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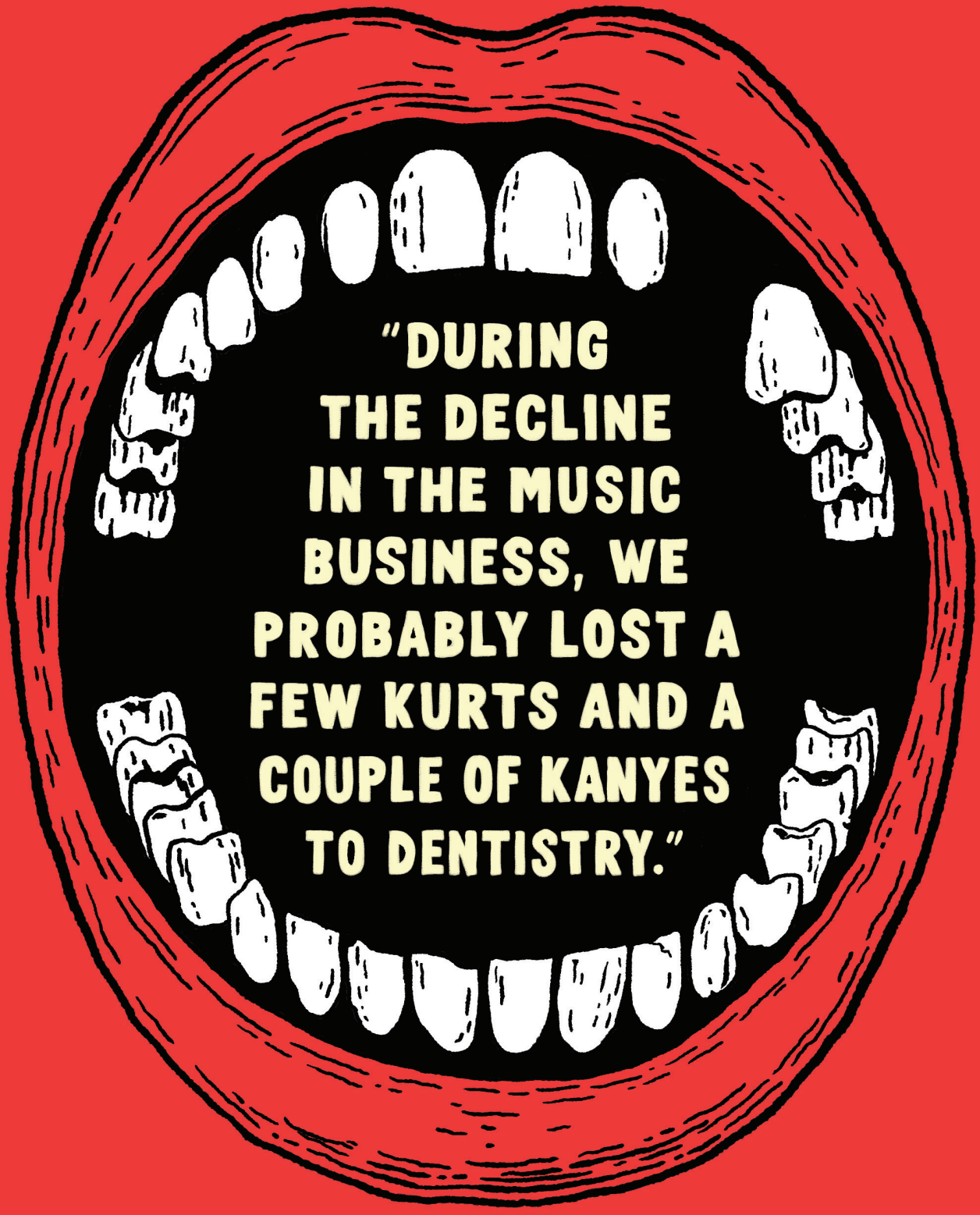

Q1 2020

TEENAGE CANCER TRUST AND BMG WOULD LIKE TO THANK MICK FLEETWOOD AND FRIENDS FOR THEIR CELEBRATION OF THE MUSIC OF PETER GREEN AND THE EARLY YEARS OF FLEETWOOD MAC HELD AT THE LONDON PALLADIUM ON 25TH FEBRUARY 2020.

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EDITOR'S LETTER

Tim Ingham

The popular modern maxim to 'speak my truth' tacitly yet proudly argues there is always more than one retelling of any event – bending every occurrence into a fiction-splashed narrative onto which our own subjective viewpoint can, and should, be impressed. It adds to a collective erosion of the idea of the gospel – whether religious, journalistic or anecdotal – furthering a rabid culture of self-trust. It is malleable, and therefore open to manipulation, ego and error. It is the definition of Trump's America.

How did we end up in this situation, where one person's reality – no matter how warped by self-serving myopia – has become more valued than art, and more trusted than evidence?

I mean, it can't *all* be down to TikTok.

Such thoughts have been pinging around my brain of late – not least when reading about a new venture from L.A-based distribution and services company, Stem. For the betterment of its artists, Stem has launched Scale – a financial mechanism designed to threaten the age-old record company model of advances, by enabling artists to obtain an upfront payment based on their current streaming income.

A few in Label Land have pointed out that the $100m-backed Scale bears more hallmarks of a bank loan than a trad record industry guarantee. If an artist borrows $8,000 from Stem while generating $1,000 per month from streaming – and if said artist agrees to sacrifice 60% of their income until the 'advance' is paid off – they would ultimately return $9,920 to Stem/Scale... equivalent to a total charge of $1,920. (Also, Scale's 'advances', Stem has confirmed, never actually get written off.)

What most struck me about Stem's announcement of Scale was this quote from the firm's founder, Milana Rabkin Lewis, justifying the need for the launch: "It's heartbreaking to witness people take money without clearly seeing the amount they have to pay back, how long it will take, or how much ownership they are giving up. Then, they compete for attention and resources that are already spread thin. It's a fight for creative and financial freedom."

> **"One person's reality – no matter how warped by self-serving myopia – has become more valued than art, and more trusted than evidence."**

This attack on traditional label advances is the latest broadside to be thrown on a voluminous pile. Elsewhere, rapper Mase recently castigated Puff Daddy on Instagram regarding a historical publishing deal between the pair. Mase said that Puff "purposely starved your artist", adding: "For example, u still got my publishing from 24 years ago in which u gave me $20k."

What is lost in both Rabkin Lewis and Mase's salvos here is a rounded view – the rapidly-vanishing gift of being taught all sides of the story. Rabkin highlights "heartbreaking" deals that artists have endured – and this undoubtedly happens. But she ignores the multitude of artists, of myriad commercial levels, who've enjoyed enduring and prosperous relationships with record companies (of varying generosity). Mase, meanwhile, overlooks both the investment-heavy, high-risk industry dynamics of the 1990s, and the fact that his position as a featured guest (and minority writer) on No.1 Bad Boy Records hits (*Mo Money, Mo Problems*, *Can't Nobody Hold Me Down* etc.) blew up his career.

The modern-day onus is rightly on record companies, like never before, to prove the value they can bring to an independent act's career. But the music industry buzzword of 'transparency' works both ways: it's a rigged game if these indie artists are only being presented with a single, deliberately injurious narrative.

It was therefore refreshing to see rapper/producer Tunji Ige tweet in early March: *"For every label/management violated me story there's a this nigga ran off once he got popping and I ain't have no sunset clause on him."*

His point: believe it or not, record labels get screwed too. Perhaps, publicly and more often, it's time they spoke their truth.

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In this issue...

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Kieron Donoghue is the founder of Humble Angel Records, and the creator of Warner Music Group's flagship playlist brand, Topsify. Donoghue became global streaming playlist strategy boss at Warner after the major acquired his Playlists.net in 2014. Donoghue led Topsify's global strategy at Warner for the subsequent three years.

EAMONN FORDE

Eamonn Forde has been writing about all areas of the music business since 2001. He is Reports Editor at *Music Ally* and regularly writes for *IQ, The Guardian, The Big Issue, Q* and *The Quietus* among other titles. He completed his PhD at University of Westminster in 2001. His book, *The Final Days of EMI: Selling The Pig*, is out now via Omnibus Press.

VIDHI GANDHI

Vidhi Gandhi is an artist manager and A&R at TMWRK management and records – a company that represents the likes of Diplo, TV on the Radio, Dirty Projectors, Animal Collective, MO and Yellow Days. Gandhi was previously A&R Manager for Ninja Tune, and has worked in artist development and concert promotions in both India and the UK.

RHIAN JONES

Rhian Jones is a respected freelance journalist who often focuses on the music industry. In addition to writing regularly for *Music Business UK* and *Hits Daily Double*, she is a Contributing Editor for *Music Business Worldwide*. In this issue, Jones discusses the trend of new artists playing arenas. She also interviews three fast-emerging UK managers (page 98).

MARK MULLIGAN

Mark Mulligan is the founder of London-based MIDiA Research, and one of the most respected, and widely-read, analysts working in the global business. A technology and entertainment expert, Mulligan has been covering the digital music business for over a decade. In this issue, he delves into the evolving nature of the major music companies.

PETER ROBINSON

Peter Robinson has been a music journalist for over 20 years, and keeps a keen eye on the global entertainment industry. Robinson has written for the likes of *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *TIME*, *Noisey*, *i-D*, *Smash Hits*, *Q Magazine*, *Time Out*, *Attitude*, *Notion* and *The Telegraph*, and runs his own must-read online publication over on *Popjustice*.

‘The people here are wildly passionate about music, they really want to help’

In his first interview since joining YouTube, Dan Chalmers tells MBUK why he left Warner after nearly 20 years and how he intends to bolster an ongoing mission to make his new employer the music industry’s unlikely best friend - and biggest revenue provider...

MBUK meets Dan Chalmers, newly appointed Director of YouTube Music, EMEA, at the firm’s North London HQ the morning after the BRITs. Well, at the crack of 12:30, at least. (For some reason, suggestions of an earlier rendezvous were knocked back.)

The BRITs will have been quite a different night for Chalmers compared to the annual ceremony he has become accustomed to attending (even if the day after provides a fuzzy familiarity). For the first time in nearly 20 years, the BRITs was more school disco than school sports day for Chalmers; he was an enthused neutral rather than an anxious competitor – and he rather liked it. As the exec points out, he had plenty of reasons to celebrate several of the big winners (and nominees) – partly thanks to his old ties and partly thanks to his new employer. “I was hosted by Warner [at the BRITs], and there were some artists and albums there that I’d worked with, particularly Stormzy, which was great to see,” he says. “It was great to talk to people from all the labels – plus there are more after-parties for me to go to now! I think 70% of the nominees have been involved in some of [YouTube’s] programmatic packages, be that Artist on the Rise, or Foundry, or YouTube Originals; the team have done an amazing job. The Dave campaign, particularly, is evidence of the incredible work people like David Mogendorff and Roz Mansfield have done in really helping break artists.”

Adds Chalmers: “The label relations team, led by Azi Eftekhari and Lizzie Dickson, James McGuiness, Sheniece Charway and Corbyn Asbury, have done a really intensive job of shifting the perception of YouTube in the UK, offering programmatic packages, support and information on how [the music industry] can maximize the platform.”

Lyor Cohen, YouTube’s Global Head of Music, was also in town for the BRITs – and, more importantly, to be interviewed by *MBUK* straight after Chalmers’ debut gig.

Now in his early 60s, Cohen admits to “going deep” at the after-parties, but seems remarkably fresh, predictably frank and as happy as ever to avoid answering-by-numbers. That said, numbers are the one thing Cohen largely refuses to discuss, even though, in an unusual move, Susan Wojciki, YouTube’s CEO, recently published some important ones via a blog post. In it, she revealed that YouTube paid music rightsholders over $3bn in 2019, through ad revenue and subscriptions – the latter coming from 20m subscribers to either YouTube Music or YouTube Premium.

Asked if he can go into any detail of how and where that $3bn came from, or if he’d like to forecast where that 20m number might go next, Cohen declines to talk specifics. Instead, he offers up a different set of metrics and targets: “We want to be the No.1 revenue source to the music industry. We want to be the easiest, most reliable partners. We want to be the best place to source talent. We want to be the easiest and most effective way of promoting your artists.” Typically small-scale ambitions, there, from one of the industry’s most timid characters.

“I just felt like my time was done and I was ready for a new adventure.”

First though, to Chalmers, the new boy with decades of experience, on how he was finally tempted away from Warner – and why he believes he can now benefit more artists (and all record companies) from outside the major label system...

Before last year’s big move, you’d been at Warner for nearly 20 years. Remind us how you got there and how your role evolved into a unique one over the years.

I did a short internship at Interscope/Geffen/A&M, which meant working on Eminem’s first record and Blink 182, which was cool. Then I went across to Warner and I ended up running Rhino, ADA and East West, which gave me the opportunity to work with every type of artist at every stage in their career. So, people like Pink Floyd, David Bowie, Kate Bush, Led Zeppelin and Fleetwood Mac, but also right the way through to signing Stormzy for his first record, working with artists like AJ Tracey, Major Lazer, Noel Gallagher, Macklemore and Ryan Lewis.

The brilliant bit about it was I was able to build phenomenal relationships and brilliant partnerships. I think that was really my core strength, and the beauty of the role at YouTube is I’m able to continue and extend those partnerships.

Is there anything you’d pick out during your time at Warner as a highlight or something you’re especially proud of?

I think it would be those relationships, rather than any one moment. That’s testament to the work that I was able to do with the artistic community, management community and the label teams. And I think those are lasting things that will, hopefully, be important and of benefit for years to come.

How did the culture of Warner change during your time there, particularly after Max Lousada took over the UK company?

Max is a brilliant leader; he’s a brilliant business guy and a brilliant record guy, which is a hard line to tread. We really focused on that ‘independent major’ mentality, giving a bespoke focus to artists, but then obviously using scale and infrastructure to break acts. Max was a huge champion of that. And he was really supportive of me in my role; he gave me the flexibility to define the strategy, and, within that, support my failings as well, because you’re not always winning. It was a great partnership. Max went on to take on the global role [heading up worldwide recorded music at Warner] and is doing a fantastic job.

When did the YouTube opportunity first come into view for you, and what was your reaction?

The first conversation was probably over 18 months ago, but then it sort of gathered pace again a year ago, around the BRITs

Grammy-winning Dua Lipa is an ex-YouTube Foundry artist. She now has over 12m subscribers on the platform – and over 4bn views

[2019]. My perception of YouTube initially was one of sort of the unknown, I guess. I knew the great job that the guys here were doing, and I had seen what they were doing to try and shift the narrative, encouraging people to lean into the platform. But to me there was still a mystique around [YouTube]. And, originally, there was a little bit of scepticism around YouTube's strategy. So it wasn't really until I got the chance to dive into the conversations with Lyor and Cecile [Frot-Coutaz] about the overall plan, regionalisation and the wider EMEA opportunities, [that] things really started to gather pace.

What made you ultimately decide to say yes and leave a place, in Warner, where you must have felt very much at home?
I'd had an amazing run at Warner; my divisions were market leaders, I'd signed and worked on Platinum records, No. 1 records, worked with legendary artists. I just felt like I was ready for a new adventure. I wanted a new learning experience. I felt like the opportunity with YouTube, to help continue the journey that Lyor had taken, to help continue to bridge the gap between the artistic community and YouTube, to form that connective tissue, was something that I could really excel at, [assisted by] the partnerships that I have in the business. Plus, Lyor and Cecile are very convincing!

"I still think there's a way to go to make sure people can lean in, in the best possible way."

Even when you'd made the decision though, it must have been tough to leave Warner?
Really tough, yeah. And another opportunity was put on the table [elsewhere], but I just felt, with YouTube, that it was a completely unique, one-off opportunity to join a great company that's still very much in its sort of formative years.

It was a tough conversation because at some points in my career I thought I'd never leave Warner. In the end, though, it was the right time to make the move.

And you were with Warner's team at the BRITs, so clearly you left on good terms.
Absolutely. Max is really understanding and obviously Max and Lyor go back a long way too. My message to Max was that I very clearly felt I could play a positive role in helping the music industry [via] my role at YouTube.

What have you learned about YouTube since you joined that has surprised you?
Well, I'm barely a month in, it's a vast organisation, so there's a lot to learn. The wider [YouTube] team, like Vivien Lewitt, Christophe Mueller and Stephen Bryan in Lyor's team, are brilliant ambassadors and experts on the music platform. The biggest observation I've made has been the quality of the people here; they're wildly passionate about music, they really want to help.

BRIT Award-winning Dave, an ex-YouTube Foundry artist, launched his YouTube channel back in 2013. He has since said: "YouTube has always been the launchpad for my music. Being a part of Foundry meant that once my music and videos were ready to go, I knew they were in a position to make as much noise as possible."

They want to partner with the music industry and improve performance on the platform; they really just want to be the best partner, there's no strategy in terms of disintermediating the music business whatsoever. Candice Morrissey and Gudrun Scheweppe from our business development and publishing clearance teams here in EMEA are great proof of that dedication to partnership. It's genuinely been inspiring to see so many passionate people who touch music within the organisation.

Can you tell us specifically about your role – a newly-created role within YouTube's hierarchy?
With Cecile coming in, YouTube is taking more of a regional focus, in line with [its] global strategy, and of course music is a large proportion of the platform. There are a lot of bespoke and unique relationships within music [required], across publishers, labels, societies, artists, creators and curators on the platform. So, as part of a country-first approach, it was critical to have a role dedicated to music and to ensure that we can touch local culture within all of the key markets.

What does your To Do list look like?
In general: learn, and meet people. I've been on three off sites, I've been to two key markets already, and the job is to meet people and understand what's been going on. Obviously, I've had a good oversight of the global strategy, and so it's a process of marrying that with some of my external views and how that best knits together with the internal priorities.

Who are you talking to outside the building, mainly? Managers? Labels?
The honest answer is everyone. We had a great session with the MMF [recently], which I think they found very useful.

Given my background, the label conversations are ongoing, I'm meeting some of the key publishers, and we also want to really focus hard on working with the artistic community as a whole, on communicating what our strategy is and leading people to work best with the platform, explaining how they can optimize within YouTube. The team here has done an amazing job, but I still think there's a way to go to ensure that people can lean in, in the best possible way.

And have you detected any whiff of scepticism or negativity in terms of that background context of the industry being unhappy with the remuneration it receives from YouTube?
I've not encountered that conversation at all. I really think the narrative has shifted. And I think you can see from the way we worked with artists on the BRITs, via our new programmatic packages, and how people can best work with the platform, that we're seen to help break talent, nurture talent, promote acts, promote catalogue. And we have twin engines: one is AVOD [Advertising-based Video On Demand] and the other is subscription. Plus there's a multitude of other opportunities including ticketing, live, merchandise and alternative monetization which allow people to navigate through YouTube in lots of different ways. And [YouTube] is the only place, really, where the artist can tell their own story through their own eyes.


Recent YouTube Foundry artists: Girl In Red (left) and Beabadoobee (right)

Credit: Jonathan Vivaas Kise

Do you think the industry is too focused on the cents-per-stream issue, which misses out some of the less (immediately) financially tangent work YouTube does?
Listen, I think there is still a bit of a disconnect and it's my job to help repair that in this region. YouTube offers a unique opportunity because it's not just about subscriptions. Subscriptions is a priority, but we also have a huge AVOD business and we've just published figures which are highly significant to the music industry. The core strategy is to break acts, to promote music and to be the best partner [to the music industry]. The strategy of how we go about that, and explain that to the industry, is one of my main priorities.

> ***"Music is a real priority for YouTube and I think a lot of the credit for that can go to Lyor."***

What advantages does YouTube offer emerging artists and their management over other platforms?
YouTube is an open platform, obviously, for one. And we have investment programs with the MMF, investing in managers at an early stage and educating them on how best to utilize the platform.

We have Foundry, which is an established programme now, which obviously is designed to help break acts. Dave was part of Foundry, I think back in 2016/2017, and we intend to roll more of these packages out across the region.

I think the beauty of YouTube is that it's a platform that artists naturally lean into. I think it's a platform that artists love to use because it gives them the ability to tell their story, in so many different ways compared to other platforms, whilst at the same time monetizing their music, creating a community and engaging with their fans.

What would your message be to artists, managers and labels as you settle in here at YouTube?
We want to be their number one partner. We want to help break more acts. We want to help promote more music, and that includes established artists as well. And we want to help artists, managers, labels, publishers and the overall community grow revenue to help create a sustainable environment where everyone benefits.

How would you categorise Lyor as a leader at YouTube?
What some people may not see, because they've not been behind the curtain, is the job that Lyor does internally [at Google/Alphabet], to promote music; what he does in that area is critical. He's been so influential as a passionate leader for music within the business; I've seen how he's been able to influence the agenda. Music really is a priority for YouTube, and I think a lot of the credit for that can go to Lyor – and obviously the wider team.

Lyor's an inspirational guy. He really understands how artists work, he understands their needs – and labels' needs too. How he's been able to knit together artistic priorities with a focus on business has been huge for our industry. ■

'I think we're past being the industry's dirty little secret'

YouTube's Global Head of Music, Lyor Cohen, talks about delivering revenue, discovering artists, building bridges between engineers and artists – and possibly making himself redundant in the process…

Dan Chalmers is filling a new role at YouTube. So, what is that role, why create it now and why is Dan the right person for the job?

Well, first up, it wasn't created now, it was created years ago and just filled now. I wanted it to be clear to the music industry that a music person occupies that role, to continue the cadence with the music business that we actually are here to serve them, and to partner up with them, and to listen. We have two [things] that we have to deal with: we have to deal with the music industry and we have to deal with all the opportunity that's presented with YouTube. And we have to advocate for music.

A spirit of collaboration and partnership makes it that much easier for us to focus on building more products for the music industry. And [Dan's] role is very important, because these are global products being built that need input from arguably the greatest heritage of music region there is, right?

I always like to say, if you cut a British person open they bleed music. And there's a rich, cultural, musical heritage throughout Europe, so I think we will build better products with your voice in it.

And what makes Dan the right person?

He's worked inside of the music industry, he has an understanding of what's difficult about being in the music business. But I think also, because of his ADA experience, he understands how the new evolution of the business is, that distribution in the walled garden is not part of the equation, and I think that's really helpful.

You were at the BRITs. How pleasing was it to see so many artists who you worked with in their earliest days picking up awards?

You know, I actually don't want to beat my chest like that. We're honoured and privileged to be a part of the story, and our team is a musical team, so we feel privileged to be part of this process, but we don't want to shine a light on anything specific. So, if money is the big issue, we want to continue providing growth in revenue. Do you know what I'm saying? I don't want or need to beat my chest on that; those that know, appreciate and understand. If there is an issue, I want to solve the issue. It's basically that: I want to be great on revenue, great on finding talent, great on analytics, great on promotion. I want to be... what would make me the most pleased is at the end of the year, our partners say, 'Working with you guys has been the easiest and most effective thing that we've done with any company.' That would make me happy.

The popular narrative around your joining YouTube was two-pronged: (i) that you had 'switched sides', and (ii) that if the idea was to make peace with the labels, then they'd picked quite a combative person for that mission. Have those notions been dispelled?

Well, I actually don't spend much time trying to understand what people think or feel about me. I know that I wake up every day believing that if I can be helpful in making artists, songwriters, labels and publishers make more money from music, then I've done something that I think is good, period.

So whether people think I'm confrontational or not, or I'm the right person or not… I wake up every day believing that as long as I can contribute, I continue to do it. I think in the 20 years, [during] the decline in the music business, we probably [lost] a few Kurt Cobains and a couple of Kanyes to dentistry, and maybe we could help change that.

Maybe we could make those conversations [for artists] with their parents slightly easier, by virtue of having growth in the platforms, and by making it easier, maybe we'll luck out and find a few more.

When you were on the label side, negotiating with retailers or distributors or whoever, who were you fighting for – the people who owned the company or the artists whose music you were negotiating over?

Ultimately, the more money flowing to labels and publishers allows for more budget for A&R and marketing. Of course, [that means] more money for the coffers of those who own [the labels], but typically when business is growing, there's more A&R and marketing dollars, which is great for sourcing and bringing artists to market. If you keep your North Star about artists and songwriters, you fight harder; if it's for yourself, you will probably give up earlier. Why I think I was, I hope, an effective negotiator [during Lyor's label years] was because I was fighting for artists and songwriters that depended on me.

> ***"During the decline in the music business, we probably [lost] a few Kurts and a couple of Kanyes to dentistry."***

But, ultimately, the true strength of negotiation in that business is about diversity. What I mean by that is, if I was negotiating against a monopoly or a single entity, it would be very hard for me, no matter how tough I supposedly am. But when there's choice, which I think is the most important thing for distribution, that's good for the artists, labels and publishers. And that's why I think YouTube and Google being part of this ecosystem is so important, because it helps bring diversity to distribution.

And the IFPI? Who do you think they're fighting for?

You'll have to ask them, and I think it's a tricky question for me, because... [YouTube is] about sustainable business. A sustainable business is one that the fans are nuts for. What fuels those fans are the artists, so the artist [must be] appreciated and remunerated for their work – and the people who invest in them also need a seat at the table. A sustainable business is when everybody is in harmony with one another – we're seeking that harmony.

Labels, collectively, are sometimes quite down on ad-supported platforms. In the light of the numbers Susan Wojcicki just announced, do you think that's an understandable position, or an odd position?

I think that you're articulating an *old* position. Because in my recent conversations with the music industry, they're now starting to wake up to the fact that their future will depend on three things: subscription, ad-supported and direct-to-consumer products. They're now becoming much more sophisticated about the ad-supported platforms, fans who are willing to pay with their eyeballs.

When you take a look at the Nordics flat-lining and declining in subscription, you start recognising there is a ceiling to subscription, and the rest of the business will be those that are prepared to pay with their eyeballs. And so I think people are starting to be more sophisticated around the power of advertising.

If that change is happening then it's happening now. Because previously, labels have viewed every consumer using an ad-supported service – labels might call it 'free' – as a potential convert to subscription. And every user that doesn't then convert is a defeat – a man down.

That's the thing that I wanted to work with the labels on, to partner with them in understanding that it's not 'free'; it's [people] that pay with their eyeballs. Nobody wants to be in the 'free' business, right? Free means you receive no revenue.

The fact is, as you've seen, [the labels] receive enormous amounts of revenue [from YouTube]. More importantly, ['free' users] create our funnel, through which we can identify those that are prepared and willing and ready to move to subscription; they go hand-in-hand. Any mature media business is both ad-supported and subscription.

Remember, [the labels] were hurting for 18 years and the bounce happened primarily around subscription. They would have suffered a lot over those many years, a lot of colleagues have lost their jobs, it was a really difficult period.

So I think when subscription came, they were so relieved and thrilled that there was a new business model that actually helped. And now, after the pain of this decline fades and we move beyond the very the start of growth, they're starting to have greater peripheral vision, and that includes people who pay with their eyeballs.

You observed in the past that the relationship between YouTube and the labels used to be: every three years, negotiate hard, three year break, then come back and bang heads again. That's presumably changed enormously, so what's filling in those three year gaps?

What are the conversations more about now, and what's the mood like?
The conversation is, in the majority of instances, week in week out, 'Can we listen to your artists? Can you play us your music?' [Laughs] I know it sounds like a very novel idea, but we like music. And that's [the labels'] wares, and since we're only negotiating for those wares, it may be subtle, but it's very important to us that we are comrades in understanding what the product is. So, by listening to their artists, by hearing the stories of their artists, maybe helping their artists find their audience, we could start becoming better partners.

Which is much better than an arm wrestle every three years.
I mean, I'm certain that to some extent there will always be an arm wrestle, but hopefully that's more at the pub having a good time, sharing a beer together, than at some annual competition. To us, the most important part is the discovery; how does a really talented person find their audience and how do we help that audience find them? That's the real job that we could actually do, and if we do a great job with that, then there is going to be an abundance of opportunity for everybody.

Do you think there is or was ever an element of YouTube being the music industry's dirty little secret? So, in public they make pronouncements about how evil you are, but in the back channels they recognise you as perhaps their most important partner for breaking new artists – just, shhh, don't tell anyone we love you.
I don't think there is much shushing anymore! I think that we're past being the dirty little secret. I think with them understanding that we could play in both areas of subscription and advertising, and of course promotion, and then layering on direct-to-consumer, that we've heard loud and clear what they need from us. We've [also] heard them loud and clear: [Adopting industry voice] 'Launch a subscription service so you can shepherd those that are willing to pay to a service, build something that we know you're capable of doing.'

So we did. And we're very proud of the product that's been built. We get a lot of accolades from people saying that the product is really good, and it will get better. Being good listeners to our partners wasn't the worst thing in the world, because it's actually led us to launching this subscription service and growing our business.

Listening to our partners is essential for us. [YouTube execs] Christophe Muller and Waleed Diab, across music licensing and business development, are such great examples of this spirit that has made both our business and partnerships in the industry stronger.

As someone with a background in various areas of the business, do you see, or did you see, a big difference between the way independent labels view YouTube and interact with you and the way the major labels view and interact with YouTube?
So the answer is yes and no. I think it's individual to the indie. The independent business is exploding on YouTube, everybody knows that, and it's just great to watch, it's really wonderful to see.

On a similar note, and again, because you've got backgrounds in both areas, is there a big difference in the way managers view YouTube than in the way labels view YouTube?
I think managers are actually the most active participants in YouTube, it's wild; they see YouTube as their first tool.

Is that because they see all upsides in all areas of their artists' business, as opposed to the labels only looking at certain areas?
Yeah, maybe. We're making it more intuitive, easier to access, for them. Soon we'll be launching our analytics on mobile, just acknowledging that managers are rarely in their office, an artist can access that on their mobile phone easily.

"I don't look at Spotify or Apple or TikTok as competitors."

