia Kings and Intocable, we were able to break through in a major way. I’m very proud of what we’ve accomplished.

You then moved from EMI to Sony BMG after they’d merged, and there was a wholesale restructuring of both companies. What state was the company in when you first got there?

Frank Welzer, who was the head of Sony Music Latin America, and Kevin Lawrie, who was head of Norte, a mix of U.S. and Mexico bundled into one, wanted to revamp the combined Sony BMG label and bring in the core team they saw running the West Coast at EMI. At the time, it was Miguel, Manny Prado, who is now with me at Interscope Capitol, radio promotion guru Karina Puente and me. We were basically building a West Coast for Sony BMG U.S. Latin from scratch.

What were some of your early successes?

We worked with so many great artists. Sergio Vega blew



Los CT’s Ramon Emilio Hernandez, Alejandro Buelna, Natanael Cano, Gabito Ballesteros, Seroussi, Delilah and ICLG’s Manny Prado

up; Vicente Fernandez had a huge comeback moment with *Para Siempre*, which was his biggest album ever. We also had Los Cuates De Sinaloa, Los Pikadientes de Caborca and, of course, Gerardo Ortiz. If you go back and look at the evolution of Gerardo Ortiz and DEL Records starting in 2010, that whole movement set the tone for what we're seeing today in regional Mexican music.

Your tenure at Sony had two distinctive phases, your initial years starting in 2004 on the West Coast, and then your transition to Sony Music Latin in Miami around 2011, a time when Sony corporate was considering the elimination of the Latin division. How did things turn around?

There was a period where the music wasn't quite hitting the mark. When you think of the memorable moments in Latin music from the early 2010s, not much comes to mind. We had Romeo Santos, which was essentially the standout story. Then you look at the industry; physical sales were dead and the outlook for the business was bleak. There were talks about shutting down Sony's U.S. Latin operation. Fortunately, Afo Verde, head of the Latin Iberia region, along with Maria Fernandez, who is now the COO, gave me free rein to figure it out.

In 2014, with the convergence of streaming and reggaeton breaking into the mainstream, an opportunity presented itself. It was the year Enrique Iglesias had the first global Latin hit of the streaming era, and J Balvin took off. From that point, we grabbed the bull by the horns. I had a tremendous guide, A&R Jorge Fonseca, who was appropriately nicknamed "The Sniper." He helped bring in all the urban acts, like Nicky Jam, Farruko, Ozuna, Darell, Paloma Mami, Rauw Alejandro and many others. Thanks to brilliant campaigns orchestrated by Lorenzo Braun, who was our head of marketing, we became unstoppable. We had so many back-to-back hits, there were times when you looked at the charts of any Latin country and we would own nearly the entire Top 10.

The list of all the artists we signed from 2013 through 2018 is remarkable. We had amazing partners, such as Juan Diego Medina and La Industria, Inc. with Nicky Jam and Manuel Turizo; Walter Kolm and WK with Maluma, Wisin, Carlos Vives, Silvestre Dangond and CNCO; Frank Martínez and Carbon Fiber with Farruko; Armando Lozano with Ricky Martin and Mau y Ricky; Fernando Giaccardi with Enrique; Andy Martínez and Edgar Andino with Yandel; Raphy Pina with Natti Natasha; Eric Duars with Rauw; Polo Montalvo with Pedro Capo and Kany Garcia; and Artie Pabon with Romeo Santos and Victor Manuelle. We partnered with Michel Vega and Marc Anthony when they launched

Magnus Media and signed Gente de Zona together. We teamed up with Ben Tischker, Marc Jordan, Dr. Luke and the RCA team for Becky G's successful Latin crossover. There were also Prince Royce, Bomba Estereo, Mambo Kingz and DJ Luian with Hear This Music, Rvssian and many others. My last moves included bringing in Bad Bunny's debut album, thanks to my good friend Noah Assad of Rimas, and signing Camilo with Ricardo Montaner before he had released any music. We had a close partnership with The Orchard as well, and combined, we hit nearly 50% market share in the U.S. Latin market. I'm particularly proud of our contribution to the evolution of the music. We really made an impact



WME's Richard Lom, Seroussi, Ivan Cornejo, manager Pamela Cornejo, Janick and WME's Richard Vega

by bringing pop and urban writers together for the first time via the Sony Secret Sessions, which were conceived by A&R Alejandro Reglero. That concept did not exist prior to 2014. Many of the classics from that era came out of these sessions.

