

billboard

JUNE 26, 2021 • BILLBOARD.COM



2021

Country Power Players

HOW KANE BROWN, MICKEY GUYTON AND BROTHERS OSBORNE
ARE ROCKING NASHVILLE'S STATUS QUO

PLUS

EXECUTIVE OF THE YEAR
CMT'S LESLIE FRAM

COUNTRY'S TOURING TRAFFIC JAM
WHO GETS THE GREEN?

From left: John Osborne, Guyton, Brown and T.J. Osborne.



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2020-2021

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billboard

Hot 100



DaBaby (left) and Dua Lipa

Dua Lipa Keeps 'Levitating' At Radio

REALLY BELIEVE TIKTOK GAVE IT A HUMONGOUS JOLT BACK into the pop-culture forefront," says Erik Bradley, music director at KNOU (97.1NOW!) Los Angeles and assistant program director/music director at WBBM-FM (B96) Chicago, of Dua Lipa's "Levitating," featuring DaBaby. "There was a period as it was reemerging at radio when you couldn't open TikTok without seeing it all over your feed."

More than a year after the original was released on Lipa's album *Future Nostalgia* — the remix with DaBaby arrived in October, and the song subsequently entered the Billboard Hot 100 — "Levitating" holds at No. 3 as it hits a new No. 2 high on the Radio Songs chart, up 4% to 81.1 million impressions, according to MRC Data. It first reached No. 6 on Radio Songs in January and exited the top 10 for over two months until May. It also spends a second week at No. 1 on the Mainstream Top 40 and Adult Top 40 airplay charts.

Further helping the song's longevity: "the upbeat tempo, with several major artists' songs being ballads," says Cat Thomas, program director at KQMV (MOViN 92.5) Seattle. "We need the tempo to separate the slow songs."

To date, "Levitating" has drawn 1.7 billion in cumulative radio audience and 590 million U.S. streams, and has sold 307,000 downloads.

—GARY TRUST

WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	TITLE	CERTIFICATION PRODUCER (SONGWRITER)	Artist IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
1	1	1	#1 4 WKS BUTTER	R. GRIMALDI, S. KIRK, R. PERRY (J. ANDREWS, R. GRIMALDI, S. KIRK, R. M. A. BILOWITZ, S. GARCIA, R. PERRY)	BTS HYBE/BIG HIT ENTERTAINMENT/COLUMBIA	1	4
2	2	2	AIR GOOD 4 U	D. NIGRO, ALEXANDER 23 (O. RODRIGO, D. L. NIGRO)	Olivia Rodrigo Geffen/Interscope	1	5
3	3	3	LEVITATING ▲	KOZ, S. D. PRICE (C. COFFEE, JR., S. KOZMENIUK, S. T. HUDSON, D. LIPA, J. L. KIRK)	Dua Lipa Feat. DaBaby WARNER	2	37
7	7	4	KISS ME MORE	YETI BEATS, R. CHAHAYED (A. Z. DLAMINI, D. SPRECHER, R. CHAHAYED, G. A. POWELL II, C. LANG, L. S. GOTTWALD, S. I. ROWET, T. SHADDICK, S. A. KIPNER)	Doja Cat Feat. SZA Kemosabe/RCA	4	10
6	4	5	PEACHES ▲	HARV, SHINDO (J. D. BIBER, A. WOTMAN, G. D. EVANS, B. HARVEY, L. M. MARTINEZ, JR., L. B. BELL, F. KING, M. S. LEON, K. YAZDANI, A. SIMMONS)	Justin Bieber Feat. Daniel Caesar & Giveon RAYMOND BRAUN/DEF JAM	1	13
4	5	6	LEAVE THE DOOR OPEN	BRUNO MARS, D'EMILE (BRUNO MARS, B. ANDERSON, D. EMILE II, C. B. BROWN)	Silk Sonic (Bruno Mars & Anderson .Paak) ATLANTIC	1	15
5	6	7	SAVE YOUR TEARS ▲	MAX MARTIN, O. T. HOLTER, THE WEEKND (A. TESFAYE, A. BALSHE, J. QUENNEVILLE, MAX MARTIN, O. T. HOLTER, A. GRANDE)	The Weeknd & Ariana Grande XO/REPUBLIC	1	27
9	8	8	ASTRONAUT IN THE OCEAN	T. HAPI (H. MICHAEL, T. HAPI)	Masked Wolf TEAMWRK/ELEKTRA/EMG	6	18
10	11	9	MONTERO (CALL ME BY YOUR NAME) ▲	TAKE A DAY TRIP (O. FEDI), R. LENZO (M. L. HILL, D. M. A. BAPTISTE, D. BIRAL, O. FEDI, R. LENZO)	Lil Nas X COLUMBIA	1	12
8	9	10	DEJA VU ●	D. NIGRO (D. L. NIGRO, O. RODRIGO)	Olivia Rodrigo Geffen/Interscope	3	11

THE WEEKS MOST POPULAR CURRENT SONGS ACROSS ALL GENRES, RANKED BY RADIO AIRPLAY, AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS AS MEASURED BY MRC DATA, SALES DATA AS COMPILED BY MRC DATA AND STREAMING ACTIVITY DATA BY ONLINE MUSIC SOURCES TRACKED BY MRC DATA. SONGS ARE DEFINED AS CURRENT IF THEY ARE NEWLY RELEASED TITLES, OR SONGS RECEIVING WIDE SPREAD AIRPLAY OR SALES ACTIVITY FOR THE FIRST TIME. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND REGULATIONS. © 2021 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND MRC DATA INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



The first solo Hot 100 entry by the 27-year-old San Juan, Puerto Rico, native also returns to its No. 3 high on Hot Latin Songs.

45
RAUW ALEJANDRO
"Todo de Ti"

How did "Todo de Ti" come together?

When I was finalizing my album, *Vice Versa*, I felt like something was missing. That's when "Todo de Ti" was born. I got inspired by old-school sounds like funk and disco — I'm a huge fan of James Brown and Bruno Mars. I was looking for that track that I could dance to onstage. The most important thing in my music is the melodies. I was so excited about the track that we finished it in two days.

You've experimented with pop before. Why do you enjoy exploring that genre?

That was a preview of the future. This is the type of music that I like to do. I believe that artists should not have any rules — if reggaeton, or any other genre, makes them happy, then that's what they should do. I like to get out of my comfort zone and to be able to explore, expand and grow. I don't like getting boxed in a certain type of genre. I want to become a complete artist.

The music video takes place at a roller rink and features Shaquille O'Neal. How did you score that?

I know how to dance and skate, but not how to dance while skating. I trained an entire week with choreographers. Shaq's manager and my manager have a close relationship. When we told him about the idea, he got excited. We filmed the video in Atlanta because that's where he [lives] and where skate culture is. It was like the planets aligned. —JESSICA ROIZ



1
BTS
"Butter"

The song becomes BTS' longest-leading Hot 100 No. 1, passing the one-week reign of "Dynamite" in 2020. "Butter" also tops *Billboard's* returning Songs of the Summer chart.

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	TITLE PRODUCER (SONGWRITER)	CERTIFICATION	Artist IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
14	14	11	RAPSTAR E.BANKZ, SYNCO (T.T.BARTLETT, E.BANKZ, A.WU, S.L.LINDSTROM)	▲	Polo G COLUMBIA	1	10
15	13	12	FOREVER AFTER ALL CHIP MATT THEWS, J.D. SINGLETON, L.COMBS (L.COMBS, D.PARKER, R.WILLIFORD)		Luke Combs RIVER HOUSE/ COLUMBIA NASHVILLE	2	34
11	12	13	WITHOUT YOU O.FEDI, B.SLATKIN (C.K.J.HOWARD, B.WALSH, O.FEDI, B.SLATKIN)	▲	The Kid LAROI COLUMBIA	8	28
18	18	14	BEAUTIFUL MISTAKES A.M.GOLDSTEIN, B.BLACKBEAR, J.A.N.LEVINE, M.T.MUSTO, A.M.GOLDSTEIN, J.KIRKLAND, J.K.HINDLIN, M.J.PETE		Maroon 5 Feat. Megan Thee Stallion 222/INTERSCOPE	14	15
HOT SHOT DEBUT		15	HAVING OUR WAY AZUL WINTER, PREME WALLIS, LANE, J.LOMASTRO, O.K.MARSHALL, K.CEPHUS, K.BALL, L.COMBS, AMIR STIVIE, B.J.PLOMASTRO, N.JAHANBIN, P.JAHANBIN, T.THOMPSON		Migos Feat. Drake QUALITY CONTROL/ MOTOWN/CAPITOL	15	1
NEW		16	THOT SHIT OG PARKER, LIL JU (M.J.PETE, J.I.PARKER, J.M.MASON)		Megan Thee Stallion 1501 CERTIFIED/300	16	1
17	15	17	BLINDING LIGHTS MAX MARTIN, O.T.HOLTER, THE WEEKND (A.TESFAVE, A.BALSHE, J.QUENNEVILLE, MAX MARTIN, O.T.HOLTER)	▲	The Weeknd XO/REPUBLIC	1	80
		10	YONAGUNI SMASH DAVID, FINESSE, BYRD, TAINY (B.A.MARTINEZ OCASIO, S.O.JIMINEZ, A.SINGH, BYRD, O.J.CEPEDA MATOS, M.E.MASIS FERNANDEZ, J.M.REYES DIAZ)		Bad Bunny RIMAS	10	2
13	17	19	DRIVERS LICENSE D.NIGRO (O.RODRIGO, D.L.NIGRO)	▲	Olivia Rodrigo GEFFEN/INTERSCOPE	1	23
22	22	20	BEST FRIEND DR. LUKE, ROCCO DID IT AGAIN! (D.HARPER, A.Z.DLAMINI, T.THOMAS, R.WALDES, L.S.GOTTWALD, K.AINE, A.T.R.SMITH)		Saweetie Feat. Doja Cat ICY/WARNER	14	23

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	TITLE PRODUCER (SONGWRITER)	CERTIFICATION	Artist IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
25	24	21	HEAT WAVES D.BAYLEY (D.BAYLEY)	▲	Glass Animals WOLF TONE/POLYDOR/REPUBLIC	21	22
23	23	22	HEARTBREAK ANNIVERSARY S.THOMAS, S.M.BIDAYE (G.D.EVANS, V.WADE, S.THOMAS, M.BIDAYE)	▲	Giveon NOT SO FAST/EPIC	17	18
78	87	23	SAL STM STRAIGHTENIN D.DUREL, A.HES, M.ECASTRO, S.LLOYD, N.KUZIAS, G.MARSHALL, C.EPHUS, K.BALL, J.DETREZ, C.TRELL, J.D.GINTINS, K.BELLO, D.MCFHERSON, A.FRAN		Migos QUALITY CONTROL/ MOTOWN/CAPITOL	23	5
39	37	24	WANTS AND NEEDS CARDON ON THE BEAT, DEZ WASHINGTON, 40 (A.GRAHAM, D.A.JONES, R.LATOUR, D.CLEARY, KRELL, N.J.SHEBIB)		Drake Feat. Lil Baby OVO SOUND/ REPUBLIC	2	15
12	19	25	TRAITOR D.NIGRO (O.RODRIGO, D.L.NIGRO)		Olivia Rodrigo GEFFEN/INTERSCOPE	9	4
NEW		26	NO RETURN TAZ TAYLOR, R.JOHNSON, M.WU (T.T.BARTLETT, C.K.J.HOWARD, D.D.BANKS)		Polo G Feat. The Kid LAROI & Lil Durk COLUMBIA	26	1
NEW		27	AVALANCHE D.DUREL, QUAVO (O.K.MARSHALL, K.CEPHUS, K.K.BALL, D.MCFHERSON, B.STRONG)		Migos QUALITY CONTROL/ MOTOWN/CAPITOL	27	1
43	38	28	FAMOUS FRIENDS C.YOUNG, C.CROWDER (C.YOUNG, C.R.BARLOWE, C.CROWDER)		Chris Young + Kane Brown RCA NASHVILLE	28	12
21	25	29	CALLING MY PHONE G.RY, BORDEAUX, NON NATIVE (LIL TJAY, R.V.VALENTINE, JR., R.A.MARTINEZ, L.CAMPOZANO, B.WALSH, H.SIYUUM)	▲	Lil Tjay Feat. 6LACK COLUMBIA	3	18
34	33	30	TELEPATIA TAINY, M.LARA, ALBERT HYPE (K.LOAIZA, CRIS CHIL, S.M.PRIMERA MUSSETT, M.LARA, A.C.MELELENDEZ, M.E.MASIS FERNANDEZ)		Kali Uchis EMI/ INTERSCOPE	30	17
30	30	31	MOOD O.FEDI, B.SLATKIN, KBEAZY (G.L.VON JONES, O.FEDI, B.SLATKIN, K.C.BACH, M.I.O.LMO)	▲	24kGoldn Feat. iann dior RECORDS/ COLUMBIA	1	45
36	40	32	GONE D.GARCIA (N.GALYON, B.JOHNSON, N.MOON)		Dierks Bentley CAPITOL NASHVILLE	32	14
37	39	33	POV TBHITS, MR.FRANKS, O.FRID (A.GRANDE, T.L.BROWN, S.FRANKS, O.FRID, T.M.PARKS)		Ariana Grande REPUBLIC	33	15
26	32	34	EVERY CHANCE I GET TAY KEITH, DJ KHALED (K.M.KHALED, D.A.JONES, D.D.BANKS, B.L.CHAMBERS)		DJ Khaled Feat. Lil Baby & Lil Durk WE THE BEST/EPIC	20	7
		20	LATE AT NIGHT MUSTARD, GYLT TRYF (R.W.MOORE, JR., D.J.MCFARLANE, S.R.KHAN ZAMAN KHAN)		Roddy Ricch ATLANTIC	20	2
31	42	36	MY EX'S BEST FRIEND T.L.BARKER (R.C.BAKER, T.L.BARKER, N.A.LONG, M.T.MUSTO)		Machine Gun Kelly X blackbear EST19X/BAD BOY/ INTERSCOPE	20	44
53	50	37	LIL BIT J.M.SCHMIDT (T.HUBBARD, J.M.SCHMIDT, B.REDFERRIN, C.HAYNES, JR.)		Nelly & Florida Georgia Line RECORDS/BMLG/COLUMBIA	37	13
NEW		38	NEED TO KNOW DR. LUKE (A.Z.DLAMINI, L.S.GOTTWALD)		Doja Cat KEMOSABE/RCA	38	1
33	36	39	WOCKESHA Y.C.REAL, RED, J.ROCKAMORE (D.D.WHITE, JR., E.B.JORDAN, M.DEBARGE, C.PEARSON, J.D.NELSON, J.ROCKAMORE)		Moneybagg Yo CMG/N-LESS/ INTERSCOPE	33	8
20	28	40	HAPPIER D.NIGRO (O.RODRIGO)		Olivia Rodrigo GEFFEN/INTERSCOPE	15	4
41	45	41	WHAT YOU KNOW BOUT LOVE I AM TASH (B.B.JACKSON, T.ZENE, T.A.OLIVER, E.LUMPKIN)	▲	Pop Smoke VIC/RECTOR WORLDWIDE/REPUBLIC	9	41
24	29	42	UP YUNG DZA, DJ SWANQO, SEAN ISLAND (CARDI B, J.K.LANIER THORPE, J.D.STEED, E.SELMANI, M.ALLEN, J.BAKER)		Cardi B ATLANTIC	1	19
16	26	43	FAVORITE CRIME D.NIGRO (O.RODRIGO, D.L.NIGRO)		Olivia Rodrigo GEFFEN/INTERSCOPE	16	4
63	51	44	BLAME IT ON YOU M.KNOX (K.M.ALLISON, J.EDWARDS, T.KENNEDY, M.TYLER, B.WHITE)		Jason Aldean MACON/BROKEN BOW	44	8
66	53	45	TODO DE TI MR.NAISGAL, EL ZORRO (R.A.OCASIO RUIZ, L.J.GONZALEZ, R.E.PABON NAVEDO, J.M.COLLAZO, E.L.PEREZ ROVIRA)		Rauw Alejandro DUARS/SONY MUSIC LATIN	45	3
		46	BEAT BOX DAMN E (N.HARDEN, E.JOSEPH, L.WILLIAMS, J.L.KIRK)		SpotemGottem Feat. Pooh Shiesty Or DaBaby SPOTEMGOTTEM/REBEL RECORDS/ GEFFEN/INTERSCOPE	12	22
48	49	47	TIME TODAY REAL RED, YC (D.D.WHITE, JR., C.PEARSON, J.D.NELSON)		Moneybagg Yo CMG/N-LESS/ INTERSCOPE	31	19
		48	GANG GANG A.FERRARO (T.T.BARTLETT, D.M.CARTER, JR.)		Polo G & Lil Wayne COLUMBIA	33	4
	16	49	HATS OFF CHI CHI, YOUNG T.N.C, OSONDU, D.A.JONES, D.D.BANKS, TRAVIS SCOTT, T.PERINPANESAN)		Lil Baby, Lil Durk & Travis Scott ALAMO/QUALITY CONTROL/ MOTOWN/INTERSCOPE/CAPITOL	16	2
47	55	50	SETTLING DOWN J.JOYCE (M.LAMBERT, L.DICK, N.HEMBY)		Miranda Lambert VANNER/RCA NASHVILLE	47	14

ALEJANDRO: 80THISHOOTER; BTS: COURTESY OF BIG HIT MUSIC.