You've just announced some numbers covering ad revenue and subscriptions, are you able to expand on those at all, or talk about where you want those numbers to go, either in terms of the total revenue returned to the industry or numbers of subscribers?
No, I can't talk to you in specifics, but we want to be the number one revenue source to the music industry. We want to be the easiest, most reliable partners. We want to be the best place to source talent. We want to be the easiest and most effective way of promoting your artists.

You might be some of those things already, but not the number one contributor of revenue, right? You're number two now, is that correct?
You're baiting me – so I'm not going to take the bait!

What is your view of TikTok and the rise of user-generated short-form viral video, and will it have an impact on your business either strategically or maybe commercially?
I love it. It's funny when you say 'your', I want you to know one thing: I don't look at Spotify or Apple or TikTok as competitors. Anybody who is willing to invest in the music industry is a comrade in arms with me.

There's plenty of room for everybody to contribute to making music – which is an international art form – more

L-R: Tuma Basa, YouTube's Head of Urban Music; Lyor Cohen; Mama Burna (Bose Ogulu); Burna Boy; and Stefflon Don at the recent YouTube Music Excellence Brunch, in London, celebrating black British culture in music

valuable for the artists and songwriters. And if it's more valuable, you get more songwriters and artists and it just makes everything that much better.

So, a lot of people misunderstand and see some sort of, I don't know what it is, some sort of really rough competitor, but I adore what TikTok is doing. I think it's really great and I don't know what else to say; there's a period there.

The industry is about to announce its fifth or sixth year of consecutive growth after 15 or so years of decline. How confident are you that this growth will continue – and what are the key factors in ensuring that it continues?
So, I never forecast. In my own life, I never forecast. But there has never been a better time to have a conversation with your parents to say that you're going to join a rock'n'roll band and just put a pin in college. I feel like there's all green-for-go signals in front of us. I do think that there are challenges, because the levee broke, okay, and now you have a billion bands swimming around your ankles. So how do you invest to define what you like?

When you talk about the algorithm, we're in the 2.0/3.0 version of the algorithm, and that has to be better, because right now it's basically an echo chamber, and that's not delightful. Remember when we'd [go] to a record store, we were beelining to one thing, we came out with another thing and our minds got blown? Do you know what I'm saying? I hate this phrase because they use it in tech and I don't want anybody to think I've become a tech person, but how do you trip someone onto something that will 'surprise and delight' them? Something that then becomes such an important part of their life; how does that happen now?

So we have a lot of things to sort through, but you could look at that as a challenge or you could look at that as opportunity – and fun. The beautiful news is I'm blessed with an abundance of the greatest engineers on the planet, period – make sure you do a pull quote on that so I can show my engineers, who are just extraordinary *[Blame the subs - Ed*]. You know, they are the finest, the best… the joy of working here is you work with the most incredible genius engineers. And so my signature to this period of my life is to actually introduce the engineers to the music industry, and get out of the way [of that relationship].

At first, they said I'm the guy who's going to shuttle between [the two] and I said, 'I'm too old, I'm going to forget some things,' you know. I don't want to shuttle between two people; I want to *connect* two people. And I think that's what's happened [at YouTube during Cohen's tenure] that I feel the most proud of; the engineers are becoming smarter because of their relationship and context with the music industry. Does that make any sense?

It does; just be careful you don't make yourself redundant in that process.
I'm happy to be redundant. I'm happy to be redundant [if, as a result, it means] looking back at this as a period where I was helpful. ■

THE 'CASSETTE REVIVAL' IS NOT NORMAL

Peter Robinson isn't averse to a bit of cuddly music business nostalgia – except when it is utterly fucking batshit...

An admirable stance in the streaming era, particularly pertinent in the wake of widespread festival cancellations, is the notion that if we really want to support our favourite artists, the best route is to buy merch. That's merch or, as we'd call such paraphernalia in the free and easy days when there were fewer demands on our time and attention, permitting us to be cavalier with our syllable use: merchandise.

For this to truly work we need to be honest with ourselves about what is and what is not merch (merchandise). A T-shirt or a mug, for instance, is merch. A bottle opener, a 'beer koozie' (WHO USES THESE?), or anything else that seems only to exist in the catalogues of companies who'll slap a generic band logo onto any old tat for a minimum order of 50 units, is also merchandise. A vinyl album, meanwhile, is chart eligible and is therefore music.

Then, somewhere in the middle of all that, we have the cassette. The cassette was the height of convenience until several more convenient formats came along, leaving the cassette looking incredibly inconvenient to the point where we can now admit it was the worst-ever music format — and I say that as someone who lived through the mid-noughties era of the 'USB stick single'.

Ostensibly the cassette counts as music, in the sense that it contains sounds, but in an era when the only people who actually possess cassette players are World War II veterans and psychopaths, cassettes themselves fall very much into 'any old tat' territory.

And yet. I can't believe I'm writing this in 2020, but here we are with the cassette, which as I may have mentioned is the worst-ever music format, being regarded as a viable way of distributing tunes. As in: actual, proper artists are actually, properly releasing their new albums on cassette, as if it's totally normal.

This is in contrast to cassette releases from a couple of years ago being regarded as 'cute' or whatever. So this isn't about the playful lunacy of, say, Mark Ronson releasing his last album on cassette, MiniDisc (!) and 8-track (which, I know, looks like I added it for comic effect but it actually happened). It's about the worst-ever music format enjoying a genuine revival thanks to artists who fall into two camps.

"The worst ever format is being regarded as a viable way of distributing tunes."

First, there are acts like The 1975, Billie Eilish and Ariana Grande, whose fans have no first-hand experience of the horrors their parents endured relating to this woeful format and are tapping into a bizarre sort of imagined nostalgia in the same way Instagram influencers post selfies from Chernobyl. And then there's artists whose fans should frankly know better: Madonna, Kylie, Pet Shop Boys.

In theory, the rise of streaming should have ushered in a post-format pop landscape, except of course the rise of streaming also requires a rise in alternative revenue streams, so here we are. But am I going mad? Am I the only one who's identified the cassette as the worst-ever music format? Or has the entire music industry been gripped by some sort of mass delusion? I mean, even more so than usual?

Taking the situation to its logical extreme, we have the new Dua Lipa album *Future Nostalgia,* which is available not just on cassette but on a not very futuristic and extremely nostalgic TRIPLE-CASSETTE BUNDLE, priced at about eleven quid, which appears to be the same album, three times, on different coloured cassettes. This would actually represent good value for money were it not for the fact that cassettes — and this really does bear repeating — are the worst music format of all time.

Lipa's triple-cassette offering is certainly novel. Is it, somehow, an OCC-enraging but admirably egregious attempt to pass off one sale as, actually, three sales? Team Lipa aren't exactly shying away from physical formats with this release: the album's also available on CD, gold (not actual gold) cassette, pink vinyl, a boxset, and in bundles such as vinyl and cassette, CD and cassette, and finally, quite triumphantly: boxset, CD, vinyl and cassette. In this context one could argue that Dua's cry of 'LET'S GET PHYSICAL!' in her current single is a call to action that ranks as the music industry's smartest marketing move of the 21st century.

Then again, perhaps the triple-cassette offering is merely the consequence of someone accidentally over-ordering and attempting to make the best of it. Either way, the bundle exists.

I don't know what makes me most angry about the Dua Lipa triple cassette debacle. Is it the fact that the music industry embraced streaming, and in doing so accidentally moved to the most environmentally friendly pop delivery format since townsfolk took a horse and cart to see someone bang out tunes on an unamplified lute, but then decided to resume the manufacture of unnecessary items made out of plastic?

Or is it the fact that I really want the new Dua Lipa album on triple-cassette?

If I do buy *Future Nostalgia* on cassette, I'll eventually do what everyone else who buys the cassette will be doing: I'll use my streaming subscription to listen to the album endlessly at the marginal cost to myself of £0.00, and I'll put the (comparatively infinitely more expensive) cassette on my shelf. And there it will stay, until it goes into a box.

The only thing necessary for the cassette revival to continue is for good men to do nothing and I'm not going to just stand by and let this cassette revival business take root. In 2020 the cassette is not a music format; it's barely even merch. It's a fucking ornament.

"Has the entire industry been gripped by mass delusion? I mean even more than usual?"

Maybe this is where we're going. Stormzy releases his new album as a decorative thimble (with presentation case). The new Shawn Mendes album is issued as a decorative statuette in exclusive collaboration with Lladro. Rita Ora's next release takes the form of a granite birdbath and birdfeeder bundle, with fans able to subscribe to monthly seed deliveries, thus revolutionising pop and disrupting the birdfeed market in one fell swoop. Anne-Marie's next opus is available on streaming, on CD, and as a one-off Wicker Woman-style effigy into which Anne-Marie herself is unceremoniously hoisted on release day and set ablaze by angry islanders.

In any case the Official Charts Company must take decisive action. Either cassettes — ornaments — are made chart ineligible, or the OCC makes eligible every other type of merch-related trinket it's possible to staple a download code to. And if this means Dua Lipa becomes the first artist to top the charts on tea towel sales alone, so be it.

KEY SONGS IN THE LIFE OF…

Sonny Takhar

He's worked closely with artists that have sold hundreds of millions of records worldwide, and these days he's an L.A entertainment mogul. But it all started for Sonny Takhar with his brother's record collection in Leicester – and the nightclubs in nearby Nottingham...

1.

2.

In his 12 years at Syco Music, Sonny Takhar worked records that sold more than 400m copies worldwide – as he contributed both essential marketing expertise and A&R nous to the label. The marketing part of Takhar's professional arsenal was finely honed over the course of two decades with Sony Music, a tenure which began at RCA Records as a Junior Press Officer in the early nineties. Takhar's A&R skills, however, were sculpted within a very different crucible: as a house DJ in the late eighties, regularly spinning vinyl for dancefloors of Nottingham club Venus.

Takhar didn't quite make it as a professional floorfiller – though his mixing skills did get featured in *The Face* magazine (more on that shortly). But, says Takhar, any major creative musical decision he's made during his career since this era has always come back to the essential lessons he learned behind the decks.

> ***"It's no fluke to me that some of the best A&R people started out as DJs."***

"There's nothing more sobering than going to a record shop, spending 50 pounds, your rent money, on imports and trying to decide whether what you're buying is going to move the audience or not," he tells *MBUK*. "It's no fluke to me that people I consider to be some of the best A&R people out there started their careers as DJs."

At Syco, Takhar worked very closely with one of the most successful British A&R minds of all time – Simon Cowell – across artists including Leona Lewis, Labrinth, Fifth Harmony, James Arthur, Little Mix, One Direction and Susan Boyle.

When Takhar decided to leave his role as President of Syco in 2016 to launch his own venture, Cowell called him "one of the most talented, loyal and hardworking music executives I have ever met". These days, that talent and hard work is being ploughed in a new, independent direction. Takhar is steering the ship of Los Angeles-headquartered Kyn Entertainment, an entertainment rights and artist management company that works with acts including fast-emerging Instagram star, Lewis Blissett, plus American-Canadian boyband PRETTYMUCH and Westlife – a staple of the British charts for the past 20-plus years, who are set to play two nights at Wembley Stadium in August.

Kyn is free to ink partnership deals with record companies and/or distributors on a case-by-case basis, after launching as a JV backed by concerts giant Live Nation in 2017.

"The rationale behind [launching Kyn with Live Nation] was really to find a partner that was in the music entertainment space, but really understood the changing face of artist partnership deals without any conflicted position," explains Takhar. "The first two years have really been about building a team – there's 12 of us now – and building a roster."

He adds: "My philosophy is very simple; I call it the four 'A's, as crass as that might be: it's artists, it's A&R, it's audience, and it's agility. Being [independent] comes with different sorts of pressures than [the corporate world] but they're all positive pressures you put on yourself. I left Syco at a very exciting point for the business, where the tectonic plates of the industry shifted

forever. It became evident to me that I needed to become closer to the artist. Technology is driving both consumer engagement and consumption today; we're at the beginning of an environment that's continually going to change, I believe, in favour of the artist."

In addition to Kyn, Takhar also runs a music publishing venture, S2 Songs, in partnership with pop-songwriter extraordinaire, Savan Kotecha, which last year inked a global deal with Universal Music Publishing Group. He's also an Exec Producer on a music-based movie, currently in development, for which he's working with Marc Platt – the Hollywood producer behind worldwide Box Office hits like *La La Land*.

All of which brings us up to speed re: Takhar's modern-day executive escapades. But it's 34 years in the past that we begin our story of the five tracks that changed his life – as he explains how a teenage boy in the Midlands fell for the rhymes and rhythms of a solid gold rap classic…

"I was surrounded by all of these sounds – it was an incredible education."

1. Run DMC, Peter Piper (1986)

I grew up in Leicester in the the seventies and eighties, which at that time was a real multicultural melting pot. They say you're schooled by your environment when you're young, and I very much was: my brother was three years older than me and had this amazing vinyl collection.

At that time in Leicester, pop music was prevalent, but equally the British jazz-funk scene was growing. Bands like Central Line, Second Image and Imagination were all big for us, as was reggae. And then hip-hop emerged at the same time as electro.

I was surrounded by all of these sounds, and it was an incredible education. I remember the day my brother brought back *Raising Hell* by Run DMC [the group's seminal third album].

I was in my mid-teens, 15 or 16, and the first song on the vinyl was *Peter Piper*, which was never a single. It's got great, almost whimsical pop sensibilities, but also this incredible energy. It was cool, it had beats which blew your mind, and it was my favourite song on the album.

One of the first concerts I ever went to was Run DMC at the Birmingham Odeon in 1987, that infamous tour they did with the Beastie Boys, when the tabloids tried to ban them because they [the Beasties] had this inflatable phallic thing [laughs] on stage. By today's standards, production-wise, it probably wasn't the best concert, but at the time it was life-changing. It was a real foray into hip-hop for me, but also into the rare groove scene, and into club records.

Those years, between 16 and 21, when you're starting to go out, pretty much form the basis for your lifelong musical taste. I had no idea I'd end up in music at this point in my life. I actually had designs on entering the advertising industry, which in the mid-to-late eighties was probably the sexiest industry emerging.

2. Cece Rogers, Someday (1987)

Someday was released in 1987, but I discovered it in 1989, when I started DJ'ing at university. I was resident DJ at a club called Venus

Run DMC, pictured in September 1986

Photo: Trinity Mirror / Alamy

in Nottingham – a seminal nightclub that embraced both house music and the Balearic scene. I used to warm up for incredible DJs like Sasha and Tony Humphries. And I started to buy vinyl.

Nottingham was such an important part of my schooling. There was a club called The Garage in the late eighties that had a floor for house music, a floor for hip-hop and rare groove, a floor for goths and punks. It was this incredible melting pot of tribes and music, and you could go from floor to floor.

This was before the house scene had really developed enough to warrant its own club night. Then, in around '89, The Garage closed down and turned into [legendary Notts nightspot] Kool Kat, and there was a guy there called Graeme Park who was a resident DJ; he was a friend of my brother's, so we used to follow him up and down the country, including a club night in the Hacienda every Friday where Graeme and Mike Pickering were residents. It was an amazing time to be a teenager, and it inspired me to be a DJ.

I don't know what happened to Cece Rogers, but this song represents that entire period for me. He had this celestial voice and lyrics that lifted you. It's a record that would come on at the end of the night and just encompass everything about this era of house music. I loved hearing it, and it became a staple of my set for about a year – a very euphoric and important record.

This was while I was studying, but weirdly enough, I was actually at uni in London, Greenwich University, studying Marketing & French – I was on my way to working for a French advertising agency. Every weekend I used to get in the car, travel up the M1 and go and DJ at Venus. I eventually elected to stay in London and became an intern at *iD* magazine. [Working] across the way from me was a young Edward Enninful, who was the fashion assistant [and would go on to become "the most powerful man in fashion", according to *The Telegraph*]. I chose not to go to France, but to stay in London. I was even profiled in *The Face* magazine as one of the future stars of the DJ world. But I realised that magazine article was probably as good as it was going to get, and I soon quit...

3. Wu-Tang Clan, C.R.E.A.M (1993)

I stopped DJ'ing around 1992, when I got a job at RCA Records. I was desperate to get a legitimate job in the music business. I got rejected by, I think, every major label, but, thanks to this contact, RCA hired me as a Junior Press Officer. I did that for about a year; I didn't particularly enjoy it, if I'm totally honest. But then I got an opportunity: Mike McCormack was the Head of A&R at RCA, he'd just arrived, and he was beginning to sign more UK soul artists.

Coincidentally, the RCA US label had started to sign more R&B artists like SWV, and they'd just done a deal with Loud Records. Mike wanted one focused department and he asked me to run it. One of the first records I worked was the debut Wu-Tang album; I didn't fully realise at the time how seminal a rap record that would become. I remember bringing in the Wu-Tang for their first ever UK visit – the promoter had put them up in a hotel on Bath Road near Heathrow Airport to keep them out of trouble.

One morning, I had to pick them up for some promotion. I went to phone their rooms from the lobby, but none of the phones were answered. I looked out the window to the car park, and there they were, literally hiding behind a bush. They'd done a runner because they'd clocked up this huge telephone bill calling America, and they couldn't pay it – and the promoter refused to pay it.

> **"I looked out the window to the car park, and they were literally hiding behind a bush."**

This was an era where I cut my entrepreneurial skills, even in a corporate environment, because you had to hustle. The reason this band and this song are so important to me is because we succeeded in getting the second album [*Wu-Tang Forever*, 1997] a few years later to No.1 in the UK charts. And it was at that point, as an executive, I got on the radar of the upper tier of the company. I remember getting a call from Simon [Cowell] who at that time was an A&R consultant, saying, 'Could we meet up [because] someone from sales had said we could work together on certain songs.'

It was an era where I was working acts like Funkmaster Flex, Mobb Deep, SWV, Omar – it was a magical time, and it really put me on the map.

4. Leona Lewis, Bleeding Love (2007)

Leona won season three of *X-Factor*, and at this point I was running Syco, both TV and music companies. She was incredibly special – everyone felt it from the very first audition. But with that talent came a lot of pressure; she was the first [*X-Factor*] artist that the US label and Clive Davis had taken a keen interest in. We needed a big record. One of the many things I've learned from Simon is the importance of relationships, both with the artist but also with the songwriting community. I've been lucky enough to have long-lasting relationships with the likes of Steve Mac, Wayne Hector, Savan Kotecha and Ryan Tedder, amongst many other great songwriters.

Sonny Takhar's Kyn Entertainment manages Lewis Blissett, Westlife and PRETTYMUCH

Ryan had been working on another project that had been signed to Syco at the time, and we'd pretty much come to the end of the A&R process for Leona. We'd even picked a single. Then a CD of uncut Ryan Tedder songs arrived, and track three was *Bleeding Love*. Inexplicably, the artist that had co-written it [Jesse McCartney], or his label, had turned it down. I'm not an A&R genius, but for me – and everyone, quite frankly – it was a one-listen song. Leona did an amazing version, and it became our first single. It's a song that not only defined Leona Lewis but, importantly, defined the [*X-Factor*] format; it legitimised the TV show by showing it could really deliver global stars and global hits, in a way that other shows couldn't and hadn't. The song went on to become the biggest track in the world in 2008.

A lot of A&R is about taste and a lot of it is about your networks – but equally it's about confidence. Speaking personally, this was a song that really gave me the confidence to believe that I could do the job well.

5. Labrinth, Jealous (2014)

Tinie Tempah's *Pass Out* had just become a big hit, and I called up Guy Moot who was publishing the song. I enjoyed the energy of *Pass Out*, the urgency; it was an unorthodox record and I loved it. I wanted to meet the producer with a view to potentially working with our [Syco] artists. I met Labrinth the following week, loved him, and it became obvious during the course of our conversation that he was a real artist. Something struck me that this was someone more than just a producer – he was someone that would go on to be very important. He was just about to sign a record deal with another label, and I knew I had to act quickly and decisively to sign him.

Happily, he decided to sign with [Syco] – one of the first times we'd signed an artist outside of the TV format. In one of our first meetings, I asked him what his challenges were. He said: 'One of the biggest things I want to do is become a better and more consistent songwriter.' So we organised a trip to Nashville, which gave him discipline, from both a storytelling point of view but also in terms of getting things finished. One of the songs he came back with was *Jealous*.

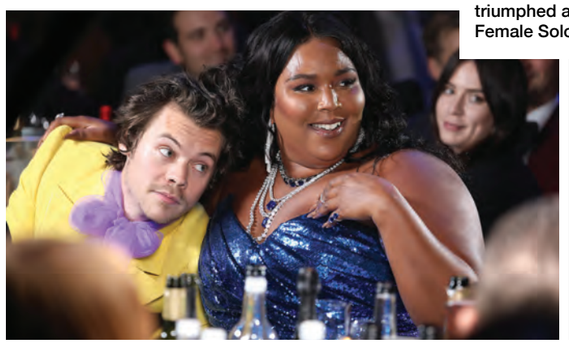
Soon after his return, he performed at this intimate party to 20 or 30 people; he got up with his guitar, played a couple of songs, then played *Jealous*. The story [that inspired the song] is a very personal one about a member of his family. He told that story, played the song, and I looked around the room and literally everyone was in tears.

For some reason, it didn't make the first album; other songs had taken over. But when we were considering the second record, the idea of *Jealous* came back into the conversation. We put the song out; even though it wasn't his most successful single, in my opinion it's his most meaningful. It's a song that defies era – a true classic composition. Labrinth is a very special soul and a very special artist, and the best is yet to come for him. ■

The BRIT Awards 2020

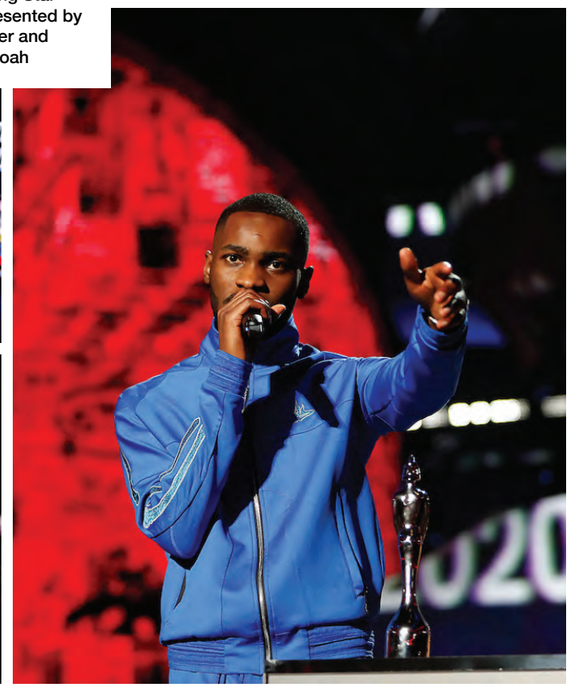
The 40th BRIT Awards took place on the evening of February 18 at the O2 Arena in London. Presented by host Jack Whitehall, the televised ceremony showcased performances from some of the biggest names in global music – including Billie Eilish, Lizzo, Harry Styles, Stormzy, Lewis Capaldi, Dave, Rod Stewart and Mabel. The show, which put a notable focus on artists' visual creativity, was Chaired this year by Universal Music UK boss, David Joseph...

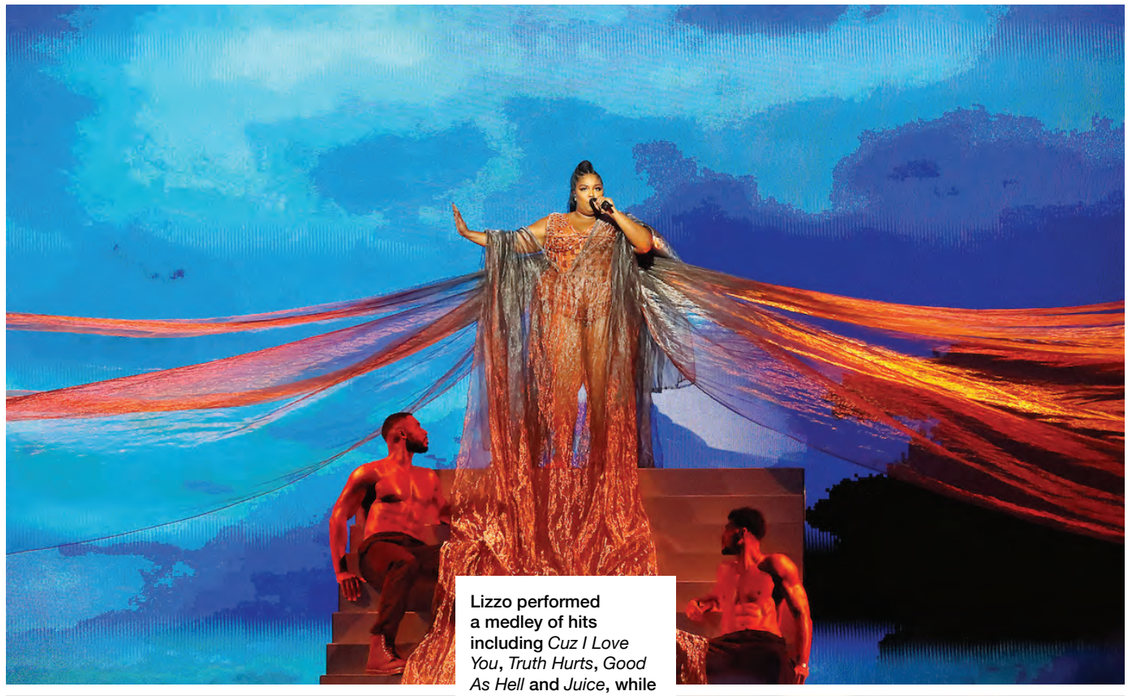
Lewis Capaldi, accompanied by bottle of Buckfast, won Best New Artist. Polydor-signed Mabel triumphed as Female Solo Artist

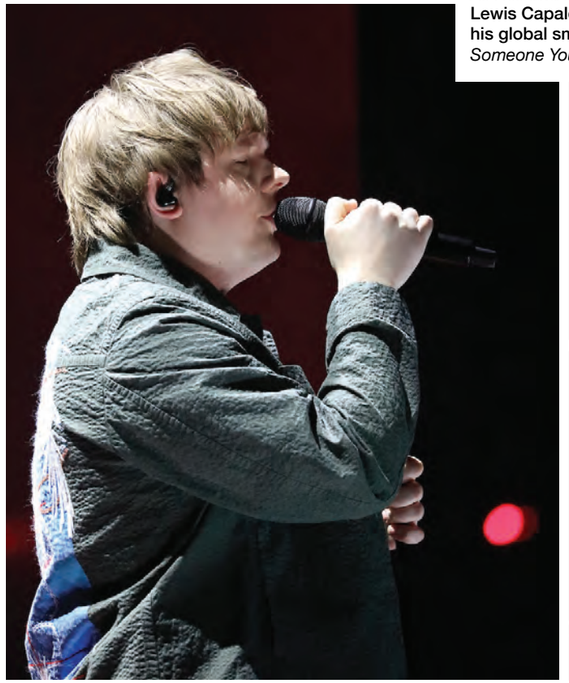


All pictures: John Marshall/JME International

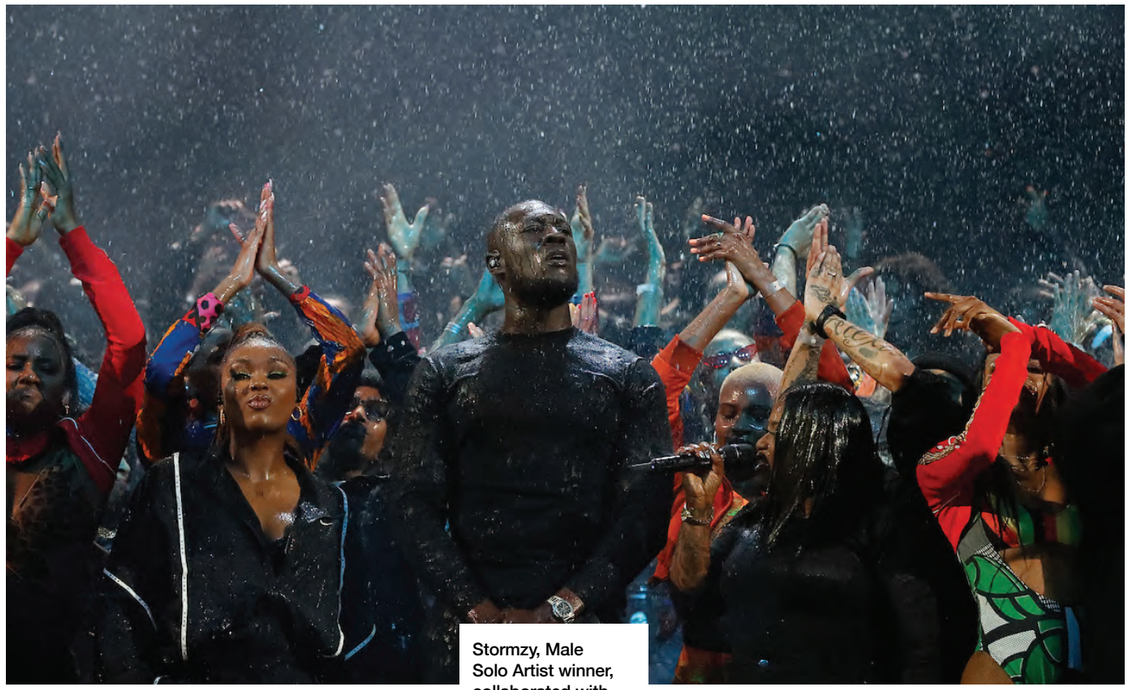
Another Polydor act, Celeste, won the BRITs Rising Star Award, presented by Sam Fender and Adwoa Aboah







Lizzo performed a medley of hits including *Cuz I Love You*, *Truth Hurts*, *Good As Hell* and *Juice*, while Lewis Capaldi sung his global smash *Someone You Loved*



Stormzy, Male Solo Artist winner, collaborated with Burna Boy and many others (in the rain)

BRITs: all the winners

Album Of The Year
(Presented by Billie Eilish and Finneas)
Dave - Psychodrama

Song Of The Year
(Presented by Tom Jones)
Lewis Capaldi – Someone You Loved

Male Solo Artist
(Presented by Ronnie Wood)
Stormzy

Female Solo Artist
(Presented by Ellie Goulding and Jorja Smith)
Mabel

Group Of The Year
(Presented by Anne Marie, Courtney Love and Hailee Steinfeld)
Foals

Best New Artist
(Presented by Clara Amfo and Niall Horan)
Lewis Capaldi

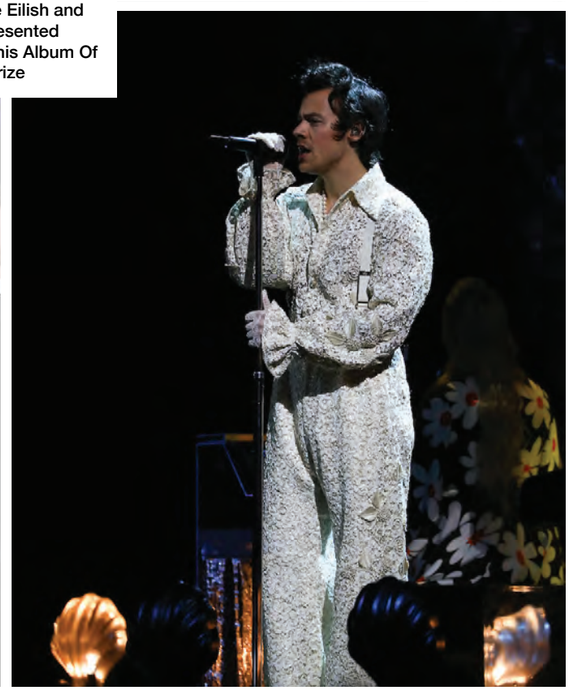
International Male Solo Artist
(Presented by Kiefer Sutherland and Paloma Faith)
Tyler, The Creator

International Female Solo Artist
(Presented by Melanie C)
Billie Eilish

Rising Star
(Presented by Sam Fender and Adwoa Aboah)
Celeste

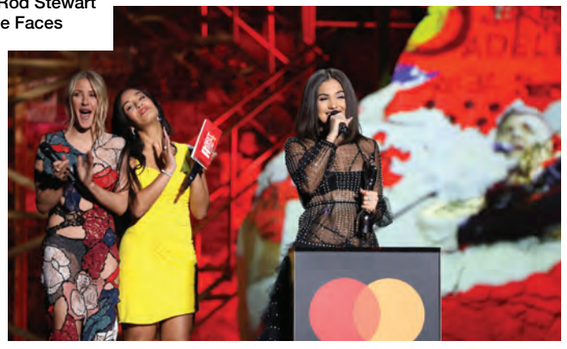
Producer Of The Year
Fred Again

Kiefer Sutherland was pleased to see Tyler, The Creator win International Male Solo Artist. Billie Eilish and Finneas presented Dave with his Album Of The Year prize



CELESTE
DAVE
FOALS
STORMZY

Billie Eilish performed *No Time to Die* on the big night, as Ronnie Wood and Rod Stewart reunited The Faces



‘SOMETIMES WHEN YOU HEAR SOMETHING YOU LOVE, PATTERNS GO OUT THE WINDOW’

After a staggered start, Mark Mitchell and Nick Burgess are jointly at the helm of Parlophone, looking to kick-start a new era defined by being brave and doing things differently...