You were red-hot at Sony and at the pinnacle of the Latin music market; why make a move at that point to Interscope and start all over again building something from scratch?

At the core of everything I do lies the question: How can I be the best partner to the artist? If I'm capped, then my abilities are capped, and the artist's ability to grow is also capped. From 2015 to 2018, everybody wanted to sign in Miami because it's the doorway to break in all the Latin territories, with the possibility of collaboration on the American side. Latin artists were gaining global recognition, and I strongly believed they deserved access to the same resources as any other superstar. The problem was that each side of the

industry, both Latin and American, was missing half the story. Neither side knew about the culture of the other. The American side especially didn't get it. Their solution was to hire someone with a Hispanic name who looked the part, maybe spoke Spanish, and then hand them a checkbook to go chase the artists. In the end, that's a lose-lose proposition.

I saw a hole in the market to bridge the gap between the Latin and the general markets, and I didn't see anybody in the position to create that solution. This idea excited me and occupied my mind right up until the point in early 2019 when I left Sony. Just two days later, before I even had a minute to think about where the ideal place and person would be to present this idea, John Janick calls me. This is very John. He's always five steps ahead. I gave him my elevator pitch, and without hesitation he said, "I got it—let's do it."

In a business that can be so heavily siloed based on genre and expertise, the manner in which you've created a natural and harmonious integration of Latin music into IGA is groundbreaking. How did you go about creating this structure within Interscope, and which other executives were instrumental in this approach?

A lot of what other people are doing is chasing without fully understanding the context and the culture. The key is that we can't be living on an island. We could never call it Interscope Latin, because that's precisely when it becomes a satellite, and even worse, like a stepchild. We built a team of experts in the Latin space who are seamlessly integrated into Interscope Capitol's general-market teams. The only thing that separates us is geography. Even though many of us are based in Miami, we work very closely with the entire staff in L.A.

It's important to mention that every project requires a different configuration, because a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work. When you have a Kali or a KAROL, there's a difference in how you organize the team. You have different leads and different people who are spearheading the conversation, but it doesn't mean that you don't have other parts of the company involved. You have to assemble the team around the artist's needs, so we designed the operation in tandem with the artists that we were working with. You don't take a blueprint from another label and just copy it. The whole point was making this a more thoughtful exercise. When we sketched out the plan in 2019, you had all this noise and the clutter of content and releases, and it was bound to get worse. We had to prepare for that.

Who are some of the key people you work with at Interscope?

We have an extraordinary team and support system. I have to give a shout-out to **Steve Berman**, our vice chairman, who's been a tremendous mentor and cheerleader throughout our journey. **Annie Lee**, our COO, has been critical in helping us establish and grow the operation. **Jason Kawejsza**, our EVP and head of business and legal affairs, is one of the most creative dealmakers and effective deal-closers I've ever met. And I'll never forget the countless times our CRO and GM **Gary Kelly** fought to ensure that our artists received the right treatment and the exposure opportunities they deserve.

We're very fortunate to have **Jose Cedeño** as our GM.

While we're all passionate people, from an operational standpoint, I needed the brain of an engineer to help me create the structure and ensure that we have the right individuals in each role. Back at Sony, I brought in Jose to help me restructure the company when the business shifted toward digital. He may not have come from a music background, but he's one of the best executives in the industry today. When I introduce him, I often say, "He's the guy who does all the work; I just do the talking."

Cristina Nadal, our first employee, played a crucial role in laying the foundation and now oversees all our DSP relationships. **Austin Barmak**, formerly the manager for **KHEA**, one of our first signings back in 2019, now leads our marketing team. It speaks volumes that someone who was previously an outsider, managing an artist during a fiercely contested bidding war, chose to join us. We also have **Andrea Rodriguez** handling all of our digital marketing; **Manny Prado**, who rejoined me last year from Sony to head our West Coast office; and **Ray Velez**, our star A&R, who's been instrumental in developing Xavi. We also work with an exceptional group of executives across Latin America and Spain.



With Xavi

What were some of the key moments when it became apparent that what you and your team were building was yielding the results and workplace culture you'd envisioned?

The day KAROL G came in to sign with us, we were all sitting in a big conference room. She wanted to be at a place that not only understood her roots but also knew how to take her where she wanted to go next. Sitting there in that conference room with the team, I turned to KAROL and said, "You know, we built this for you." It was also gratifying to get validation from her team, a collective of brilliant minds whom I admire: Noah Assad, Jessica Giraldo, Raymond Acosta, Ivan Alarcon, Juan

Guillermo Rodriguez and Oswaldo Rossi.