THE WEEKND'S "BLINDING LIGHTS" AND "THE VOODOO PARTYS," SKELETON'S "DUPLICATE," AND STAY'S "MISTAKES" WERE STREAMED BY MORE THAN 100,000 LISTENERS. DR. LUKE'S "NEED TO KNOW" AND "HATS OFF," MARSHALLS' "COP," AND "BEAT BOX" WERE STREAMED BY MORE THAN 100,000 LISTENERS. MITSUNO'S "DREAMS" WAS STREAMED BY MORE THAN 100,000 LISTENERS. "HATS OFF" WAS STREAMED BY MORE THAN 100,000 LISTENERS. "BEAT BOX" WAS STREAMED BY MORE THAN 100,000 LISTENERS. "BEAT BOX" WAS STREAMED BY MORE THAN 100,000 LISTENERS. ©2021 BILLBOARD MEDIA, LLC AND AMERICA'S BILLBOARDS. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



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DELIVER ME (THIS IS MY EXODUS)

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KANYE WEST

Hands On
 On God
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LA NAUVE

PODCAST

marko



MARKO



MARKO EN YOUTUBE



LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	ARTIST	CERTIFICATION	IMPRINT/DISTRIBUTING LABEL	Title	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
HOT SHOT DEBUT	1	#1 1WK POLO G		COLUMBIA	Hall Of Fame	1	1
NEW	2	MIGOS		QUALITY CONTROL/MOTOWN/CAPITOL	Culture III	2	1
	3	OLIVIA RODRIGO		GEFFEN/IGA	Sour	1	4
	4	LIL BABY & LIL DURK		ALAMO/QUALITY CONTROL/MOTOWN/IGA/CAPITOL	The Voice Of The Heroes	1	2
	5	MORGAN WALLEN		BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	Dangerous: The Double Album	1	23
NEW	6	TWICE		JYP/REPUBLIC	Taste Of Love: The 10th Mini Album (EP)	6	1
	7	GREATEST GAINER		IMPERIAL/REPUBLIC	BO BURNHAM Inside (The Songs)	7	2
NEW	8	MAROON 5		222/INTERSCOPE/IGA	Jordi	8	1
	9	MONEYBAGG YO		CMG/N-LESS/INTERSCOPE/IGA	A Gangsta's Pain	1	8
	10	J. COLE		DREAMVILLE/ROC NATION/INTERSCOPE/IGA	The Off-Season	1	5
	11	DUA LIPA		WARNER	Future Nostalgia	3	63
NEW	12	MAMMOTH WVH		EXT	Mammoth WVH	12	1
	13	LUKE COMBS		RIVER HOUSE/COLUMBIA NASHVILLE/SMN	What You See Is What You Get	1	84
	14	JUSTIN BIEBER		RAYMOND BRAUN/DEF JAM	Justice	1	13
	15	THE WEEKND		XO/REPUBLIC	After Hours	1	61
	16	POP SMOKE		VICTOR VICTOR WORLDWIDE/REPUBLIC	Shoot For The Stars Aim For The Moon	1	50
	17	TAYLOR SWIFT		REPUBLIC	Evermore	1	27
	18	POST MALONE		REPUBLIC	Hollywood's Bleeding	1	93
	19	LIL BABY		QUALITY CONTROL/MOTOWN/CAPITOL	My Turn	1	68
	20	MACHINE GUN KELLY		EST19XX/BAD BOY/INTERSCOPE/IGA	Tickets To My Downfall	1	38
	21	QUEEN		HOLLYWOOD	Greatest Hits	8	443
	22	JUICE WRLD		GRADE A/INTERSCOPE/IGA	Goodbye & Good Riddance	4	161
	23	JUICE WRLD		GRADE A/INTERSCOPE/IGA	Legends Never Die	1	49
	24	ROD WAVE		ALAMO/GEFFEN/IGA	SoulFly	1	12
	25	DJ KHALED		WE THE BEST/EPIC	Khaled Khaled	1	7
	26	HARRY STYLES		ERSKINE/COLUMBIA	Fine Line	1	79
	27	FLEETWOOD MAC		WARNER/RHINO	Rumours	1	429
	28	POOH SHIESTY		1017 GLOBAL/ATLANTIC/AG	Shiesty Season	3	19
	29	LUKE COMBS		RIVER HOUSE/COLUMBIA NASHVILLE/SMN	This One's For You	4	211
	30	THE WEEKND		XO/REPUBLIC	The Highlights	2	19
	31	ARIANA GRANDE		REPUBLIC	Positions	1	33
	32	THE KID LAROI		COLUMBIA	F*ck Love	3	47
NEW	33	GARBAGE		STUN VOLUME/INFECTIOUS/BMG	No Gods No Masters	33	1
	34	TOMORROW X TOGETHER		HYBE/BIGHIT ENTERTAINMENT/REPUBLIC	The Chaos Chapter: FREEZE	5	2
NEW	35	PI'ERRE BOURNE		SOSSH/INTERSCOPE/IGA	The Life Of Pi'erre 5	35	1
RE	36	LADY GAGA		STREAMLINE/INTERSCOPE/IGA	Chromatica	1	40
	37	BILLIE EILISH		DARKROOM/INTERSCOPE/IGA	When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?	1	116
	38	YOUNG THUG & VARIOUS ARTISTS		YOUNG STONER LIFE/300/AG	Young Stoner Life: Slime Language 2	1	9
	39	ORIGINAL BROADWAY CAST		HAMILTON UPTOWN/ATLANTIC/AG	Hamilton: An American Musical	2	299
	40	MEGAN THEE STALLION		1501 CERTIFIED/300/AG	Good News	2	30
	41	POLO G		COLUMBIA	The GOAT	2	57
	42	BAD BUNNY		RIMAS	El Ultimo Tour del Mundo	1	29
	43	BAD BUNNY		RIMAS	YHLQMDLG	2	68
	44	MORGAN WALLEN		BIG LOUD	If I Know Me	10	142
NEW	45	SOUNDTRACK		WATERTOWER/ATLANTIC/AG	In The Heights	45	1
	46	GIVEON		NOT SO FAST/EPIC	When It's All Said And Done... Take Time	5	14
	47	CREEDENCE CLEARWATER REVIVAL		FANTASY/CONCORD	Chronicle The 20 Greatest Hits	18	528
	48	42 DUGG		4PF/CMG	Free Dem Boyz	8	4
	49	TRAVIS SCOTT		CACTUS JACK/GRAND HUSTLE/EPIC	ASTROWORLD	1	150
	50	BOB MARLEY AND THE WAILERS		TUFF GONG/ISLAND/UMI	Legend: The Best Of...	5	683

LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	ARTIST	CERTIFICATION	IMPRINT/DISTRIBUTING LABEL	Title	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
	45	ELTON JOHN		ROCKET/ISLAND/UME	Diamonds	7	188
	46	LIL TJAY		COLUMBIA	Destined 2 Win	5	11
	47	KENDRICK LAMAR		TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE/IGA	good kid, m.A.A.d city	2	451
	48	EMINEM		SHADY/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE/IGA	Curtain Call: The Hits	1	533
	49	DOJA CAT		KEMOSABE/RCA	Hot Pink	9	85
	50	DRAKE		YOUNG MONEY/CASH MONEY/REPUBLIC	Scorpion	1	155
	51	TAYLOR SWIFT		REPUBLIC	Folklore	1	47
	52	POST MALONE		REPUBLIC	beerbongs & bentleys	1	164
NEW	53	CROWDER		SIX STEPS/SPARROW/CAPITOL CMG	Milk & Honey	59	1
	54	CHRIS STAPLETON		MERCURY NASHVILLE/UMGN	Starting Over	3	31
RE	55	LINKIN PARK		MACHINE SHOP/WARNER	Meteora	1	119
	56	CHRIS STAPLETON		MERCURY NASHVILLE/UMGN	Traveller	1	301
	57	LIL DURK		ALAMO/GEFFEN/IGA	The Voice	2	26
	58	TAYLOR SWIFT		REPUBLIC	Lover	1	95
	59	J. COLE		DREAMVILLE/ROC NATION/COLUMBIA/LEGACY	2014 Forest Hills Drive	1	341
	60	SZA		TOP DAWG/RCA	Ctrl	3	210
	61	JUICE WRLD		GRADE A/INTERSCOPE/IGA	Death Race For Love	1	119
	62	NICKI MINAJ		YOUNG MONEY/CASH MONEY/REPUBLIC	Beam Me Up Scotty	2	5
	63	AC/DC		COLUMBIA/LEGACY	Back In Black	4	468
	64	EMINEM		SHADY/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE/IGA	Music To Be Murdered By	1	73
NEW	65	PRINCE		NRG/LEGACY	The Truth	71	1
NEW	66	RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE		EPIC/LEGACY	The Battle Of Mexico City	72	1
	67	FLORIDA GEORGIA LINE		BMLG	Life Rolls On	21	18
NEW	68	TOM PETTY AND THE HEARTBREAKERS		Angel Dream: Songs And Music From The Motion Picture 'She's The One'	Angel Dream: Songs And Music From The Motion Picture 'She's The One'	74	1
	69	2PAC		AMARU/DEATH ROW/INTERSCOPE/UME	Greatest Hits	3	375
	70	JOURNEY		COLUMBIA/LEGACY	Journey's Greatest Hits	10	673
	71	GLASS ANIMALS		WOLF TONE/POLYDOR/REPUBLIC	Dreamland	7	32
	72	SUMMER WALKER		LVRN/INTERSCOPE/IGA	Over It	2	89
	73	POST MALONE		REPUBLIC	Stoney	4	236
RE	74	ARIANA GRANDE		REPUBLIC	k bye for now (swt live)	80	3
	75	TWENTY ONE PILOTS		FUELED BY RAMEN/EMG	Scaled And Icy	3	4
	76	GUNS N' ROSES		GEFFEN/UME	Greatest Hits	3	534
	77	JACK HARLOW		GENERATION NOW/ATLANTIC/AG	That's What They All Say	5	27
	78	ROD WAVE		ALAMO/IGA	Pray 4 Love	2	63
	79	MICHAEL JACKSON		EPIC/LEGACY	Thriller	1	475
	80	TOM PETTY AND THE HEARTBREAKERS		MCA/GEFFEN/UME	Greatest Hits	2	414
	81	ED SHEERAN		ATLANTIC/AG	÷ (Divide)	1	224
	82	TAYLOR SWIFT		REPUBLIC	Fearless (Taylor's Version)	1	10
	83	LIL UZI VERT		GENERATION NOW/ATLANTIC/AG	Eternal Atake	1	67
	84	ZAC BROWN BAND		HOME GROWN/BMG	Greatest Hits So Far...	20	309
	85	DABABY		SOUTH COAST/INTERSCOPE/IGA	BLAME IT ON BABY	1	61
NEW	86	MARINA		CRUSH MUSIC/ATLANTIC/AG	Ancient Dreams In A Modern Land	92	1
	87	YOUNGBOY NEVER BROKE AGAIN		NEVER BROKE AGAIN/ARTIST PARTNER GROUP/ATLANTIC/AG	Top	1	40
	88	BRUNO MARS		ELEKTRA/EMG	Doo-Wops & Hootigans	3	524
	89	KAROL G		UNIVERSAL MUSIC LATINO/UMLE	KG0516	20	12
	90	SLEEPY HALLOW		WINNERS CIRCLE/RCA	Still Sleep?	38	3
	91	RODDY RICCH		BIRD VISION/ATLANTIC/AG	Please Excuse Me For Being Antisocial	1	80
	92	BILLY JOEL		COLUMBIA/LEGACY	The Essential Billy Joel	15	241
	93	LEWIS CAPALDI		VERTIGO/CAPITOL	Divinely Uninspired To A Hellish Extent	20	109
	94	LUKE BRYAN		CAPITOL NASHVILLE/UMGN	Born Here Live Here Die Here	5	34



Polo G's First No. 1

Polo G lands his first No. 1 album on the Billboard 200 as *Hall of Fame* opens atop the tally, earning 143,000 equivalent album units in the United States during the week ending June 17, according to MRC Data. All three of the rapper's charting albums have reached the top 10.

The 20-track *Hall of Fame* contains Polo G's first No. 1 single on the Billboard Hot 100, "Rapstar," which spent two weeks at No. 1 (on the charts dated April 24 and May 1). The album also boasts guests such as The Kid LAROI, Lil Durk, Lil Wayne, Nicki Minaj, Roddy Ricch, Pop Smoke, Rod Wave and Young Thug.

Of Hall of Fame's 143,000 units earned, streaming-equivalent album units make up 124,000, equaling 181.9 million on-demand streams of the album's tracks; album sales 18,000, aided in part by deep discounting at digital retail for part of the week; and track-equivalent album units a little over 1,000.

Polo G previously hit the top 10 with *The Goat* (No. 2 in 2020) and *Die a Legend* (No. 6 in 2019).

—KEITH CAULFIELD

THE BILLBOARD 200 CHART RANKS THE MOST POPULAR ALBUMS OF THE WEEK, AS COMPILED BY MRC DATA. BASED ON MULTI-METRIC CONSUMPTION (BLENDING TRADITIONAL ALBUM SALES, TRACK-EQUIVALENT ALBUMS AND STREAMING-EQUIVALENT ALBUMS).





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billboard

JUN. 26 2021

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	TITLE	Artist	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
2	1	1	#1 GOOD 4 U	Olivia Rodrigo	1	5
1	2	2	BUTTER	BTS	1	4
4	5	3	SAVE YOUR TEARS	The Weeknd	1	24
-	3	4	YONAGUNI	Bad Bunny	3	2
 <p>The Puerto Rican star's Spanish- and Japanese-language track (named after the westernmost island of Japan) holds in the top five with 80.3 million streams and 2,100 sold globally.</p>						
3	4	5	TODO DE TI	Rauw Alejandro	3	4
5	6	6	LEVITATING	Dua Lipa Feat. DaBaby	2	37
6	7	7	KISS ME MORE	Doja Cat Feat. SZA	3	10
8	8	8	MONTERO (CALL ME BY YOUR NAME)	Lil Nas X	1	12
9	9	9	PEACHES	Justin Bieber Feat. Daniel Caesar & Giveon	1	13
7	10	10	DEJA VU	Olivia Rodrigo	3	11
11	11	11	ASTRONAUT IN THE OCEAN	Masked Wolf	3	21
13	13	12	LEAVE THE DOOR OPEN	Silk Sonic (Bruno Mars & Anderson .Paak)	2	15
10	12	13	TRAITOR	Olivia Rodrigo	7	4
12	14	14	DRIVERS LICENSE	Olivia Rodrigo	1	23
21	22	15	RAPSTAR	Polo G	3	10
17	18	16	BLINDING LIGHTS	The Weeknd	2	41
HOT SHOT DEBUT	17	17	HAVING OUR WAY	Migos Feat. Drake	17	1
15	16	18	HAPPIER	Olivia Rodrigo	14	4
18	19	19	DYNAMITE	BTS	1	41
28	26	20	FIEL	Los Legendarios, Wisin & Jhay Cortez	15	14
32	29	21	I WANNA BE YOUR SLAVE	Maneskin	21	4
14	17	22	FAVORITE CRIME	Olivia Rodrigo	14	4
25	25	23	FRIDAY	Riton X Nightcrawlers Feat. Mufasa & Hypeman	18	17
42	38	24	BEAUTIFUL MISTAKES	Maroon 5 Feat. Megan Thee Stallion	24	15
20	20	25	BUILD A BITCH	Bella Poarch	20	5
NEW	26	26	SOLAR POWER	Lorde	26	1
NEW	27	27	THOT SHIT	Megan Thee Stallion	27	1
23	24	28	PAREJA DEL AÑO	Sebastian Yatra X Myke Towers	16	9
NEW	29	29	NEED TO KNOW	Doja Cat	29	1
88	57	30	QUE MAS PUES?	J Balvin & Maria Becerra	30	3
16	21	31	BRUTAL	Olivia Rodrigo	11	4
36	37	32	HEAT WAVES	Glass Animals	31	24
26	28	33	WITHOUT YOU	The Kid LAROI	10	30
50	48	34	WANTS AND NEEDS	Drake Feat. Lil Baby	2	15
30	30	35	THE BUSINESS	Tiesto	12	32
125	15	36	LOST CAUSE	Billie Eilish	15	3
-	106	37	BEGGIN	Maneskin	37	2
NEW	38	38	NO RETURN	Polo G Feat. The Kid LAROI & Lil Durk	38	1
34	32	39	DAKITI	Bad Bunny & Jhay Cortez	1	33
NEW	40	40	AVALANCHE	Migos	40	1
-	176	41	ALCOHOL-FREE	TWICE	41	2
40	39	42	WATERMELON SUGAR	Harry Styles	9	41
148	190	43	GG STRAIGHTENIN	Migos	42	5
29	33	44	JEALOUSY, JEALOUSY	Olivia Rodrigo	19	4