There it is look, hiding in plain sight, a great big pound sign, front and centre of the Parlophone logo, bold as… well, yeah, bold as brass.

Odd, isn’t it? For any record label (especially Parlophone) to flag up cash – that root of all evil – so prominently on its front door, to make such a ‘Let’s drop the pretence’ statement part of its calling card. Only, of course, it isn’t. All is not what it seems. That pound sign? It’s actually a stylised and reversed L, for Lindström, as in Carl Lindström, the German founder of the label back in 1896.

So, what are we actually looking at? It’s something being done a little differently, a simple twist of font, which then generates a £. Now it makes more sense.

Stretching a pre-decimal point? Well, maybe, but consider the Beatles (which, when discussing Parlophone, is a contractual obligation): a band who changed the commercial landscape and parameters, but did so by being creatively different (oh, let’s be honest, better) than anyone that had gone before. The £ came after, and because of, the ♪. That's a founding and fundamental principle of modern Parlophone, and one that drove the company through a golden period in the nineties and beyond, when it signed and championed artists including Blur and Radiohead under the leadership of Tony Wadsworth. More recently, though, whilst still home to some of the most successful artists in the world, most notably Coldplay, Parlophone has, perhaps, lost some of its lustre in terms of exciting new signings and breaking new acts.

“Parlophone wasn’t chasing market share when they signed Radiohead and Blur.”

That’s something that relatively new co-Presidents Mark Mitchell and Nick Burgess are determined to put right. They are both clearly honoured to be the latest custodians of a label that is as important a part of British pop music history as any other you can name – but for them to succeed, they must position it as part of the future, with artists who will do, on their own terms, what previous Parlophone artists did in their time: reshape culture, blaze a trail and, as a happy consequence, sell loads of records and make some decent £.

The pair are a classic marketing/A&R combo. Mitchell, after several years in the independent sector, joined Atlantic in 2011 as Senior Marketing Manager and rose to General Manager in 2012 – working on campaigns for Ed Sheeran, Anne-Marie, Plan B, Bruno Mars, Clean Bandit, Jess Glynne, James Blunt and Rudimental along the way. Burgess, meanwhile, made his name as an A&R at Virgin where he signed and worked with, amongst others, Bastille, Chvrches, Blossoms, MNEK, Lewis Capaldi and Loyle Carner.

Here the pair talk about their ambitions, their signings, how they’ve re-styled the label through new hires, the importance of “being brave, being different” and becoming the sort of record label that, as has been the case with Parlophone in the past, “people look at from the outside and go, That’s what we want from a record company...”

Can you talk us through how you both arrived here at Parlophone? Obviously it was a slightly more circuitous route for you, Nick.

Nick Burgess: Yes, my situation was a little tricky. I was fully ensconced as Head of A&R at Virgin EMI. I’d been in that job for over 15 years, with a brief move to Sony for three years in the middle. Max [Lousada, Warner’s Global Head of Recorded Music] called me up and asked if I would be interested in the Parlophone job

The timing wasn’t great for me, because I was halfway through my contract, so that was where the staggered start came in [Mitchell was appointed as co-president in January 2018, with Burgess not completing the pairing until a year later], but my instincts were that it felt really exciting and a fresh challenge that I needed at the time.

I was always really keen to work with Max, he was someone in the industry that I admired massively from the outside. And to join a label with the branding of Parlophone, it’s a job that is very difficult to turn down, especially as a boy growing up in Liverpool, obsessed with music.

Mitch, you pretty much had to just get in the lift, right?

Mark Mitchell: Yeah, I’d been at Atlantic for eight years, joined as a marketing manager and moved up to GM before I left. I really loved Atlantic, it was great, and what I hadn’t quite realised [while working as Atlantic], was that in my time there I’d rebuilt the marketing, creative and press teams.

A couple of years ago Max sort of had to point that out to me, and then said, ‘I want you to do it again, at Parlophone.’ He introduced me to Nick, we met up, it was a bit of an arranged marriage situation, but after a while we were like, this seems to be working, there’s chemistry.

What were your thoughts when you first heard the word 'Parlophone' as a possible next home for you?

NB: In 1999, when I came down from Liverpool, and then into the noughties, Parlophone was *the* label. It was undoubtedly the number one label in the UK as a destination for artists. So, for me, as an A&R person for 20 years, it's the most prestigious name of all the labels. Obviously all labels, like all companies, have ups and downs, but we've got an incredible brand, it's the most important label name in the world to me.

Mitch, as someone who was closer to the label, within the Warner family, you were probably just as aware of its strengths but also possibly had an idea that it might have needed a refresh?

MM: Yeah, like Nick I grew up in the business admiring that Parlophone period of the early/mid-nineties, when it was the Pet Shop Boys, the starting of Radiohead, and then Blur. It was a real purple patch; they could do absolutely no wrong.

So yeah, it had all that magic when the first conversations started with Max and myself. But, being closer, I was aware that it was a label that probably needed a little bit of help to be a bit more contemporary in today's society.

I think whenever there's new management coming to any label there's going to be a change, and there's going to be a new energy just by new leadership.

And I was really, really eager when I came in, before Nick arrived, that the conversations were not just coming from the top. I spent a long time getting to know the people, getting to know the staff, getting their opinions about things. I'm always really interested in what everyone's opinion of the label is, regardless of the department or their position. I think it's really healthy to have those open discussions where everybody can speak their mind.

NB: I always thought of this label as an establishment of taste and quality, and I always believed that there was an authenticity about everything it did. Historically, they identified talent better than anyone, and then they articulated it better than anyone. And that's something we wanted to bring back to Parlophone, we want to be a label that people look at from the outside and go, 'That's what a record company should do; that's what we want from a record company.'

What was the handover period like with [previous label head] Miles [Leonard] and how would you describe his legacy?

MM: Miles was incredibly generous, and we still have a relationship with him. Anything about those deeply embedded relationships with some of the artists and the management community, he was always there for us and always a great help. He was also really encouraging of what we wanted to do, he really wanted us to do our own thing. There was no point where it was, 'This is how it's done.'

NB: Miles is a brilliant A&R person and executive. He came through the system the same way as myself, as a scout, and moved all the way up through the ranks. He was always a music person. He always wanted to do the right thing and he came from that tradition of Parlophone, so he lived through the Tony Wadsworth and Keith Wozencroft days, and they handed him the baton. He did a brilliant job.

When you're introduced, presumably by Miles, to, say, Coldplay, as the guys who are taking over their label, what's that like? Daunting? Do you feel you have to impress from minute one or do you just concentrate on not spilling tea over yourself?

NB: It was really natural to be honest; the band were really engaged. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a bit nerve-wracking before they walked in but as soon as we all sat down we had a great conversation and ended up going quite deep quite quickly!

Chris, especially, was really chatty and we just discussed the new record they were making (*Everyday Life*, released late last year, the band's eighth No. 1 album in the UK) and 15 minutes in we were into the meaning of life. Ultimately, we just wanted them to know that we would be incredibly supportive and that for them nothing would really change. I think they appreciated our honesty and support. It was the same for Damon [Albarn], Tinie Tempah and Stereophonics; everyone has been super supportive of us and what we are trying to do with the label.

"For me, as an A&R person, it's the most prestigious name of all the labels."

Mitch, how was that period when you'd been announced as co-MD, but Nick hadn't been named and hadn't arrived?

MM: There's an analogy that I've used, with Parlophone being this beautiful, incredible Georgian house. And with me coming from the marketing and general management side, and Nick being the A&R, I extended that analogy to say the house needed a little bit of fixing up, structurally, before you choose a colour on the walls, buy the furniture and make it your own home.

I was basically getting the place fit for when Nick came in and really brought the new energy of some new artists and getting going with it.

What do you think of dual leadership generally, and also can you give us an insight into how this particular partnership works?

MM: Well, I'm not saying this because Nick's in the room, but I couldn't imagine doing this on my own. What I did in the year before Nick came in was not the whole role. And we spent an incredible amount of time talking about everything; I speak to Nick more than anyone else, all the time. And I think instinctively, with 70% of what we do, or what comes towards us, we know who's going to handle it. I get involved in some of the A&R and Nick gets involved in some of the non-A&R stuff, of course, but generally, we just know.


Hamzaa


Ashnikko

NB: We want the label to win, it's not about individuals. It's not about my decision or Mitch's decision, it's whatever's the best for the label. I'd much rather do this as a duo, because I think running a label involves such a broad set of skills.

And actually, what it enables each of us to do is to live in our strengths, and if you're living in your strengths you can be your own superpower. Whereas often, if you're from a creative background and you're not as good at process, you spend so much of your time on the bits that you're less good at, that you're not as strong as compared to the bit that you are good at and you can end up doing neither bit particularly well.

There are certain humans that can do everything across the gamut, from talking to an 18-year-old artist about the bass line on a B-side, to staying on top of the detailed machinations of a marketing campaign, but most people have their strengths and weaknesses, and if you have a record company run by two people operating in their strengths, nothing gets lost between the two of them.

So, Mitch, complete this sentence: Nick's strengths as an executive are…

MM: Great decisions. Having instinctive artistic knowledge and understanding, i.e. Nick goes after artists as opposed to products and I think that harks back to what Parlophone's about. Parlophone's never had the biggest roster, nor would it ever want to have, but I think if you look back through the great artists on Parlophone, and the ones we've signed since we've been here, they're all true artists. They're all very brave. When they start out they're quite isolated, they tend to be outsiders, they're not coming from a pack mentality. They can actually be quite vulnerable and nervous at the beginning, but they are true artists, and Nick's got a good nose for sniffing those out.

And Nick, the same for you on Mitch…

NB: Mitch also doesn't have an ego. It's never about him – it's never The Mitch Show…

MM: Not yet!

NB: Yeah, give it a few months... No, he supports my decisions, he's across everything operationally, which is a Godsend for me, because I'm less good on that area. And that's what's great about working as a duo: he thinks of things I'd never think of and hopefully I do the same.

It's a widened bandwith of experience and expertise, which can only be good. You've got two brains that are in sync with each other and have the same agenda, but also cover different areas. As an artist and a manager, that's just more bang for your buck, isn't it?

I think it's also beneficial because, a while back, a label President could say, We're going to spend X amount on this artist, and we're


Tones and I

going to do A, B and C – and generally that artist would get a chance to be successful. Nowadays that just doesn't work. We're putting out an artist's work in the truest, most authentic form possible. And we're always, every single person within the label, we're questioning, Is this going to work? Is this the right thing to do?

We stress test each other's decision making. So if I say, 'I want to do this, I want to sign this artist,' or, 'I want this to be the roll out of the singles,' what's great is you close that door and Mitch will be like, 'Okay, talk me through that; why is that the right thing to do?' And that may help me to decide that, yes, it is the right thing to do. Or Mitch might go, 'I don't know, isn't there a better way of doing it?' And he's probably going to be right!

Often, when it's a sole president there's a fear of showing weakness and they can get wedded to a decision, even if they're not 100% on it. We get an opportunity to really challenge each other.

After that 16-month wait, when you were finally in the same building, what was on the To Do list in that first meeting?

MM: I think it was probably roster, both in terms of staff and artist.

NB: I think the number one thing we wanted to establish, and it's taken us probably a year to get there, is an authentic, unique culture.

We want to be a culturally relevant label, and we want to reflect and influence culture, which is what Parlophone has always been renowned for. It's about not just following trends; it's about being different and being brave, signing things that maybe other people were scared to sign, things that were unconventional or unfashionable. The perfect scenario is other labels raising an eyebrow, going, 'Wow they signed *that?*' – with a big question mark – and then proving that we actually did know what we were doing, that we had a vision and it wasn't just machine gun A&R.

Who have been some of the key hires so far?

MM: So, when I started in 2018, the first person that I brought in was Jack Melhuish. Jack and I worked together at Atlantic, and then he went over to be marketing director at Polydor, and he was hugely successful there.

I knew Jack well, so that was a reasonably easy fit. I'll be honest though, I thought I was getting the same person that left Atlantic, but I underestimated him, because he'd spent three years within the Universal and Polydor system, learned a hell of a lot and came back incredibly strong with great and really different ideas.

NB: In A&R, I really wanted to make the department more diverse, whilst also hiring people with an alternative understanding of the industry. It was very important to me to some really strong female A&Rs, because sadly I think there's still a paltry few being given the chance.

I was always a massive fan of Ina Rasinger, who was the head of A&R at Sony Germany. She signed James Arthur. Nobody believed in him at the time, but she had that conviction to sign someone who was, again, unconventional and unfashionable, and she A&R'd his comeback, and gave him that huge global hit [*Say You Won't Let Go*].

And then I hired Jin Jin, who's a really respected and successful writer in the music business. She has several number one singles, and developed Jess Glynne with Atlantic. Jin Jin's an incredible hustler and an amazing human being. She's emblematic of the culture that we want to create here.

When artists come to Parlophone, I want them to know that we're not just A&R people who look at data and scour the internet for ideas. We're a team that can actually get them in the studio, and get involved to help create something more powerful than what they had when they walked through the door.

MM: On the marketing side, there's also Ben Skerritt who came from Polydor, he's come in as Senior Marketing Manager. And another brilliant hire is Casey-Amber, who came from an experiential marketing company, Urban Nerds. It's very much about finding A&R people that actually make an immediate impact on an artist. We have also hired some super talented diverse, young A&Rs in Michael, Komali and Alex.

NB: I also want to mention Anya de Souza who was Head of Digital Marketing at Syco. She's full of amazing, fresh ideas, really strong-minded. I guess they all really tell the story of what the new Parlophone is, in terms of just people who listen, people who are committed and people who are determined to succeed, but also who are quite non-conventional hires.

"It did feel like the signing policy had slowed down somewhat."

Moving on to the artist roster, what was your initial assessment?

NB: When you inherit Parlophone, it comes with some of the biggest artists on the planet built in, and we're incredibly proud to work with them.

But it did feel like the signing policy had slowed down somewhat. I don't know for what reasons, and it's not for us to work out why that happened. My job was to assess the roster as a whole and see where it needed improvement.

I think it needed a lot of fresh, new music and it also needed a consistent roster of some middle artists on their way to superstardom, the ones that are going to be festival headliners in the future, maybe on their second or third albums, delivering consistent numbers and a constant schedule. We looked at it and it was a bit light in that middle department. It was light, generally, compared to other labels. Virgin EMI, where I had come from, had a roster four or five times the size of Parlophone.

Roughly what number were you at when you guys took over?

MM: I think it was about 30 UK signings.

And is that a good number for Parlophone?

NB: Well, like I say, we needed to refresh the roster and that doesn't always mean new signings. Some artists had been here a while and maybe weren't working, so we spring-cleaned and then went on a mission to sign the best quality artists we could.

MM: I think one big difference to Nick's experience at Virgin, or mine at Atlantic, was that there was hardly any international roster; there's no Parlophone US. So, along with Max, we formed a relationship with Elektra Group, which is run by Gregg Nadel and Mike Easterlin. I worked with them when I was at Atlantic, so it was a natural fit. And also we have some Parlophone-signed stuff that goes through Warner Records in LA. Coldplay go through Atlantic Records in America as well. So, we now have relationships with all those guys, which means a lot more international repertoire coming in, including Tones and I, who of course has been incredible.

NB: We're never going to be the biggest label in the UK and we don't want to be, that's not our agenda. Our agenda is just to have a label where every single act is fulfilling its potential, where we look at it and go, that's exactly the level that act wants to be and deserves to be. When we get disappointed is when we feel they should be bigger than they are, and maybe that's because we haven't articulated the message well enough to the media, or to their audience. But we feel like if we've got 30 acts all fulfilling their potential, for the size of the label that we are at the moment, that would be absolutely perfect.

Because one of our key USPs, what we really pride ourselves on, when it comes to managers and artists, is that when they come to Parlophone, everyone isn't overworked; you can get attention to detail, you will get 100% focus and the urgency and passion that all acts deserve if you believe in them.

Sometimes artists sign to a label and they think they're going to get that urgency and that intensity and that passion and that delivery and execution of a campaign, only to find out that there are three other acts in that lane, and they're all further down the runway. All of a sudden they're wondering why no one's returning their calls.

So are you happy with those two strands of the business now, the team and the artists?

NB: It's the start now, yeah. We see 2020 as the new beginning of Parlophone – Parlophone 2.0, or maybe it's 3.0. We've signed five or six [new] things that we're really excited about, that we really believe in. But obviously we're open for business and want to sign more things that we love, that we feel deserve a record deal, deserve our attention and that we feel we can add value to.

In 2020, we'd love to sign three or four more things that we

really feel will bring strength and value to the label, and where we could add value to the to the artist's career.

Who are the artists you've signed that you're particularly excited about for this year?

NB: We're excited about all of them, but there are a few things that we feel are further down the runway maybe than the others.

There's a girl called Ashnikko that we signed who we're incredibly excited about. There's a real global excitement about her. She's a unique artist who's completely unconventional. There was no competitive process, we found her, we loved her and we believed in her. It's been a proper artist development story; the artist she is today is definitely not the artist that came through the door.

MM: I think in many ways she's a very 2020, or maybe even 2022 artist. But she's also a very Parlophone signing. She completely harks back to that idea of being the outsider. She's actually American and her parents moved to Latvia in her teenage years. She didn't speak a word of the language. That's going to make you an outsider.

NB: In a very different lane we've got this band called The Snuts. Again, probably a quite unfashionable act, as in not what every other major label is signing, but we are. They're four kids from Glasgow who are the biggest band in Scotland by a long way, selling tickets all over the UK now. The write great songs and the singer has a unique voice.

They're a very long-term proposition, though. I genuinely believe that eventually they're going to be on album four, five, six, headlining festivals. It's about patience, and about belief. Through our relationship with Disturbing London we have Yxng Bane and Poundz, who are both super exciting prospects. There's also a girl called Hamzaa that we love, a really powerful and strong artist with a great voice. We also have Jack Curley, Sad Night Dynamite and Elderbrook. We are excited about all our new acts.

MM: Again, Hamzaa is a true long-term project. You could argue that she would fit in to a current climate of young female artists, but she's actually slightly different from that and she's going to find her own path. It wouldn't be right for us to push her into the more commercial lane, instead we're supporting her and her journey.

I was going to ask you about the competitive landscape and whether or not there are some crazy deals being done, but you've mentioned a couple of times that you don't tend to get involved, is that right?

NB: Well, first up, it's always been competitive and it always will be. I've been in A&R for 20 years and I've never walked into a gig and thought, This is going to be easy. And now there's also competition in terms of artists not wanting record deals at all!

But you're right in so much as we don't really want to try to get involved in competitive deals. My experience is that the minute a competitive deal happens, the whole campaign gets distorted, the reality for the artist gets distorted, because everyone's telling them they are special and they can think they've already made it... Look, we all know that to break an act in this business is incredibly difficult. It takes real commitment and hard work, and I think those deals just make them feel like they're a star before they've even sold a record.

Open and honest conversations are very hard to have once you've spent that much time trying to sign someone, and you've given them a million pounds or whatever it is.

MM: I think also when deals get stupid in terms of money, they tend to be short-term, and we want to be signing things with a view to long-term relationships. I'll be really proud of putting out the fourth or fifth Ashnikko album, if albums are still a thing at that point!

I think labels have to really show what their value is, and what they do. As Nick says, a lot of what we do is about listening and amplifying, as opposed to inventing or re-inventing. I don't think anybody out there wants record company campaigns anymore, they want the artist's campaign.

"Nobody wants record company campaigns anymore, they want the artist's campaigns."

NB: We realise now that, as labels, the only thing that we have control over is content. What I mean by that is we don't have control over distribution, we don't have control over media, but we do have control over what we put out, over the quality of that content and the articulation to the audience.

Everything else, we're sort of at the mercy of someone's taste and perspective: oh, the head of Spotify or Radio 1 didn't like it? So, does that mean we should all down tools and not release a record? We just have to keep talking to the audience and convince them of an artist we believe in; our job, where necessary, is to slowly but surely change people's minds about artists we're passionate about.

MM: Generally, and with some fantastic exceptions, I don't think there's enough brave records being made at the moment, and that's definitely something we want to put right.

What's the Parlophone pitch under you two guys?

MM: I think we've given you it! We are passionate experts. We have bandwidth and experience and you get 100% attention and focus at Parlophone. Quality is king for us. But it isn't just us about us two, it's always about the team, because it would be disingenuous of us to imply that we'll be involved in every single conversation all the time. So we want them to meet our team, the people they'll be


Coldplay


Kano

working with, the A&R people, the marketing people, the creative people – people who we think are amazing.

If you're that proud of your team, it makes sense to invite opinions from them ahead of big decisions.

MM: I've been doing this a long time, but there are people out there [on the Parlophone floor] who know a lot more than I do about certain aspects of this business. The way this business evolves, the rate at which it changes, it would be arrogant to pretend you know everything about everything – it would be ridiculous, in fact.

Also, if an artist meets our team and it doesn't really work for them, then it's probably for the best in the long run. You get the artists you deserve.

The old adage is that you can't choose your family, but I can't think of anything closer to a family than working with an artist, and in this case you can choose; both sides can. So bring people you love into that family.

Nick would know this more than me, but sometimes you come across an artist, you stand there watching them perform, and their pure talent is just irresistible. You don't rush off to look at their Instagram or check their streaming numbers. You just stand there with your jaw on the floor thinking, Oh my God.

NB: In my job, when you become a fan of the artist, it's a very different thing to when you're watching an artist and you're going, 'Yeah, good voice, people might like it,' and you spend most of your time second-guessing. You're looking for patterns, because human brains are designed to understand patterns. But sometimes when you hear something you love, patterns go out the window; you just become a fan in the same way you did when you were a teenager. As an A&R person, they're the ones that are usually the most successful.

I would say that in its simplest form, what we want to do is find things that we love and ask people to agree with us; that's all we're trying to do.

And that's what we want to do as much as possible. What we don't want to do is go to the public and say, 'If you like Billie Eilish, you might like this.' We don't want to get into that game.

What does success look like to you, in the medium- to long-term?

NB: I think it's about defining ourselves so that people from the outside look at it and go, 'That is a label that is doing things the right way: it's authentic, it's honest and it's helping great artists fulfil their potential.'

MM: That's always going to be more important than an extra nought-point-whatever market share. I don't think you can chase money, and you can't chase market share. But what you can do is do the right things. I don't think Parlophone was chasing market share when they signed Radiohead and Blur. ■

IS THE LIVE INDUSTRY RISKING 'TOO MUCH TOO SOON'?

New stars are breaking into bigger venues faster than ever before. But, asks Rhian Jones, is this necessarily a smart strategy?

At the tender age of 18, Billie Eilish has reached (multiple) arena level, won five Grammys, a BRIT award, had the best-performing album of 2019 in the US with her debut, where she also claims six Top 40 singles.

Lewis Capaldi has two BRIT awards, the best-selling album of 2019 in the UK with his No. 1 debut, five Top 10 singles, and is currently playing a string of arena dates. For artists who've only fairly recently reached mainstream consciousness, it's quite a lot, isn't it?

10 years ago, Adele was playing venues with a couple of hundred capacity on her debut tour, and didn't reach Shepherd's Bush Empire, let alone arenas, until her second album. Which is when she won a 'proper' BRIT after getting Critics' Choice on the back of her first record.

The thing that's changed since, of course, is streaming and social media. Both make it easier for an artist who sticks to build a large worldwide audience, and fast. Whilst streaming the hell out of an artist's songs, that audience is apparently quite willing to part with cold hard cash for an increasingly expensive gig ticket.

In turn, the music industry is reaping the benefits. Last year, the live business grew 10% to contribute £1.1bn to the British economy (nearly double the value of the recorded music sector). Globally, the major labels are now making over $1m per hour from streaming. That is all really great news. The music business is clearly entering a new decade in (comparatively) rude health.

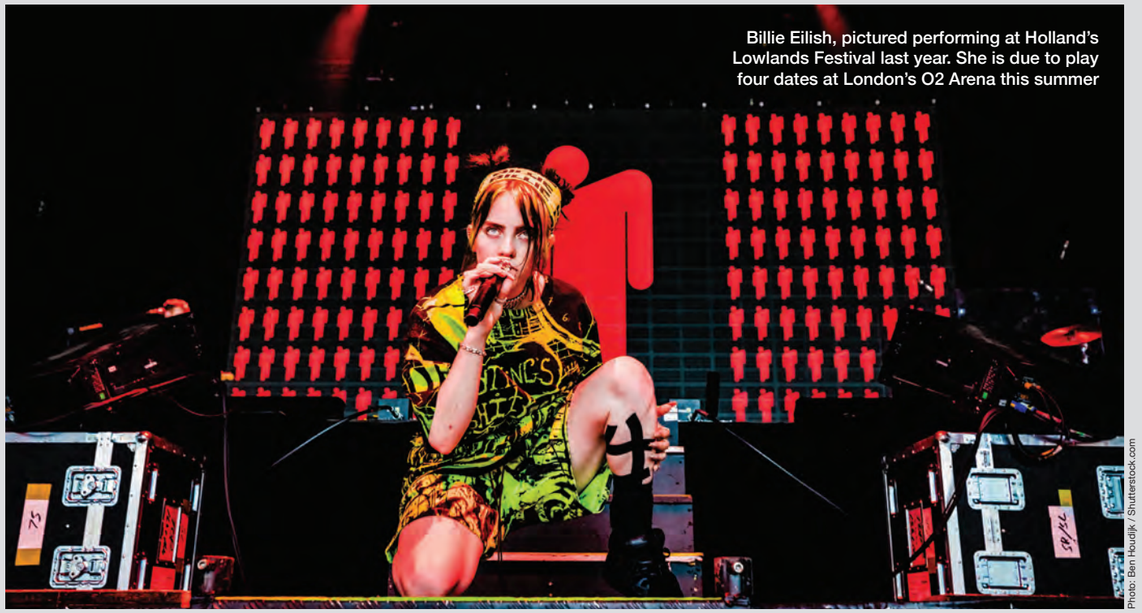
But there's a key question here that demands answering: what happens next? What happens when an artist gets so big, so quickly, ticks off all their career goals, and still has a lifetime ahead of them? "There is a chance that the natural cycle of an artist might be shortened," Steve Homer, co-President of AEG Presents answers. "The discovery procedure is so much more universal now, everyone can discover an act, and then there is nowhere left for it to go to."