Similarly, my pitch to Ivan Cornejo and his team, Pam Cornejo and WME's Richard Vega, was that he needed somebody who understands both sides, because it's very intricate. Somebody can easily box him in as, say, only a regional Mexican artist when he's really more like a Johnny Cash. He's a singer-songwriter. He's Mexican and American.

There's also Xavi, an artist we signed directly and developed from zero. We've spent two and a half years nurturing him, and in the middle of that he had a nearly fatal car accident that sidelined him for a while. It took a village patiently working with him to bring him up, along with his crew: Racson Lopez, Natalia Corona, Fabio Gutierrez, Marjorie Garcia, Michael Leonard, and WME's Rob Markus, Richard Vega and Richard Lom. And now he's the biggest breakout story of the year. It's so fulfilling to be in a place where we can talk about these success stories, but it wouldn't have happened without John's and the executive team's support.

Today, labels creating joint ventures and strategic partnerships with boutique companies is becoming more of the norm. Your own company did a deal with Los CT, headed by manager Emilio Hernandez and artist Natanael Cano. Do you see this trend continuing?

You have to engage with entrepreneurs; otherwise, you're essentially isolating yourself in a bubble. This business is all about connecting dots. I'm not thinking about this transactionally. At some point, these relationships are going to pay dividends. If you approach partnerships with a purely transactional mindset, then I think you might as well pack up and go home or prepare to live with a sad-looking P&L.

Even with a solid grasp of the fundamentals, there are so many tiny variables that change daily. If I'm not connecting with people like Emilio and Nata, I'm cutting myself out of that information loop and bound to fail. When I look back at where the roster that we have now originated, most of it is tied to relationships that were cultivated, some of them many, many years ago.

Moving forward, where do you want to focus your own and your team's resources?

This may be the most obvious thing to say, but we are going to develop artists and strive to be their best possible partner. That's the answer today, tomorrow and in 10 years. I'm also dedicated to grooming executives and entrepreneurs. We've seen many cases of artists whose doors open, they ride the wave of momentum and then crash and burn. Artists need to be surrounded by professionals. Yes, it's always going to be artists first, but this other part is equally if not more, important, because it's so lacking. We need more skilled managers. We need more skilled agents. We need better executives across the entire industry.

Is your focus to sign artists only out of the U.S.?

We're not just signing talent in the States. As trends evolve and global opportunities arise, we're breaking away from the notion that if you're based in the U.S., your focus is solely on this market. We encompass everything Latin, wherever in the world it makes sense. If you look

at the charts in every Spanish-speaking country, you'll see music from a variety of markets. It doesn't make sense to be siloed in that way. We've done away with those boundaries, and, of course, we have great teams working in all territories. For instance, we've partnered with the Spanish label Sonido Muchacho on Judeline, a magical up-and-coming songstress from the coast of Andalusia, and with LionFish and Rebeca Leon on st. Pedro, a singer-songwriter from the Canary Islands.

Since starting at IGA, you've clearly had a lot of success while nurturing a vision of seamlessly introducing Latin music into Interscope. What is your apex objective?

We've accomplished our ultimate goal, which is to be deeply ingrained in the company's DNA, just as we are. When you step into the building and ask any employee, "What types of music do you guys work on?" and their response is, "Oh, we do pop, rock, hip-hop, Latin, etc.," at that point, you know you've become an integral part of the label, not just an afterthought. And what truly matters to me is how this strengthens our ability to be the best possible partners for our artists.

"We're not just signing talent in the States. As trends evolve and global opportunities arise, we're breaking away from the notion that if you're based in the U.S., your focus is solely on this market. We encompass everything Latin, wherever in the world it makes sense."

How has the recent formation of Interscope Capitol Labels Group affected what you do?

It's a positive all around. In addition to working with the Interscope team in L.A., we now also get to collaborate with Capitol and Tom March's team on some projects as well; for example, J Balvin. For us and our artists, it means more options and resources. Our ecosystem just got bigger.

It feels like a busy summer for Interscope Capitol Miami. Can you talk about some of the projects you have coming out?

We have albums from J Balvin, Ivan Cornejo, Xavi and Chino Pacas, in partnership with PFL and Street Mob. Tons of new music from Judeline, KHEA, ROBI, Gabito Ballesteros, Delilah, Los Dorados, El Padrinito Toys, Ptazeta, ARON, Teo Planell and ODDLQUOR, among others. ■

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