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	TITLE	Artist	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
39	43	45	MOOD	24kGoldn Feat. iann dior	2	41
31	40	46	HEARTBREAK ANNIVERSARY	Giveon	10	18
24	34	47	BODY	Tion Wayne X Russ Millions	11	8
45	46	48	2/CATORCE	Rauw Alejandro X Mr. Naisgai	45	6
35	45	49	GOOSEBUMPS	Travis Scott & HVME	15	25
22	36	50	ZITTI E BUONI	Maneskin	22	4
33	41	51	AM	Nio Garcia X Flow La Movie	24	10
38	44	52	BOTELLA TRAS BOTELLA	Gera MX + Christian Nodal	9	8
44	47	53	DANCE MONKEY	Tones And I	16	41
43	49	54	EL MAKINON	Karol G & Mariah Angeliq	39	12
19	31	55	ENOUGH FOR YOU	Olivia Rodrigo	13	4
-	27	56	LATE AT NIGHT	Roddy Ricch	27	2
53	54	57	DON'T START NOW	Dua Lipa	30	41
52	55	58	RAM PAM PAM	Natti Natasha & Becky G	52	5
47	51	59	UP	Cardi B	4	19
86	147	60	GANG GANG	Polo G & Lil Wayne	44	4
61	63	61	PERFECT	Ed Sheeran	30	41
56	62	62	SOMEONE YOU LOVED	Lewis Capaldi	24	41
49	53	63	TELEPATIA	Kali Uchis	10	17
27	42	64	1 STEP FORWARD, 3 STEPS BACK	Olivia Rodrigo	17	4
NEW	65	65	BLACK HEARTED	Polo G	65	1
51	65	66	WELLERMAN	Nathan Evans	16	21
54	67	67	YOUR LOVE (9PM)	ATB x Topic x A7S	37	19
70	75	68	FOREVER AFTER ALL	Luke Combs	4	26
57	66	69	COVER ME IN SUNSHINE	Pink + Willow Sage Hart	49	15
62	74	70	BED	Joel Corry X RAYE X David Guetta	48	15
60	70	71	BEST FRIEND	Saweetie Feat. Doja Cat	31	23
NEW	72	72	MODERN DAY	Migos	72	1
NEW	73	73	MALIBU	Migos Feat. Polo G	73	1
59	72	74	STREETS	Doja Cat	8	23
-	23	75	HATS OFF	Lil Baby, Lil Durk & Travis Scott	23	2
93	90	76	HIGHER POWER	Coldplay	24	6
66	78	77	ROSES	SAINT JHN	14	41
NEW	78	78	PAINTING PICTURES	Polo G	78	1
72	77	79	RASPUTIN	Majestic X Boney M.	72	8
55	73	80	ARCADE	Duncan Laurence	36	20
NEW	81	81	LOST	Maroon 5	81	1
NEW	82	82	DINERO	Trinidad Cardona	82	1
63	68	83	WOCKESHA	Moneybagg Yo	58	8
64	81	84	HOLD ON	Justin Bieber	4	15
58	71	85	CALLING MY PHONE	Lil Tjay Feat. 6LACK	2	18
77	86	86	SHAPE OF YOU	Ed Sheeran	68	41
80	83	87	MIENTEME	TINI X Maria Becerra	80	7
75	84	88	SUNFLOWER	Post Malone & Swae Lee	47	41
101	99	89	LEAVE BEFORE YOU LOVE ME	Marshmello X Jonas Brothers	89	4
NEW	90	90	TOXIC	Polo G	90	1
69	79	91	BANDIDO	Myke Towers & Juhn	11	25
-	129	92	TRANSPARENTSOUL	Willow Feat. Travis Barker	92	2
76	87	93	HEAD & HEART	Joel Corry X MNEK	17	41
107	108	94	HEARTBREAK ANTHEM	Galantis, David Guetta & Little Mix	83	4
134	52	95	PALE BLUE	Kenshi Yonezu	52	3
81	94	96	SAVAGE LOVE (LAXED - SIREN BEAT)	Jawsh 685 x Jason Derulo	1	41

THE BILLBOARD GLOBAL 200 CHART RANKS THE TOP SONGS BASED ON STREAMING AND/OR SALES ACTIVITY FROM OVER 200 TERRITORIES AROUND THE WORLD—INCLUDING THE UNITED STATES—AS TRACKED BY MRC DATA. THE RANKING IS BASED ON A WEIGHTED FORMULA INCORPORATING OFFICIAL ONLY STREAMS AND AD-SUPPORTED TITLES OF LEADING RADIO AND VIDEO MUSIC SERVICES, PLUS DOWNLOAD SALES FROM TOP MUSIC RETAILERS ACROSS THE GLOBE. SEE CHARTS.LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2021 BILLBOARD MEDIA, LLC AND MRC DATA, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



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POLO MOLINA

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MANAGEMENT



82

TRINIDAD CARDONA
 "Dinero"

Toggleing between English and Spanish, the song debuts at No. 82 on the Global 200 and at No. 69 on the Billboard Global Excl. U.S. chart. The Phoenix native's breakthrough track enters the charts with surges of 121% in streams to 14.6 million and 180% in sales to 1,000 worldwide in the week ending June 17. The increases follow the song's recent boom in activity on TikTok, after it was originally released in 2017.



110

JUSTIN WELLINGTON
 FEAT. SMALL JAM
 "Iko Iko (My Bestie)"

The team-up by Wellington, from Papua New Guinea, and Small Jam, from the Solomon Islands, scored 12 million streams (up 22%) and sold 6,000 downloads (up 2%) globally in the tracking week. It's the latest charted version of the composition, whose origins date to 1953 in New Orleans. The Dixie Cups first brought the song to the Billboard Hot 100 in 1965, reaching No. 20, while The Belle Stars sent it to its No. 14 best in 1989, helped by its inclusion in the 1988 hit movie *Rain Man*.

—ERIC FRANKENBERG

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	TITLE	Artist	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
82	91	97	34+35	Ariana Grande	2	33
90	97	98	BABY SHARK	Pinkfong	38	40
100	104	99	CIRCLES	Post Malone	49	41
103	92	100	POSITIONS	Ariana Grande	1	34
37	58	101	HOPE UR OK	Olivia Rodrigo	22	4
46	61	102	YOUR POWER	Billie Eilish	6	7
83	88	103	LA NOCHE DE ANOCHE	Bad Bunny & Rosalia	7	29
NEW		104	TYPE SHIT	Migos & Cardi B	104	1
78	95	105	BELIEVER	Imagine Dragons	70	41
65	80	106	WE'RE GOOD	Dua Lipa	21	18
85	98	107	ROCKSTAR	DaBaby Feat. Roddy Ricch	8	41
102	110	108	RUN	OneRepublic	102	6
NEW		109	CLUELESS	Polo G Feat. Pop Smoke & Fivio Foreign	109	1
-	157	110	IKO IKO (MY BESTIE)	Justin Wellington Feat. Small Jam	110	2
41	69	111	MY LIFE	J. Cole, 21 Savage & Morray	4	5
92	100	112	BAD GUY	Billie Eilish	54	41
94	105	113	HAWAI	Maluma	3	41
71	101	114	RUNAWAY	AURORA	22	11
96	116	115	DREAMS	Fleetwood Mac	10	38
105	85	116	FOLLOW YOU	Imagine Dragons	66	14
156	131	117	LIL BIT	Nelly & Florida Georgia Line	117	7
97	111	118	SHALLOW	Lady Gaga & Bradley Cooper	59	41
74	102	119	EVERY CHANCE I GET	DJ Khaled Feat. Lil Baby & Lil Durk	27	7
48	76	120	PRIDE.IS.THE.DEVIL	J. Cole & Lil Baby	9	5
-	182	121	PETROUCHKA	Soso Maness Feat. PLK	121	2
109	113	122	LEMONADE	Internet Money & Gunna Feat. Don Toliver & NAV	4	41
112	135	123	WAP	Cardi B Feat. Megan Thee Stallion	1	41
121	127	124	MEMORIES	Maroon 5	71	41
106	123	125	YOU BROKE ME FIRST.	Tate McRae	16	41
NEW		126	PARTY LYFE	Polo G Feat. DaBaby	126	1
114	124	127	SWEATER WEATHER	The Neighbourhood	62	38
115	120	128	BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY	Queen	107	37
NEW		129	PICASSO	Migos & Future	129	1
95	115	130	TALKING TO THE MOON	Bruno Mars	57	12
RE-ENTRY		131	EPIDEMIC	Polo G	56	4
NEW		132	VACCINE	Migos	132	1
-	89	133	BY YOUR SIDE	Calvin Harris Feat. Tom Grennan	89	2
110	133	134	OLD TOWN ROAD	Lil Nas X Feat. Billy Ray Cyrus	70	41
130	137	135	DESPACITO	Luis Fonsi & Daddy Yankee Feat. Justin Bieber	120	37
133	161	136	YOU	Regard x Troye Sivan x Tate McRae	113	8
154	139	137	RAIN ON ME	Lady Gaga & Ariana Grande	22	41
84	114	138	BEAT BOX	SpotemGottem Feat. Pooh Shiesty Or DaBaby	38	20
99	121	139	GOOD DAYS	SZA	7	25
NEW		140	ANTISOCIAL	Migos Feat. Juice WRLD	140	1
129	141	141	CLOSER	The Chainsmokers Feat. Halsey	100	37
136	143	142	BEFORE YOU GO	Lewis Capaldi	32	41
NEW		143	HEART OF A GIANT	Polo G Feat. Rod Wave	143	1
124	144	144	RIDE IT.	Regard	86	40
122	132	145	LOVELY	Billie Eilish & Khalid	70	41
98	119	146	BIPOLAR	MC Don Juan, MC Davi & MC Pedrinho	98	6
NEW		147	BOOM	Polo G	147	1
89	112	148	POBLADO	Crissin X Totoy El Frio X Natan & Shander	86	5

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	TITLE	Artist	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
144	142	149	SENORITA	Shawn Mendes & Camila Cabello	67	41
NEW		150	LIGHT IT UP	Migos Feat. Pop Smoke	150	1
117	140	151	FOR THE NIGHT	Pop Smoke Feat. Lil Baby & DaBaby	7	41
131	154	152	MONSTER	YOASOBI	87	22
132	136	153	WHATS POPPIN	Jack Harlow Feat. DaBaby, Tory Lanez & Lil Wayne	17	41
73	109	154	MISS THE RAGE	Trippie Redd & Playboi Carti	13	6
135	148	155	YORU NI KAKERU	YOASOBI	16	41
127	146	156	ANOTHER LOVE	Tom Odell	99	10
123	151	157	LITTLE BIT OF LOVE	Tom Grennan	123	7
NEW		158	GO PART 1	Polo G Feat. G Herbo	158	1
113	125	159	SAL Y PERREA	Sech	113	4
111	126	160	911	Sech	48	16
RE-ENTRY		161	WILLOW	Taylor Swift	2	23
NEW		162	BZRP MUSIC SESSIONS, VOL. 40	Bizarrap & Eladio Carrion	162	1
126	156	163	MY EX'S BEST FRIEND	Machine Gun Kelly X blackbear	25	41
150	174	164	SAY SO	Doja Cat	50	40
158	162	165	LA CURIOSIDAD	DJ Nelson Presenta Jay Wheeler & Myke Towers	40	41
128	150	166	MY HEAD AND MY HEART	Ava Max	32	20
120	149	167	WHOOPTY	CJ	10	34
-	159	168	LOVE AGAIN	Dua Lipa	159	2
157	173	169	SOMETHING JUST LIKE THIS	The Chainsmokers & Coldplay	133	28
NEW		170	SO REAL	Polo G	170	1
140	169	171	GOOSEBUMPS	Travis Scott	102	38
119	158	172	NEXT LEVEL	aespa	65	5
141	160	173	WHAT YOU KNOW BOUT LOVE	Pop Smoke	11	41
138	152	174	512	Mora & Jhay Cortez	138	4
178	179	175	COUNTING STARS	OneRepublic	143	19
NEW		176	BLOODY CANVAS	Polo G	176	1
145	177	177	DON'T STOP BELIEVIN'	Journey	145	35
139	145	178	OUR SONG	Anne-Marie & Niall Horan	93	4
NEW		179	FOR THE LOVE OF NEW YORK	Polo G	179	1
NEW		180	BIRTHDAY	Migos	180	1
162	178	181	SWEET CHILD O' MINE	Guns N' Roses	162	24
152	188	182	HOTEL CALIFORNIA	Eagles	149	35
161	180	183	I DON'T CARE	Ed Sheeran & Justin Bieber	105	37
155	187	184	BREAKING ME	Topic & A7S	21	41
87	134	185	PHANTOM THIEF	back number	87	4
165	184	186	SMELLS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT	Nirvana	165	24
91	155	187	TELL EM	Cochise & \$NOT	91	3
163	181	188	ALL OF ME	John Legend	97	39
-	35	189	VOICE OF THE HEROES	Lil Baby & Lil Durk	35	2
183	186	190	TAKE ME TO CHURCH	Hozier	129	23
180	193	191	SAY YOU WON'T LET GO	James Arthur	96	37
153	166	192	KIRARI	Fujii Kaze	135	6
164	189	193	INTENTIONS	Justin Bieber Feat. Quavo	65	40
104	163	194	DICK	StarBoi3 + Doja Cat	94	7
170	191	195	THUNDERSTRUCK	AC/DC	170	13
147	172	196	RELOJ	Rauw Alejandro & Anuel AA	41	33
168	185	197	ADORE YOU	Harry Styles	68	40
142	167	198	BAILA CONMIGO	Selena Gomez With Rauw Alejandro	22	20
118	164	199	BACK IN BLOOD	Pooh Shiesty Feat. Lil Durk	29	22
NEW		200	BROKEN GUITARS	Polo G Feat. Scorey	200	1

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Contents

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ON THE COVER

From left: John Osborne, Mickey Guyton, Kane Brown and T.J. Osborne photographed by Diana King on June 7 in Nashville.

John wears a John Varvatos blazer and shirt, 7forallmankind jeans, Old Gringo boots and Stetson vintage hat. Guyton wears a Little Black Tux jacket, Safiyaa pants, Stuart Weitzman shoes, Grace Lee earrings and Mud Lowery necklace and ring. Brown wears a Dolce and Gabbana suit, Nahmias shirt, Gucci shoes, Alligator Jesus necklace, Scott Bros. by Kendra Scott bracelets and David Yurman ring. T.J. wears a John Varvatos suit, rag & bone T-shirt and Lucchese boots.

THIS PAGE

Willow photographed by Munachi Osegbu on June 11 in Los Angeles.

Angel Chen jacket and pants, Steff Eleoff rings.

TO OUR READERS

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CMT's **Leslie Fram** leads *Billboard*'s seventh annual Country Power Players list celebrating the genre's wins as the industry enters a post-pandemic world. Plus: How Nashville is leading the way back to live music, a rising wave of young Black female artists, radio programmers reveal their secrets and more.

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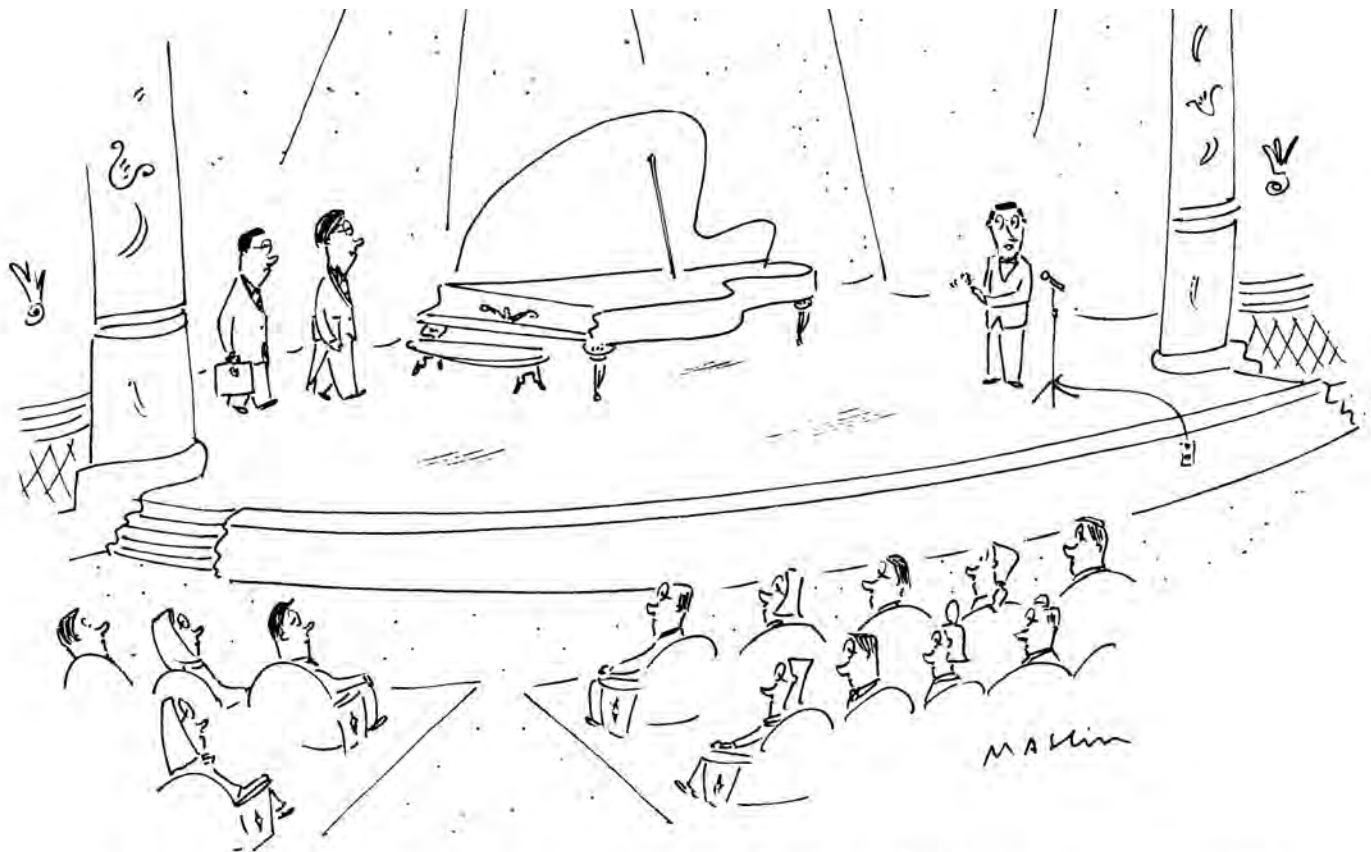
Celebrating 25 years together, the **Black Eyed Peas**' core trio of will.i.am, apl.de.ap and Taboo are in the midst of a second global takeover — this time, on the Latin charts.