"Choosing when to capitalise and when to hold back is a tough balancing act."

Alongside the global nature of streaming, not investing enough in the crucial early development phase that creates life-long fans is another element that may shorten an artist's longevity.

Pop music historian and author Jennifer Otter Bickerdike, who developed marketing campaigns for Eminem, Queens of the Stone Age, Nirvana, Limp Bizkit and Gwen Stefani while at Interscope Geffen A&M Records, says a slow and steady approach has always been a crucial part of building a loyal fanbase. "A big thing that I think is missing now is the idea of building a fanbase one person by one person, who are truly invested with that artist," she explains. "Engagement and connection between artist and fan on a smaller platform, a smaller more intimate stage, helps to ensure a longer career because that fan has been with the artist from the beginning."

Bickerdike points to bands like Queens Of The Stone Age and U2, "who started off slowly, building into bigger venues," and are still around today because they brought their fans along with them. Limp Bizkit, on the other hand, didn't. "I think one of the reasons why they don't have the legacy or following now that some of their peers might, is because they didn't invest in that crucial step enough," she adds. "They were everybody's band and therefore they were nobody's band."



Billie Eilish, pictured performing at Holland's Lowlands Festival last year. She is due to play four dates at London's O2 Arena this summer

Photo: Ben Houdijk / Shutterstock.com

One of the reasons for Adele's success is the way in which she and her team protect her brand. She promotes selectively around an album campaign, with a few standout moments, tours, and then has plenty of time at home and out of the limelight in between.

September Management have so far had a similar slow and steady strategy for Rex Orange County, proving it is still possible to do that in the streaming age. Further examples of bands with a strong core fanbase include The 1975, who were playing arenas towards the end of their second album campaign, and Twenty One Pilots, who had a seven-year development period before reaching mainstream success, thanks in part to their manager's refusal to go to radio prematurely.

Choosing which opportunities to capitalise on and when to hold back is a really tough balancing act, especially when there's money to be made and lots of people to pay. But there are two crucial facts worth considering during that decision making process.

"They were everybody's band, and therefore they were nobody's band."

The first is that, as predicted, the rate of streaming growth is slowing — in 2019, the three major labels saw a 12% dip in their year-on-year rise in streaming revenues.

The second is that, as pointed out in a recent *Guardian* article, five out of the top 10 worldwide tours of the last year featured band members over the age of 50, and there's an increasing amount of heritage acts cancelling shows due to illness (Madonna, Elton John, Ozzy Osbourne, Aerosmith and Metallica), as well as a number who are either currently on their last hurrahs or have quit touring entirely (Paul Simon, Bob Seger, Kiss, Neil Diamond and Eric Clapton).

Those two facts point to a clear need to ensure artists and their teams have a long-term revenue earning opportunity outside of recorded music, as well as a requirement to properly incubate the arena and stadium headliners who will be replacing the retiring old-guard. At their current rate of development, there is a risk that 'too much too soon' will mean many of today's current superstars burn through an entire career before they've had a chance to reach veteran status.

WHAT I WISH I'D KNOWN

Vidhi Gandhi started her career in music in her home city of Mumbai, before, at 19, moving to London, where she worked in venues before spending five years at Ninja Tune. Today, she splits her time between management and A&R at TMWRK Management and its tastemaker record label, TMWRK Records. Here, she talks about some hard lessons learnt at the beginning of her career...

The big lesson I've learnt across the board really, and not just in my career, is to do with impatience. Where I grew up, in Bombay and India generally, the culture is to be impatient; everything is available now. When I moved to the UK, I came to London thinking that's how it was going to work, and obviously we are in the Western world, so everything is going to be even quicker. I ended up learning patience the hard way.

I made a snap decision to quit my job at a venue I was working for and, being very young, over-confident, a bit arrogant, I thought I'd get another job quickly. I know how hard it is for people to stay in the UK under visa conditions, but I was very sure of myself at the time. I didn't manage to get a new job, and got sent back to India with no way back to the UK for 11 months.

I was very angry at myself that I'd let that happen and it had impacted my life, despite that fact that my family drilled into me when I was a kid that you have to be very thorough. It was a particularly hard year, one that taught me a lot of lessons in humility.

I think about it a lot now because I have to hop visa to visa a lot of the time, and it's had a ripple effect on how I navigate music industry jobs. It's not so easy for me to just put my hand up and say, 'Okay I want to leave or change jobs.' I have to really think about who is going to be able to employ me. So that is the one mistake I would not make again; I won't make snap decisions.

Another lesson I learnt early on is, if you're passionate about a project, and want to shout it from the rooftops, don't do so if you're trying to turn it into some kind of business proposition. If you're trying to put on a show with an artist, or sign a record or management deal, don't go telling everyone how great that artist is until you've closed the deal. I learnt that the hard way while doing a show in India. I ran around telling everyone about this great band that I was working with, and a promoter just went around me to the agent and got the deal done. I was really sad about it. It's a rookie error that I see a lot of people making now. They give away their tips because they are so excited and passionate about an act, and that's fine as long as you're not trying to work with that artist or on that project. If you are, I would say keep it to yourself until you're sure it's yours – then start telling everyone about it after that.

"It was a hard year that taught me a lot of lessons in humility."

Gandhi represents Allie Crow Buckley at TMWRK

I remember Matt Riley at AWAL saying there are no secrets in the A&R world, which was a bit of an eye-opener to me at the time. Any A&R who thinks they are the only person on it, they're wrong; there are always other people on it. If you are looking at it there are probably 10 other people looking at it, because the internet allows for that to happen. So the fact that there is a lot of competition is also something to keep in mind when you are trying to do deals with artists or trying to work on a project.

The third big lesson I learnt was about favours. When I first came to the UK, I didn't really know how favours worked. It's not in Indian culture to be like, 'If I give you this, you are going to have to return the favour at some point.' You just do something for someone and that's that. So I didn't really know that if you ask for guest-list, you should be prepared to give it back. I was just naively like, 'Can I get some guest-list?' And when that person came back around, asking for guest-list from me, I was like, 'I don't think I can help you.'

It didn't even cross my mind to return the favour, because if this was in India, you would just forget about it ever happening. But I think

that really upset the person who pointed out that they'd given me some guest-list – in fact they were quite straight about it!

Especially in an industry that's so heavily reliant on relationships and networks, if you're going to ask for a favour, be prepared to return it, or don't ask at all. That is something I try to live by more or less when asking for things now.

Trusting your gut is another important one. Music is such an emotional and personal thing; what I like, you may not like, and vice versa. All of the times when things have gone wrong is when I've not followed my instinct.

As human beings, there is the logical side of your brain, where you are hopeful and analytical, and your brain is saying, 'No of course this could work' or 'you can make this happen', but deep down, if you know it's not going to happen and still try to do it, that's when things can get really confusing and often end in a mess.

Even something as minor as 'don't send an email just yet', or 'don't go chasing that project just yet'. I still do it because the logic says otherwise, but I try to incorporate trusting my gut a little bit more because it serves you almost all of the time.

Not listening to my gut has also meant I've missed out on things. I found this amazing electronic artist in New York way back before they had any music out, aside from one track on a compilation.

I kept saying to my colleague, 'We really need to get this now because I think it's going to be a thing'. That person was a bit lax about the whole situation; I kept chasing and nothing happened. Then this artist put out one song and it all snowballed from there for them, which is amazing, but I felt like I hadn't controlled that situation enough to do what I wanted to do with it.

Especially in the A&R world, there is a lot of 'it's too early' or 'it's not quite the right timing', and as much as I agree with timing, if you really love it and have an instinct about it, you've got to go for it. I wish I'd pushed my agenda a little bit more in that situation, because maybe it would have turned out differently.

I have one more lesson: a lot of the time people in any industry, not just music, love to write emails and I think so much gets lost in translation as a result. There is a mental block that people have about getting on the phone, but I feel like there is no amount of clarity an email can give you that a phone conversation or meeting up with someone will.

I hope, as I go along in my career, I can do more of that rather than getting caught up in reasoning or strategy over email, where you're not able to get your point across enough.

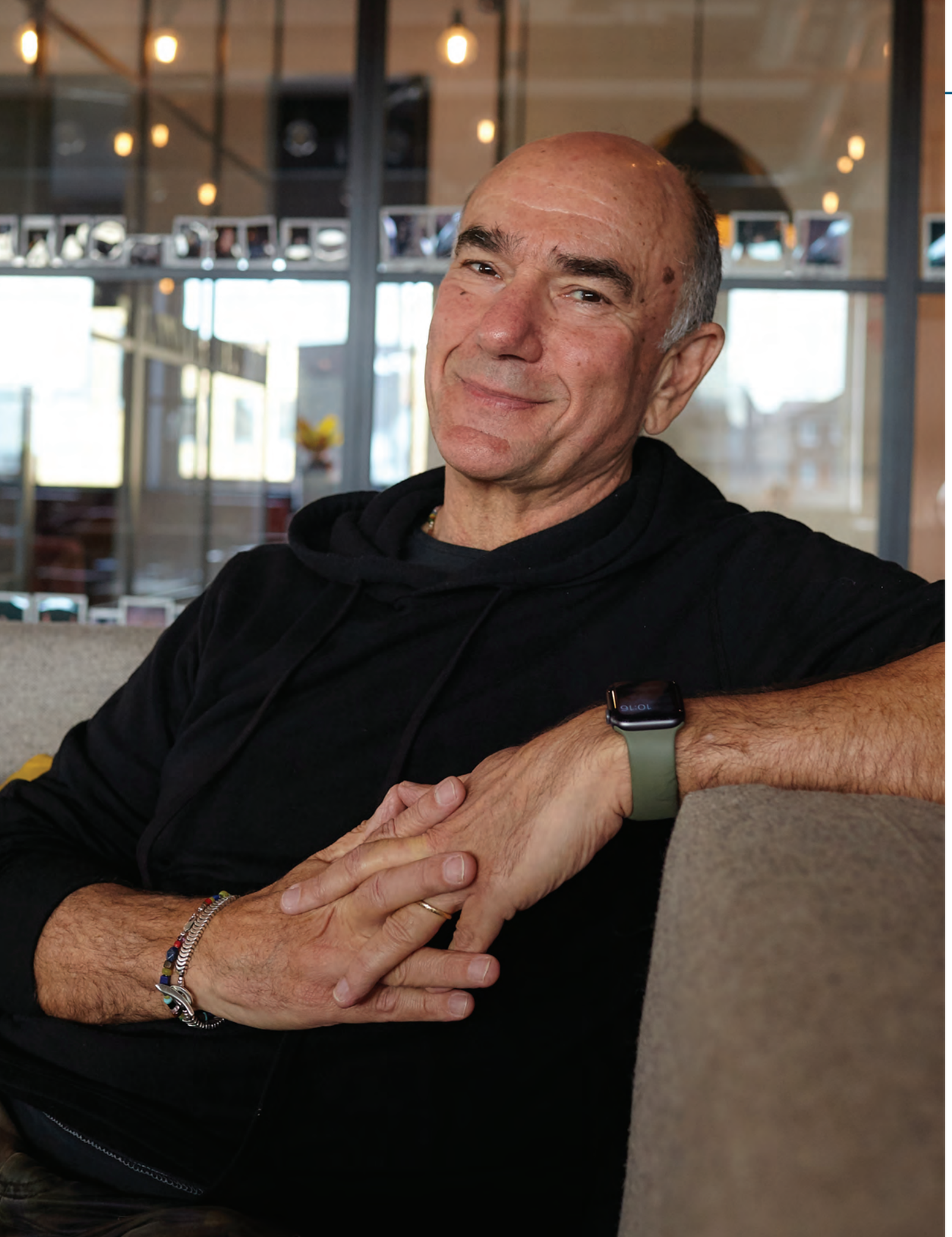
You also risk offending people just because everyone has their own way of speaking. I've offended people and have been offended by people, and I feel like a lot of that weirdness and awkwardness can be cut out by just getting on the phone.

Vidhi Gandhi was interviewed by Rhian Jones

Gandhi worked for 5 years at Ninja Tune, whose artists include Jayda G

Photo: Farah Nosh

"Any A&R who thinks they're the only person on it, they're wrong."



MARCHING TO A DIFFERENT BEAT

Platoon is a distribution and creative services company that's worked with the likes of Mr Eazi, Rex Orange Country and Billie Eilish in the past. Now, bedding in to its relationship with new owner Apple, the London-based company is showcasing its A&R skills by working with a fresh and exciting crop of international artists...

The last time *Music Business UK* was in Platoon's offices to interview its founder, Denzyl Feigelson, was early 2018 – when the exec, who also founded now Kobalt-owned AWAL, eruditely explained to us why he has long believed that artists should, if they can, maintain ownership of their own copyrights.

His view hasn't changed, of course; if anything, in the subsequent two years, it's the major labels – with a raft of shorter-term artist licensing agreements, plus deals like that inked between Taylor Swift and Republic Records for her last LP – that have moved somewhat further towards acceptance of this concept.

Something rather major *has* changed at Platoon since early 2018, however, with Apple fully acquiring the A&R and artist services company at the close of that year. Not that you'd notice much difference in Platoon's London offices in Tileyard, Kings Cross – which remain, just as they did then, immaculate (and rife with gleaming Apple products, naturally).

Another thing that requires a hefty update for you, dear reader: two years ago, when Denzyl told us about the promising teenage kiddo that Platoon had signed up for distribution a few years earlier, then watched depart to Interscope/Darkroom – Billie something-or-other – we barely managed to scrawl her name down in our jotter. Now, it's close to question No.1: How did Platoon end up signing Billie five-Grammys-and-a-cultural-juggernaut-of-an-album Eilish when she was still in school – and how does Feigelson feel about her mega-success since then?

We said *close* to question No.1, because there's plenty more to catch up on with Platoon. Take, for example, its current roster of budding talent, including Grammy-nominated songwriter-turned-artist, Victoria Monét, and hotly-tipped NYC-born rapper, Princess Nokia. There's also Platoon's fast-growing efforts in Africa, not to mention Sagun – a Nepal-based artist who apparently racked up more global streams than any other

Platoon-signed act in 2019. First though, there's that Apple deal to discuss – and why Feigelson feels Steve Jobs' company "really gets the essence of what we do..."

You, personally, and Platoon as a company, have been a friend and affiliate of Apple over many years, but how did an actual acquisition come about and what difference has it made to Platoon?
It was really just a natural progression. We were doing good stuff, we were trying to build better services for artists, and Apple really understood that. As you see, we're still here in Tileyard, we're still Platoon, we're still independent, we've just got a partner who helps us do a much better job.

Is it fair to say Apple was not the first company to approach you about the idea of an acquisition?
That is fair, yes; they were not the first. Certainly the labels had been here – looking more at JVs, because they love JVs. You know, we had such a great run, in terms of A&R, and I think our hearts were in the right place, doing the right thing for artists, going back to Jorja [Smith], Billie [Eilish], Rex OC, Stefflon Don, YEBBA, it was just this great period of allowing artists to incubate freely here.

"We don't tie artists down to [us] owning their rights. We never have; I never have."

Why say yes to Apple and not others? And why avoid the label option?
[Selling a stake to a label] didn't make sense, because artists need to be free. Our job is always to understand the DNA of an artist, because every artist is so uniquely different. No one size fits all, we get that, and so we really don't want to limit their options; we want everything to be possible for them.

Apple really got the essence of what we wanted to do. And if you think about the timing of it, about October 2018, I had investors, I had to go and raise another round, and there was this opportunity… y'know, it takes years to build a company, it took me 18 years to build AWAL to the point where it went to Kobalt.

This [Apple deal] wasn't a big protracted negotiation, it just came together quite magically. And of course I have a history there, going back to working with Steve [Jobs] in 2001. From there on I got to work on pretty much all the music innovations at Apple, from the iPod, through iTunes, and up to Apple Music. So I was part of the family, I think.

The definition of what a record label is has changed massively, and is getting increasingly closer now to the sort of deal Platoon offers. Turning that on its head, do you ever feel like a record label, or is that an offensive term to you?
No, it's not offensive at all. I've been doing this too long not to know that we all exist together, it's an ecosystem that has to work together. But [Platoon] see ourselves as a modern artist services company. We don't tie artists down to owning their rights, we never have; I never have. I have a long history of doing this, and it's just in my nature to try and help an artist stay creatively and economically free. Because once you help an artist build a robust business, a lot starts to happen for them.

Do the more artist-friendly deals that record companies are doing now, including deals that are essentially service deals but on frontline labels – see: Taylor Swift – make you proud of the fact that you have stuck your flag firmly in that ground, with two companies, for a long time?
[That trend] has actually allowed us to innovate even further [with our] artist deals. I would encourage you to talk to Victoria Monét, who is one of our priority artists. She's an amazing artist who's been through the major label system already.

I don't want to comment on the specifics of her deal with us, but she has a very creative deal that allows her to do what she needs to do, with us putting a great campaign together, and putting opportunities in the right place. She wanted creativity to be at the heart of what she does, and it's all coming together for her.

If you look at our current roster of artists, it's Victoria Monét, it's kennedi, who wrote hits for Dua Lipa and for Ariana Grande, and is an amazing artist in her own right. There's also Poo Bear, Justin Bieber's co-writer for years and years, we're putting out his solo project. There's no rhyme or reason in us signing artists who are also great [professional] songwriters, by the way – they have just gravitated towards us. There's also Aaron Smith and Holly Humberstone, both incredibly talented writers and artists. Everyone I can think of here is incredibly talented as a writer *and* as an artist.

We recently refocused ourselves in terms of signings; this year, a light bulb went off. Now we have two distinct ways we work with artists: there's discovery, because we're good at finding artists, being their first partner, giving them that initial support and encouragement; and then we have sort of the Victoria Monéts of the world, who come to us already quite baked and in need of something different. It's nice. And it means we're signing [fewer] artists – very few.

At what sort of rate are you signing artists now?
I think we did one or two a month last year, and that feels about right for us.

How many pages are there in a Platoon contract?
Two. I mean, obviously there's some addendums, but the basic contract is two pages long.

Our contract is short, and we've really worked hard on it over years; it works, it's solid, but there's not too much to it, and it's one of the things that allows us to maintain a creative process.


Victoria Monét


Holly Humberstone


Princess Nokia

What do you mean by that?
There are inherent problems, if you think about a 150 to 300-page contract, that takes time [for an artist to work through]; it could take months. What happens to creativity in that process is interesting to watch, and I've watched it for 30 years.

Because when you meet an artist, they're full of creativity, right? 'I want to do this, I want do that. My first single is this, and then my fourth single is this. I want to do this kind of video, then I want a tour, then I want to do some merchandise, then I want to collaborate with this artist, then I want to go do some live sessions. Oh, and I'm looking at my data and it looks like Germany's my fourth biggest country…' And so on.

You want to maintain that. It might seem trivial, but to me it's not trivial. That's probably the most important thing that we like to do with artists, maintain that light, that spirit. I've noticed in my experience as being a manager of major label artists, that the contractual process [involved in some major deals] actually dims the light a little bit. You're sort of stuck for a while. You don't know what your budget is. You can't go in the studio. You're talking to your lawyers every day. Maybe your A&R who signed you isn't there anymore.

Last time we spoke to you, we discussed some artists, such as Billie Eilish, Rex OC, Stefflon Don and others. Platoon accelerated their careers – helping to take them from being raw to market-ready propositions – and then watched them leave to sign elsewhere. Now, you may have had overrides in the contract and probably did very well out of those examples, but does the Apple acquisition mean it's easier to convince artists like these that you can take their careers further – and they don't have to leave?
It's over a year on from the [Apple] deal, we still have a basic website, we don't solicit, there's no place that people can send us anything, it's all word of mouth, and we've continued that. I don't go out. I don't go networking. I don't go speaking. The goalposts have changed, I can really focus and do a great job. We're really doubling down on space here at Tileyard, we're investing in more space for creativity, including studios, and we're loving that; we love offering that to our artists. What we're seeing out of that is much more collaboration, much more engagement with producers and writers, songwriting workshops, things like that. So this is proving to be really fruitful for us.

To go back to your question, I can tell you that we didn't have overrides for all those artists, because that wasn't our model. So, Steff happily incubated here because she was free to come and go. This was her office. In fact, this was a building site when we were working with Steff. And even when she got her deal from Polydor, they [Steff London's team] came in here and we talked about it, we laid out the papers and said, 'Well, try this,' or, 'Go back to them with this.' So that was the spirit in which those artists were here.

Rex OC was here for several singles and it was obvious that he was going to go places. Billie was here for a period when she just needed to be herself. And we gave her that time, there was nobody pressuring her to do anything, just helping her do what she wanted to do and be who she wanted to be. And then she moved on.

Because of what she's gone on to do and achieve, can you tell us a bit more about how you came to work with her and what that was like? She must have been incredibly young at that time – like, 15?
14.

Can you maybe address the conspiratorial suggestion that keeps lingering, that she wasn't just an exciting organic talent, but actually some kind of industry 'plant' – a project cooked up between you and Apple?
It was honestly a very serendipitous affair. It was us, in our office, finding her on SoundCloud the same day that two people who were working at Apple, on Zane [Lowe]'s team, also sent me the link. That was *Ocean Eyes*, and it was undeniable. And it was only on SoundCloud.

"We found Billie on SoundCloud the same day that two people at Apple sent us the link."

The two guys at Apple said, 'Look, we know the managers and we'd love to hook you up, you should talk to Danny [Rukasin, Eilish's co-manager, alongside Brandon Goodman].' Within seconds we called Danny and he was like, 'I need to get this out, can you help us?'

From there, it was just natural. She had such a wonderful team. The two managers, Brandon and Danny, are incredible. Her mom, Maggie, is incredible. And then, you know, you do what you do. You take her to L.A, you take her into the building and she meets everybody; we introduced her to Zane and Jimmy [Iovine] and whoever was in that day. So, yeah, she got some very early plays at Beats 1, but there was no calculated [plot]... it was just support, but there was support from all kinds of people in the industry, because she was undeniable.

Not from everybody, obviously. There was months and months where labels didn't really pick up on it, the A&R people didn't pick up on us. But, y'know, when any artist gets so big, there's always lots of those stories that come out. Nobody sat in a room and said, 'Okay, together, we're going to make her the biggest star in the world.' We only sat in a room and said, 'How can we support you?'

If she had stayed with Platoon, where do you think her career would be today?
It's an impossible question. I think the timing of it… we were so young in our evolution. When they called me and said, 'Hey, we're going to take a deal with Interscope, with Darkroom', I was like, 'Fantastic, congratulations.' If I was in another world, I could have gone, 'Well, let me match the offer…'

But I wasn't thinking that. I was thinking we've done a great job up to here and now her next evolution is starting and we're going to support that.

Presumably you're impressed and pleased with the job that Interscope and Darkroom have done so far?
Oh completely. And it took a minute too, right? It didn't happen immediately. We've all stayed completely part of the family, you'll see some Gold and Platinum records on our walls there, that they've sent us over time.

I'm completely impressed with the work that they've done. But you've got to hand it to Billie and Finneas, it's a pure case of the music making the difference. They are self-contained and really hardworking. I saw how hard they worked. I mean it was 2017 that they did the first London show, at The Courtyard, for just over 100 people, including six of us [from Platoon].

On a purely artistic level, so let's leave the execs out of this success story, why has Billie connected so big, so wide and so intimately with so many people, do you think?
You have to look at everything about the way she was brought up: her conditioning, her amazing parents, the fact that she was home-schooled, that she could go from her bedroom to Finneas' bedroom and they could talk about... Just the magic of how *Ocean Eyes* came about: she needed to do something for her dance routine and Finneas said, 'Why don't you sing it?'

And if you just look at the craft of their songs. I mean, look at what she's done with *A Time to Die*, you know? They researched, they listened to every other Bond song, and yet they didn't want it to be like any other Bond song. It's gorgeous. And it captures the spirit of Bond. I just think they're the voice of this generation, but she spans more than just her generation. She's one of those that very occasionally comes through, like a Frank Sinatra or Peter Gabriel. She's that good.

If an artist with that level of potential walked in today, post-Apple acquisition, how would it pan out differently?
Keep in mind, in those days we were just a distribution company. But our hearts were in the right place and we wanted to do more, and we probably gave more than a distribution company [usually would]. We gave our experience, and our network, and we probably talked to the managers every day. But our deals were distribution; you're free to leave. That was a *one*-page contract.

I'm not claiming anything; I'm just claiming that at that time we gave an incubation period for those artists, including Billie, but we gave it in our way. Which is, you won't just upload your music


Sagun

and we distribute it and you're just another number; we were never that, we didn't want to be that. We wanted to evolve into where we are now, which is having the resource so that if another Billie walks in here, we will do our utmost to help them build a sustainable, successful business.

And stay with you.
And stay with us. However, we don't want anybody who doesn't want to be here. Which means we need to do an amazing job so that nobody wants to leave. Why wouldn't we?

Obviously this doesn't apply to Billie, which makes this a safe juncture to ask, but does it ever frustrate you, or make you sad, when you are in sync with artist, you're a fan of that artist, but a cheque comes in, you concede that they can't turn it down, so they move on to a label... and then you see the new people in their life making decisions that you know are not the best for their career?
It might be [frustrating], for some people. But I am extremely lucky and thankful that I've been dealt a card that allows me to go, 'It is what it is.' I'm just at a place in the last few years where it's like, I don't have the time and I don't want to stress about anything other than focusing on what's at hand.

I get your question, and it has happened, and it does happen. This may be waxing a little philosophical, but there's no point in me thinking about [that]; it's out of my control. There's nothing I can do; it doesn't help. And [that wisdom] comes with age.

Also, I've said to any artists who have come and gone that I'm always there for you. You're welcome to call me at any time. And they do. And their managers do.

I'm going to flip it a little bit, because that was all about the majors' threat to you. But I would suggest that Platoon might also give label heads a couple of sleepless nights. And yet, when the Apple deal was announced, something that could be seen as increasing your industry weaponry, there seemed to be little out there from Major Label Land but goodwill and congratulations. What's going on there?
Well I think maybe because we're an artist services company, and not a label. And it's also probably quite fair to say that any of our artists are [potential] pickings for them. So, in many ways they're not seeing us as a threat. I haven't had an animosity call from anybody since the deal. I've only had increased interest and nothing but good vibes.

I bumped into everybody at the BRITs and everyone was incredibly friendly: 'I see you're working with Aaron Smith'; 'My A&R people tell me Holly Humberstone's the next big thing.' We're not a threat; we're a creative services company. We're building services here. If anything, they're looking to see: what are they doing? And if they can learn from us, how fantastic is that?

Whilst it might not drift into animosity, do you think your relationship with labels might now change somewhat? You mentioned your artists being 'pickings' for majors – but maybe not *easy* pickings anymore, as you look to hold on to acts longer, rather than accept them moving on as part of life?
That's true, but we're… if you think about it, there are tons of indies out there. There's more than ever before. Anyone now can put their music up through TuneCore, Ditto, DistroKid, Amuse, Stem, CD Baby, you name it. We're just out here doing our thing, and I don't think we're...

But if the next hypothetical big artist signed with Platoon, then stayed with you, and you had the level of success with them that Billie Eilish and Interscope are having right now, the labels would be looking at you going, 'Those bastards!'
Good! That would mean we were doing a great job.

The IFPI published its chart of the Top 10 Global Artists from 2019 the other week. Can you see a day that a Platoon artist is in that league?
Absolutely. I look at those things, and it kind of bothers me, even when you look at just the weekly lists, and it's like, how many indies are on that list? There's not even the big indies, the ones that have been around for a while.

There was a bit of a moment last year – an *MBW* headline, in fact – when Aaron Smith landed in the primary position in the flagship playlists of both Spotify and Apple UK on the same day. Did that send a message that Spotify – and other DSPs – are comfortable with your ownership structure, and happy to promote your artists?
I think the other DSPs have always felt that we were artists first, and they, quite rightly, continue to feel that. We had tremendous support with Princess Nokia. She just released two albums, and they got support and coverage everywhere. Both of them are doing incredibly well, on all DSPs. And the DSPs are all very different, which is fantastic. Some are algorithmically-driven, some are editorially-driven.

We've had the heads of the DSPs come in, we've invited everybody to come here, see what we do, take them into the studios, chat with whoever's in session that day, they get the vibe. As you know, the reason we built this space was to go, 'This is your office, come hang out here, come work here.'

I think the Aaron case was indicative of how it's all going, but we get similar support, constantly, and it's all because of us doing our job. Aaron just popped over [to Platoon HQ] the other day and Holly Humberstone was in the studio, and it was like, 'Oh, I wrote a song once with Holly, do you mind if I pop in?' And the next thing you know, they're working on something together.

> ***"I feel like we're in the spirit of the old Motown, from way back."***

That's how it should be. I feel like we're in the spirit of the old Motown, from way back: there are studios, there's people working together, there's people writing together, there's events coming together.

If you wanted this piece to reveal or reflect one thing about Platoon, what would it be?
That we are signing amazing artists to distribution and services deals. And we continue to grow our services around those artists. We're really happy with how everything has happened since we last spoke; it's allowed us to become a better version of ourselves. And there's lots of... well, actually I'm not telling you, because it's not in our nature to shout about it. Just watch this space – you'll see.

Platoon is based at Tileyard, London. Located in Kings Cross, Tileyard is Europe's largest community of artists, studios and businesses, all revolving around music, ideas, collaboration and creativity. ■

'Any label would be proud of our African roster'

Platoon launched its Cape Town Creative Lab in September 2018. Since then, the company has rapidly upped its efforts across Africa, and, according to Denzyl Feigelson, now has over 60 artists from the continent signed.