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*“Won’t you please welcome Edwin Nells—accompanied,
as always, by his attorney.”*

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and congratulate our client

BLACK EYED PEAS

on 25 amazing years of music and friendship.
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Congratulations To Our Honorees

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CINDY MABE

MIKE HARRIS

ROYCE RISSER

BRIAN WRIGHT



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We congratulate Fiona Prine and the Oh Boy! Records family on the launch of the Hello In There Foundation. May John's love, kindness, and generosity live on forever.

thistlefarms.org

This year, Warner Music Group is donating ad space in *Billboard* to elevate voices of activists, organizations, and charities that are creating real change. Our 2021 Country Power Player honorees — Ben Kline, Ben Vaughn, Cris Lacy, James Marsh, John Esposito, and Kristen Williams — selected Thistle Farms for their dedication to providing women survivors with access to safe housing, financial independence, and a lifelong community of support.



The Market

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Will Avatars Kill The Radio Stars?

New “virtual artist record labels” are betting that the next generation of performers will be made, not born

BY TATIANA CIRISANO

TWO YEARS AGO, Anthony Martini’s teenage daughter showed him an Instagram profile for a green-haired rapper with tattooed arms, hypebeast style and glitched-out trap tracks getting hundreds of thousands of plays on SoundCloud. Martini — a former artist manager who helped develop artists like Lil Dicky and MadeinTYO, and in March became CEO of Royalty Exchange — signed the rapper, who now goes by FN Meka, to his record label, Factory New. Since then, FN Meka has released three official singles and acquired 9.7 million TikTok followers. It’s a typical story about online artist development, but with a twist: FN Meka isn’t real, and Factory New isn’t for human artists.

FN Meka is a virtual avatar, designed by Martini’s business partner Brandon Le, which performs music created with artificial intelligence algorithms. Martini and Le run Factory New to develop virtual acts and “sign” ones created by other developers.

“We’re taking cues from a company like Marvel as opposed to a record label,” says Martini. “There’s a way to enable a much longer career if you build a franchise, and we’re going to start creating a universe of music characters.” Like Marvel’s heroes, these artists won’t age — or even ask for a raise.

Virtual artists aren’t new: Animated band Gorillaz, created by musician Damon Albarn and visual artist Jamie Hewlett, have sold the equivalent of over 24 million albums worldwide (ac-

cording to its label, Parlophone) and won a Grammy Award for hit “Feel Good Inc.”; Hatsune Miku, a Japanese pop star character who sells out arenas in her home country, was slated to perform as a hologram at last year’s Coachella. Now the music business is emerging from a pandemic that shut down touring, at a time when virtual reality and AI technology are making significant strides, and investment is flowing into companies like Spirit Bomb, a Warner Music Group-backed virtual artist record label from production studio Strangeloop Studios, and Authentic Artists, a startup launched in April with funding from Linkin Park co-founder Mike Shinoda.

One star to watch is Lil Miquela, a perpetually 19-year-old Brazilian-American model/pop star with 250,000 monthly listeners on Spotify and endorsement deals with Calvin Klein and Prada. She was created by the studio Brud, which specializes in virtual social media personalities and has raised \$6.1 million, according to Crunchbase. (Lil Miquela brings in over \$10 million a year, according to the U.K. online marketplace OnBuy.) When co-founder Trevor McFedries launched Lil Miquela’s Instagram profile in 2016, where she now has 3 million followers (with the same number on TikTok), he says his peers “couldn’t

2.8M

MONTHLY SPOTIFY LISTENERS OF LEAGUE OF LEGENDS VIRTUAL K-POP GIRL GROUP K/DA

● WARNER MUSIC BOUGHT DAVID GUETTA’S RECORDED-MUSIC CATALOG AND SIGNED A DEAL FOR FUTURE RELEASES. ● 300 ENTERTAINMENT UNVEILED ITS NEW SPARTA DISTRIBUTION DIVISION.

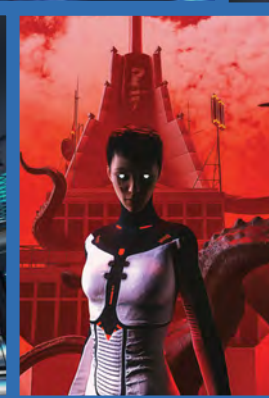
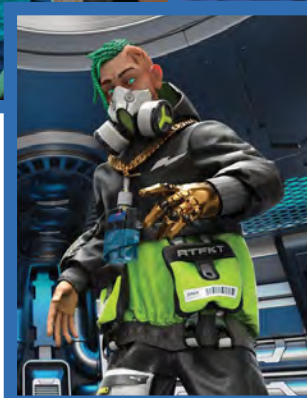
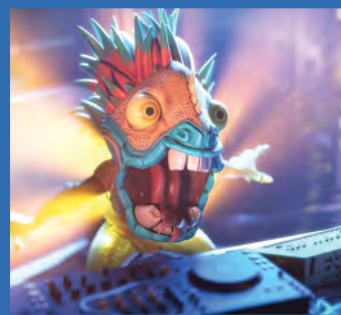
wrap their heads around” the idea of a virtual celebrity. But he figured that today’s teenagers consume so much pop culture online that it no longer matters much whether the people they follow even exist offline.

“It became really apparent that young people didn’t differentiate between Miquela and other celebrities they followed,” says McFedries, who has toured as a DJ with Katy Perry and produced music for Azealia Banks under the name Yung Skeeter. “If you’re 11 or 12, some of your first friends are probably Roblox or *Minecraft* players” from virtual interactions. “And the relationship between Miquela and a fan [versus] between Rihanna and a fan — interfacing via these mobile devices — feels pretty similar.”

Just like human artists, virtual ones need a narrative for fans to follow, whether that’s relatable or futuristic. Lil Miquela’s Instagram posts are a mix of Generation Z “It” girl aesthetics (think Telfar bags and bucket hats) and political advocacy (like a post about defunding the police); FN Meka is basically a cyborg video-game character who goes bowling and uses inhuman speed to whip up meals in TikTok videos; the futuristic, alien-like artists on Spirit Bomb’s roster have been sent back in time to save the world.

“What allows people to connect is seeing their story and persona and wanting to follow the next step on their journey,” says Ian Simon, co-founder of Spirit Bomb and Los Angeles-based Strangeloop, which has created tour visuals for artists including Kendrick Lamar and SZA, and started to work more seriously on virtual artists when the pandemic halted touring.

The music matters, too, of course. While songs for acts like FN Meka are created with AI, other virtual artists rely on human collaborators. Lil Miquela’s vocals blend real singers’



Clockwise from top left: Brud's Lil Miquela, Authentic Artists' DJ Dragoon, Riot Games' K/DA, Spirit Bomb's XEN and Factory New's FN Meka.

voices with computer-generated sounds, and McFedries calls on talents like producer Jasper Harris, songwriter Sarah Aarons and singer Teyana Taylor to create her music. *League of Legends* game publisher Riot Games’ virtual K-pop girl group, K/DA — which has 2.8 million monthly listeners on Spotify — relies on an in-house music team of 20, as well as vocals from artists like Kim Petras, Becky G and real-life K-pop girl group (G)-IDLE.

Working for an avatar can have its advantages. Simon says that without an actual artist earning a royalty on recorded music, Spirit Bomb can offer music producers “considerably more favorable deals.” And virtual artists are ideally positioned to take advantage of new digital revenue streams like non-fungible tokens and digital goods for video-game players. In March, FN Meka sold an NFT animation of a “super toilet” for \$6,400, and Spirit

“WE’RE TAKING CUES FROM A COMPANY LIKE MARVEL AS OPPOSED TO A RECORD LABEL.”

—MARTINI

Bomb’s first “character card” NFT, featuring the virtual artist XEN, sold for \$4,000 in April. For a few dollars each, *League of Legends* sells “skins” that let players appear in the game like members of K/DA. That money could add up: Gamers spent about \$50 billion worldwide on such in-game items in 2020, according to MIDiA Research — more than the music business took in.

Next steps include interactive experiences that could let fans influence virtual artists’ music and stories. Authentic Artists, a seed-stage startup launched in April by Chris McGarry, a former music strategist at Facebook’s Oculus, lets fans influence how such artists perform during virtual shows

on Twitch — which already have average watch times of over 30 minutes. And Brud’s McFedries will soon let fans essentially vote on what actions virtual characters like Lil Miquela take. “You can imagine a world where [virtual] artists going to the Grammys or not is a vote that fans can take,” he says, referring to The Weeknd’s decision not to attend this year. “If the fans are like, ‘No, we’re going to stand in solidarity with The Weeknd,’ then the artist doesn’t go.”

What does this mean for real-world artists? There’s a fear that the virtual could replace the actual, as well as skepticism that music created by AI can ever live up to the real thing, like when an algorithm “trained” on Nirvana’s music created a song in the band’s style. Then again, how different is the idea of executives creating a virtual star from the advice and creative direction given by the managers, label heads, A&R executives and various consultants who help real-life artists?

“I was talking to someone and they were saying, ‘You’re making virtual artists. What does that do to human artists?’” recalls McGarry. “My response was, ‘Why should Scooter Braun be the only person who’s allowed to manufacture artists?’” **B**

MARKET WATCH

21.6B

↓ 0.7%

TOTAL ON-DEMAND STREAMS WEEK OVER WEEK

Number of audio and video on-demand streams for the week ending June 17.

17.25M

↑ 6.5%

ALBUM CONSUMPTION UNITS WEEK OVER WEEK

Album sales plus track-equivalent albums plus streaming-equivalent albums for the week ending June 17.

512.0B

↑ 11.0%

TOTAL ON-DEMAND STREAMS YEAR OVER YEAR TO DATE

Number of audio and video streams for 2021 so far over the same period in 2020.

● **MARIAH CAREY** SWITCHED FROM ROC NATION TO RANGE MEDIA PARTNERS FOR MANAGEMENT. ● **DEMI LOVATO** SIGNED WITH UTA WORLDWIDE, MOVING FROM WME.

Congratulations to our 2021 Billboard Country Power Players.

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you helped us
heal our broken
hearts and
keep the faith.



SONY MUSIC GROUP



SONY MUSIC
PUBLISHING

Power Restructure

NEWLY APPOINTED PRESIDENT/CEO HARVEY MASON JR. NAMES VALEISHA BUTTERFIELD JONES AND PANOS PANAY CO-PRESIDENTS

► For the first time, the Recording Academy will have a separate CEO and president — or make that presidents. Starting Aug. 16, Recording Academy president/CEO Harvey Mason Jr. — who accepted that role on a permanent-basis in May — will relinquish half of his title to co-presidents Valeisha Butterfield Jones and Panos Panay, restructuring the organization's executive suite.



Butterfield Jones



Panay

Butterfield Jones — who was hired as the academy's first chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer in May 2020 after four years as Google's global head of inclusion — will retain her existing responsibilities and now oversee membership and awards, advocacy and related initiatives. Panay, who founded and ran Sonicbids and will join the academy from Berklee College of Music, where he was senior vp of global strategy and innovation, will also become chief revenue officer.

"The three of us will be operating as a unit as we strengthen every system in every part of our organization from the inside out," says Butterfield Jones.

The new co-presidents assume their roles at a period of dramatic change for the academy. The previous CEO, Deborah Dugan, was ousted after five months, in January 2020, just 10 days before that year's Grammy Award ceremony. (The organization accused her of workplace bullying. She filed an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission discrimination complaint alleging she was terminated because she had threatened to expose misconduct. Arbitration hearings are scheduled to begin July 12.) Since then, as board chair and interim president/CEO, Mason has instituted a major structural reorganization, overseen new diversity initiatives for incoming voting member classes and, in April, led a board of trustees vote to disband nomination-review committees. After a lengthy search process to hire a new president/CEO, Mason was named to the role permanently on May 13 and recently told *Billboard* that a hiring search is underway for in-house counsel.

"We had come to a place where we needed to do things differently," says Mason, adding the move represents "an opportunity to build a dynamic new leadership team," to focus on growth and innovation.

On June 2, the academy's board of trustees also announced its new slate of elected officers: Tammy Hurt as chair, Rico Love as vice chair and Om'Mas Keith as secretary/treasurer. Christina Albert returned as chair emeritus. "Developing the academy for the 21st century as part of this amazing group," adds Panay, "I'm energized and inspired by the opportunity to do good and do well." —GAIL MITCHELL



Settling Artists' Accounts

Is Sony's decision to begin paying royalties to acts with balances a recoupment coup for the label, as well as its acts?

BY DAN RYS AND ED CHRISTMAN

IN AN INDUSTRY WHERE smart executives look for angles others don't see, Sony Music Group's June 11 announcement that it would begin to pay royalties to artists with unrecouped balances that were signed to its labels before 2000 and haven't received an advance since, was greeted with surprise, enthusiasm and also a bit of cynicism.

The move, part of Sony Music's new Artists Forward initiative, is designed "to increase the ability of those who qualify to receive more money from uses of their music," the company said in a letter to its partners obtained by *Billboard*. The label will not modify its contracts or even adjust the balance — just ignore them in order to prioritize "transparency with creators."

It's hard to find anyone in the industry who doesn't like Sony's idea. The cynical take is that the company isn't leaving as much money on the table as it might seem: Most acts that dominate the charts in the streaming era were signed more recently, and the more popular ones have either recouped or received another advance in the last two decades. The amount of money involved will almost certainly be dwarfed by the \$4.87 billion in recorded-music revenue Sony made last year. "If you have been unrecouped for that long," says one artist lawyer, "Sony probably doesn't care about your royalties."

Many artists affected by the policy will care quite a bit, though, and the sheer number of acts involved means the money will add up: A source familiar with the program says some could receive thousands of dollars — and in some cases tens of thousands of dollars — a year. (How much this costs Sony will ultimately depend on sales of albums by the artists involved.) In 2015, Beggars Group instituted a similar policy, partly because many older artists were seeing an uptick in royalties from streaming, but, in some cases, not one that would be significant enough to pay off their

unrecouped balances. "What inspired it was seeing what catalogs were earning £500 or £5,000 [\$700 or \$7,000] every six months because of streaming," says Beggars founder/chairman Martin Mills. "That seemed significant enough to pay through to the artist, but not significant enough to worry about it making much of a dent in a half-million-pound debt."

The move also positions Sony Music, the second-largest of the three majors, as artist-friendly at a time when both a streaming-driven industry boom and increased attention on racial justice issues have put a spotlight on the unfairness of some recording contracts. "The public has become more aware of artist issues, and the current social climate might have been behind this move," says Cedar Boschan, a royalty expert and forensic accountant.

Boschan points out that decades ago, when the CD boom focused attention on older artist contracts, MCA eliminated unrecouped balances and raised royalty rates for artists on Chess and Checker, and other labels instituted various other reforms. This could be the beginning of another such wave: BMG is reviewing contracts of labels it has acquired, a source says that Warner Music is also considering its options and Universal has said it is committed to looking into legacy contracts, too.

This move could help Sony Music forge closer relationships with legacy artists when some are looking to terminate the copyright grants to their sound recordings (which Sony hasn't allowed) and others are thinking about selling rights or royalty streams. With more players than ever bidding on music assets, including an array of institutional investors, this move makes Sony stand out as a potential partner. It "gives Sony a pole position," says Allen Kovac, a veteran manager and founder/CEO of Better Noise Music, "if a chance to buy an artist's rights becomes available." **B**

Congratulations to Wasserman's Country Power Players



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Betterton**



**Lenore
Kinder**



**Jonathan
Levine**

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Sydney Sprague onstage at the Rebel Lounge in June.

Small Venues Face Big Problems

As the live business returns, federal funding delays are draining the concert pipeline

BY DAVE BROOKS

CONCERTS ARE COMING BACK with what looks to be a busy, competitive fall season. But the Small Business Association's sluggish rollout of the \$16 billion Shuttered Venue Operators Grant program that Congress approved in December is leaving independent venues and promoters ill-prepared for a robust return.

For the past 15 months, venues have been largely shuttered due to COVID-19 restrictions. The SVOG was created to save indie venues from permanent closure and level the playing field with corporate competitors Live Nation and AEG, which relied on borrowing during the pandemic — except that the checks haven't gone out yet and no one's certain who's getting one. As of June 21, only 677 venues and promoters had received SVOG funds from the SBA, about 13.5% of those that applied. And although many of these spaces can open up now, that only intensifies their need for funds so they can rehire employees, make deposits to book acts, hold shows and start bringing in money again.

"Everything's turning on so fast," says Stephen Chilton, owner of the Rebel Lounge, a 300-capacity club in Phoenix. "We all know that September, October and November are going to be crazy, but we have no revenue coming in now and it's hard to staff up enough to handle that volume."

Indie promoters face a tough decision on how to proceed while still awaiting SVOG funds as festival season approaches. Prime Social Group co-founder/president Adam Lynn canceled three out of six events for the multicity Breakaway Music Festival this year and rescheduled the others for later in 2021 due to uncertainty over the status of its SVOG application.

Others are even worse off, and he says that "many independents are not able to issue their fans refunds" because they already spent that money on artist deposits or production costs. Now those promoters are just hoping that SVOG funds come through in time — or else they'll need to cancel shows at the last minute and lose more money, as well as customer goodwill.

Because independent businesses don't have the same access to cash as corporations like Live Nation and AEG, agent Wayne Forte with Entourage Talent says much of the touring sector is now running on credit and capital backed by what is supposed to be "billions of dollars of government aid that hasn't arrived." And overleveraged promoters defaulting on their obligations could create a liquidity crisis that would be hard to contain or recover from.

"Unfortunately, if there is a problem," adds Forte, "we probably won't know until it's too late." **B**

Game Over?

FACING MORE BIG ONLINE SERVICES THAT USE MUSIC, PUBLISHERS AREN'T PLAYING. THEIR LATEST MOVE: A \$200 MILLION LAWSUIT AGAINST ROBLOX

BY TATIANA CIRISANO

OVER THE PAST YEAR, ROBLOX HAS BECOME A popular online platform for kids and teenagers to create and play simple but addictive games — and apparently also upload unlicensed music by artists like Olivia Rodrigo and The Weeknd to listen to at the same time. Now, the National Music Publishers' Association is demanding that the company behind it stop playing around and start paying for music in a \$200 million lawsuit filed June 9.

Now that streaming is an established business, the trade associations that represent rights holders are focusing more on ensuring they get paid by companies that incorporate unlicensed music into their products. One early battle was against the exercise bike startup Peloton, which the NMPA sued for \$370 million in 2019 and settled with the following year.

"We are getting more aggressive," says NMPA president/CEO David Israelite. "Tech companies keep making the same mistake in asking for forgiveness instead of permission." Not every NMPA publisher is participating in the Roblox lawsuit: Sony Music Publishing and Warner Chappell, whose parent companies have partnered with Roblox on in-game performances, aren't part of it. (Warner Music Group made a series H investment in Roblox in January, reportedly worth eight figures; the company declined to comment.) But rights holders see significant opportunity in licensing these kinds of startups — a process that can sometimes involve litigation as well as negotiation.

"We seem to have run into a whole bunch of companies blossoming at the same time," says RIAA chairman/CEO Mitch Glazier.

The same day that the NMPA announced its lawsuit against Roblox, it also claimed it would ramp up its process for filing takedown notices for infringing content on the Amazon-owned livestream platform Twitch, in partnership with the RIAA. Although Twitch operates under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, which offers it "safe harbor" from infringement lawsuits as long as it responds to such notices, filing them by the thousands can frustrate users and give rights holders leverage.

In most cases, the end result of this maneuvering is a licensing agreement: The only question is when and on whose terms. Some startups postpone paying for music in order to focus more on growth. That's especially tempting if competitors aren't licensing either.

In a statement, Roblox — which has 42 million daily active users — promised to defend itself "vigorously" against the lawsuit, adding that it does "not tolerate copyright infringement." (The platform uses upload filters, although they seem easy to bypass.) The company declined to comment further.

As for the future, Israelite says, "We haven't said we'll never sue Twitch." **B**



A photo illustration of the Roblox logo.

SPRAGUE: NEIL SCHWARTZ; ROBLOX: RAFAEL HENRIQUE/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

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Opry Entertainment President Scott Bailey

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BILLBOARD'S 2021 COUNTRY POWER PLAYERS

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and the circle unbroken on



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*Opry Live
No. 1
on Pollstar's 2020
Top 100
Livestreamers
Chart*



The Arctic World Archive in Norway.

Until The End Of The World

An arctic island will soon have a vault to protect culturally significant recordings — for at least 1,000 years

BY RICHARD SMIRKE

 **LONDON** — Buried almost 1,000 feet below a snow-covered mountain, on an arctic island midway between Norway and the North Pole, a Norwegian company is planning to create what it says will be a doomsday vault to preserve the world's most important music recordings for at least 1,000 years. Using future-proof digital storage, the Oslo-based Elire Management Group wants to store recordings of everything from major-label pop hits to Australian Indigenous music with the same safeguards offered by the Arctic World Archive and the Global Seed Vault, two existing storage facilities housed underground in the Svalbard archipelago.

"We want to preserve the music that has shaped us as human beings and shaped our nations," says Luke Jenkinson, managing director of the Global Music Vault and managing partner at Elire, which is financing the project.

The Arctic World Archive houses copies of historical artifacts like Vatican Library manuscripts and paintings by Rembrandt and Edvard Munch, while the Global Seed Vault is a backup storage facility for the world's genetic resources. Both are designed

to withstand natural and man-made disasters, including nuclear attacks.

The need for safe and secure long-term storage for recordings hasn't been a pressing concern for nearly as long as that for manuscripts, but several recent events have underscored its importance. In 2008, a fire at a Universal Studios backlot destroyed a significant number of tapes archived by Universal Music Group, including some masters, although the company had secondary copies of many of them. Digital storage presents other issues: Myspace confirmed in 2019 that a server migration led to the loss of up to 50 million uploaded tracks. "That's the danger of migrating onto a new hard drive or data center every five years," says Jenkinson. "The data is hard to keep track of, and files get lost or deleted."

The three major labels — and many independents — already store physical and digitized music files in multiple, geographically separate locations around the world. Sony Music UK says it has a custom-built archive for audio and audiovisual recordings, as well as a library of all its releases, and it stores digital safety copies and duplicate

recordings separately. Warner Music Group archives recordings at different locations around the globe. And UMG also keeps its assets and safety copies at different locations, according to a memo that UMG archivist Pat Kraus sent to staff in March 2020.

Both the majors and many independents also store recordings with Iron Mountain Entertainment Services, a 70-year-old Boston-based firm that houses the original recordings of Frank Sinatra and various other major-label masters in both digital and physical storage facilities throughout North America and Europe.

Elire, a commercial venture group that is typically involved in projects like establishing urban mobility hubs and electric aviation, says its Global Music Vault isn't intended to compete with these existing facilities, but instead offer an extra level of protection in case the worst should happen. It plans to preserve master-quality digital copies of recordings on purpose-built capsules that won't require server migrations, and it's negotiating with potential technology partners, including the Norwegian company Piql, whose PiqlFilm format

uses binary coding and high-density QR codes written onto special durable optical film. (Piql, which started out printing digital movies to analog film for Hollywood studios, also runs the Arctic World Archive with the Norwegian state mining company SNSK.)

According to Piql, its migration-free storage medium can last for over 1,000 years and is built to withstand the kind of extreme electromagnetic pulses that could result from a nuclear explosion, which could permanently damage electronic equipment and play havoc with digital files. An extra level of protection will come from Svalbard's low temperature and dry permafrost conditions — which should also discourage more than a certain amount of foot traffic.

Deciding what music deserves to endure for a millennium is a bit more complicated than picking desert-island discs, but Elire has partnered with the Paris-based International Music Council to form a global committee that will work with national music business groups to select examples of various countries' "most precious and loved" music, says Alfons Karabuda, a Swedish composer and president of the International Music Council. Elire also wants the public to vote on national submissions, although how that will work has yet to be decided. "We don't want to just protect a certain genre and certain era," says Jenkinson. "We want the nations and regions of the world to curate what music gets deposited."

The vault's first deposits — scheduled for spring 2022 — will focus on preserving Indigenous music. Future phases will concentrate on pop recordings, which can only be copied to the archive with clearance from rights holders. The vault's organizers are confident that record companies will recognize the value of protecting their master recordings "in the best possible way," says Karabuda.

Elire intends to make money by charging companies and individuals for deposits to the vault. It also plans to make the vault's contents accessible to listeners around the world, when it has the permission of rights holders, and share the revenue this generates with creators. (Plans are in the works for a visitor center near the vault.)

"We don't want to be another record label, and we don't want to be another streaming service," says Jenkinson. "But we do want this music to be accessible and celebrated and give back to the communities that actually own it." ■



**CONGRATS TO OUR 2021
BILLBOARD COUNTRY
POWER PLAYERS!**

LOUIS MESSINA

RICH SCHAEFER

STACY VEE

ADAM WEISER



AEG
PRESENTS





Miller photographed June 10 at the eOne office in Nashville.

FROM THE DESK OF

GINA MILLER

Senior VP/GM, eOne Nashville

BY FRANK DIGIACOMO

PHOTOGRAPHED BY CEDRICK JONES

WHEN GINA MILLER WAS GROWING up in South Memphis, one of her school bus stops was in front of the abandoned Stax Records studio on East McLemore Avenue. “It was graffiti-laden and looked like nothing else would ever be born from it,” she says. The soul label had been forced into bankruptcy in 1975 after a local bank foreclosed on the loans keeping it alive — a move that one of its co-owners, Al Bell, in the 2014 documentary *Take Me to the River*, attributed to Memphis’ white establishment and its determination to destroy successful Black-owned businesses.

“All of the things I saw and experienced there helped shape me,” says Miller, who moved to Nashville in 1995, and, while rising through the ranks of Entertainment One’s outpost there, has become a vocal advocate for equality, diversity and inclusion in Music City.

Miller’s first break in the industry came through sheer determination. After meeting Light Records president/CEO Michael Olsen at one of her two sons’ football games — “he was the only one driving

a luxury car” — she took an unpaid internship at the gospel label for over a year. “I did whatever I needed to do to learn,” she says, “and to offer the wisdom I had” from earning a music degree, a license to teach music and her deep knowledge of the Light catalog, which included The Winans, The Hawkins Family and Andraé Crouch. “It was the music I had grown up with,” says Miller, who was hired in 2004 as the label’s radio and retail promotions coordinator.

In 2009, eOne acquired Light Music, and in 2019 Miller was promoted to senior vp/GM of eOne Nashville, where she oversees the label’s gospel and R&B output, among other responsibilities.

Miller is also a co-founder and vp of the board of directors of Nashville Music Equality, which champions diversity, inclusion, equity and opportunities for minorities and underrepresented groups in the music business. The group, founded in response to the murder of George Floyd and the formation of #TheShow-MustBePaused, marked its one-year anniversary in May. Asked what grade she’d give the Nashville music industry in effecting change, Miller is blunt about the challenges ahead: “I’m going to give us a C+ right

now. There’s still a lot of work that needs to be done. Changing mindsets is very hard. It’s uncomfortable, it’s dirty, and it is not glamorous work.”

How has your business changed since Hasbro sold eOne Music to Blackstone?

It hasn’t. I’ve been through six acquisitions in 17 years. My job is to keep everything moving forward, and that’s what we’re doing. SESAC is one of the companies that are part of our new family; so are CCLI [Christian Copyright Licensing International] and Harry Fox [Agency]. I’ve met with SESAC president Kelly Turner and other Blackstone team members, and we’ve had candid conversations about the future. I can tell you that when I conveyed my plans to them, they said, “Go, girl, go.”

Is SESAC going to represent your artists who write their own material?

It won’t be a mandate. But I am excited about new opportunities we can create in partnership for our artists who have not yet decided upon a PRO or want to make a change.

What eOne artists are you excited about?

I can’t say enough about our veteran artists — Jonathan McReynolds, Todd Dulaney, James Fortune, Syleena Johnson and Q Parker, to name a few — and I am stoked about being able to give young, talented, independent artists a shot. Three to watch are Jabari Johnson, Randy Weston and Shana Williams, who will be releasing albums in the fourth quarter or 2022.

What's the political climate in Nashville?

Historically, we have been a conservative Republican town. I've lived in and all over Tennessee my entire life, and what's happening to the political landscape right now is serious. Gov. Bill Lee signed a measure into law banning the teaching of critical race theory. Public schools can no longer teach certain concepts of race and racism or they risk losing state funding. History is history. Whether or not you agree with it, it should be known, shared, examined — taught.

How did you become politically active?

When you grow up in Memphis, you have no choice. I grew up not far from where Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated, and one of the things that people say about Memphis is that you feel, even today, a heaviness looming over the city. About three years ago, I went to Memphis with Lalah Hathaway for a show at the Orpheum Theater. I told my mom, who's 87, and she said, "When you get there, take a look at the fire escape, because that's how we would get into the theater if we wanted to see something." Moments like that are profound for me and connect the dots to why my mom signed me up to be active with the NAACP as a kid, and why I still am today.

How has that translated into what you are doing with Nashville Music Equality and other organizations?

With Nashville Music Equality, it's important to me that we don't lose sight of the racial injustices that happen day to day. Sometimes, if it doesn't look like Charlottesville [Va.], people don't relate to it as an issue. But we see microaggression and systemic racism every day at our companies, our churches, our communities and even our families. So I remind people that in addition to the big issues, we have to talk about things like what happened to my friend when she got her COVID-19 vaccine. The nurse squeezed her arm and said, "Oh, I thought your skin would have been tougher than that." When people tell me that racism doesn't exist anymore, I'm like, "Well, racism may be dead, but the racists are not."

Nashville's music industry is largely white and male. How much resistance does NME encounter?

Right now, I am leading diversity and inclusion initiatives in a lot of different spaces, including the Recording Academy, where I am an ambassador. Management companies, agencies, the leaders of a lot of country labels have come to our monthly events, and a lot of them have called us to have private counsel. They want us to figure out what they're doing wrong, because they do want to do something different. But we are also dealing with a lot of people who would rather have conversations about diversity and inclusion instead of coming up with a real plan. I'll have an agency ask, "What can we do?" And when I get on a Zoom call to work with them, I see 20 people who do not look like me. I'm like, "Well, before we jump in, let's deal with your staff."

Have you had any personal encounters with racism in the music industry that fuel your activism?

I've looked back at encounters I've had and thought, "Have I been a victim of racism or the inequitable circumstances of being a woman?" In terms of my own career disappointments, I would say both. But if



I had to pick one, I would say women in general have a hard time moving forward in the music business, getting proper salaries and high-level opportunities. Ethiopia [Habtemariam] just got promoted to chairman/CEO of Motown this year, which is definitely worth celebrating. But we're seeing more women, and more Black women, rising to leadership roles in other sectors than we are in the music industry. There are so many Black female mayors now; in Texas, 17 Black female judges were elected in Harris County. And the Vice President is a no-brainer.

What's your take on Morgan Wallen's record deal being suspended by Big Loud and Republic?

I don't know what was involved in the suspension, but that was the right starting place for the label. Let's take Morgan Wallen out of it. This situation was a catalyst for a lot of conversations. The real question is: Has it changed things for the better — at this format, in the music industry, in this city, in this state and in the world — for the long haul? Eradicating racism and responding to what have been largely systemic prejudices and biases requires transformational work. Transformation doesn't happen overnight. It has been said that what is measurable is sustainable. It's too soon to tell what's now right, or what's still wrong. Not enough time nor action has passed. Only time will tell.

A recent profile of Mickey Guyton in *The New Yorker* quoted a professor from Simon Fraser University who said country music narrates the "ongoing siege of simple innocent white folks" and is a "f— you to anyone who celebrates the forces behind the siege." What's your response to that?