"Platoon Africa has an impressive roster; any label would be proud of our African roster," says Feigelson, who began his own career in South Africa working with local artists such as Johnny Clegg and Savuka.

Platoon's modern-day African roster includes signings like Ghana's Kwesi Arthur, Nigeria's Odunsi and, to name two key South African artists, Msaki and Amy Faku.

Adds Feigelson: "We [recently] had a record-breaking album in South Africa with Samthing Soweto [*Isphithiphithi*, 2019]. It was the biggest pre-add [on Apple Music] in the country, bigger than Justin Bieber, bigger than anyone. [Soweto has] done tens of millions of streams in South Africa alone.

"We've now recreated what we have [in London] in Cape Town, with a hub and studios. People there are getting together and writing with each other, hosting songwriting camps, things like that."

ARE THE MAJORS BECOMING INFRASTRUCTURE COMPANIES?

Revenue growth has been back on the music industry agenda for half a decade now. But, argues Mark Mulligan, for the majors it is not a case of remembering how to sell music, or rediscovering an audience; it is about reinventing who they are...

2019 was the fifth successive year of growth for the recorded music market and the positive momentum looks set to continue. The headline revenue figures do not, however, tell one of the more interesting stories that is taking place: the transformation of the major record business models, diversifying away from purely monetizing rights towards becoming infrastructure and services companies.

Now, you may think I am stretching things using the words 'interesting' and 'infrastructure' in the same sentence, but bear with me on this, because the underlying dynamic might just be the most important thing to happen to major label business models in the modern era.

First of all, we need to look at why this shift is happening…

Niche is the New Mainstream

In the not-so-distant past, major record labels created hits and superstars, and they made their money by commercialising those successes over the course of many years. Traditional linear media (i.e. TV and radio) was where you found your fans and because the shows and channels on those platforms were scare commodities, labels with deeper pockets usually got a disproportionate level of access.

In short, the system was geared for major label success. But now that younger audiences are themselves scarce commodities on traditional media, digital platforms are the best bet for marketing new, frontline acts. The crucial difference with digital ad platforms is that access is democratised. Any label of any size, even an independent artist, can run a campaign on Facebook or Google. And, because digital campaigns are targeted, what happens is the rise of smaller but more passionate fanbases rather than bigger artist brands with uneven engagement. This is the era of niche as the new mainstream.

> **"Getting an audience to go deep with an artist is a major challenge."**

The net result for major labels is twofold:

1. Competition for audience attention is unprecedently fierce. Even if you persuade someone to listen to your artist's song, getting them to go deeper with that artist is a huge challenge. Major labels (and indeed many bigger independents) are in the business of building artist brands. In the song economy, an audience often has a relationship with the song rather than the artist.

2. Building mass market superstars is harder to do. Audiences are fragmenting (everywhere, not just in music) and the global and national brand-building tools (TV, radio) that labels relied upon are becoming less useful. So, hits are becoming smaller. There are more of them, but the attention pie is getting cut up into more slices faster than it is growing. Spotify reports in its financial filings that the volume share of streams accounted for by the majors and Merlin combined fell from 85% in 2018 to 82% in 2019. The long tail of labels and artists is growing faster than the head (which is both majors and bigger indies).

Rewiring the Business

During the noughties downturn, the major record labels developed a crucial skillset: they learned how to assimilate disruption into their business models in order to survive, and then thrive. Their scale and operational resources are so much larger than even the bigger independents that they are able to invest in new areas when their competitors most often cannot. In doing so, they are able to maintain their leading positions even when faced with accelerating disruption. Case in point: Universal Music grew its market share in 2019 despite that streaming surge for smaller indies.

The majors recognised some time ago that the independent sector was likely to be buoyed by streaming. More recently they saw the same was going to happen for independent artists. Instead of running from the disruption, the majors embraced it by:

- Launching and acquiring label distribution businesses (with marketing services layered on top)
- Launching independent artist platforms (again, with marketing services)
- Being agile with artist deals (label services, joint ventures, etc.)

Smaller independents are now able to tap into global scale marketing and distribution support in a way that would simply be out of their reach if they were trying to do it themselves. Similarly, artists are able to become major label scale superstars while retaining long-term ownership of their rights. Ironically, the major labels have become growth catalysts for the rise of independence. The definition of independence is changing; it is no longer as clear cut as it once was. Independence for newer labels and artists in the twenties means doing things on your terms but taking advantage of the best possible resources at your disposal.

Universal Music grew its global market share in 2019, thanks to artists like Taylor Swift

Unintended Consequences

This strategy has helped drive major label revenue growth as well as independent growth, a proverbial win-win. But, it does have a series of unintended consequences. The old model was about making superstars and building catalogue value. Now, a growing portion of major label revenue is either distributed (no rights); co-owned rights; or fixed-term licensed rights. While the majors obviously continue to invest in and have success with their core repertoire, this new set of revenue streams is most often about providing infrastructure and services to music that they either do not own or only own for a period. It is a completely different business. The unintended consequence is that the longer term future for the major record companies is as much about becoming services businesses as it is about being record labels.

‘THE MUSIC INDUSTRY MUSTN’T MIX UP THE VERY MAINSTREAM WITH GENUINE BIG MUSIC FANS’

Hannah Overton is the European MD of one of the world’s most successful independent record companies, Secretly Group. Now moving into her ninth year at the firm, Overton discusses her role, the art of deal-making and the future of the independent sector...

Secretly Group is made up of three separate labels – Secretly Canadian, Jagjaguwar and Dead Oceans – and has evolved into publishing and distribution. It has huge acts on its books, such as Bon Iver, Sharon Van Etten and Angel Olsen, as well as an envy-inducing run of new and breaking acts. These include Moses Sumney, Phoebe Bridgers, Bill Fay, Shame, Khruangbin, Unknown Mortal Orchestra, Stella Donnelly and Porridge Radio, as well as returning indie heroes like Slowdive, Dinosaur Jr and Bright Eyes.

Hannah Overton is Managing Director for Europe at Secretly and joined the company in 2012. Growing up in North Yorkshire and then moving to Cheshire, being given an alarm clock radio when she was 10 was her gateway into music. Green Day’s *Dookie* was her first album (and seeing them on that tour was her first concert), but she had her world changed by Belle & Sebastian’s 1996 debut, *Tigermilk*.

While studying physiology at university in Newcastle she also worked in student radio and booked acts for the student union, as well as working as a student rep for IPC titles like *Uncut, NME* and *Melody Maker*. This gave her a rounded knowledge of the music business. “It wasn’t really accidental networking,” she says of her multiple roles. “It was because I was drawn to it. It was the most exciting thing possible.”

After university, she moved to New York for four months, working at HMV on Fifth Avenue just as The Strokes were taking off. “We’d see them around all the time. The East Village was *the* place to hang out.”

Returning to the UK and working back in Cheshire doing data entry at Henkel (“famous for making Pritt Stick and wallpaper paste”) allowed her time to immerse herself in music biographies and write speculative letters to indie labels in London.

“I wrote a letter to Martin Mills telling him how much I loved his labels and talked a little bit about the bands that I loved on the various different labels,” she says. “Apparently Martin loved my letter and asked the HR person to put it to the top of the pile.” That led to a job on reception at Beggars Group, and from there to an A&R job at XL, initially in publishing and then for the label, joining just as The White Stripes were going stratospheric and also seeing the company move up several gears with the signing of Dizzee Rascal and then Adele.

“I wrote a letter to Martin Mills telling him how much I loved his labels.”

While at XL, Overton set up singles label The Blue Rider with colleague Julia Willinger, naming it after Wassily Kandinsky’s painting and his manifesto. “One thing he really hooked onto was the idea of art and music together and being able to see music in art and art in music.”

After almost a decade at XL (“Richard Russell is an incredible creative force and a great person to learn from, but I felt like I’d done my time”), she left to help launch Secretly properly in the UK in 2012.

In bringing Secretly to Europe, what was your role?

There were two people freelancing for Secretly at the time – Mike Holdsworth and Tom Davies. There were a lot of releases and just two people to manage that.

The partners were doing brilliant A&R but, when things were going really well, their hands were being forced and they’d have to license the artists to other labels. [The company] didn’t want to do that anymore. They wanted their own staff to run things. The role was to build up our systems to the point where we could potentially handle a Bon Iver album. That was the unspoken remit. If Bon Iver wants us to do the record worldwide, how can we work towards being able to handle that? We just gradually increased the teams so we had more and more capacity.

Was the UK office the bridgehead into Europe and beyond?

Secretly was very US-focused previously. The partners had a real desire to become a global label, not just an American label. We changed the mindset. So when we were setting up an album, we’d think globally, rather than what works for the US. We changed a couple of distribution set-ups just to make sure that we were being more bullish in the territories. We were able to spend more marketing money and it was able to go a long way.

You came into A&R before online really shifted things. How has the A&R process changed in that time?

It’s still really important for an A&R person to have their networks and their trusted

Bon Iver

sources. There has to be a filter process. You can't be on top of every new artist coming out. There's so much noise. You need to find your system, whether that's talking to promoters, people who have rehearsal rooms or managers. Thankfully, we've also got a great reputation and people will come to us.

True, brilliant A&R is based on an individual's taste. If you look at the greatest record labels in history, from Motown to Island or whoever, they're usually based on a forceful individual's taste. At Secretly we've got four brilliant owners across three great labels. The A&R was driven by those people initially – Darius [Van Arman], who set up Jagjaguwar, Phil [Waldorf], who set up Dead Oceans and Chris and Ben Swanson, who set up Secretly Canadian. I think their vision has followed on.

What kinds of deals are you offering acts?

We don't do anything less than three-album deals because we know it's a long game and you have to spend time working with an artist to develop them. You can't do that in just one album – or even two albums. Working with artists like Sharon Van Etten, Angel Olsen and Moses Sumney, it's obvious that those artists need time and space to develop. It's our job to encourage them and help them realise their own vision whilst also managing their business carefully.

How do you tell acts 'no', or that what they are working on is awful?

I've definitely been bad cop and I've talked to an artist about perhaps the need to do more recording, or to keep working at something. It's very rare that an artist will say, 'I'm going to make a book of poetry,' but the poetry is terrible!

Our A&R is shrewd enough that that we work with a bunch of very talented people. And they trust us as well. They work with us rather than against us.

Sometimes you hear an amazing piece of new music, you meet an artist and you just know personality-wise that perhaps you're not going to get on with them very well. So you move on, because you need to be able to have those frank artistic conversations; you can tell.

That doesn't mean that they're not going to get on with someone else. You have to find someone who you share a vision with.

How do acts push the boundaries of what the label can be and take the company in a slightly different direction?

We love artists who challenge us. I think Moses Sumney is a perfect example of that. We've just released the first part of his new album, *græ: Part 1*. It was his idea to release the album in two parts. He said, 'What if I wanted to do this? Could you do that for me?' There's an artist with incredible self-awareness and he knew he had written a very long, very intense album, and that it would be better digested in two parts.

"You can't be on top of every new artist coming out. There has to be a filter process."

Acts like Foals and The 1975 are also releasing albums in two parts. Is the album still creatively and commercially viable in an age of playlists?

Albums are still incredibly relevant. If artists are going to make truly brilliant work, they need to immerse themselves in a world. The best art isn't going to be a two-minute single that people get instantly. The best art is something that takes time to understand and get your head around. That's the music that will have longevity.

The streaming experience is pushing promiscuity in listening. How can album acts work here?

You have to build the artist's world. You have to make an audience interested in an artist. That's through an artist having many facets to their world, having very strong visuals, having an artist who means something and who stands for something. You have to create momentum to keep driving listeners back to that artist. The casual music fans will only dip in and out. But the 10% of music fans will become interested in your artist if your art is good enough.

Instagram and TikTok are exacerbating that rapid turnover. It's like a twist on the Andy Warhol aphorism: 'In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 seconds.'

It's a problem. I think people do have short attention spans these days. But I think also those people are probably people who don't really have a genuine interest in music; music is a background thing to them, or something that accompanies visuals. We've got to be careful not to mix up the very mainstream with the people who are genuine big music fans. Our job is to take our artists from being niche, credible artists into the mainstream. That takes time.

Diversity is – rightly – a huge issue in the industry today. How is Secretly Group diversifying its roster and staff?

We could talk about the music industry being very traditionally white and male – and probably middle class. If the makeup of our staff was that, then we wouldn't accurately be reflecting our artists. If you don't accurately reflect your artists, then you can't sensitively market and promote them. I believe in having a diverse staff in order that we can work better with our artists.

With so many DIY tools and label services options out there, often meaning acts own their masters, what future does the standard label deal have?

If you're going to be a truly successful artist, you need to have a global campaign. It needs to be worked on by quite a large team of people, in multiple territories, who are communicating well and all at the same time. To do that you need to sign to a record label. I don't really think any of the label services companies perform that very well.

Phoebe Bridgers

Photo: Olof Grind

The smart artists and the smart managers realise that: if you want investment, resources and a team around you, you've got to give something up. Often that will be your master copyrights. We work on a profit-share basis. The artist is our business partner when it comes down to the cold, hard financials. We work very closely with artist and manager to make sure that the business side of things is smart, that we're putting enough resources in to make them successful, but that we're also not overspending.

What do you think about bidding wars?

Some labels will overpay because they need a flagship signing. Or perhaps they haven't signed anything credible for a long time. So they need to really overstretch to have a front-of-shop artist and attract others. That's what majors have done forever. It still goes on. And it goes on with indies as well. [At Secretly] we lay it on the line and we say, 'This is how our business runs. This is how we make money and this is ultimately how we hope you will make money. We're a business team, we work together. Your business is our business. Our business is your business.' If that's the sort of environment they want to be in, they'll sign to us. They have complete artistic freedom, they do whatever they want, we help steer them and guide

Moses Sumney

Photo: Ibra Ake

them. If they just want to go and take a huge advance and find somewhere where perhaps, culturally, it might not be a great fit for them, that's their decision to make.

London was the centre of the music business when you were starting out, but it's increasingly economically unviable for labels and acts to be based here. What could a post-London music industry mean?

It's definitely becoming a difficult city to be creative in. But I think the United Kingdom as a whole is a difficult and more expensive country to be creative in. I feel like fewer young creative people are moving to London. There are other places that people would rather be.

I'd love to see the [British] music industry become a bit more decentralised. If you look at America, it is decentralised. Of course, LA and New York are still big centres, but I work for a company that's based in Bloomington, Indiana! I think that's really wonderful.

That is something AIM has been working really hard on – reaching out to areas outside of London and helping to empower people and encourage them to be entrepreneurs.

"You have to build the artist's world. You have to make an audience interested in an artist."

What have you learned in almost two decades in the music business?

There was a lot of excess and a lot of waste when I joined. I've definitely seen the industry become more strategic. It's really important to be nimble. I think independent companies have the ability to be very nimble and change their systems quite quickly, which gives us a competitive advantage against major labels.

What has the industry itself learned in that time?

That it has to look to the horizon and not look at its own feet. Martin Mills is an incredible example of that. It was his and a few other people's vision to set up AIM and then Merlin. I think they've created something which is essential to the survival of the independent music industry.

I've been part of two ecosystems that haven't really worried too much about what the rest of the industry is doing. Both Beggars and Secretly are constantly looking ahead, at the horizon, for what's coming. Making sure the A&R is good and making sure that the business makes sense, but also keeping an eye on the future. ■

THE UK GOVERNMENT DOES NOT CARE ABOUT THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

Eamonn Forde has watched the denizens of No.10 prevaricate and praise over the years – but he says, especially when it comes to our current PM, asking is not the same as getting for the music business...

One gets the impression that Boris Johnson does not listen to music, or the music industry, very much.

Why should he? It's not like the UK music business is hugely important for the national economy, tourism or the country's export power.

Except… UK Music's *Music By Numbers* report at the end of last year found that music, across all its component industry parts, was worth £5.2bn to the British economy. It employs over 190,000 people in different roles domestically. It also generates £2.7bn a year in export terms.

During the run up to Brexit, the Leave campaigners, Johnson among them, croaking like a mendacious toad, were focusing on fishing as the metonymic British industry that needed saving from the EU. Not to throw shade on fishing – it's dangerous work for terrible pay – a House Of Commons Library report from December 2017 said it employed 24,000 people and contributed £1.4bn to the British economy. In employment terms, fishing creates 12.6% of the jobs and 27% of the revenue music does.

One would think that the music industry and its unified lobbying against Brexit would be listened to. Hollow platitudes fell, and continue to fall, from Johnson's cabinet and government ministers' mouths. Nothing has changed. Here is the bed of uncertainty they have made for the music industry. Now they must lie in it.

Conservative governments have traditionally had little empathy for the music industry. In the eighties, Margaret Thatcher told *Smash Hits* that her favourite song was *(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window?,* which was a hit for Lita Roza a mere three decades earlier, but at least it exposed how much of an anachronism she was. She had previously said, in 1979, that *Two Little Boys* by Rolf Harris was her favourite song. Least said, soonest mended.

"Hollow platitudes fell – and continue to fall – from Johnson's cabinet."

Even David Cameron – the Tommy Cooper of the Brexit process – at least pretended to like The Smiths. At least until Johnny Marr tweeted him in December 2010 about it: 'Stop saying that you like The Smiths, no you don't,' wrote Marr, 'I forbid you.'

Labour had a different tact. In 1964, Harold Wilson was photographed larking with The Beatles and in the eighties, Neil Kinnock was tightly bound to Red Wedge. Tony Blair utterly understood the power of music in courting the youth vote, hence his attempts to woo the stars of Britpop in the mid-nineties.

Boris Johnson, in possibly the greatest act of trolling by a sitting prime minister, claimed in November 2019 that one of his favourite bands was The Clash. Which, given his politics and

his privileged upbringing, is perhaps the most punk thing he will ever do. And that's the point. Music is not something he cares about. Music is either weaponised to irk his enemies or it becomes collateral damage in his ongoing cult of personality.

With Johnson seizing his moment through the braggadocio of 'Get Brexit Done' and his plans to "whack" the deal "in the microwave" at "gas mark four" (a carefully contrived use of faux stupidity), still we were no clearer on the matter. Even when inside Number 10, the bloviation around the Boris Bounce did little to allay fears that, really, nothing was going to be clarified for businesses of any stripe operating in the EU.

The worry now is that UK acts touring in Europe may be subjected to a costly carnet system, while the Home Office has given clarity on what non-UK acts touring in the UK will have to deal with from January next year.

They will need a Tier 5 Temporary Worker – Government Authorised Exchange visa that will cost £244, show they have £1,000 in savings and apply 90 days in advance.

All this will do is pull the rug from under a grassroots and small venue business in the UK that has already been suffering due to gentrification and a local authority system that seems to think live music and clubbing are an inconvenience at best and unspeakable at worst. The Music Venue Trust has been fighting hard to protect these venues, and Lohan Presencer of Ministry Of Sound wrote recently for *MBW* about the need for labels, DSPs and more to support this. It all needs real government support; but it will not get real government support.

Then there's the timing where, after years of lobbying, labels and publishers across Europe got changes made to the European Copyright Directive that took on board at least some of their concerns. In October 2018, the BPI's Ian Moss was being led to believe the British government "would put it into UK law as a matter of course anyway, post-Brexit". The ousting of Theresa May as PM in July 2019 changed that.

Johnson was never going to care about this. "It's a classic EU law to help the rich and powerful, and we should not apply it," he tweeted in March 2019. "It is a good example of how we can take back control." What that 'control' is and how any one 'takes it back' is, of course, utterly unclear. At least he is consistent, ruffling his hair and saying nothing of substance.

The UK has now entered the interim period before the withdrawal process proper. That means the Copyright Directive will not be implemented into law here and rights owners are being left to suck it up. The 'it' being bitter disappointment and a legislative framework that tilts in favour of massive tech companies rather than investors in art.

Tom Kiehl, the acting CEO of UK Music, said in February the British music industry supports a comprehensive free trade agreement between the UK and the other countries in the EU. "Market access is vital," he said. "We need to avoid a cliff-edge at the beginning of next year which could spell disaster for music." Jump cut to the closing scene of *The Italian Job*. Except there's no Michael Caine and no one has a "great idea".

In September 2018, Geoff Taylor of the BPI said a new post-EU future for the British music industry can only happen if "our government supports us by ensuring a strong Brexit deal that enables artists to tour freely, robustly protects music rights, and prevents physical music products being impeded in transit".

Asking and getting, the music business is quickly learning, are two very different things.

There is a haunting photo of Boris Johnson, when mayor of London back in March 2013, conducting a photo shoot at London Bridge with *X Factor* finalist Misha B. In it, he awkwardly holds an acoustic guitar and forms a 'chord' on the top frets, but with a capo on the fifth fret. Here was a foreshadowing of his time in Number 10 – bluster underscored with ignorance.

That photo now stands as a warning from history. Like a dog scrambling around with a bin on its head, setting the kitchen on fire.

Photo: Koca Vehbi / Shutterstock

"At least he is consistent, ruffling his hair and saying nothing of substance."

‘THIS GENERATION OF ARTISTS ARE SAVVY ABOUT THEIR OWN POTENTIAL, RIGHTS AND COMMERCIAL WORTH’

For years, Conrad Withey worked successfully within a major label. Now, he works with the majors, but outside them, at powerful A&R scouting platform Instrumental. And he believes record companies might be better off leaving some elements of A&R to the robots...

Which three global hits best define the transformation of the record business in the last 12 months?

Well, there’s Lil Nas X’s *Old Town Road*, obviously – which built up such a head of steam independently on streaming services, Columbia Records couldn’t resist waving a multi-million dollar cheque to sign the artist in March last year.

Talking of Columbia and mega-cheques, there was also *Roxanne* by Arizona Zervas, which was doing over a million streams a day in the US before the Sony label swooped for its second viral hit-signing of 2019 – for another megabucks fee.

And then, of course, there was/is *Dance Monkey* by Tones and I. Having now surpassed a billion Spotify streams worldwide, the Australian-born phenomenon continues to rack up over four million streams a day on Daniel Ek’s service, after pretty much remaining No.1 on Spotify’s worldwide chart, consistently, for a full five months.

What unites all three of these tracks? Well, there’s a Sony Music connection – all three are signed to the major, with the exception of *Dance Monkey* outside of Australasia, where it’s signed to Elektra/Parlophone/Warner. But they’re also all tracks of which, at some point or other over the past year, you’ve very possibly heard an A&R executive suggest that they “came out of nowhere”.

One person who strongly disagrees with this notion – that viral streaming smashes are born and gestated in a bewildering vacuum obscured from the industry’s gaze – is Conrad Withey, CEO and founder of London-based A&R scouting platform Instrumental. As Withey puts it, Lil Nas X, Tones and I and Arizona Zervas “all came from somewhere” – the industry just happened to be looking in the wrong direction at the time.

That somewhere, Withey points out with a grin, was closely monitored by Instrumental’s algorithm, which flagged all three breakout artists as ‘hot’ months, if not years, before major labels started piling on the zeros in their signing contracts. (Instrumental’s tools flagged Lil Nas X as ‘hot’ in December 2018, three months before Columbia swooped; Tones and I was flagged in March 2019, two months before *Dance Monkey* was even officially released as a single in Australia – let alone achieved its world-conquering run; and Arizona Zervas, amazingly, was flagged as ‘hot’ by Instrumental in December 2017, nearly two full years before Columbia snapped up *Roxanne*.)

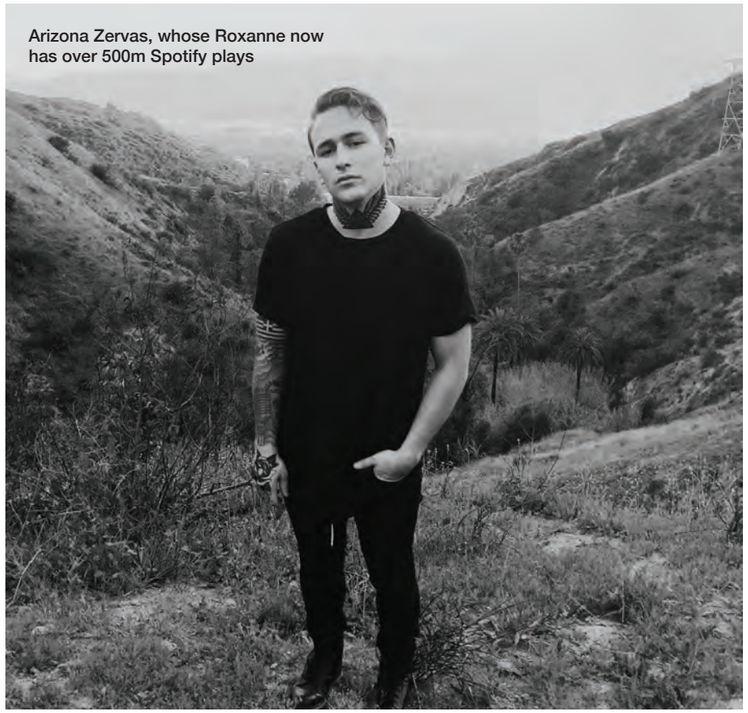
> ***“We’re changing the [A&R] discovery process.”***

With over 40,000 tracks being uploaded to Spotify each day, and some 500 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute, Instrumental monitors an inordinate amount of music. To aid its discovery algorithms, the platform uses data from 30,000 influential Spotify playlists and hundreds of the ‘most engaged’ YouTube upload channels (GRM Daily, World Star Hip Hop etc.) to filter out the artists with the largest potential for making it big on digital services.

As a result of this fishing exercise, Instrumental finds around 5,000 new artists every week with the potential to go on to greater things. It can then match these artists to over 4,000 ‘micro genres’ in order to help labels, managers, agents and others to discover would-be hit artists operating in their specialist fields. To aid those labels further, Instrumental recently launched its own ‘Watchlists’, which it manages internally on behalf of record companies. These Watchlists continually monitor data on artists that have been highlighted as being promising for a specific external A&R team, but when said A&R team deems it ‘too early’ to commit to these acts with a full signing.

Watchlists pull in additional social data about each artist, in addition to Instrumental’s own daily ratings – with one based on growth (Gx points) and one based on online engagement/popularity (Ix points). Any spikes in status automatically generate email and/or text alerts that can be sent to label A&R teams.

Here, Withey – a former President of Warner Music Entertainment – explains how Instrumental is helping record labels at home and abroad find and sign tomorrow’s superstars even earlier, he says, than a pair of ‘golden ears’ might...



Arizona Zervas, whose Roxanne now has over 500m Spotify plays

How is Instrumental able to flag hot artists so early – what is the algorithm looking for?

Over the last two to three years of developing our tech platform we have finessed the discovery process to be able to pinpoint that moment when an artist starts to become meaningful to the wider music industry versus being a self releasing 'enthusiast'. We have a range of criteria across social and streaming data for the initial discovery point but of course very few of those will become 'hot'.

What our algorithm is looking for in order to categorise an artist as hot is a set of growth requirements all happening at the same time. That covers streaming performance including playlisting and follower growth, but also social engagement (broader popularity driven by sharing, subscribing etc). We've found that when all these things happen together in a particular way that is a reliable indicator of emerging and ongoing commercial potential.

Then what matters is tracking whether artists stay hot. Tones and I, for example, was flagged as 'hot' on our platform just seven days after the release of her first single *Johnny Run Away* and when she only had 900 followers on Spotify. I doubt many people would have written a multi-million dollar cheque at that point. But she has stayed 'hot' every week since then, which is exceptional – just as her resulting success has been. Watching her hot streak develop over the following few weeks you would have grown in confidence at signing a deal and that would still have been many weeks before she truly broke out internationally.

You recently launched Instrumental's Watchlists. How do they work? How many artists are added to specific genre lists each week?

Watchlists are simply a response to what clients are telling us they need. The music industry splits into majors and everyone else. Major labels are perfectly equipped to extract value from data and insight platforms like ours, as they are so well resourced – both within each frontline label and centrally. Everyone else, though, is resource and time poor so our Watchlists offer a simple way to ensure you don't miss out on new artists important to your business.

They are populated and run by our team and are typically genre- or country-focused – for example, UK hip-hop, Nashville or Australia Watchlists – and therefore targeted at a more specialist label or regionally focused music business.

We include only relevant emerging, independent artists and build a dedicated Watchlist that any number of subscribers can access. The data is refreshed every day and we rank the artists in the list by two metrics – Gx, our growth score which tracks momentum, and Ix, our Instrumental score, which measures popularity.

Any significant daily changes to an artist's status triggers alerts to the subscribers of those lists, so even when you are super busy you won't miss out on important news. Depending on the genre, we discover, qualify and add between 10-50 new artists every week. This is such a dynamic business now – it's incredible how quickly things change, every single day.

Which labels are you already working with and have you seen any notable success/case studies there in the past two years?

We are working with all three majors in markets across North and South America, Europe and Asia and a wide range of indie labels and non-record businesses.

I wouldn't call out any particular case studies because I think there are so many factors that have to combine to deliver success and our [role] is super specific to the very earliest stage of that journey – but just knowing that we were able to flag up acts like Lil Nas X, Lil Tecca, Tones and I, Arizona Zervas and others, when they had less than 1,000 followers, backs up our confidence that the value is there.

And it isn't just about mainstream pop acts. Those same dynamics can be seen when you drill down and look at specific genres like classical, jazz, Christian, ambient and so on – whatever level your business chooses to engage with new talent the data can help focus that process on prospects that will really drive growth.

Conrad Withey and team celebrate the Christmas 2019 UK No.1 single with Ladbaby, signed to Instrumental's in-house label/ services company, frtyfve

A&R obviously gets a bundle of resources from the music business, but does scouting get enough of that pie?

Such a good question and something of a bugbear of mine. A&R covers a huge number of things – a wide variety of skills, processes, instinct, judgement and analysis. When you look at other industries these things have all become specialised, meaning that someone's entire job is to become world class at each bit. So often in music one person is expected to do it all, which in the modern, streaming-first world just isn't possible.