A lot of times when people hear the words "country music," the next word they hear in their heads is "supremacy." But here's the thing: The experiences sung about in country are our experiences as well. Country music talks about family, faith, beer, liquor, heartbreak. These are American stories. This is not exclusive to one group of people. My son loves country music. He wears cowboy boots. He drives a pickup truck. So, it's not the music or the lyrics. It's the heart and the mindset behind the people who think that what has been created is only for them. And you can't talk about country music, R&B, jazz or any genre of music without talking about how Black people are the foundation of these genres. The banjo was created by a Black person. 📌

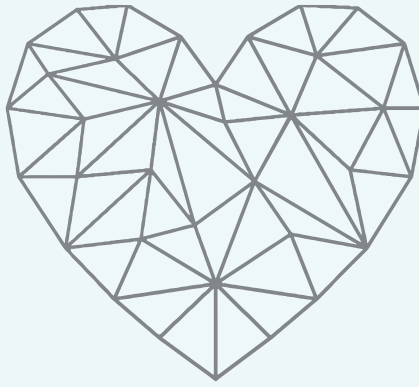


1. "This replica of a church reminds me of my foundation and faith," says Miller. "The photo is of The Hawkins Family, who, along with Andraé Crouch, forever changed contemporary gospel."

2. Miller with her two sons (from left) Stephen Miller II and Wes Miller. "Balancing motherhood and my career is my greatest flex."

3. "This plaque begins, 'Thankful... for every win, every loss, every yes, for every single no...'"

4. "Nods to Memphis and Soulsville are among my books," says Miller. "They are stacked next to my sorority cup. I'm a proud member of Delta Sigma Theta."



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#LETSLIFTLIVES

The Sound

PG. 32 INSIDE THE SPACE JAM SOUNDTRACK * PG. 34 THE HOTTEST NEW SONGWRITER

REBEL YELL

Willow is on a mission to change
the face of pop-punk — and
is the perfect person for the job

BY HERAN MAMO

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MUNACHI OSEGBU

Willow photographed
June 11 in Los Angeles.

Styling by Chloe & Chenelle
Ottolinger top and pants,
Dr. Martens shoes, Vitaly
necklace, Steff Eleoff earring and
ring, Cartier and anGostura rings.

WHEN WILLOW Smith was 3 years old, she accompanied her mother, Jada Pinkett Smith, on tour with her metal band, Wicked Wisdom. It later turned out to be a crash course for Willow in letting loose — and learning to take up space in a genre that isn't historically welcoming of Black women.

Her mother receiving death threats and having objects thrown at her while performing onstage showed Willow what kind of woman, and artist, she wanted to be someday. By the time Willow was 12, she shaved her head in rebellion of continuing her first tour — ironically named after her 2010 pop breakthrough, “Whip My Hair,” which reached No. 11 on the Billboard Hot 100.

The song's viral success is what scored Willow — who was born and raised in Los Angeles by Pinkett Smith and father Will Smith — a recording contract with Roc Nation that same year. But instead of cranking out more hits, she stopped releasing music until 2014, when she returned with her experimental R&B debut EP, *3*. She followed it up with her 2015 introductory album, *Ardipithecus*, and released her next two full-lengths (2017's *The 1st* and 2019's *Willow*) on both Roc Nation and her brother Jaden Smith's imprint, MSFTSMusic.

While it's clear that Willow has always possessed a punk sensibility, she's now channeling that outlook into her music, as evidenced by her latest single, “Transparent Soul,” featuring blink-182's Travis Barker. As Roc Nation co-president Shari Bryant says, “This is not new to her, this is true to her.”

As the lead track off the artist's upcoming fourth album, “Transparent Soul” previews

Willow's vision of pop-punk coming soon — and so far, it's paying off. The single has raked in 35.7 million global on-demand streams through June 9, according to MRC Data, and became Willow's first Hot 100 entry, debuting at No. 87, since 2011 (with “21st Century Girl”). It also became her first song to climb *Billboard*'s rock and alternative charts, reaching No. 2 on Rock Streaming Songs. “This is a space that she's going to own over time,” says Bryant. “It's so authentic, and that aligns with what punk music represents: It's all about feeling your confidence.”

Even so, Willow questioned how to navigate the sound at first, considering her vocal training was rooted in pop and R&B. She spent 2020 exploring indie rock on her collaborative album, *The Anxiety*, with fellow artist and rumored boyfriend Tyler Cole — which they released after locking themselves in a box right as the pandemic began for a 24-hour performance piece — and dropping an EP with mantra meditation musician Jahnavi Harrison. But as the world started to reopen, Willow craved to create, quite literally, outside of the boxes in which she felt confined.

“It was me coming to a point where I just said ‘eff it’ and wanted to have fun,” she says. “This album is the most I've let myself loose.” Adds Carly Mann of Willow's management firm, Three Six Zero: “It's a bold new step in Willow's musical journey.”

As it happens, it's a step into a pop-punk aesthetic that's having quite the resurgence with non-rock artists taking the lead, creating the perfect opportunity for Willow to make noise in the space. Rappers 24kGoldn and Machine Gun Kelly employed guitar-driven melodies on their recent hits — the former's “Mood” (featur-



ing iann dior) topped the Hot 100 for eight weeks, and the latter's *Tickets to My Downfall* became the first rock album to crown the Billboard 200 in over a year. But even as the genre becomes more accepting of artists who didn't necessarily come up in the format, it's increasingly clear that it largely remains a fraternity of rockers.

“In the guitar world, it's heavily dominated by white men,” says Willow, “and I just wanted to come in and fuck it up. I hope to see more women of color rocking out and playing guitar and bass, and I want to be their cheerleader. I want to be in their service.”

For the album's other high-profile features, Willow personally reached out to rapper Tierra Whack and the punk-pop princess herself, Avril Lavigne. “That's how

bad she wants it,” says Bryant. “Everything about this project and how it came together is all Willow.”

Her collaboration with Lavigne, “Grow,” provides the perfect bookend to the icon's 2013 single “Here's To Never Growing Up” by flipping the genre's ideology of being forever young into a forward-looking message about one's maturity. Elsewhere, “Don't Save Me” showcases Willow's instrumental savvy, mixing guitar chugs with electric bass.

“I wanted to let other people of color know that we should be able to do whatever we want; we should be able to scream and growl and shred,” says Willow. “And with the history of what we've had to endure in this country, I think that rock is a pretty perfect place to do that.” **B**

INSIDE LOOK

WELCOME (BACK) TO THE 'SPACE JAM'

“I LOVED IT AS A KID. I had the merch, the shirts, the shoes, everything,” says Damian Lillard, current NBA superstar of the Portland Trail Blazers, of the 1996 pop culture phenomenon *Space Jam*. The intergalactic basketball comedy starring Michael Jordan and the Looney Tunes became a must-see family event; its original soundtrack was arguably even bigger — with top 10 Billboard Hot 100 hits in R. Kelly's “I Believe I Can Fly” and Seal's cover of

“Fly Like an Eagle” — selling 4.7 million copies, according to MRC Data.

Twenty-five years later, Warner Bros. Pictures' long-in-the-works stand-alone sequel, *Space Jam: A New Legacy* (now starring LeBron James alongside Bugs Bunny), will arrive in U.S. theaters and on HBO Max on July 16. Its soundtrack, featuring an all-star squad including Lil Uzi Vert, Jonas Brothers, SZA, John Legend, Lil Wayne and Lillard — who acts in the movie and performs on the soundtrack as Dame D.O.L.L.A. — is out July 9. “We knew there would be a lot of excitement, a lot of expectation and a lot of pressure,” says music supervisor

Kier Lehman (*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, HBO's *Insecure*), who, along with co-supervisor Morgan Rhodes, worked with label partners at Republic Records, producer Ryan Coogler's Proximity Media and James' production company, SpringHill.

Sammie Taylor, executive vp A&R at Republic, says the first *Space Jam* soundtrack resonated thanks in part to its cross-generational appeal, and that finding a middle ground for multiple audiences was the hardest part of creating a follow-up. “You're trying to find songs that moms are going to feel good with their kids listening to, or teenagers are not going to feel like, ‘Oh, this is too corny,’” he says. Lead



LeBron and Bugs in Warner Bros. Pictures' *Space Jam: A New Legacy*.

single “We Win” is a result of that multidemographic approach: The song pairs Atlanta rap superstar Lil Baby with gospel veteran Kirk Franklin and has earned 4.5 million on-demand U.S. streams.

Salt-N-Pepa is the only act to appear on both film soundtracks; this time it teamed with Saweetie and Kash Doll on “Hoops,” a move meant to “present the golden

era of hip-hop” to a new generation, says Cheryl “Salt” James. Meanwhile, Lillard, who contributed to the song “About That Time,” looks forward to passing down his fandom. “My kid's going to be watching this movie hearing me being able to share my history with the movie,” he says. “It was an opportunity I couldn't pass up.”

—JASON LIPSHUTZ

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Beville Dunkerley
Head of Country Talent Relations,
SiriusXM & Pandora

IN DEMAND

SUPAKAINE

SONGWRITER

Not long before COVID-19-related closures, rapper-turned-songwriter Supakaine had a chance encounter that changed the course of his career. After ending up in the same room as Saweetie during a writing session, the pair began intensively working together on her upcoming album, *Pretty Bitch Music*. Through working with the rapper, Supakaine met Dr. Luke, who quickly took a liking to his quick-witted writing style and signed him to a seven-year publishing deal with Prescription Songs in April 2020. Already, the Detroit native has scored two Billboard Hot 100 hits: Saweetie's "Best Friend," featuring Doja Cat, and Latto's "Bitch From Da Souf (Remix)." While he has also worked with acts like Sch\$oolboy Q and Internet Money, he says his most successful writing credits have been for women artists, for which he pulls inspiration from his relatives and exes. "I go on Twitter, and some of the girls I know got the most outrageous tweets," he says. "Being a good songwriter, you pay attention. I feel like my blessing is to be behind the scenes and help really find that star — but the goal is to be an executive. Five years down the line, I want to be writing the songs *and* making the plays." —NEENA ROUHANI



Supakaine (foreground) in the studio earlier this year.

SAWEETIE & DOJA CAT



Saweetie (left), Dr. Luke and writers Theron Thomas and A1 LaFlare came across a half-written version of "Best Friend" sent by Doja Cat (right) in February 2020 while scrolling through tracks at the studio. "We thought, 'If Saweetie does this with Doja Cat, that's a fucking moment,'" recalls Supakaine.

With his own lyrical contributions ("Is that my bestie in a Tessie?") combined with Saweetie's audacious style, the duo knew the song would be a hit. "Saweetie is a super perfectionist," he says. "We probably wrote five verses for the song." It paid off: "Best Friend" became her highest-charting single, reaching No. 14 on the Hot 100 and topping Rhythmic Airplay.

DIXIE D'AMELIO



In line with his aspirations to find and help develop the next star, Supakaine is working extensively with Antonio "L.A." Reid signee Dixie D'Amelio. Since the TikTok celebrity-turned-singer debuted as an artist with the single "Be Happy," Supakaine spent time with D'Amelio during a writing camp in February to find a

direction for her songs. "I was asking her what she's into to get a quick glimpse of her taste," says Supakaine. "She was so quiet, so it really was just me asking her questions." But eventually, they tapped into the idea of "love that drives you crazy," and her upcoming hit, "Psycho," was created — in addition to a handful of other tracks to be included on D'Amelio's forthcoming album.

LATTO



Supakaine first met Latto face-to-face in May at a writing session put on by RCA president Mark Pitts and Dr. Luke; a year prior, he and Latto had virtually celebrated the Atlanta rapper's Hot 100 breakout hit, "Bitch From Da Souf (Remix)." Supakaine says the story behind the remix was

simple. "We were just in the studio kicking it one day, and Latto sent ["Bitch From Da Souf"] to Saweetie like, 'Yo, can you hop on this?'" After receiving the track, he and Saweetie wrote a verse capturing her "West Coast girl" energy. "Whenever you shout out a city or area, it's going to do good," says Supakaine, who calls the song "an anthem."

ONE TO WATCH

Myke Towers

FROM Río Piedras, Puerto Rico

AGE 27

LABEL Whiteworld Music/Warner

FOUNDATION Myke Towers (born Michael Torres) learned to rap on the basketball courts in Río Piedras when he was a kid who delivered papers to make money. He was inspired by reggaetón duos Zion & Lennox and Wisin y Yandel, though later took cues from underground rappers like Venezuela's Canserbero. By 19, Towers began uploading his own lyrics-driven music to SoundCloud. He says writing with pen and paper helps:

"Seeing a blank sheet and extracting something from it is a challenge." **DISCOVERY** In 2018, after a lackluster stint with an independent label, Towers felt he had hit a dead end, so he approached Orlando "Jova" Cepeda and José "Tito" Reyes, founding partners of the Puerto Rico-based label/production/management company Whiteworld Music. "We saw an original, humble, focused artist," says Reyes. "He was underestimated, like an ugly duckling," adds Cepeda. "He was the opposite of the [reggaetón] genre. Quiet. We steered him toward music people wanted to hear." Towers says their belief in his skill was transformative. "It doesn't matter how much talent you have.



You need structure." In February, after a two-year courtship, Warner Latina and Warner Records jointly signed Towers through Whiteworld to a global distribution deal that Warner Records co-chairman/COO Tom Corson called "one of our most

important signings of the past year." **FUTURE** Coming in the fall is *Michael*, Towers' fourth album, that he says is more "sentimental" than April's *Lyke Mike*, which explored hip-hop, trap and drill. To continue refining and diversifying his sound, he has been working with producers like Ovy on the Drums and Sky Rompiendo (Karol G and J Balvin, respectively) in addition to regular collaborators like Fara. He expects to tour before the year ends and already has plans for a third album this year to create a trilogy. "I've made it clear I can play two musical extremes, but I'm [still] on the rise," says Towers. "A lot of people don't think I've arrived yet." —LEILA COBO

SUPAKAINE: ERIN ALLEN; SAWEETIE: DOJA CAT; BRANDON ALMEIDA; D'AMELIO: MATT WINKEL/REUTERS/RYAN ODONNELL/GETTY IMAGES; LATTO: PRINCE WILLIAMS/WIREIMAGE; TOWERS: JONATHAN MANNING/WIREIMAGE.COM

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COUNTRY POWER PLAYERS

KANE BROWN, MICKEY GUYTON and **BROTHERS OSBORNE** are leading Nashville toward a brighter, more inclusive future — and finding power in simply being themselves

BY MARISSA R. MOSS PHOTOGRAPHED BY DIANA KING

Onwards And Upwards





From left: Brown, Guyton,
John Osborne and T.J.
Osborne photographed
June 7 in Nashville.



FEW WEEKS AGO, T.J. OSBORNE — half of the powerhouse country duo Brothers Osborne — received a particularly memorable text message. Earlier this year, T.J. came out publicly as gay in a landmark moment for a genre with few out superstars, and his fellow artist Jamey Johnson was the latest of countless peers who reached out with a message of support. “It’s better to be hated for who you are,” texted Johnson, “than loved for what you’re not.”

“I just thought, ‘Fuck yeah,’” says T.J., recounting the story over Zoom to a group of artists who are intimately familiar with what it’s like to challenge the status quo in country music: his brother and bandmate, John (sitting in front of his Nashville fireplace); Mickey Guyton (feeding her baby boy, Grayson, in Los Angeles); and Kane Brown (surrounded by award plaques at his home). They all nod in solemn agreement. “At the end of the day,” adds T.J., “I just want to be who I am.”

Music Row and country radio have historically thrived — even banked — on sameness. The charts have been dominated by a narrow definition of who (and what) makes a hit, with one particular philosophy looming large: that it’s better to be loved not for who you are, but by the right people. The Nashville establishment is predominantly white, straight and male, and often slow to recognize the intentional ways it has been kept as such. It has made artists like T.J. reluctant to come out, discouraged writers like Guyton from sharing their true stories and distracted from the record-breaking accomplishments of a talent like Brown.

But Brown, Guyton and Brothers Osborne are among those now unafraid to shock this mold. These are the artists building a new future for Music Row, where power doesn’t equate to chart position alone — it reflects something deeper, where ownership, individuality and the quest for inclusion hold more weight than a hit single. They may not all

have equal radio or institutional support on their side, but the freedoms of streaming, the possibilities of crossover markets and their fearlessness about speaking out have created a movement within the mainstream to expand the genre beyond just one look, sound or perspective. The real renegades of Nashville aren’t just those who eschew the system altogether — they’re the ones who try to rebuild it from the inside out.

It’s a strategy that Guyton, 38, has mastered in the past year. She came to Nashville in 2011, signed to Capitol as the only Black female artist on a major country label. Since then, she has endured barriers both subtle and sinister, through racism and sexism both quiet and overt. When she released the superb “Black Like Me” after the murder of George Floyd, it opened up country music to a whole new audience who had never

to support me, and that’s OK. Let me do it a different way.”

Brown, 27, who rose through the ranks without the initial support of the Music Row establishment, has become a brand unto himself over the past two years. He revolutionized how Nashville thinks an artist can achieve success, embracing social media and YouTube to amass a passionate fan base. Now, he’s becoming a behind-the-scenes force, too, launching the label 1021 Entertainment (a joint venture with Sony Music Nashville) and publishing imprint Verse 2 Music (with Sony Music Publishing Nashville). He has collaborated with everyone from Marshmello to Camila Cabello, made history as the first Black male solo country artist to perform at the BET Awards and scored five No. 1 Country Airplay singles, with both of his full-length albums — 2016’s self-titled set

“Owning your power is not being afraid to take chances or try things our own way. Or even if you are afraid, doing it anyway.”

— KANE BROWN

dreamed they would see their story represented — and it also opened doors for Guyton. She received a Grammy nomination, performed at the ceremony and hosted the ACM Awards alongside Keith Urban. She started many crucial conversations about the genre’s systemic and historical racism, all during a pandemic when people were confined to a computer, not an arena. Above all, she found her most creative and resonant voice by doubling down on what makes her unique instead of fighting to fit in.

“As a Black woman who has been signed to a label for a very, very, very long time, I was finally like, ‘Fuck this — I am literally crazy if I keep doing the same thing over and over,’” she says, rocking her young son in her arms. “I said, ‘Enough is enough. I’m going to do things on my terms. I’m not going to write another song that you think will work on country radio.’ Country radio was not going

and 2018’s *Experiment* — ruling *Billboard*’s Top Country Albums chart. He’s one of the first major country artists to put concert tickets on sale as the pandemic eased up, and his 35-city Blessed & Free tour will hit all 29 NBA arenas this fall.

“Kane has modernized the approach to being a successful country artist,” says Martha Earls, Brown’s manager. (Her husband, Kent, is his partner in Verse 2.) “You could say the same thing about [T.J.]. I certainly would never speak for anyone, but the old approach was, ‘If you’re gay, just sit there and pretend you’re not, because it could bother somebody.’ Now the modern approach is to lead with your truth. That’s the thing that I’ve always loved about Kane: his willingness to be very open about his life. We’re living in the future versus trying to hold on to the past.”

Surely, Brothers Osborne can’t relate to the magnitude of what Guyton and Brown endure as Black country

artists. But the duo, known for John’s fearless guitar work and T.J.’s gorgeous baritone, is certainly familiar with pushing against business as usual, having defied plenty of conventional career wisdom since the pair moved to Nashville from coastal Maryland. The brothers spoke about gun control and supported Democratic candidates, but while T.J., 36, had not hidden his sexuality from his friends, he publicly remained in the closet for much of his career. Eventually, following in the footsteps of out country artists and writers like Brandy Clark, Shane McAnally, Chely Wright and Ty Herndon, he came out in a *Time* article between album and tour cycles — a decision manager John Peets says was the result of over a year’s worth of conversations and deliberations.

“It was really important to him to do it for kids that were like him growing up,” says Peets, “and we wanted to make sure that if he did it, we minimized the reasons that would look not genuine.” The duo capped the moment off with “Younger Me,” a note to those kids and T.J. himself that shows, as he sings, “being different really wouldn’t be the end.”

Guyton, T.J. and John, 39, have known one another for a decade, going back to the “Misfit Thanksgivings” they would host with friends like Maren Morris and Kacey Musgraves before they had fame and the money to travel home for the holidays. (It’s no coincidence that Morris and Musgraves are among Nashville’s other most visible artists joining alongside them as white allies working to make mainstream country music a more welcoming place for all.) Though Brown hasn’t gotten to know the group well yet, he’s relishing the chance to do so — “T.J., you’re strong as hell for coming out,” says Brown. “I’m proud of you” — as well as talk about what they’re here for in the first place: the music.

Brothers Osborne, like Brown, are getting back on the road to support their excellent album *Skeletons* in June. Guyton will focus on her debut, *Remember Her Name*, coming in September, the title track of which was written in memory of Breonna Taylor. “We’re going to try and find the right platform for live performance, but I don’t think it’s going to be in a traditional trajectory of a country artist at all,” says Gary Borman, her co-manager



Styling by Tiffany Briseno
Brown wears an AMIRI jacket, Marc
Jacobs shirt, G-Star jeans, Scott Bros. by
Kendra Scott bracelets, Alligator Jesus
necklace, David Yurman ring and watch.



Styling by Anna Redmon
John (left) wears a Madewell shirt, Todd Snyder jacket, 7forallmankind jeans, Frye boots and a vintage Stetson hat.
T.J. wears a Madewell shirt, Hudson Jeans jacket, rag & bone jeans and Lucchese boots.

alongside Steve Moir. “Before, we were speaking into an empty void. Now, we’re speaking to a bunch of hearts and minds.”

Over the course of a lengthy Zoom chat, the four artists reminisced about their early days, how they coped with the past year and how they’re helping usher in a new future for country music — as well as the country itself.

It’s amazing to think about those Misfit Thanksgivings. So much talent, and long-lasting friendships, too. Mickey, I don’t think most people realize how long you’ve known Brothers Osborne.

MICKEY GUYTON T.J. and John were some of the first people in Nashville to embrace me and take me under their wing and be my Nashville family. Those were some of my favorite memories.

T.J. OSBORNE When I first met Mickey, even as a gay man, she was so hot it made me nervous. Kane, if it ever happens again, you’re invited.

KANE BROWN I appreciate it, man. I played a show with Brothers Osborne when I first started at some outdoor venue, I don’t remember where.

JOHN OSBORNE I watched Kane at that show and thought, “Man, he has a great voice.” He wasn’t a household name yet, but there were a few hundred people in the audience singing every damn word. It was abundantly clear that he was a rocket ship about to explode.

One thing uniting everyone here is that you’re all redefining what it means to be successful in country music. How do you define power in your own careers?

T.J. The thing that comes with fame that I enjoy isn’t the attention. I do like the attention; I’m not going to lie to you. But it really is being able to have power to influence and change the narrative. To change other people’s lives.

GUYTON In country music, I felt that you’re only allowed to be one way. And as a woman, you’re only allowed to sing about heartbreak or love. But it’s so important to sing your truth. That’s why I fell in love with country music. When I saw that you came out, T.J., I cried because you’re such a beautiful man, and I imagine all these members of the LGBTQIA+ community are going to flock to you because you represent who they are. And Kane — this biracial, beautiful

Black man that came and just shook the entire country music industry by being himself.

BROWN Part of owning your power is not being afraid to take chances or try things our own way. Or even if you are afraid, doing it anyway. Certain songs I cut or wrote, writers we’ve signed or even launching a label, we’ve all done it on our own terms.

JOHN I feel very lucky that there are artists changing the definition of what it is to be a country artist.

In that sense, it feels like there’s no music more suited for this polarized time than country music — which really was borne out of, and shaped by, so many different cultural tensions and collisions in America.

T.J. Isn’t that amazing, though? One of the most narrow lanes of genres

tagged me on an [Instagram] story. I had him come in, write a song with me, and the label wants to use that as my next single. I just want to give everybody a chance — no matter where you come from, no matter where you have been — and just leave the door open.

GUYTON Walking the walk.

JOHN That is indicative of how you need to operate in business in general, but especially the music business. We get roped into this notion that we have to do it the way it has always been done. And that worked for decades, before the internet age. Now if you adhere to this strict policy of one way of doing things, you’re going to be left in the dust.

T.J. John and I have talked many times about starting our own publishing venture. It seems fun, but it’s also a scary thing to get involved in.

“There was a fear of pushing the envelope because it could be career suicide. We’ve proven that we can continue to be ourselves.”

—T.J. OSBORNE

has become one of the most diverse places for different-sounding music, different types of people. It’s such an exciting time for country music.

BROWN What unites us is that music brings people together and heals.

Kane, you’re essentially building your own empire with your publishing company — signing the likes of Joybeth Taylor, Alex Maxwell, Rivers Rutherford and Josh Hoge — and your label imprint, which signed Restless Road.

BROWN I feel like my whole life I’d been beat down. So it’s me just trying to be the bigger person. When I signed Restless Road, I told them I wouldn’t sign anybody else until I broke them. I just want them to know I have all my focus on them. [For publishing], I just sign whoever’s a good writer. I just signed this dude Levon Gray out of Alabama. He’s a Black guy, super R&B. He

BROWN When I was coming into the music industry, I was trying to go through all the *X Factors* and *American Idols*. I basically started all of this on my own. I failed so many times and then overcame everything. Where I came from, living in a trailer, going to 12 different schools? I feel like I’m on top of the world.

We often define modern “outlaw” country as a bunch of straight, white dudes with tattoos, but what you’re all doing seems pretty “outlaw,” too, in a way.

JOHN The reason why it was “outlaw” was not because they were robbing banks. It was outlaw music because they weren’t adhering to the norm. Philosophically, it’s not much different from what we’re doing now. We decided: “Let’s be us.”

GUYTON It’s an exciting time. But I think to myself, “Is it really changing?” I’m still getting called an “f-ing

n-word” on Twitter, and I’m still getting my child called ugly and [being told] to go back to the projects. I think, “There’s no way it’s changing.” And then I go to Nashville and do a show and see Black people backstage working, and that’s something I didn’t really see before.

T.J. Once I came out, there were so many [men] who were like, “I love country music, but me and my husband have gone to shows for 20 years, and we always felt a little uncomfortable. Thank you for making us feel like we’re not such outcasts.” I’m like, “Fuck yes! That’s what it’s all about.”

BROWN At my shows, everybody comes out: Black, Hispanic, Asian, white, gay people. And that’s just what I love, knowing everybody has a place to go.

GUYTON I was so scared when I came to town. I trusted all these older guys that knew the formula — and there really is no formula, especially for someone like me. Any time I would try to overthink it and write this formulaic song, it never worked for me. And it was confusing because I would write something and everybody would be like, “It needs to be really, really country.” And I’m looking over here at Sam Hunt like, “What do you mean?” No offense to Sam; I love him. I finally was like, “I cannot listen to you guys. Because what a man thinks and likes as a song for a woman may not be what a woman wants to hear from another woman.”

John, you vocally supported your brother and bandmate wholeheartedly through his coming-out process. Your Instagram video about him was really sweet — and said all the right things.

JOHN That wasn’t my thought initially. My thought initially was, “This is my younger brother. I love him for who he is, and I’ll be there for him no matter what.”

T.J. I noticed a lot of times since I’ve come out, people want to separate me from John. And that’s exactly why I came out — so we’re not separated. That we are equal.

GUYTON [John] stands up for what’s right. I’ve seen him go to bat for me in times where I felt so small and alone. And he would give me encouragement that nobody else did. He saw me when nobody else did. He is a true ally.

JOHN You’re going to make me cry.

I'm sure there's a bit of a calculus to determining people's intentions lately — fielding requests and wondering, "Are you asking me here for my music or for a different reason?"

T.J. It's nice when people want to help out. But it can be frustrating, especially in Pride month: "Do a playlist, Spotify wants you to do this." If you want to help me, do that shit in fucking November. You doing it in Pride month is nice, but that's really helping you. Sometimes it's really aggravating because I think when people do that, they feel like, "My work here is done, I'm an ally." No, I need help year-round.

GUYTON There is a lot of being tokenized, and it's difficult. I'll take the blows, though. It's so much bigger than just me. If I can help prevent that from happening to future people of color — and not just Black people, not just gay people, anybody that's marginalized — if I can take the blow to make it not as hard for them, I'll do it.

T.J. When a lot of the Black Lives Matter stuff was going on, we had people coming to us being like, "You should collaborate with Kane or Mickey." And I'm like, "I would love to collaborate with them, but I don't want to collaborate with them just to be like, 'Hey, I like Black people.'" Hopefully, it should be implied already, but I just want to collaborate with them for a fucking cool song.

BROWN This year has been shit, but I just won my first ACM Award [for video of the year for "Worldwide Beautiful"]. And it wasn't like, "Congratulations on winning your first ACM. How does it feel?" It was like, "How does it feel being Black and winning your first ACM?" So in my head, I was like, "I feel like I'm about to win this award because of everything that's going on right now." I felt like they were just giving me a handout. And luckily, I had a lot of country artists and my team be like, "No, you worked your ass off. You deserve it." This year has been crazy. If you talk about how you feel, you get bashed. If you don't talk about it, you get bashed. Just trying to find where your place is has been the hardest part for me this year.

How important is it for you all to be honest with your fans about these feelings and struggles?

BROWN I tend to channel a lot of my honest feelings or experiences into my songs. I'm very open with my fans about my life, but I also try to stay positive. It's honestly a balance I'm figuring out, but a barrier comes down when writing lyrics. Writing "Learning" [a 2016 single that discussed a number of struggles] was a way to talk about growing up, and I hope when other people hear that song or other songs of mine that it gives them hope.

John, you have been very open about your experiences with depression and anxiety in a part of the music business where talking about mental health can still be pretty taboo.

JOHN It's important to talk to people about what you're going through. I'm a happy person. I'm kind, I'm hardworking and have successes. But a year and a half ago, I was suicidal.

"I trusted all these older guys that knew the formula — and there really is no formula, especially for someone like me." —MICKEY GUYTON

I never thought I would get there, but I was, and I learned a lot. And fortunately, I had the quarantine time off to get myself in a good place and understand what I needed to do going forward.

T.J. Country is famous for three chords and the truth, and that's great when it's your truth, but what about ours? Why can't I say my truth?

GUYTON I don't feel like I really had a choice [about being honest]. I know people have heard it over and over again, but from a Black woman who knows firsthand what discrimination feels like, I'm watching women — doesn't matter what color you are — being actively discriminated against on a daily basis [in country]. It got to the point where I could shake every hand and kiss every baby and write with every hit songwriter in Nashville, and it's still not going to change. And it still hasn't changed. But I realized that people would listen if a Black woman said

it. When a Black woman says, "Hey, white women are being discriminated against in country music," all of a sudden, everybody's ears turned up like, "Huh? Oh, really?" It feels like we're in the 1950s.

And on top of that, you have to constantly prove that you are "country enough" or battle with people gauging your authenticity.

GUYTON I grew up on gravel dirt roads in Crawford, Texas, next to, at the time, Gov. George W. Bush's ranch. And where my grandmother was buried, you had to drive over a 100-year-old bridge. So every time anybody says what's country and what's not, I'm like, "Are you the country police?"

BROWN I just stopped caring. That's the first thing people say: "You're not country." And I'm like, "Well, uh, OK." I'm country as shit, so I don't know.

of the things that are said to Mickey on Instagram, I know what Kane has had to deal with, and I've seen firsthand what my brother has to. But that's what you get for being a big proponent of positive change. As tough as it is, history will look back at it as a great thing.

Musically, what is everyone most excited about in these next few months as we come out of the pandemic and head back on the road or into the studio?

JOHN To be honest with you, I'm a little bit nervous, because we haven't played a full show in forever, but I don't even think it's going to matter. People are so ready for live music.

Mickey, your debut album is coming out soon, and you're working on a new one as well, Kane.

GUYTON I'm so excited. I had a woman produce it, Karen Kosowski, and it has been really great. I found her after years of going through the whole Nashville circle. She's a truly incredible woman.

BROWN We're working on the album right now. I'm more focused on touring, but I've been writing basically every day. I like so many different sounds, so it's finding which ones go together. I've got some that are pretty rock-heavy, one's almost over-the-top metal. Of course, two pop songs, and one with the artist H.E.R.

GUYTON You can do anything. Watching your rise was incredibly encouraging for me because you came from the outside, and knowing how not always welcoming Nashville can be, you were like, "Fuck it! I'm going to do it in my own way." And now everybody's there for the photo op.

JOHN What's amazing in all of this is, until someone came along that is different, there's a whole school of people that thought they never had a chance. Every time Mickey sings her ass off at an award show, there will be a Black girl who immediately thinks, "I can do that." And then a biracial boy will see Kane and go, "That's my guy. I can do that." And now T.J. will be onstage, and a young gay child will look at him and go, "Yes, that path is for me."

T.J. There was a fear of pushing the envelope because it could be career suicide. We've proven that we can continue to be ourselves. We can speak our mind, and it will still resonate. There's room for all of us. **B**



Styling by Tiffany Gifford
Guyton wears a BIBHU mohapatra
dress and Pamela Love earrings.



EXECUTIVE OF THE YEAR

LESLIE FRAM

At CMT, she's using every tool at her disposal to elevate rising artists and make country music a "big, beautiful tent for all underrepresented voices"

BY MELINDA NEWMAN

From left: BRELAND, Fram and artist Priscilla Block photographed by Katie Kauss on June 3 at Pearl Diver in Nashville.



IN THE MID-'80s, LESLIE FRAM WAS A FLEDGLING DJ WORKING HER WAY through college at top 40 station WABB-FM in Mobile, Ala., when its program director critiqued her aircheck in a manner so harsh, it's still seared in her memory. "He threw the cassette across the table and said, 'You haven't improved one bit,'" she recalls. "I remember thinking, 'Hey, I can't take that tactic if I'm ever in the position to mentor or help someone.'"

Fast forward a few decades, and Fram is in precisely that kind of position as CMT's senior vp of music strategy and talent. She mentors artists daily — and it's safe to say that she has never flung anything at them other than a compliment or some helpful advice. Since starting at CMT in 2011, Fram, who oversees all musical integration within the brand — including original programming, CMT.com and music video airplay across all CMT platforms — has been a fierce supporter of all country artists, especially burgeoning acts, as well as an outspoken advocate for diversity and inclusion.