So that's where we come in – at least for one part of the A&R process. You can let the tech take the strain on the scouting and profiling side to support an individual or a team and be confident that our entire focus will be on doing that bit of the job really well.

As I have mentioned before on *MBW*, the application of machine learning and AI is all about augmenting human processes and Instrumental is committed to being the best in the world at scouting for new artists and letting you get on with the rest of the job.

"Go make sweet music, but with artists who've proved themselves to some degree."

You run your own artist services arm, frtyfve, which now boasts two UK Christmas No.1s [with LadBaby]. How does that work, how do you ensure it's not competitive to your main clients, and how is it performing?

We actually started frtyfve as a way to generate case studies that we could use to demonstrate the value of a data-driven [Instrumental] scouting strategy. We offer artists our services on a single track basis, and use our platform every day to identify prospects. We are looking at super-early stage [signings]. We don't take any long-term rights in artists. so can't get in the way of any of [Instrumental's] clients wanting to sign an act.

The services arm is going really well and we are expanding this year. And yes, two UK Christmas No.1s under our belt proves what's possible. We've loved working with LadBaby and raising lots of money for the Trussell Trust, but those projects are something of an outlier versus the day to day on frtyfve. That

said, we wanted to work with Mark and Rox because their growth and engagement data was undeniable and we felt we could convert that into sales – which we did!

Don't Instrumental's tools take the humanism and romanticism out of the A&R process?
Imagine you are a label scout or A&R manager. Your job is to find trending tracks and talent from amongst the 40,000 new releases everyday. You have nothing to help you. So the only way to succeed in your job is to go through those manually. Or just 'hit and hope' you spot something that saves your job. That doesn't sound very romantic. That's the bit we help with.

We may be changing the discovery process, but everything after that is as romantic as ever.

In fact, by leaving us to do the scouting you can get on with the romantic bit. The human-to-human, relationship-based, creative partnership. Go make sweet music, but do so with artists who've already proved themselves to some degree.

Do you still meet resistance in the industry based on those who dismiss you as being on the wrong side of 'gut vs. data'?
All the time. My favourite email was from a metal label head in the US who said, 'With respect, I like going to dirty bars, drinking beer and finding live bands – so you can fuck off.'

Fair enough, I love that attitude, but we *are* seeing that less and less. We have been described as 'Moneyball For Music' before in the *FT* and I do often compare the journey we are on to the way the use of data was adopted in sport.

Take Opta, for example. They are now a dominant force in football and their xG metric which measures a forward's underlying performance and is used across the board – from Premier League clubs, their management, coaches and scouts, to TV pundits on *Match of The Day*. But it took a long time to get there; Opta started up in 1996 and xG was first mentioned in analysis on *MOTD* in 2017. We know we have to be in this for the long run, because people take time to adjust their ways of working. But it will happen.

What did you learn during your time at Warner that has proven most valuable as you build out Instrumental?
When I was at Warner I ran Warner Music Entertainment and our whole remit was counter programming to the other frontline labels [Atlantic, Parlophone and WBR]. We looked for artists or music opportunities that we could develop that didn't need radio to break and deliver a return on investment.

That typically meant I was drawn to signings where the creator already had a fanbase in place or we were targeting an audience that was under-served. That led to successful projects like Hugh Laurie's blues albums, or The Overtones. No-one thought [such projects] were going to work, but I could see an engaged audience ready to consume new music.

I guess it was that mindset that led me to be fascinated first with YouTube and then other platforms like Spotify and TikTok, where audiences gather, create, discover and share – which leads you to opportunities you'd never thought about.

> ***"We have been described as Moneyball For Music."***

I've always hated doing stuff just because other people are having success with something – I'm much happier swimming against the tide.

Instrumental raised $4m in growth capital in 2018. What has that money mainly been invested in?
It's pretty much all been about investing in data, data science and engineering. We've bet on this being a long-term shift in the music industry and we continue to develop products and services that can help other businesses navigate the increasingly complex environment.

Our focus in 2020 is on developing more and more robust metrics and prediction capabilities – inspired by the likes of Opta – and looking to reshape how we measure success in this industry.

It's interesting to see you launch 'at a glance' points via Ix and Gx. What's the purpose/ambition of these metrics?
It's very much in line with our goal of getting clients to the information that matters to them *today*. These indexes help point out meaningful change you should know about – whether that's for an artist who is completely new to you or for an artist prospect you've been keeping an eye on for some time.

We are serving up notifications driven by our Ix and Gx scores via mobile texts and will launch an app this year because this is now a 24/7 proposition. Rarely are clients actually sat at their desktops; it's a mobile-first world.

The independent artist sector is booming according to recent stats. Is that something you're recognising – and what can the major labels do about it?
It really is and I think what is amazing is the speed with which an independent artist can be catapulted from obscurity to the mainstream nowadays. It's almost happening in hours – let alone days or weeks. And the scale is incredible. We find around 5,000 new quality artists a week from the self-releasing space.

I do think there will be some interesting developments in how majors, indie labels and other music businesses work with this generation of talent, because they are completely different, culturally, to what came before. They are savvy about their own potential, rights and commercial worth and, crucially, they've often done the heavy lifting before they even start conversations with partners. That changes the dynamic completely. You really have to come with your 'A' game and demonstrate clearly the value you can add. ■

Lil Nas X teamed up with Billy Ray Cyrus to dominate the Billboard Hot 100 – but Instrumental flagged him as 'hot' months before he inked a deal with Columbia Records

Photo: Derek Keogh / Shutterstock.com

NOBODY CARES ABOUT YOUR PLAYLIST BRAND

Kieron Donoghue, who launched Warner's flagship global playlist brand, Topsify, has some home truths to get off his chest...

Some may say the headline above is a bit rich, especially considering I set up a playlist brand and sold it to a major label – but hear me out.

Quite often I get asked by people and companies interested in creating an audience on streaming platforms like Spotify, Apple Music and YouTube etc. if they should launch their own playlist brand.

They get excited by the prospect of becoming a powerful playlist brand with a cool quirky name (using no vowels, of course). They want to cover all of the main music genres, using sexy artwork covers displaying their unique 'brand identity'. They dream of attracting millions of followers who they think will stream their playlists blindly, consuming every song served to them simply because it's wrapped up in a cool playlist brand. Great. Problem is, literally nobody cares.

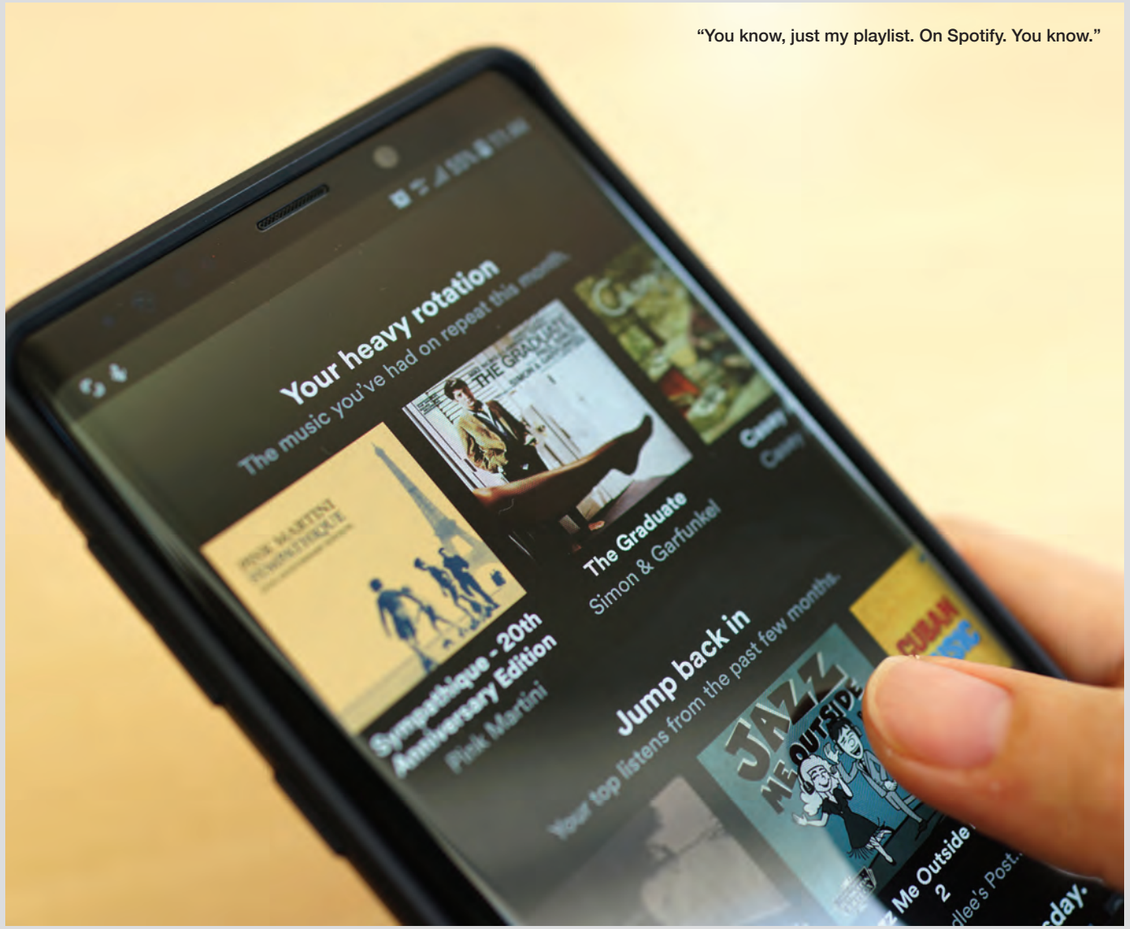
If you stop your average Spotify user in the street and ask them what their favourite playlist brand is on the platform, they'll just stare at you blankly. Ask them to name *any* playlist brand in the world, and they won't have a clue as to what you're talking about. You can even go one step further and ask them what their favourite playlist of all time is. Again, they won't have a clue.

Sometimes, if a friend of mine tells me that they like a particular song or artist, I ask them where they heard it. 'On my Spotify', is the most common answer. If I ask what playlist they heard it on, or how they came across it, they have no idea. 'It was on my playlist', they say. Okay, what playlist? 'You know, just my playlist. On Spotify. You know.'

They don't know or care where their music comes from – which is why it's incredibly hard even for an artist to break through the noise and become known, never mind a playlist brand.

Yes, the major labels operate their own playlist brands, but they have to in order to remain competitive. They need somewhere to seed their songs to find an audience as it's too risky relying solely on editorial support or algorithms.

Other notable exceptions of streaming playlist brands that people actually know of are compilation brands that have managed to successfully migrate over to streaming platforms (examples such as Ministry of Sound and Now That's What I Call Music are obvious – but let's not forget that they have been around for decades and have become household names due to longevity and millions of dollars of advertising spend. They weren't created especially for streaming platforms, they were brands already that are now on streaming platforms.)



Even the likes of Spotify and Apple Music are spending their marketing dollars on promoting specific major playlists, rather than a collection of playlists.

Spotify has created events and huge campaigns around some of their biggest playlists like Rap Caviar, Viva Latino and Hot Country. Apple Music has done similar things with their flagship dance playlist, danceXL and their Agenda playlist in the UK, which celebrates black music culture. And if you ever find yourself in Times Square in New York you'll see examples of flagship playlists from all of the streaming platforms fighting for their share of space on the giant TV screens.

> **"The average Spotify user has no idea what their favourite playlist is."**

So, my advice is never to focus on a playlist's *brand*, but rather on simply growing the audience of a unique playlist or two. Try to fill the gaps – in other words, look to create playlists that the streaming platforms don't already have. Nobody needs yet another 'top hits' or 'workout' playlist. Try to differentiate yourself from the existing editorial playlists using artwork that's different.

For example: playlist artwork doesn't have to be square. Mind. Blown.

‘SONGS AND CHORUSES MAKE THE WORLD GO AROUND’

Markell Casey’s career started brightly in the UK at Warner and then Virgin Records – but since moving to Los Angeles with Pulse, he’s creatively flying...

Where’s the best place to find great artists these days? SoundCloud? TikTok? Spotify? Try your local organic grocery store.

Markell Casey, the London-born, L.A-based A&R exec met Mercury Prize winner James Blake at his local Erewhon in Los Angeles while doing his weekly shop last year. The pair hit it off, and Casey subsequently signed Blake to an exclusive global publishing deal at Pulse Music Group. “We just started talking about music and what he wants to be doing,” says Casey, Senior Director, Creative at Pulse, of their chance meeting in LA. “I was just like, ‘Man, I really, really love your work.’ It felt like a natural fit.”

Since joining Pulse in 2016, in addition to Blake, Casey has signed and works with the likes of producers Whethan, Jai Wolf, Lido, Nigerian-born rising star Kah-Lo and New York-based artist and in-demand songwriter YEBBA.

YEBBA (real name Abbey Smith) has worked with some of the world’s biggest stars – from Mark Ronson and Ed Sheeran, to Sam Smith, Robert Glasper and even A Tribe called Quest. She also featured on the Stormzy track, *Don’t Forget to Breathe (Interlude)* from his and second album (and second No.1 UK album) *Heavy Is the Head*.

“Being in the studio with YEBBA and just watching and hearing some of her stuff, you are literally moved close to tears,” says Casey. “It's unbelievably good. I consider her to be anointed, because you can't teach that. You either are gifted, or you’re not, and she is.”

Casey’s passion for music started as a child growing up in Ealing, West London. He tells *MBUK* that he taught himself how to play piano from earwigging on his brother’s lessons. “My parents couldn't afford for us both to have lessons, so I would just


James Blake

Wheathan

sort of stand outside the room and listen," he remembers. "After his lesson I'd sit down and try to replay what I'd heard.

"I can deconstruct chords now", he continues. "I'll just take one note at a time, when you take a root note and then build between the intervals, a third and a fifth and then somehow just get the chords together. When you're doing that over a period of time, you end up becoming really quick. So yeah, I was really good at [piano] that and then slowly picked up drums."

Casey explains that a pivotal moment in his music career came when he was in sixth form. He was introduced to someone at Prince Charles' youth charity, The Prince's Trust. Following a Prince's Trust-organised coaching weekend for young musicians, Casey was introduced to Uche Uchendu, who at the time worked as a producer at BBC Radio 1. Uchendu became a mentor to Casey, showing him "how the music business works" and particularly how A&R works.

"I remember he was like, 'You're doing the job, but you just don't know it yet', says Casey. "I just started making music; I'd always send Uche demos and he'd always come back to me with feedback. To this day we're still good friends. Eventually, many years later in our friendship, he ended up helping me to get a job, through the Prince's Trust.

"They hit me up and they said, 'Look, we know you've graduated university', and I was helping them out informally on a couple of things, just turning up and volunteering for events they were putting on. They said, 'There's a role going at Warners; you'd have to work as a licensing intern.' And I thought, 'All right, safe. I'll do that.'"

Around the same time, Casey had done a few songwriting sessions with one of his friends from uni, singer/songwriter Sinéad Harnett, in Chalk Farm at the Roundhouse. "They had music studios where you would literally pay £1 for an hour. It was so sick," says Casey. "We wrote a couple of tunes and then we put out a video on YouTube and it just went nuts.

"I remember one day waking up, while I was still living in my parents' house, and I [saw] these mad messages from Wiley and all these people saying, 'How do you know this girl? Who is she?' I thought I was being pranked, but then A&R people started hitting me up."

This was to be the beginning of an already distinguished A&R career that, in the UK, took Casey from Warner Music Group to Virgin Records (where he signed MNEK, Chvrches and others). Casey relocated to Los Angeles in 2016 to join Pulse – itself recently acquired by Concord in a nine-figure deal – and his career now appears resolutely on the up-and-up...

You started at Warner in 2011 as an intern. What was it like working there?

I quickly realized that I wasn't going to be a licensing intern forever. Then Dan Chalmers [then head of Rhino and ADA], was like, 'You need to go upstairs and talk to Christian [Tattersfield, then UK President] because I think you're being wasted here.' I thought, 'Wow, that's a pretty big statement.'

So I went up there and I said to Christian, 'Apparently I'll be really good at [A&R].' And he was like, 'Well, start joining me in our meetings.' When I was younger I was very confident, somewhat too confident for my own good! I walked into that A&R meeting and I basically started telling everyone what's what.

I don't think many people liked it, looking back, but Christian really liked it. He was like, 'You should have an opinion; it's down to you to prove that your opinion is based on fact.' So he really encouraged me to try and sign artists. It was a mad, mad time.

Where do you think that confidence came from?

It stems from my dad. He was very confident and really aware of who he is in the world. My dad, when I was growing up, was a part-time preacher and he really instilled the values of your [importance] in the world, but also that you're not the most important person in the world; you have to help people. He had a corporate job that he quit and then retrained to become a social worker, because that's something that he fully, passionately believed in doing.

Seeing that, someone going from a pretty cushy corporate job to helping families, has a profound effect on you. Some family friends were like, 'Why are you doing this now? You're going to lose money.' And he was just like, 'No, this is the right thing to do.' You have to have a sense of conviction about what you do in your life.

I felt like I walked into a bit of a boys' club when I joined Warners. They were all very nice, but you definitely had to hold your ground. [Luckily] for me, I did public speaking when I was in high school. When I walked into Warners, I was just like, 'Well, I'm not going to be intimidated by anyone here, because I belong here, maybe more so than some others here.' I was pretty vocal, and thankfully Christian was really supportive and just encouraged me to keep going.

"When I was younger, I was very confident, too confident for my own good."

After Warner you went to Virgin Records UK as an A&R scout. Were you specifically looking for a new job elsewhere?

I had been trying to sign a couple of artists when I was at Warners and I was close to those artists, because when you make music you know the artist's language. You can really talk to them in a way that maybe most people in the business can't. I'd met the Haim girls at South by Southwest. I probably wouldn't have been allowed, but I just said, 'I'm booking my tickets. I know you guys are not going to pay for it, but I'm going.'

I went and I met the girls with [manager] Jon Lieberberg. We really got on and they were sound. Wild Belle was another band I was trying to sign. Mahalia as well, who I was introduced to by Uche. I'd met Mahalia's parents, and her manager at the time, Matt Ross, and it was just a confluence of a lot of these things.

I was around and I had the connection to the artists. Christian basically said to me, 'Look, the reality is, you're not going to be able to sign these artists here, so why don't you go and talk to Max Lousada at Atlantic, because I think you'd have a better chance there.' But things just didn't align. I had a really amazing meeting with Max; he's just phenomenal, that guy. He said, 'Look, I don't have the head count at the moment, but hopefully we can work it out.'

Via Uche, I had met [then-Virgin EMI A&R exec] Nick Burgess four or six months prior. He was just like, 'Oh, Uche keeps talking about you, I'm looking to hire someone. Why don't you come in for a meeting?' I was like, 'Okay, sure.' I had a list of artists I was looking to sign and I didn't think he liked that! I went in again [a second time] and [Nick] explained, 'Look, I think the first time we met it probably wasn't the best meeting.' [Then] we really hit it off, because [it turned out] a lot of the artists that I wanted to sign, Virgin at the time were trying to sign as well.

They didn't have an A&R scout, so it just all aligned and they offered me a job. I told Christian I'm going to do this. He gave me some incredible advice and wrote me an amazing letter of recommendation and off I went.

What advice did Christian give you?

He came up under Roger Ames and Roger is arguably one of the smartest people in the music business. He said to me, 'Right, you have to ensure that you have ownership in your work, whatever that looks like. That's a very important component of how you can control the creative process.' And he said, 'It's not going to be easy. No one's going to hand it to you on a plate. You have to earn it. You have to make sure you tell this to your lawyer.' I followed his advice, and he was right – it wasn't easy. I don't think [the request] was well received by Nick and Miles [Leonard] at the time. But I also think they liked the fact that I came in there with just a very clear [idea] of what's important to me. They were like, 'Have some success first and we can maybe talk about that.' All I can say is, looking back on it, Christian was right.

While you were at Virgin, you signed Chvrches, MNEK, Circa Waves, Kali Uchis. What's striking about that list of signings is the diversity of the genres. How important is it for the longevity of an A&R executive's career to be able to spot talent across a range of genres?

You have to develop your skillset whatever you do in life. I grew up listening to jazz and gospel music for starters. That was my foundation, and it's something I always go back to. But as you get older, you start being exposed to different kinds of music. And for me it was hip-hop very early on. When I was about 10 or 11 I knew all the verses to Biggie songs. And then alternative music came in. Like Friendly Fires, I'd listen to their tunes and I'd just be like, 'Shit, this is mad.' All the stuff Paul Epworth was doing with them, just hearing that piqued my interest in electronic music and then I started listening to Goldfrapp.


YEBBA

When I heard the Chvrches demos, we had been going back and forth on it in an A&R meeting and I remember someone saying to me, 'Do you actually really like this?' Which was such a weird question, because I was like, 'Shit, yeah, someone *should* actually be asking that question.'

Is that a question that's often asked in A&R meetings?
I don't hear that question being asked as often as I would like it to be asked. It depends on the company and the team. It's a question that I definitely ask, because I know what I'm good at and I know what I'm good at spotting. This question has been asked for many years: should you just sign people who you like, or is [it just about] a business component? I may be wrong here, but I do think you should only sign music that you like, because you probably know what to do with it. That passion, that extra 10%, goes a long way in this business.

How did the opportunity come about to move to Los Angeles?
I had been at Virgin for three years. My deal was coming up and we were in conversations about extending it for three more years. The conversation that I had with Christian all those years ago was still in the back of my mind. At the time, I really wanted to include publishing in what I did. I had some preliminary conversations with a few people about funding something that I would then run in conjunction with my job at Virgin, because to me that didn't seem like a conflict.

Because of my background working in studios, I would come across lots of songs – and I love songs. Songs and choruses make the world go around. I thought, 'I should be doing that.' I had several conversations about that [with Virgin] and it was looking like that wasn't necessarily going to pan out the way I wanted it to. I mentioned my frustrations to a lawyer friend of mine and unbeknownst to me he told Maria Egan, [President and Head of Creative] at Pulse Music Publishing.

She just got in touch and said, 'I hear you're looking for opportunities, why don't you come to LA for a weekend?' I thought, 'This is pretty wild.' But I also thought, 'Why not?' And I did. I met Maria and I met [Pulse co-CEO] Scott [Cutler] and the way that they went about stuff was impressive. This is the difference between American and British mentalities in business. For them, 'no' wasn't really a part of the conversation. It was like, 'If it can't work, it can't work, but let's try to figure out how we can do stuff.' That really impressed me.

We worked out a situation where everything was just easy. It was almost a revelation really, to think that you can have a conversation with someone and then three or four days later, it's agreed and you move onto the next thing. There were many factors of why I left, but it had gotten to a point where living in London was just too much of a drag for me. Waking up every day with grey skies wasn't pleasant or enjoyable. And also seeing some of my friends at Future Classic in Australia working really hard but also having a [pleasant] life seemed quite appealing. Also, professionally, it seemed a bit nuts to turn down [the opportunity] to work in the biggest music market in the world, to stay in a place that I wasn't really loving. So yeah, it felt good to do it and I'm happy I did it.

What does success look like to you?
Success is doing inspiring work. There's obviously a professional element of it in terms of recognition from peers and there's always a financial component of it. But I go back to my dad's decision to do what he did; it's about doing meaningful work.

That is success in its truest sense. Don't get me wrong, I love being in L.A. and getting to do what I do with the incredible clients that I get to work with, but when I left London, I made a promise to myself that I wouldn't let my work become my identity.

When I was working at Virgin, and this is no one's fault, it was purely me not being aware that this is not a good thing, but my [sense of] value was being tied up in my work and my identity, and that's something that I promised myself would never be the case again. I enjoy my work. I love it, and I feel like I'm really driving ahead, but success is not necessarily tied to my job as such. It's so much more. It's about how impactful my work is being to the people around me and the world in general.

> ***"That passion, that extra 10%, goes a long way in this business."***

Last year Pulse Music Group c-founder Scott Cutler told MBW of you that 'after he signed YEBBA, if he wants to sign something, we just get it done'. That statement is very telling about the creative freedom that you seem to have at Pulse. Would you agree with that?
Oh yeah, absolutely. For starters, I don't really sign a lot of people. Signing YEBBA was a process. She's brilliant and she takes her time in allowing you to be in the inner circle. It was a 15 month process from first meeting her to actually starting to work together formally. But the fact that [Pulse] backed me all the way on that, to me, was really, really incredible. It's not something that I will forget anytime soon.

With some people, they probably would not have been so accommodating. Like, 'Well, why is it taking so long?' Again, Scott and Josh, having been creative, know that sometimes things can just take a little bit longer than you want them to and you just have to go after extremely talented people, because in the end they will do something [great].

YEBBA is widely tipped to become a global star in the next few years. How did you meet her?
My friend had a blog and she posted about the song that [YEBBA] had done, *My Mind*, at a Sofar Sounds performance. The minute I saw that, everything we were talking about earlier – about the voice and the voice cutting through like a hot knife with butter, it was that moment for me. It was very emotional. I was moved.

So I thought, 'Well, I guess I'm going to New York,' where she was [based]. I just emailed her managers and said, 'Hey, I really, really think she's exceptional and I'd love to meet and find out more.' They were very nice. They wrote back and were like, 'Thank you so much for the interest, but we're really not taking any meetings right now.'

I was actually heading to New York to meet with Jai Wolf, who I was trying to sign as well. So I said to them, 'Well, no problem. I'm going to be in New York in two weeks anyway because I actually have a business thing to attend.' So they were like, 'Okay, cool.' And I said, 'Let's meet up.'

So we met up and the manager, Ross, loves jazz music, so we really connected on that. I said to him, 'Look, I know she doesn't want to meet anyone, but in the event that she changes her mind, please let me know.' And for some reason that I can't quite understand now, she said she wanted to meet me.

The minute we met I was just like, 'This person is special – I feel like you're my person and I'm your person.' And then, yeah, 15 months later we got there! But it was just about being respectful and listening to what she wanted to do and helping to facilitate really, without any of the, 'Well I did this for you so now you owe me and the company…' It was never any of that.

Why would a songwriter want to sign with Pulse?
There are a lot of very good publishing companies around. But the thing that differentiates us from a lot of other companies is that, imagine you're a parent and you have 12 kids. You love all your kids, all 12 of them, you really do. But the reality is, you are a parent and you have so many kids and you have all the other pressures of life. So I think out of those 12 kids, one or two may end up getting more attention than the others.

At Pulse, we don't have a massive roster of clients; that's by choice. We really are trying to be mindful about who we work with, because we realise there are only so many hours in the day and there's only so much you can do. You have to make sure that you have manageable rosters.

A few people who have been in the main system, what happens is they come to Pulse and they see that it's like family, it's like a base, it's a studio and office complex. Everyone has a smile on their face, people greet you and welcome you. You feel like you're part of a community. ■

‘THERE’S STILL ARTISTS COMING THROUGH WHO HAVE THE ABILITY TO SELL 50,000 TICKETS’

Here, veteran live music business executive and AEG’s European Festivals CEO, Jim King, discusses his impressive career rise – and how he played a key role in AEG winning (and recently renewing) the contract to promote concerts in Hyde Park…

Named by AEG Presents as CEO of its new European Festivals division last summer, Jim King oversees all aspects of the promoter’s talent and operations for its portfolio of festivals.

Those events include the 65,000 capacity BST Hyde Park, with Kendrick Lamar, Post Malone, Taylor Swift, Duran Duran, Pearl Jam and Little Mix booked to headline this year; Victoria Park’s multi-weekend All Points East; and Paris’s Rock en Seine, where Rage Against Machine top this year’s bill.

Like a lot of good UK music business career stories that started in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, King’s own path to the industry began at an acid house party.

“When I was 16 and at school, in 1988, a friend and I rented a room; a social club. My friend DJ’d, and we sold tickets for £2.50 each,” he recalls. “Another friend’s dad was a printer so we had a handwritten flyer and ticket,” he continues.

“It sold out. It was a great party. We counted out about £400 between the two of us in coins at the end of the night on my mum’s kitchen table. That was the first ticketed show I ever did.” From there, King went to study at Liverpool Business School in 1990 and became good friends with James Barton, “a promoter and DJ around the club scene” in the city.

Barton was co-founder (along with Darren Hughes) of the Cream nightclub, which evolved into the Creamfields festival in 1998, with Cream Holdings eventually selling in 2012 to Live Nation for nearly £14m. “Cream went on this stratospheric rise,” says King.

“In 1998 we were asked if we wanted to do a dance music festival by The Mean Fiddler. The introduction came from a good friend of ours, [concert promoter] John Reynolds who sadly passed away last year. “We knew John from [club night] POD in Dublin. He introduced us to Vince Power and Melvin Benn, and we did the first Creamfields in 1998 down in the Matterley Bowl.

“We were down from Liverpool every week at The Mean Fiddler’s offices in Harlesden, working with Melvin and Vince and their team; some of The Mean Fiddler staff actually work at AEG now. I got bitten by the bug there.”

King worked with Cream until 2004 and left to start his own company, Loud Sound, which produced a number of UK festivals including Creamfields (before its acquisition by Live Nation), as well as Rob Da Bank’s Bestival, Victoria Park’s previous resident Field Day, Fatboy Slim’s infamous early-to-mid-2000s Brighton beach parties and Rockness, which ran from 2006 to 2013.

“Norman [Cook], Garry [Blackburn], his manager, and David Levy came up with this idea of doing a show [on Brighton Beach] on New Years’ Day,” says King.

“It sounded like a great idea and it was a really good party but it was so cold and the rain was pretty bad. Then we did one in the summer. “Around the same time as that, they had been asked to do a show up at Loch Ness by two guys who lived up there, Robert Hicks and Joe Gibbs. Joe still runs his own festival, called [The] Belladrum [Tartan Heart Festival]. So we started Rockness. We came up with the name after about 10 seconds.”

He adds: “We did this great show in the first year with Fatboy Slim and it sold out. It was really going to be a one-off. It was the most amazing site, still to this day. We were just trying to do our best not to mess it up too badly, but we had some great shows there: Daft Punk and Chemical Brothers and The Strokes and Biffy Clyro and many other great artists. That led me to AEG.”

Here, King recalls joining AEG, explains the challenges of running some of Europe’s biggest outdoor concerts, and shares his views on the state of the live music business in the UK…

Take us back to when you first started working at AEG and the years that followed, including winning the Hyde Park contract in 2012…

We sold half of [Rockness] to AEG and then later the whole thing, and that led me into working here now. I worked here for three years or so, just doing touring, plus we had some shows in Victoria Park because Loud Sound was producing Field Day. So we knew the park [setup] very well. We then did a number of shows in Victoria Park.

Then in about 2011, Jay Marciano had come in to run AEG in Europe. Jay had this incredible career and had just come from Madison Square Garden to run AEG in Europe; I met him at the office soon after he arrived. At the same time the tender had just come out for Hyde Park [previously claimed by Live Nation].

I had been to many shows there over the years, some amazing concerts, but had never thought the event experience itself was that great. There was certainly great respect given everybody who’d played there – from the Stones to Queen and everybody else. It just required a rethink. That’s not to criticize anybody else but when the same thing’s been running for a long time it is sometimes just time for a change.

“We knew we had to fix [the sound in Hyde Park] because of all the press.”

I felt that there was an opportunity to re-imagine what that could be. It was just fortuitous for me that when I said to Jay, ‘I think the company should have a look at this,’ he’d just been [to Hyde Park] to see Bruce Springsteen that year, and said, ‘I feel the same, that we could do something really great with this.’

That started my relationship with Jay. And he and I over several months put together this plan and got things to a point where he said, ‘Okay let’s go for it’.

Then, together with the team of people you see out there [in the AEG office] we put together this very detailed tender all about improving the experience for the artists and the fans. We felt very fortunate to win such a great contract, and that was eight years ago.

AEG recently won the tender for Hyde Park again – beating Live Nation to the contract. Obviously one of the challenges of staging an inner-city outdoor event is sound: in 2012, Blur had that problem, where the sound at Hyde Park was reportedly not loud enough. Yet when The Rolling Stones played in Hyde Park in 2013, after AEG took over, you said that it was the loudest show the space had ever seen. What changed?

Well, we did a ton of work. These things don’t happen by chance in any industry and acoustics is a science. We knew we needed to fix it because of all the negative press that was coming out. In 2012, [there were] a lot of quotes, even from the previous operator, [saying] that the park wasn’t fit for purpose anymore. I never really understood why anybody would say that; I felt that was being lazy. We brought in some really talented people who had experience working in the park, as well as acoustic consultants, Vanguardia.

A bunch of positive things came out of that process. [To test AEG’s ideas], we actually recreated Hyde Park in the grounds of a country estate and put the stage hangs in the exact location where they would go in.

Corresponding to that we put in noise monitoring points close to where the Grosvenor Hotel on Park Lane and what used to be the Odeon Cinema on Marble Arch [would be in the real Hyde Park].

We installed them onto cranes so they were the exact correlated distance and location and height and everything as it was in Hyde Park. [The sound] is probably one of the most positive aspects of what we’ve been able to deliver there. Everything else can be great.

We can all walk around and go, ‘Oh that creative looks really nice and that bar and that restaurant is really a lovely idea and we love the fact the stage does this,’ but if it’s a poor audio experience then no-one’s going to be happy. And so the experience of the overall day plummets for fans and the artists.

Hyde Park has become such an iconic

series of events on the British summer festival calendar. How challenging is it to maintain, in terms of booking the biggest headliners you can?
It's really tough. It becomes more competitive every single year and this is our eighth summer. We've booked many of the world's biggest artists already, and there's not many people who can sell 65,000 tickets. You're naturally operating in a fairly small pool of artists who are in that point of their career where they can sell that number of tickets.

It becomes difficult and sometimes you have to reach very deep in terms of the ideas to create a partnership or a package, that make that event more than just a headline concert. That's something which we've always really tried to deliver. It's not just a case of coming to Hyde Park to see one band or an artist.

Sometimes that's fine. But then there are other opportunities where we can package artists together just to create that 'never been seen before' opportunity for fans of both artists. Stevie Wonder and Lionel Ritchie playing together for the first time ever in the UK was a massive show and sold out in a day or two.

You read a lot about a shortage of superstar live acts coming through. Is that a concern?
That argument comes up every single year – and it's been coming up every year for 15 years at least. It is a relevant argument for us to be concerned about because a number of those huge baby boomer-period artists are now in their seventies, or late seventies, and they're moving away from that level of touring.
However, there are still many great artists coming through. In all sorts of genres. Look at the BTS phenomenon. Taylor Swift, Ed Sheeran, obviously, The Killers are still selling out multiple stadiums.

There's still a number of artists who are coming through and have or will have the ability to sell 50,000-plus tickets. It's down to the industry to continue to invest in artists [with that potential] so they grow and their career progresses.

Very few artists can sell stadiums out in their first cycle. But they'll grow their audience base and work towards that. We've had many younger artists selling out Hyde Park: Florence + the Machine, Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift, Post Malone, Bruno Mars. Kendrick Lamar will this year.

So there are still artists coming through but it's always a concern and it just shows that we have to keep investing in and nurturing the careers of those artists coming out of arenas and moving into stadiums.

Do more risks need to be taken in terms of some of the decisions behind the artists being booked for those big stages?
Well, yeah. This industry is built on risk, first and foremost. Everyone would like to sit here and be Ed Sheeran's promoter – and we're fortunate we promote his shows in Scotland – but most shows, most touring, still carries an element of risk with the exception of that very elite level.

And certainly, the risk comes in when you're going through the gears with the artists. Coming out of clubs, into theaters, into arenas, into multiple arenas, and then potentially going outdoors. The risk is always there.

We're happy to take that risk; that's what we do. But it's done in partnership with the agent and the manager and hopefully we're all making a collective decision that's right for everybody – especially the artist.

Are you seeing a trend in the live business where more artists are breaking at a certain level than ever before because consumers have more access to music because of streaming?
The industry is segmented in many, many ways. Through social media, there's the ability for people to consume music and for that moment to be amplified across a great many people very, very quickly. There are therefore some careers, which can accelerate faster than they've ever done before.

The downside of that for some artists is it can burn quicker and that moment travels a lot faster, so careers can be shorter. There's so much music, so the ability to consume so much so quickly means that a lot of younger people today are consuming any form of media, not just music, in very bite-sized chunks; they consume things very quickly before moving onto the next piece. There are a number of artists who manage that process differently than others and provide a consistent supply of content into that marketplace or into those channels.


Robbie Williams at BST Hyde Park, 2019

How important is streaming data for what you do? How closely is that monitored?
Data is really important. We live in a very data-rich environment. For me it's always been about the ability to track that information but then use it effectively. Obviously the data analytics [helps us] see what's going on and how people are reacting to things both positively and negatively.

And of course that comes into some of our decision making. But in live music, especially in festivals, there's still an element of that gut feeling of what's going on in a given moment.

In festivals there's a slightly longer lead time. We're planning line-ups, headliners especially, a year in advance; sometimes over a year in advance. We're less likely to take a chance on something at that level. Further down the bill, especially on some of the emerging stages, we can book [acts] a lot later. Data analytics can [be used to] support some of those decisions for sure.

Is the festival market in the UK or in London becoming saturated?
There are a lot of shows but quality shows with quality artists perform well, by and large. The issue is not so much the number of shows, it's the availability of the artists to headline them.

But it's been like this for 10, 15 years.

Finsbury Park's had a programme of events for as long as I can remember. Hyde Park's had a programme of events for as long as I can remember. Same thing with Victoria Park. Clapham Common's been hosting events for 15 years or more. I don't think it's changed that much, the landscape in the last 15 years.

It's certainly more competitive because the cost of operation is a lot higher, therefore people are trying to sell more tickets. And to sell more tickets you need the bigger artists, so everyone's chasing a relatively small number of headline artists who can sell a [large] volume of tickets. It's far more competitive that it was 15 years ago.

The barrier to entry is a lot higher financially, for sure; very few independents can operate at this level, whereas 20 years ago they could. Twenty-plus years ago we set Creamfields up on our own in Liverpool with very little money. From that came a very successful business.

It's still running to this day; it's one of the best shows in Live Nation's stable, in my opinion. In the club scene [today] that entrepreneurial spirit can [still] thrive. But at the major end of the outdoor market it's very difficult for an independent to operate. Not impossible, but very difficult.

That financial barrier to entry – is that operational costs or artist fees?

It's everything, really. The cost of entry on every level is prohibitive to pretty much everybody except a major organisation. It's not just the cost of talent. There are plenty of rich people with cheque books. But the relationships required to get that talent is a high barrier to entry. It's understandable in some ways. Especially in a major market like London.

If you are the manager or agent of a major international headline artist are you really going to take a chance going with someone you don't know on an event that's never run before?

These are [artist] reputations at risk. Hard-earned reputations for artist that maybe spent many years getting to that point, having not made mistakes. That alone makes it very hard for [a new independent promoter] to come in to book Foo Fighters or U2.

Celine Dion at BST Hyde Park, 2019

Does there need to be more support from government or music companies for grassroots live businesses?

Yes. All areas of culture and arts should be financially stimulated to ensure there is a good balance of content and delivery – not just major music concerts.

We are good at that in this country. Obviously there have been huge [government] cuts over the years but relative to some other countries we still have an ability for [funding] to take place.

But it does always need more; the amount of creativity that's coming out of young people needs to be channelled positively and [support] will obviously help to achieve that – not necessarily into major events but just the arts generally.

A sign of any good working economy and culture is where the arts are supported, especially among young people. It's a pathway to great life experiences for many young people.

How do you balance the cost of tickets with rising operational costs or increasing fees for artists?

It's very difficult because the cost of operation is very high – and the cost of talent drives the overall budget more than anything else. Talent is the one resource of our budget that is the most scarce. We can get some [show/festival essentials] from a number of [suppliers] and [drive] a better price.

But with artists, we are in a very competitive environment, which drives fees higher. And this is a commercial business, so we're entrusted to try and make a profit on what we do. That's what pays [the AEG staff's] wages, and the only main sources of revenue – [balanced] against those costs – are sponsorship, ancillaries, bars, F&B, etc, and tickets.

The Killers at BST Hyde Park, 2017

It then comes down to, 'How can we scale that ticket so it's affordable and the event remains affordable for fans?' And then still maintain a good experience for all ticket holders regardless of what you paid. Of course there are some fans who are happy to pay for a hospitality experience and that could run into several hundred pounds. We're still trying to keep the core entry price in the £60s on shows so it remains an affordable experience for people to come out to. That's a fair entry price if you look at what the artists are investing as well.

Very few artists turn up now without delivering a great show. And that costs money. The artists are naturally looking to recoup their own costs of touring – it is incredibly expensive to keep that number of people out on the road.

"The cost of talent drives the overall budget more than anything else."

How much of a concern or a challenge is the secondary market for you in terms of the mass buying and selling of tickets?

It's one of the main problems. Before there was the lack of regulation [regarding] not just the people buying an inflated price but also [ticket fraud] – i.e. the people who thought they were buying a genuine ticket but then actually end up not getting a ticket. That, in terms of the [fraudulent] aspect of the secondary market, is still a huge concern.

The good news is there are a number of initiatives, AEG's for instance, [that offer] the ability for a managed resale process with an accepted uplift of 10%, so those people who genuinely can't go [to a show] can sell their ticket on the right platform – and someone who wants to come can still buy [entry to a gig] that's sold out, but with a modest uplift that covers the costs of the person who was the primary purchaser.

What we are moving into is a more acceptable model across the major ticketing platforms, [which] the fans are beginning to use in greater numbers. ■

‘THIS IS A MOMENT TO PUSH THINGS FORWARD, TO EXPERIMENT A LITTLE’

Jack Fryer heads up Universal Music UK’s internal agency, The Square. He explains how his team marry art and science – and navigate internal competition – to boost the work of their label ‘clients’...

Disappointingly, there is no button marked ‘Underground Lair’ in the lifts of Universal’s London HQ. Instead, it’s into the helicopter and a short ride to a hollowed out volcano just north of Somers Town… Okay, it’s the extremely stylish but not quite Bond-approved ninth floor that is actually home to The Square, an in-house agency that operates at the intersection of data and creativity, marrying science and art, data and culture, insight and instinct (although it turns out The Square’s boss, Jack Fryer, personally, isn’t keen on at least two of those words).

There are no swooshy automatic doors, either, but despite the illusion-shattering banality of plain old desks and chairs, there’s still a sense that you’ve found your way to Q’s password-protected department, where new weapons are being invented and designed, where you might just see white coats as well as on-point trainers.

This largely behind-the-scenes operation, which has its roots in Fryer’s appointment to the company in 2013 as Head of Insight, received a short, sharp profile boost at the start of the year when it was announced that it will now operate under its own name, The Square.

It was a move that was simultaneously cosmetic and significant. Cosmetic because Fryer and his team carried on doing what they’d been doing the day before being bestowed with a new angular moniker, and significant because it was a recognition of the central resource’s growth, importance and unique position at the creative heart and commercial edge of Universal’s group of labels.

Fryer says The Square is, very simply, about ideas. It’s somewhere Universal’s people and teams can come to learn, to discuss, to ask, to think, to do something and imagine something they probably wouldn’t do or imagine in their own space on any normal day.

Its work is informed by data scientists, strategists and researchers, people comfortable immersed in but not buried by big data, looking to find patterns, see opportunities and deliver competitive advantages.

The Square will never sign an artist, release a record or make a deal, but, as the name implies (it’s an allusion to a Town Square), it will be central to the new geography of a new record company...

The first label you worked at was EMI, in the middle of the very messy Terra Firma period, how did you arrive there?

I’d been working at [music and brand agency] Frukt, when someone actually showed me the job ad, the job description, and said, ‘They’re literally describing you!’ At the time I didn’t know jobs like that existed. It was the early phase of this kind of stuff, I think the job was Head of Insight or something. It’s a word I’ve always loathed. Honestly, if I could just remove one word from the English dictionary it would probably be ‘insight’.

I hate the idea that insight should be the domain of one person or a few people. We’re all insightful in different ways. The best executives are habitually insightful. I just think it’s the definition of being strategic and creative. I hate the idea of having it siloed within a department called ‘Insight’. It’s one of the reasons we’ve created The Square.

It’s such a ridiculous thing to say: come to see us and we’ll be insightful for you. You’ll be the judge of that. We’re going to put some stuff in front of you that I think could be meaningful and let’s see where it takes us.

> ***“Honestly, if I could remove one word from the dictionary it would probably be ‘insight’.”***

Honestly, it’s taken me years to work it out, that only 10% of what we’re doing needs to be about the braininess of it. 90%, is engagement and connection and communication. And that is a big leap because, initially, all of this stuff was about commercial efficiency and optimization. The whole idea of The Square is: pivot it round and make it the friend of the creative. Because, if this stuff is done right, I want people to leave the room and go, ‘Fuck, me, I’ve now got a brilliant idea’, or, ‘I know what I’m going to do next and I’m excited about it’. Not, ‘I’m overwhelmed by data and bewildered by the complexity of the world.’

And, then I met David [Joseph] and it felt like there was an opportunity to push it further under the auspices of Universal. I have to say, although I don’t want to sound like I’ve been drinking the Kool Aid, Universal has been a wonderful place to work, and the culture of the company really has suited me, because it is fundamentally about empowering people to be themselves and do it their way.

I’m constantly thinking about how what we do is better and different and how we can be useful. My customers in this business

The Square team (forming an on-message right angle), L-R: Simon McMahon, Lewis Millar, Alexandra Dodd, Jack Fryer, Arslaan Ahmed, Helen Kennedy, Jon Fell, Charlotte Thomson

are the presidents, the marketing directors, the creatives. What can I do for them today that's useful? And, that's where the agency model has truly come in-house. Because that's the way I think: if we're not useful, we can bugger off.

You were at EMI when the Universal acquisition went through, and you were obviously someone they wanted to keep and someone they thought could bring something to them?
When they brought me over here, they said they were interested because it was the first time an A&R person had ever said that somebody doing any job like this was useful to them.

That is like crossing the Rubicon, because I do believe all this stuff that we do helps us be more creative. It's been a shift in my mindset and it's where The Square came from.

How does a 'neutral' department work within a company that fosters quite intense internal competition between labels? Like, if you work up an amazing new strategy for one label, does the president of that label beg you not to tell the rest?
It's a brilliant question and I can't say we have it perfectly worked out. There are two dimensions to it. One is, when we work with a label, I mean it, that relationship is sacrosanct. We're in the room with them and them only. They have a completely tailored service to their question. Then we might go to the next meeting with another label and we go back to zero. However, one of the parts of value we offer the company is that of course we do join dots. It's this idea of the Town Square, we work with everyone. It enables us to spot opportunities and, sometimes, to put people in a room who have never been in a room together before, but when they are, they can create something new. That, quietly, has become a second role for us. However, going back to your question, when we engage with a confidential project, I can tell you absolutely we look after you, our client. If we do something for Tom March, that's for Tom March; if we do something for Ted Cockle, it's for Ted Cockle.

"Come to us, think with us, we want to do something different with you."

When you first started doing what you do, was there an element from A&R, from labels in general, going, 'We'll know when we hear it'? Or, 'It's okay, we know what we're doing, thank you'?
Totally.

And how much has that changed now?
The culture has shifted immeasurably over the last three to four years. Every day, something moves. But it is also about the way we're doing it. How naïve would it be to go, 'Hello A&R person, the data tells us X, therefore you must do Y'? That is an incredibly simplistic way of looking at it.

I'm more about saying, 'Hey, have you seen this way of looking at the world? We've seen some indicators here, where might that take you?' That is a totally different conversation.

If you straight jacket creative people, they will reject you. And, that is our mission here: do not reduce the space, open up the right space. And then go.

You've said before, though, that you see what you do as a supplement, another weapon, and that you still believe in the dark arts or whatever of A&R, and in instinct, of sometimes going against what the data suggests, correct?
I really do, totally. And it depends on what you're looking at, and that's why the model of The Square is half science, half art. Every time we work on any project, you need both every time.

What is data? Data is information about the world around us. What idiot decided data was about spreadsheets? If you consider data to be the ones and noughts generated by Spotify, I think that'll only get you so far. There's another side of data which is much more human. It's about what's in the water in the UK and around the world at the moment. What are the cultural centres of gravity? What is the popular conversation? That is more useful as an explainer of things, or as an identifier of opportunity, as ones and noughts are.

Almost, that word 'data'... people who work with us honestly never come in and go, 'I need some data'. They say, 'Hey, I've got this thing, can you help us with it?'. And then yeah, if data is useful we'll look at data, but quite often it's not, and it's never the whole story.

This company is about cultural leadership, and data sometimes doesn't help you lead; instinct can help you lead. A lot of stuff that we do is about nourishing that instinct. Again: What's in the water? Where's the zeitgeist? What's changing? What are tomorrow's conversations going to be about?

I don't like this idea that everything has to be head not heart. Sometimes people's first thoughts are their best thoughts and sometimes people's instincts are more clever than anything analytical. But it doesn't mean you don't need some of this stuff around you to make you even better, give you a better chance and give you more options.

There's also a secondary point about data, which is that often it is the outliers that excel most; there's no bar chart in the world that's going to highlight that. Some of the breakthrough artists of the last 10 years, what a lot of them have in common is that they're what data people call Black Swans, the opposite of what any matrix would predict. I love that. That has to be the magic of what we're doing, because this isn't a biscuit company, it's a culture company.

How has the role changed here since you joined – both in terms of what you do and in terms of how you're viewed and utilised?
Honestly, totally. The story in simple terms is, when I first took the job, you are starting from zero, you're selling a whole new way of looking at the world. And that's about, building relationships, convincing people this thing will be useful, and then showing that it's useful. Because, you talk about Universal being internally and externally competitive – that's true, and it means that if we weren't useful, we wouldn't be here and we certainly wouldn't be expanding.

So, level of engagement, number of staff, diversity of projects, closeness to creative executives, all *way* up. Because, when I first got here, I felt like we were too much in a commercial lane. I don't want to be in the business of sending people bar charts with market share on it. That's important, but it is somebody else's job. And, over time, by showing the worth of what we're doing, we built the job we wanted it to be, and The Square is the culmination of that. That's about confidence and permission. You couldn't have done this day one, because you would have risked organ rejection.

To some extent then, is The Square something of a branding exercise, as in you're still pretty much doing what you were doing the day before you were called The Square?
I think it's more and it's better. We have new capabilities in three areas, and I'm super excited about those capabilities. And as we roadshow the labels, they feel good about them too. They know what we are: we're voice of audience, we're voice of artist as brand, and we're a voice of thinking a bit differently sometimes. And they now all know that, as The Square, we have new tools in those three areas.

Secondly, it's a better way of packaging up what we do and it gets us away from these unhelpful conversations around language like data or insight.

I just want people to feel, If I work with The Square, they'll get me where I'm going, they'll give an idea that I didn't have before, they'll give me an edge and they'll help me win. They don't need to know about the ins and outs of the methodology, they just want results.

If they do an hour with The Square, I want somebody to forget about the operational here and now, about what Facebook ads am I booking today, about the release schedule for single three. You're great at that. Come to us and think with us, we want to do something else with you, something beyond the day-to-day.

So what is a typical interaction with a label? Is it generally looking ahead to a big album release or is it more ongoing and less specific than that?
It's very diverse, but generally we're thinking about long-term development of an artist and of ideas. The labels here, the marketing managers, they're so good at what they do. In terms of release tactics, marketing tactics, devices that optimise release, Oh my God, the best in the world. So, we need to offer something that's different.

I talk a lot about strategy versus tactics. It's a chess metaphor: tactics are immediate things that might give you a momentary advantage. Strategy is long-term, sustainable, bigger picture wins. And that's why they come to us.

Our dream interaction is management company, label and artist, together, coming to us with a challenge, not a task.

So it's not, Here's the release date, map me a campaign; it's more, We want to get there but we're stuck here, or, we want to change the way the audience sees and thinks about an artist?
Exactly right. It's like, the release is fine, we've got the schedule, we know what we're doing with our partners, but we've got a challenge around positioning, we've got a challenge around audience connection, we've got a challenge around what we're doing in emerging markets. Help us understand the audience for this artist. Help us understand the different kinds of audience. Help us see where we might go next. Help us collectively come to a really compelling positioning idea for this artist. Help us tell a story of a partnership between an artist and a brand. That's what gets us out of bed.

Typically it comes back to the same thing: What does an artist stand for, above and beyond the records they release? What's their story, narrative, DNA, brand, whatever you want to call it? Who are they connecting with? What is that audience really about? That's about emotions, feelings and culture, it's not just about the ones and noughts that are served up by a digital platform, because that's only half the story.

Again, I think The Square is a more confident platform for us to do that. And I think for it to work effectively it definitely has to be about manager and label together.

Because some of this stuff definitely transcends the records. I want to feel like a service for the artist in where they're going, and there are many ways that can be expressed; the release is one of them. But, I think when we've worked at our best, the artist also felt, 'Yeah, now I feel like I've got a better plan for merchandising, for live, for my partnership stuff'. I believe we all win together so I'm not too worried… sometimes, managers go, 'Is that okay? That's going to help us more than you'. And I'm like, that's all cool, we all need to win together; it's a partnership. And I'm pleased to report more and more of those conversations are happening.

Does the level of engagement and how people use you vary a lot from label to label?
It does, and I think that comes back to having an agency mentality, and being The Square, not just another department. I'd say they use us roughly equally, but yes they do use us in different ways.

The Square should be diverse and I'm totally accepting that different executives have different styles, that's great. It's about what you want from us.

Even within a label there are people who use us in different ways. There are some people who want something a bit more transactional, there are other people that want something much more involved and long-term. Our job is to offer something for everybody, while holding on to what we believe in.

What I don't want is to go native, become institutionalised in a way that's not useful, because, that's not why people work with Square. We have to be an outside/inside thing. There's no point in us duplicating the brilliance of people that are already in labels.

Looking at the bigger picture, at your field in general, how do you think the audience/artist relationship has changed, and who or what is driving that change – audience, artist or technology?
Someone will write a dissertation on that. In the simplest possible terms, and this was said by one of our label presidents: we're in an age where people break records, media don't. So it has to be about audience connection, it has to be about nurturing a community of fans around an artist. How do we, as a record company, in a way that is self-reliant, build that audience, and know we can build that audience for you? That has to be the mission.

"There's no point in us duplicating the brilliance of people who are already in labels."

There are lots of moving parts around us and some of those moving parts are well outside our control. But I think what's so exciting about this period of the record industry is how do we, as the marketing bit of what we do, get to a point where we know, by knowing about your audience, by understanding that chemistry, that we can take you from x to y; that we can grow you?

It's often said that each generation is increasingly cynical about and resistant to marketing. Do you think that's true and if it is how do you get round that?
This is where the word 'marketing' is so unhelpful, because it's kind of a dirty word. We live in an age where the internet is an acid wash for bullshit. The days of spinning stories that aren't connected to truths are thankfully over. And the notion of marketing as something where you might superimpose a story and then buy a billboard is fucked, and rightly so. I go back to an age-old mantra, I think it's a McCann Erikson line from the fifties: great marketing is a truth well told. We come back to that way of thinking again and again.

And that's a different way at looking at marketing. Marketing as window dressing, marketing as distribution of assets, that's gone, that's yesterday. This is marketing as, 'How do we communicate persuasively about your truth, and then join up to an audience who might feel the same about the world?' That's why this cultural stuff has never been more important.

Does The Square have to be quite schizophrenic, as in the work you do, the prep you do, the digging you do, it's very deep, it's very detailed, it's very precise and complex, but then you almost have to very much *not* show your working, you have to present and pitch something very simple and elegant?


Universal's St Pancras HQ - Underground Lair not pictured. Obviously.

Yeah, totally agree. I made the mistake in my early days, I think, of probably overwhelming people. The world is full of too much stuff already. Some of that is misinformation. We want to skip to the good bits, the useful bit. I'm pretty fanatical with my pursuit of that with the guys here. They know that our output has to be so distilled that you can communicate it in 15 minutes and get somewhere good. It's like that Mark Twain quote: 'Sorry for such a long letter, I didn't have time to write a short one'.

And half the time it is what you edit out. That's as useful as anything in the challenge of how you plot a story that's going to move somebody to do something different. It's art as well as science and we keep coming back to that, because people respond to stories and people respond to emotion, and that's to do with truth and to do with art. I'll be totally honest, we're not directly a revenue centre; we're enablers of what the labels are doing. We are a service provider and so that service had better be fucking amazing.

Can you talk about the sort of things you can highlight for labels that they wouldn't discover for themselves, or suggestions you make that wouldn't come from them?
So, the way it works is we have to start with a genuine challenge or opportunity that you bring to us; we tend not to push products on people.

Then we go away and, like an agency, we come back and pitch a process for you. Now, sometimes that will mean looking at some data. But sometimes, we go, 'Actually, we don't think that's useful.' Sometimes the best process will be looking out the window for a minute, thinking about what's going on in culture, thinking about what's going on in technology, thinking about best practice, thinking about who's done this well in the past, taking inspiration from a different category, doing a workshop, having a quality conversation with the artist.

There's a whole tool box of stuff that we can do, but it's all aimed at what you want to achieve.

How would you sum up the corporate culture at Universal right now, and how does that encourage and help something like The Square?
There's something fundamentally in the water here that feels progressive. It feels like it's a moment to push things forward, to experiment a little. I love that it is encouraging of individual styles. And that's what I love about the marketplace idea.

You come to work at Universal and you can truly approach it a million different ways, but the only way to do it sustainably is to do it in a way that's right for you. And to be totally, authentically the kind of executive you want to be, basically create the thing that you want to do.

I've always wanted to do The Square; it's just taken a long time to get there. ■

Joy Crookes, managed by Charlie Owen, is signed to Sony/Insanity Records

SAY HELLO TO THE FUTURE

As you know, Music Business UK gets the big interviews – each of our issues is packed with established, influence-wielding figures of the British industry. But what do emerging artist managers currently rising through the business (i.e. tomorrow's moguls) think? Guess what – you could learn a thing or two from them...

Is management the most important role in today's music industry? There's evidence to suggest so. Over the last few years, artists have increasingly been taking a bigger slice of control as streaming and social media allows them to build an audience and reach fans directly, without the need for a label deal. Artists like Stormzy, The 1975 and Dave have secured non-traditional licensing/joint venture deals with major labels when they'd already built up a head of steam, and US superstars Drake, Nicki Minaj and Justin Bieber don't have straightforward arrangements with their major partners either. The common denominator between them all? A powerful manager who has helped increase the artist's value and negotiating might with a combination of time, development and, quite often, self-investment.

According to Midia Research, who have coined this new decade 'the age of the artist', the trend of artists remaining in the driving seat is only going to get stronger, as access to audiences increases, alternative models grow in number and power, and label services deals become an increasingly viable and successful option. None of this is news to the up-and-coming generation of managers, who, as three of them tell us, are looking forward to a future industry that is more collaborative, equal and diverse as a result of the changing scene. Joy Crookes manager Charlie Owen, Joesef manager Lyle Scougall and Kaiya Milan, who looks after jazz collective Steam Down, have all been recipients of funding from the MMF and YouTube Music's 2020 Accelerator Programme. Here, they give us their take on the current state of the music industry, where the most exciting developments are, and share their plans and ambitions for the future.

‘WE NEED AN INDUSTRY-WIDE PUSH FOR DIVERSITY & EQUALITY’

Charlie Owen looks after hotly tipped soul artist Joy Crookes, who is fast becoming a name to watch after signing to Insanity Records and receiving a BRITs Rising Star and BBC Sound of 2020 nomination. She’s been working with Crookes for the last four years in various capacities, and fell into management whilst booking bands for nights in Camden during her time at university. After a two-year stint at live agency UTA, Owen took the leap to full time management in January 2018. Crookes has spent the past few years building a significant online audience — a performance of *Mother May I Sleep With Danger?* on the COLORS platform has received more than 8 million YouTube views — and her debut album is scheduled for release this year. In terms of future ambitions, Owen says: “It’s really simple with Joy, it’s just about building a career for her that’s sustainable and has longevity. I think she’ll be a lifelong recording and live artist, and she’ll be incredibly successful because she’s got the talent to back it up.”

Can you describe your approach to management and artist development, and what’s shaped that?
For me, the priority always has to be the artist’s wellbeing. That needs to come first and foremost, especially in such a stressful and demanding industry. I take quite a broad approach and like to have a level of engagement in pretty much every aspect of what the artist is doing. With development, it’s really important in those beginning stages to make sure that an artist is given the time to find their sound, hone their craft and songwriting, and start connecting with an audience, even if it’s on a really small scale. Once you start releasing music, or press the green button on their career, your artist is still going to evolve a lot from that point in time, but I think it’s really important that, especially if you’re developing someone who is young, they are given ample time to develop as artists and as human beings first. With Joy, despite all the stuff that’s come our way, seemingly quite quickly since she’s been signed, I’ve yet to have a situation where I feel that she is really out of her depth. I think that’s because we really took our time at the beginning.

What does prioritising an artist’s wellbeing mean to you?
Making sure that you’re the first barrier with everything, so if someone wants something from Joy, I will field that and then communicate things to her in a certain way – or not at all. I’ll keep some things completely off her radar to make sure that she can focus on doing her job properly. It’s important that the artist feels protected and that you are on their side, and your sole motivation is what is right for them. I keep a really open dialogue about mental health and health in general: Are they healthy? Are they happy? Everything else is totally secondary to that. Especially with young female careers, we can all see really potent examples of people who have been in charge of the artist career who haven’t had enough regard for their welfare on that holistic level. That is the complete opposite of how I’ve come to approach management.

Where are the exciting opportunities in the current music industry?
The level of direct-to-consumer activity and engagement that an artist can have with their fans is a really exciting part of the music industry. You can create a direct line of communication and build such a loyal following off the back of that. It’s a really rewarding thing for both the fans and the artists, it’s a two-way street.

How about the biggest challenges?
Diversity and equality is something that the music industry needs to tackle. Steps are being made but there needs to be an industry-wide push in the same direction. Everyone needs to engage, in some way, in one of the initiatives and programmes that exist wherever they can. It’s a really multi-layered problem. People kick up a fuss when the BRIT nominations come out or festival bills are announced, and people say, ‘Oh no we are trying; we’ve got a diversity panel, x y and z’. But the proof isn’t in the pudding, so that needs to be elevated considerably. To the best of my knowledge, an unbiased third party that looks at things like eligibility criteria, the charts and diversity panels doesn’t exist in the music industry and that’s a bit bizarre. Even the fact that the BRITs is run by different record label heads year-on-year is bizarre.

Where do you see the industry and management heading in future?
Voice recognition is going to really change things. Record labels changing their contracts is quite slow progress, and all the other models are coming up around them, so it will be really interesting to see the switch from people wanting to sign to majors to doing distribution deals, which is already happening. In terms of the role of an artist and manager, even though it changes and evolves so much, that’s one of the most enduring things, because it can mould into any shape. There will always be a place for management – it’s essential.

‘BE TRUE TO YOUR PERSONAL BRAND, AND YOUR INTEGRITY’

Through her own Off Balance Group, **Kaiya Milan** manages London jazz collective Steam Down and solo artist Afronaut Zu, who has toured as the live vocalist for Rudimental and previously fronted Damian Lazarus & The Ancient Moons. Milan started her career working as a personal assistant to a producer, whilst managing musicians on the side, deciding to pursue the role full time after discovering a knack for artist development. Her full-time management career officially started in 2014, and she’s since fostered collaborations with a long list of brands including Adidas, Apple, Beats, Puma, Ellesse and Dr. Martens. Alongside her management duties, Milan launched her own female creative collective, The Sorority House & Co., in 2015 in order to help connect, empower, celebrate and inform women in the creative industries, and construct a shared sisterhood mentality.

Can you describe your approach to management and artist development, and what’s shaped that?
Because I didn’t take a traditional route into management, I feel like I have no blueprint for the music industry, and there is no one size fits all that works with artists. It’s about developing a relationship and understanding the artist’s identity — who they want to be and how they want to present themselves — and then being able to work and accommodate around that. I take a more hands-on approach to management. That means I’m involved in every aspect of an artist’s career, and when I think about creating plans for an artist, it’s all about how that intertwines with the touring schedule, how it filters through into other projects that you’re working on, and how you can get funding for different things. That’s why I talk about the artist identity, because it’s not just about music, it’s who you are as a person and the message you are trying to put across to your audiences; how you do that is case-by-case.

Do you have any management rules or principles you always stick by?
Don’t tell yourself no, because this industry will tell you no more than anybody else. I would also say that there is no such thing as a ‘good manager’ — there is someone who is a fit for you. It’s like a jigsaw and how you both fit into each other’s lives and careers. Know who you are and have an identity outside of your role as a manager. Don’t let the artists become your whole identity, remain true to who you are and your principles, and never feel compelled to work with an artist just because of their status in the industry. Be true to your personal brand, your integrity, and what you got into this industry to do.

What are biggest challenges about working in the music industry and management today?
The music industry is continuously changing and the amount of information to keep up with as a manager is definitely difficult, especially when you’re trying to do the best for the artist that you’re working with. The other big challenge is knowing what the best opportunities are for your artists because there are so many in this industry. It requires a higher level of visionary thinking and seeing the end goal in every situation.

What would you change about the music industry and why?
I would expand the opportunities that are available to genres outside of popular music. Especially in the UK, there is a real rise of different music scenes, and even though they are being paid attention to, I think there is definitely scope for more of that. I think the world needs to hear everything that the UK has to offer. It’s got to be done through festival line-ups and showcases, which should be representative of all types of music that come from a certain space and not so limiting.

Do you see any industry developments on the horizon?
I’m really interested to see how the new age jazz scene evolves in the next two years, that’s something that’s really bubbling at this moment in time.

How do you see management evolving in the future?
It’s an ever-expanding role. Over the last five years, managers have had to encompass a lot more roles than they previously did, and management in the future is going to change even more.

Managers are going to be creating a lot more independent structures for their artists and working with labels in direct partnerships as opposed to signing the artists to the label. The key person in between [the labels] is going to become solely the manager, and I think the way people see managers and how much they respect their role is going to increase.

What are your future ambitions?
To continue touring and releasing music. Ultimately, my roster is about changing the way people interact with music and changing the way people hear the sound. Our key goal in the near future is to stay true to that.

‘THE ARTIST’S DECISION IS FINAL – WE WORK FOR THE ARTIST’

Lyle Scougall turned his hand to management four years ago after discovering, via an open mic night, that his college classmate, the artist now known as Joesef, had been hiding a phenomenal voice. He asked if he could manage him, and the rest, as they say, is history.

During his days spent playing in a band, Scougall was the business-minded one of the group, so management felt like a natural fit. He teamed up with business partner Nathan Dunphy to officially launch Mañana Music Management in 2017. The company’s second client, DJ duo t e s t p r e s s, was another act Scougall found while studying at university. AWAL signing Joesef sold out his first gig at Glasgow’s King Tuts in early 2019, without any music out, and looks set for big things this year after appearing on the coveted BBC Sound of 2020 long-list.

Can you describe your approach to management and artist development?
Management is the facilitation of artist development, it’s about building an incubator for the artist to grow, develop and ultimately survive. So, laying the foundations for the artist and supporting them so they can feel comfortable and focus on what they need to focus on, which is ultimately writing the songs. It’s important to sit down with the artist, ask them where they want to go and who they want to be, and it’s your job as a manager to think how do we get there and stay there.

It’s a competitive world out there thanks to the ease with which artists can find an audience — how have you found opportunities for your artists?
With Joesef, we wanted to do his first ever show at King Tuts in Glasgow, and the plan was to sell out without having any music released. We did that through word of mouth and posting teasers on his Instagram. We wanted people to think, ‘Who the hell is this Joesef guy selling out King Tuts? I’ve never heard of him.’ Purely through social media and word of mouth, we sold out 300 tickets a month-and-a-half before the show. That’s when opportunities came rolling in, and we released his first song one week before the show.

Do you have any management principles or rules you always stick by?
The rules are that the artist’s decision is final — we work for the artist. Nathan and I just see ourselves as facilitators and we’re there to support their work and make them comfortable and leave it up to them to write the songs. At the end of the day, it’s always about the songs.

What’s your definition of the modern music manager?
It’s such a multifaceted role, you are across every aspect of your client’s business and a manager now is the central hub for the artist’s career. I see now that a modern music manager and the modern music industry is very entrepreneurial. I see a lot of partnerships — us and Joesef are in partnership with AWAL, everything is direct to us and you feel that you are more in the driving seat.

There is still that dominance of the larger scale businesses, but I think there is a lot more room for the independent artist and manager now to grow and have a place in the ecosystem through technology and being able to sell direct to their fans.

We can sell everything from Joesef’s website; his tickets are on sale there, his music is there to stream, and vinyl and merchandise are there to buy. We really want to focus on making it easy for Joesef’s fanbase to be able to engage with him and to buy something if they want to.

Where are the most exciting opportunities in the current music industry?
As it’s becoming a lot more entrepreneurial, the fact that you’re going to find the big companies doing partnership deals and joint venues with small and independent managers like myself, or other people in the industry.

I think now artists are a lot more aware of the situation they are in and can have a lot more control of their business, because you can see where your songs are being streamed and plan tours that way. So it’s going to be all about partnerships and building a team around your artist.

How about the biggest challenges and anything you’d like to change?
The challenges are that there is so much music out here because of how easy it is to record and distribute and promote. But the way to overcome that is to make sure that you’ve done the groundwork, so that when the artist releases their first work, it’s the best work that they have. If you’ve done the hard work in writing the songs, and have a team, a solid plan and amazing music, that’s what’s going make an artist’s career successful.

What are your future ambitions?
Grow my business, take on more clients and to be known as a management company who work with top quality artists.

We want to have artists who have longevity in their careers, and we want every artist we work with to be iconic and culturally significant.

‘Dance is the most global music language out there’

Belgium-born Bart Cools leads Warner Music Group’s global dance music strategy. Here, the veteran record exec tells MBUK about working with the Spice Girls in the nineties, working with Spinnin’ Records post acquisition and what WMG’s plans are in dance music over the next couple of years….

“They say dance is gone,” Warner Music Group’s Bart Cools tells *MBUK*, with a hint of annoyance at the suggestion, from across the room at WMG’s UK HQ on Wrights Lane, West London. “That’s not the case,” he argues. “Obviously urban is massive, but there is a big chunk of the world that still likes to listen to dance.”

He continues: “Every new hire we have in dance A&R, every track or artist that we can take out of Spinnin’ [Records] and break around the world – that’s what gives me deep motivation and passion to keep going.”

Cools’ music industry career has been going for almost 30 years already. He grew up in Belgium and landed a job as a radio promoter at EMI Belgium in 1991, working with acts like Belgian pop group, Clouseau. Prior to that, he was working at student radio.

“I was passionate about music, so [radio] was the easiest way to get records that I didn’t have to pay for,” he jokes. “If you really wanted to, you could get a job in the music industry, even in Belgium. It was pretty easy at the time, or easier than it is now.”

After working his way through radio promo and product management to Head of Marketing and A&R, he moved to London to join Virgin Records’ International Marketing team in early 1996. He started working with an unknown girl group called the Spice Girls, who he remembers “nobody else was particularly interested in” within his department at the time.

“I just happened to start working with the Spice Girls because [they were] new and fresh,” he explains. “I jumped on that mostly because they were going to Japan and I had never been to Japan, so I thought, ‘Okay this is my chance’. And then it exploded.” Released in September 1996, the group’s debut album, *SPICE,* sold nearly two million copies in the first seven weeks in the UK.

“That first album [sold] 10m globally in the six weeks leading up to Christmas. It was new for most of us,” adds Cools. (He also insists that “what happens in the nineties, stays in the nineties!” when *MBUK* presses him for any anecdotes from what he describes as a “crazy” time for the business.)

Cools continued to work with the Spice Girls for the duration of his tenure at Virgin Records, which also saw him start working with the Chemical Brothers just before the release of their No.1 second album, *Dig Your Own Hole*.

In 2000 Cools was appointed Managing Director of Virgin Belgium, EMI Switzerland and EMI Netherlands, and from 2008 onwards he was EVP Marketing, International for EMI Records. In 2012 EMI launched the Global Dance Network with Cools at the helm, overseeing campaigns for the likes of Swedish House Mafia, Deadmau5 and Eric Prydz.

In addition to those superstar dance artists, Cools has also worked with the likes of Massive Attack and St. Germain, and, for the last 10 years, David Guetta, who joined WMG following its acquisition of Parlophone Label Group in July 2013.

“Dance or dance-pop is the most global music language out there.”

“David is a very engaged and driven person,” he says of Guetta. “It’s tiring at times, because he’s so driven that he wants to release music constantly, under his name, under other names, underground pop tracks, so it’s complicated to keep that all together.

“It’s been 10 years since *When Love Takes Over* [featuring vocals from Kelly Rowland], which was [Guetta’s] first big crossover, and he’s been delivering three hits a year since then. That’s 30 massive hits in the last 10 years. We’ll try and keep going with that.”

In 2013, Cools joined WMG to head up the company’s worldwide dance music strategy, reporting to Craig Kallman, Chairman & CEO, Atlantic Records, and founder of legendary label Big Beat Records, relaunched as a dance-focused Atlantic imprint in 2010.

Less than three years ago, WMG made one of its biggest bets on dance music yet, acquiring Amsterdam-born Spinnin’ Records for more than $100 million – WMG’s biggest label buyout since its $765m acquisition of Parlophone in 2013.

Since joining WMG, Spinnin’, which celebrated its 20th anniversary last year, has expanded into Asia, while Warner Music’s wider dance division now has the label’s vast online reach (26.7m YouTube subscribers, 14m on socials) at its disposal.

“[Spinnin’s] a release machine, to a degree,” says Cools. “It’s got a team in Holland that stays there and operates a little bit like an independent within Warner. What we bought is flexibility. Tracks from Spinnin’ that need the ‘big machine’ can go into Warner, while [Warner] tracks that you think, ‘Okay maybe this is not quite ready to be exploited by Warner territories across the world’ can move into Spinnin’, and have Spinnin’ work it, if they agree that it’s a fit.”

For instance, explains Cools, last year Spinnin’ had a hit [*Post Malone*] with Dutch DJ Sam Feldt. The major has now “decided that [Feldt is] someone we would work to develop into an artist proposition”.

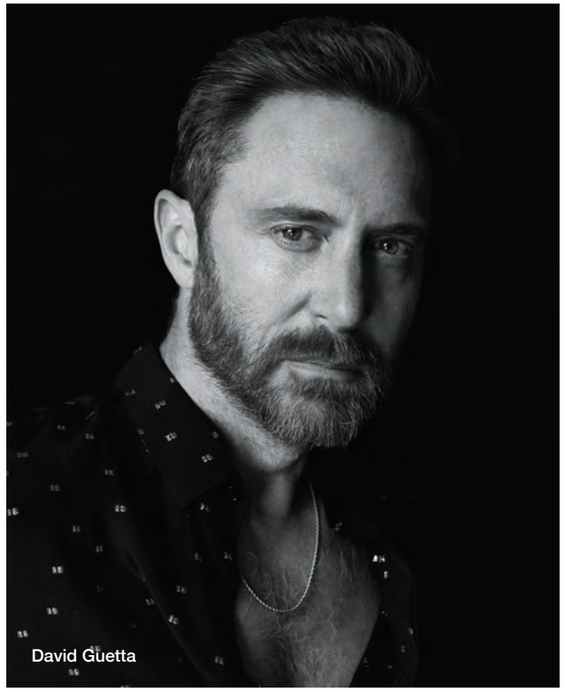
In addition to Feldt, other priority dance acts for Warner Music in 2020 and 2021 include David Guetta, Robin Schulz out of Germany, Galantis out of Big Beat in the US and British DJ Joel Corry. In addition, Cools says that he keeps his eye out for new talent constantly: “Sometimes we sign a track which it turns out is [made by] a very talented producer, and the relationship grows, so we turn that into an artist deal rather than [just ask], ‘What’s the next track?’

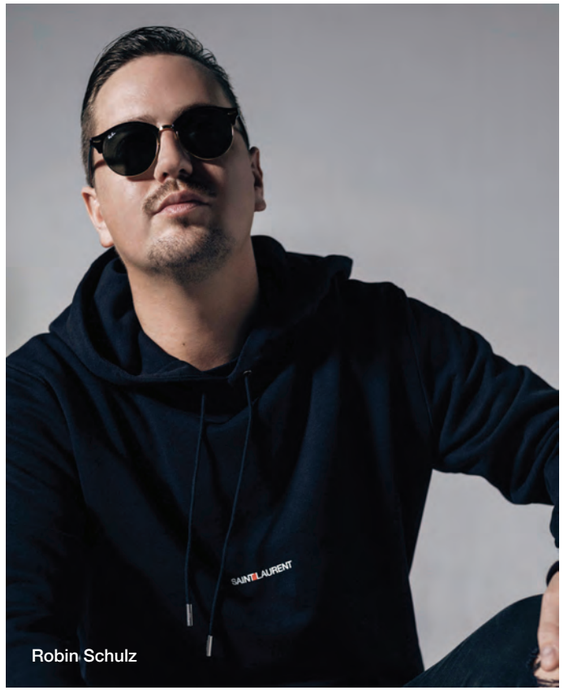
“Then we start working on long-term plans; we start developing tools that are slightly different to what you would have if you just worked a track. Working with artists, finding tracks, it never gets old…”

What was the music industry like in Belgium when you first started out?

It exploded, because at the time new TV stations started in Belgium that pushed a lot of local music, which was near-dying [previously]. Then there was this boom of local music that obviously [grew] in the nineties. CDs came in and they were good


Galantis


David Guetta


Robin Schulz

years. To give you an idea [of scale], at the time EMI Belgium was 75 people, and at the moment, Warner Benelux as a whole is 45. So yeah, it shrunk and is on the up again.

You moved to London after that. How did that opportunity come up?
That was around the time when EMI bought Virgin. Back then there was still a Virgin Belgium and an EMI Belgium, so I went to the guy that ran Virgin Belgium, because he had an international [remit] as well.

I mentioned to him that I would be interested in working outside of Belgium, preferably in London, and [EMI] were reorganising their international department. He just said, 'If you go and talk to the woman that runs it, and she agrees, then you can go.' That was the end of '95, so I started early '96, which was the beginning of massive years for Virgin, particularly in the UK, obviously with Spice Girls and Chemical Brothers and Massive Attack and Gomez. They were huge Virgin years. The best years.

You worked with the Chemical Brothers on the campaign for *Dig Your Own Hole* - what can you remember from that campaign?
They were actual album campaigns, rather than what often happens now. Particularly in dance music, it's all track-based [today] and if there's an album, [artists often] don't come with bodies of work.

Those were proper album campaigns: Chemical Brothers – and definitely Massive Attack, as well. I was doing international marketing for them, promo and marketing. They liked the fact that they were becoming global brands, but they didn't like the fact that it also came with [TV/press] interviews, this side of the business that didn't really appeal to them very much. It was a battle sometimes, but it was agreeable.

A battle of personalities?
Well, yeah, they became so successful that it scared them a bit as well. They didn't feel like they had to explain what they did or do interviews, because they didn't want to be that kind of band or person. It was difficult to convince them sometimes. Doing Japanese interviews was not their favourite hobby.

You mentioned the Spice Girls, obviously. What was it like being part of a cultural phenomenon like that?
It was crazy. At the time, I sound like a grandfather, but this was when we had the first mobile phones. We had to fax. There was no way of getting emails across the world, it was just before BlackBerrys came in, so it was crazy, particularly in the first two years.

Virgin wasn't really set up to do those things internationally. We had to call people every Friday and ask, 'How many have you sold, and how many do you need next week?' It was really basic. And then that first album did 10 million in the six weeks leading up to Christmas. So, yeah, it was new for most of us. But it was interesting.

At that point you were selling millions of physical copies of albums…
It came down to scrambling for production space, because if you had a thing like that exploding all of a sudden, and the fact that it's just before Christmas, all the factories are booked up, so we actually had to pull other stuff out of production. It was very old-school factory control, which is something that obviously, with the world I live in now, doesn't happen. It doesn't exist anymore. [Labels] prioritise the one that you know you're going to sell.

What was it like transitioning from selling millions of physical albums into the digital changes that happened in the noughties, especially around the Napster years?
I was running affiliates then, so it was a different sport. At those companies in those years, say 2002-2009, it was about managing the decline while still actually trying to do whatever you were there to do, as in finding these breaking artists, making sure you develop your artists to the level that they want to be, and at the same time managing your people and making sure that you can stay alive.

Those were the ugly years of being in the business, particularly at EMI, with all the takeover and buying and selling and that sort of stuff.

Where we are now, where we are hopefully going, it's like the world is a lot clearer, in the sense that you know you don't have to worry about the physicality of product anymore.

How did the team at Virgin deal with the pressures associated with fame that the Spice Girls had to deal with?

They didn't. You just handled it as it came. We basically weren't prepared for what happened, neither were the girls. So we just did what we thought was good at the time, and it worked out for them, as it did for Virgin.

What was the EMI Dance Network?
It was more or less what we replicated within Warner. It's like a task force, or a rapid response team if you like, that, when it's needed, can be put to work – people in each territory that are key in finding, signing, developing and marketing dance records; people that are either specialists on the A&R side, or specialists on the promo and marketing side, bundling that into a group.

At EMI, it was 20 to 25 people in major territories. At Warner, it's bigger, because we have more territories and it's more relevant for most people.

If you need an opinion, or a, 'Yes, we want to be in,' you can do that in two or three hours and have the whole world [on board].

How have A&R and marketing in dance music evolved since then?
It evolves constantly. It used to be a game of smaller labels, who tapped into the majors to license their bigger tracks, so they made their money back on advances. All the majors have now stepped in, either by buying into what we did, Spinnin' Records, or what we do internally here in the UK, by reviving or re-staffing FFRR or Big Beat in New York.

Andy Daniell from Defected has just been hired to run FFRR and Anton Powers has just joined from 3Beat to work with Warner Records to have a dance and marketing crew there. We do that more or less everywhere in the world [put dance specialists within regional labels], because we just see that there's opportunity to keep working dance tracks.

There's been a lot in the press in the last two or three weeks about the importance of songs being songs, and songs that go over half a billion or over a billion streams. They're a business in their own right. Obviously, there are quite a few of them to be had in the dance/dance-pop, area.

In what shape was Warner Music Group's presence in dance music at that stage?
[Good] in some countries, to be developed in others. But, that's exactly what I was there for, to help and suggest solutions and make sure that if we didn't have what was needed, that we could gradually work towards having specialists in each country that could be part of a global team that was like that strike force.

If you look at the globalisation of the industry, apart from urban and local language hip-hop, if you want to break with something out of Romania or Lithuania or Russia, chances are there's going to be a dance/dance-pop, track because it's the most global music language out there.

So we were kind of missing out on some of those [opportunities], because we didn't have people actually looking in that direction. We've always been very good at having dance in our pockets in the UK and in the US, particularly out of Germany and some of our Russian team; Italy as well.

"There's a lot of talent out there, it's just that there's not one unifying sound."

And then obviously two-and-a-half years ago, by buying Spinnin', we opened up that part of the world, we have our ears everywhere now. That was what was missing, and what we have now. It's just a matter of making sure it runs properly.

What was the thinking behind the Spinnin' acquisition?
Well, the key was to buy into their expertise. We needed to own more of our own channels, to market it, and if you look at Spinnin' with their YouTube channel, 27 million subscribers and their own 14 million social network subscribers, they already did what we need to do on a bigger level. When you have your own channels and you control them, that first six to eight weeks of marketing that you need to do can happen on your own channels. It's more precise, it's cheaper because obviously you control it, and it becomes an extension of your A&R too because you can test within your own channel whether something has got legs or not.

You mentioned that Spinnin' operates as an indie within the group. How does that work exactly?
Spinnin' does what it always did. It signs and releases globally. It obviously goes through the Warner pipeline.

What they do is more of a distribution economics rather than a licence. And then there is the opportunity for Warner territories or for Spinnin' or for me to actually say, 'Well, we think this needs to go through the Warner channels and be worked everywhere.'

And then we raise it... we just flip the switch if you like, and we raise it to another level, and then it becomes part of the economics change, but also obviously the marketing and promotion time that's spent on it changes. It's like a feeder label into Warner, but it's flexible. Most of what Spinnin' does is still on the distribution level, and they operate as an indie, and they do their own global promotion and specialised press and radio through their own channels.

What has it been like working with [Spinnin' co-founder] Roger de Graaf?
Working with Spinnin' is great. I can see myself a little bit as the buffer between Spinnin' and Warner in the sense that I kind of try and explain to the Spinnin' team what is expected, and what they can and can't do, and how they should tap into the resources that Warner has globally, and I do the same the other way around.

If someone in Brazil wants to pick up a Spinnin' track, it goes through me and my team and we figure out if it's worth it, or not. And then we go for it. Everyone's just been great. Obviously they used to run it as two of them, Eelko [van Kooten] and Roger, but


Joel Corry


Sam Feldt

Eelko left so he [Roger] had to get used to the fact that he was in charge on his own, but he's doing well.

How healthy is the emerging artist/producer landscape in dance music? Is there a shortage of emerging future stars?
If you look at the people at Guetta's level, or Calvin [Harris] or Tiesto, they've been there for quite some time, and there hasn't been enough new talent getting to that level of people that deliver two or three half a billion plus [streamed] tracks a year.

Meduza is there now. With Spinnin', together with our offices, we're definitely expanding the reach and trying to find talent in Brazil or Mexico. We just started Spinnin' Asia as well, so there is untapped potential there.

Spinnin' definitely has [opportunities] to sign [artists], I mean, in Brazil with Vintage Culture and Alok and Dubdogz, we've signed lots of Brazilian talent, and it just remains to be seen whether we can develop them into artist propositions that we didn't have before.

There is a lot of talent out there, it's just that there's not one unifying sound out there. What happened four or five years ago, with the EDM boom, that's not there anymore. Basically, everybody is in their own silo, which is great.

It's a very healthy business to be had, but obviously we're also interested in those things that cross over and [become] global superstars. So it's a bit more difficult to find those or develop those.

How healthy is the wider genre generally, if you look at its presence in the Top 100 singles in the UK and the US?
Well, it's had a knock in the last two or three years, with the explosion of urban and hip-hop, particularly in the US. If you look in the European airplay charts, for instance, you'll see there's a healthy 15-20% of dance tracks. If you look at the UK charts as well, with people like Joel Corry and Jax Jones and Sam Feldt, there is a steady flow of dance/dance-pop records that are an important part of our business.

So that's what we will be still going after and that's also why we have invested in A&R people to join the UK team but also teams around the world. There is a healthy business in dance, so we're making sure that we keep our position in the genre.

Are you seeing any trends in the price and structure of deals?
Deals are very competitive, which is why I think what we do with Spinnin' and with other emerging labels that we try and work with is the right thing. We try and find talent earlier.

If you want to do a deal with someone that's just had three massive hits, it's always going to be expensive. We want to be in there earlier and prove our value earlier – make sure that we are included in the development of the artist so we don't have to buy our way in, but work our way in. ■

Every Picture Tells A Story

Date: **September 9, 2002**
Location: **HMV, London**

I'm sure our HMV buying team had been regularly pressing Sony for the Holy Grail of in-store PAs: a David Bowie album signing. But I suspect a certain Alan Edwards [founder of the Outside Organisation and longtime Bowie publicist], who we knew well and had always greatly admired, had quite a bit to do with it too.

Having organised hundreds of in-stores over my 28 years with HMV, I always used to say that every artist, however iconic, always had at least one big PA in them. In my time we were graced with amazing appearances by the likes of Madonna, Tina Turner, Paul McCartney, Prince and Destiny's Child.

It was often as much a matter of luck and timing as anything else, and in September 2002 the stars truly aligned as David Bowie agreed to his one and only HMV signing, to promote his *Heathen* album.

For most of the staff there David was our God, so the idea of him visiting was almost surreal, and we were all nervous at the mere thought of being in his presence.

He was obviously hugely charming, just as we imagined, but also incredibly friendly, down to earth and relaxed, which immediately put everyone at their ease.

Alan Edwards introduced David to the HMV team as he arrived, but what was even more thrilling to me is that when he left a few hours later he not only agreed to a quick photo (to this day my most cherished possession), but he remembered my name and said, 'Goodbye Gennaro' on the way out. It was probably Alan giving him a gentle reminder, but the idea that, even for just a few seconds, David Bowie knew of my existence was almost too much to take in. And then, just like that, he was gone, and it all felt like a bit of a dream. It still does.

Gennaro Castaldo, officially one of the nicest people in the business (seriously, there was a poll; yes of course you were in it too), is the BPI Director of Communications and was formerly Head of Press and PR at HMV (until May 2013).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