In 2013, frustrated that female artists like Brandy Clark were struggling to get airplay on terrestrial country radio, she launched Next Women of Country, a signature CMT effort that bolsters 10 rising female acts each year through placements on all CMT platforms and social media, as well as a national tour. Many of the leading women heard on country radio today — Maren Morris, Kelsea Ballerini, Carly Pearce, Gabby Barrett — are NWOC graduates.

That's just one of the steps Fram has taken to shift the balance of power in her corner of the industry. In 2014, she co-founded Change the Conversation, a Nashville organization focused on fighting gender inequity in country music. The initiative has jump-started a speaker series, commissioned research and provided mentoring for young female singer-songwriters.

And just last year, following the release of a report showing that country radio played an average of 9.7 songs by male artists for every one song by a female artist, Fram pushed CMT to institute its Equal Play initiative, with a commitment to 50/50 video airplay on the TV network and CMT Music channels. "As one of the gatekeepers, we asked, 'Where can we do a better job?' Because we were not getting videos from diverse voices," she says.

While the nation confronted a historic reckoning with racial issues over the past 12 months, Fram has remained one of the industry's most prominent voices calling for change. Following George Floyd's murder last May, she co-founded Nashville Music Equality (for which she is

also a board member), an organization dedicated to creating an anti-racist environment in the music industry through conversation, education and mentorship. Her work close to home hasn't slowed: She has premiered videos by Black country acts like Mickey Guyton, Willie Jones and BRELAND on CMT, and she selected four Black female artists — Brittney Spencer, Reyna Roberts, Sacha and trio Chapel Hart — for NWOC's Class of 2021. (That group also includes Priscilla Block and Tenille Arts, among others.)

"Leslie has been such a pivotal resource for me as a new artist in town. She understands the need for diversity of both sound and perspective in country music and was an early champion of mine," says BRELAND. "I'm excited to see how we will be able to shift the culture together."

Fram has taken smart risks on unknown artists, and she has also bet on herself, fearlessly jumping among industry sectors, genres and geographic locations throughout her career. But growing up in Fairhope, Ala., "I was super shy," she says. "I was one of those kids listening to the radio in my room a lot."

Through her high school drama department, she helped produce *Platter Ladder*, a one-hour radio show on local AM station WABF, and started running the station's Sunday-morning religious program. At the University of South Alabama in Mobile, she began working at WABB (which at the time was still a rock station), taking the midnight to 6 a.m. shift. "The first song I ever played was 'The Court of the Crimson King' from King Crimson," she says. That was when she realized "the art of programming could be an amazing career — not only being on the air."

After college, she became assistant program director at an Atlanta top 40 station, which in 1992 switched to WNNX (99X), one of the first and most influential alternative rock stations in the country. "The company let us change format based on what we thought the music would look like," she says. "No research was done. We launched this station and the town turned upside down." Fram learned two key lessons there that she continues to use at CMT: Listen to your gut, and know that the audience doesn't care whether an act is signed. "It's just, 'Play us some great music.'"

After a three-year stint as program director (and morning show co-host with Matt Pinfield) at New York rock station WRXP, in 2011, she reunited with former 99X programmer and mentor Brian Philips, then-president of CMT. He offered Fram a job, even though she had never worked in country music or music video. Two weeks later, she was in Nashville.

Fram loved classic country artists, but she was less familiar with contemporary acts, so she dove in headfirst, learning everything she could. "I went to see Dierks Bentley at the Ryman. After the show, he stayed onstage and signed autographs for an hour. I had never experienced that in the rock world," she recalls. "[Universal Music Group Nashville CEO] Mike Dungan looked at me and said, 'Welcome to country music!'"

With her new team, Fram quickly expanded CMT's music discovery circle. "We were already supporting the superstars, so it was like, 'How can we foster the next generation?'" she says. She developed close relationships with music publishers, who would tip off Fram to up-and-comers. Before they even got record deals, artists including Morris, Luke Combs, Old Dominion and Russell Dickerson received video play on CMT.

Fram — who has ridden out the pandemic on her farm in Portland, Tenn., with her husband and their two donkeys, Betty and Sally (named after *Mad Men* characters), and a Percheron draft horse, Casper — still spends hours every week dealing with new artists. Unlike her callous former program director, she balances firmness with a warmth that keeps an artist's dreams intact. Instead of no, she'll say an artist's music is not quite there or needs more work. "I never want to tear anyone down," she says, "[but] I'm honest because then I can sleep at night."

"The further the artist seems from the golden ring, the more Leslie seems compelled [to] boost that artist's career," says Philips, who is now executive vp content/audience at Cumulus Media. "She has confidence in her own beliefs, and she is naturally inclined to pull for the underdog."

For Fram, who is a decade into her CMT career, championing country music means championing everyone in it. "How hard is it to play a great female artist? It's not hard," she says with a laugh. "I love the format. We just need to open up this big, beautiful tent for all underrepresented voices."

In the meantime, she has a small piece of encouraging advice for anyone who may not have as big of a soapbox as she: "A baby step is a step. A lot of women, from songwriters to publishers to artists, have created these amazing platforms for diverse groups, whether it's a showcase or songwriter camp. To me, that is how we move forward." **b**

► LABELS

Scott Borchetta

FOUNDER/PRESIDENT/CEO, BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP

Andrew Kautz

COO, BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP

Allison Jones

EXECUTIVE VP A&R, BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP

Jimmy Harnen

PRESIDENT/CEO, BMLG RECORDS

George Briner

PRESIDENT, THE VALORY MUSIC CO.

In the past year, Big Machine Label Group scored victories with both developing artists and veterans. Carly Pearce won her first awards from the Academy of Country Music and the Country Music Association (CMA), for "I Hope You're Happy Now" with Lee Brice, and Tim McGraw returned to both the label and the top of the charts with *Here on Earth*, a No. 1 debut on *Billboard's* Top Country Albums chart. Borchetta, 58, continues to keep his eyes and ears open for new talent, noting: "They come from anywhere and everywhere."

ARTIST I MOST WANT TO SEE LIVE WHEN TOURING RETURNS "Rage Against the Machine." —**Borchetta**

Mike Curb

CHAIRMAN, CURB RECORDS/CURB|WORD ENTERTAINMENT

Curb's recent successes include Lee Brice's two No. 1s on the Country Airplay chart ("One of Them Girls" and "I Hope You're Happy Now," a duet with Big Machine's Carly Pearce, which snagged the ACM Award for single of the year) while for King & Country earned its eighth No. 1 on Christian Airplay with "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" (featuring

Needtobreathe). Curb is also proud of co-producing the Fisk Jubilee Singers' 150th-anniversary album, *Celebrating Fisk!*, which won the Grammy Award for best roots gospel album in March.

DISCOVER NEW COUNTRY ARTISTS BY "Trying to listen to music every night."

Mike Dungan

CHAIRMAN/CEO, UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP NASHVILLE

Cindy Mabe

PRESIDENT, UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP NASHVILLE

Mike Harris

COO/EXECUTIVE VP, UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP NASHVILLE

Brian Wright

EXECUTIVE VP A&R, UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP NASHVILLE

Royce Risser

EXECUTIVE VP PROMOTION, UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP NASHVILLE

In addition to success with new artists like Parker McCollum, UMGN superstars Carrie Underwood and Alan Jackson reached new heights. Underwood's first faith-based album, *My Savior*, debuted at No. 1 on *Billboard's* Top Country Albums and Christian Albums charts. "She is truly one of the greatest singers of our time," says Dungan. Jackson returned with his first album in six years, a deeply traditional release that bowed at No. 2 on Top Country Albums. "Alan has made his ultimate love story to country music with *Where Have You Gone*," says Dungan, "and it's teaching each of us why country music matters."

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "Understand that many fans take sport in building them up and then tearing them down. Words and actions have consequences — be prepared to own yours." —**Dungan**

"My advice to any artist posting on social media is to measure twice and cut once. That headline you're writing will never go away."

—STEVE HODGES, SONY MUSIC NASHVILLE



John Esposito
CHAIRMAN/CEO, WARNER MUSIC NASHVILLE

Ben Kline
EXECUTIVE VP/GM, WARNER MUSIC NASHVILLE

Cris Lacy
EXECUTIVE VP A&R, WARNER MUSIC NASHVILLE

Kristen Williams
SENIOR VP RADIO AND STREAMING, WARNER MUSIC NASHVILLE

James Marsh
NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF RADIO AND STREAMING, WARNER MUSIC NASHVILLE

Gabby Barrett continued her shift from new artist to budding superstar with “I Hope” and “The Good Ones,” becoming the first female to take her first two proper singles to No. 1 on Hot Country Songs since the list adopted its multi-metric methodology in 2012. Combined, the songs have earned over 1 billion global streams. For Esposito, 66, it’s proof that risks are worth taking. “If I’ve been reminded of anything this past year, it’s that the status quo does not serve us and can be overturned at any moment,” he says. “Although we can’t wait for things to return to the old normal, we’ve got to

embrace the new normal, too.”

ARTIST I MOST WANT TO SEE LIVE WHEN TOURING RETURNS “Bruce Springsteen.”
—Esposito

Randy Goodman
CHAIRMAN/CEO, SONY MUSIC NASHVILLE

Ken Robold
COO/EXECUTIVE VP, SONY MUSIC NASHVILLE

Steve Hodges
EXECUTIVE VP PROMOTION AND ARTIST DEVELOPMENT, SONY MUSIC NASHVILLE

Taylor Lindsey
SENIOR VP A&R, SONY MUSIC NASHVILLE

Jennifer Way
SENIOR VP MARKETING, SONY MUSIC NASHVILLE

It was a banner year for Sony Music Nashville, as evidenced by the company’s stellar showing at award shows over the past several months. At the delayed 2020 ACM Awards in September, SMN earned 12 trophies, the most in its 30-year history. For November’s CMA Awards, SMN won seven awards, its largest tally in 14 years. Additionally, in March, Miranda Lambert won the best country album Grammy. The one downside is the ongoing issue of

developing artists taking so long to gain traction at radio. “If new artists are going to continue to take 52-plus weeks to hit their peak,” says Goodman, 64, “we won’t be breaking any new artists.”

ARTIST I MOST WANT TO SEE LIVE WHEN TOURING RETURNS “The Genesis reunion.”

Gordon S. Kerr
PRESIDENT/CEO, BLACK RIVER ENTERTAINMENT

Black River Entertainment kept things flowing during the past year, partly thanks to Kelsea Ballerini and her two albums — *Kelsea* and its stripped-down companion, *Ballerini*, both of which debuted in the top 10 on Top Country Albums. Kerr’s son, Josh, who is signed to Black River’s publishing company, won a Grammy and a Dove Award after co-writing for King & Country and Dolly Parton’s “God Only Knows.” “We’ve adapted and even changed during the pandemic,” says the senior Kerr. “Amid this change, our staff, songwriters and artists have had to carry on and adapt to this incredibly challenging, sad and important time in the history of this world.”

I DISCOVER NEW COUNTRY ARTISTS BY “Recently, I’ve been working a question into my conversations: ‘So who are you listening to these days?’ It has been great to hear about new music and artists from the perspective of others around me.”

Jon Loba
PRESIDENT, RECORDED MUSIC, BMG NASHVILLE

Carson James
SENIOR VP PROMOTION, BBR MUSIC GROUP

Loba celebrates Black singer-songwriter Blanco Brown racking up over 202 million streams and a No. 1 Country Airplay single with “Just the Way” (with labelmate Parmalee) as proof that “country music’s audience is more accepting of diverse voices than they are given credit for.” Meanwhile, Jimmie Allen was named best new male artist of the year at the ACM Awards, which he cites as a “strong sign that our genre is broadening.”

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL CONTINUE “Finding obscure Zoom and [Microsoft] Teams backgrounds.” —Loba

David Macias
PRESIDENT, THIRTY TIGERS

Macias does not like to play favorites with any of his artists, which include Jason Isbell and The 400 Unit and the late John Prine. The forward thinker also keeps his ear open for fresh talent through people he trusts and digital service provider playlists. “One of my favorite new artists that we’re working with, Kimberly Kelly, I found that way,” says Macias. “Three years later, I still always listen to her.”

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA “Don’t make it all about business. This is an opportunity for fans to develop a relationship with you. Be funny, be vulnerable, be charmingly discursive.”

Norbert Nix
PRESIDENT/PARTNER, TRIPLE TIGERS RECORDS

Kevin Herring
SENIOR VP PROMOTION, TRIPLE TIGERS RECORDS

Triple Tigers notched two more No. 1s on Country Airplay from its flagship artists over the past year with Scotty McCreery’s “In Between” and Russell Dickerson’s “Love You Like I Used To,” bringing the independent’s tally to seven since its 2016 launch. Additionally, Nix — who was named president of the label in September — signed Cam to Triple Tigers in partnership with Sony’s RCA in New York.

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA “People care more about what your Starbucks order is than what you are trying to sell or promote.” —Nix

Lynn Oliver-Cline
FOUNDER/CEO, RIVER HOUSE ARTISTS

Oliver-Cline, 47, says Luke Combs’ ACM album of the year honor for *What You See Is What You Get*, released by River House, her joint venture with Sony Nashville, was a highlight of 2020. “Having a body of work be recognized and rewarded by your peers is an amazing feeling,” she says. And Combs grew that body of work with a deluxe edition of the album, which included his 11th consecutive Country Airplay No. 1, “Forever After All” — co-authored by River House writer Drew Parker, who signed with Warner Music Nashville in February.

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL CONTINUE “Reading, reading and more reading. Often multiple books at a time. It really transported me elsewhere during quarantine. It continues to be a great escape.”

» MANAGEMENT

Narvel Blackstock
PRESIDENT, STARSTRUCK ENTERTAINMENT

Blackstock’s management client Blake Shelton continues to chart hits 20 years since his first release. *Body Language*, his first new studio album in nearly four years, debuted at No. 3 on Top Country Albums and at No. 18 on the Billboard 200. The set includes “Happy Anywhere,” Shelton’s Country Airplay No. 1 duet with partner Gwen Stefani, and top 10 hit “Minimum Wage.” Shelton, who has served as a coach on *The Voice* since its 2011 premiere, also marked his eighth victory in May with contestant Cam Anthony.

“The pandemic was the ultimate reminder of humility and that adapting and finding opportunity in every challenge is much better than trying to control.”

—MARTHA EARLS, EFG MANAGEMENT

Gary Borman
FOUNDER/CEO, BORMAN ENTERTAINMENT

Borman manages Keith Urban and co-manages Mickey Guyton with Steve Moir. The two artists co-hosted the April ACM Awards, making Guyton, who caused a splash last year with the Grammy-nominated single “Black Like Me,” the first Black woman to do so. The track will be part of her first full-length album, out later this year, while Urban — whom Borman has managed for two decades — will begin playing live shows in August, as well as resume his Las Vegas residency, to support his 2020 release, *The Speed of Now Part 1*, his seventh No. 1 on Top Country Albums. “In the midst of a challenging year,” says Borman, “our team got creative, stayed positive and supported each other and our artists.”

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA “Be yourself, be consistent, experiment with new technology, and embrace change.”

Ash Bowers
OWNER, WIDE OPEN MANAGEMENT

Bowers, 39, helped guide Jimmie Allen’s first two singles (“Best Shot” and “Make Me Want To”) to No. 1 on Country Airplay in 2018 and 2020 and achieved the same feat with fellow client Matt Stell’s first two tracks (“Prayed for You” in 2019, “Everywhere But On” in 2020). Says Bowers: “Being the producer and the manager of both of these artists meant that there was a lot on the line.”

I DISCOVER NEW COUNTRY ARTISTS BY “Staying active in the creative commu-

nity. As a producer, I get pitched a lot of demos from new songwriters. I always try to take the time to ask questions and learn as much as I can about who these artists and songwriters are. They are the next generation of this business. I love getting on board at the ground level.”

Virginia Bunetta
OWNER/ARTIST MANAGER,
G-MAJOR MANAGEMENT

Bunetta, 40, successfully rescheduled star client Thomas Rhett’s The Center Point Road Tour, which was postponed last May and will now kick off in Alabama on Aug. 13. Rhett — named male artist of the

year at the ACM Awards in April — also saw the first half of his double album, *Country Again: Side A*, debut at No. 2 on Top Country Albums in May, landing him his fifth top five entry on the chart.

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL CONTINUE “Peloton and family dinners.”

Coran Capshaw
FOUNDER, RED LIGHT MANAGEMENT
Brad Belanger
OWNER, HOMESTEAD
Mary Hilliard Harrington
MANAGER, RED LIGHT MANAGEMENT;
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD, COUNTRY MUSIC ASSOCIATION

Tom Lord
MANAGER/HEAD OF MARKETING,
RED LIGHT MANAGEMENT

Red Light — home to artists including Gabby Barrett, Dierks Bentley, Sam Hunt, Maren Morris and Chris Stapleton — focused on out-of-the-box thinking this past year. It established CTRL_Music_, the first country channel on Twitch and home to weekly signature show *Country Now Live*, where top performers are garnering up to 350,000 unique viewers per night. The company is also embracing innovation to help boost its women clients. “With a specific focus on our female artists,” says Harrington, “we are continuing to set the pace with massive consumption numbers with some of the most streamed songs of the year so far.”

Bob Doyle
PRESIDENT, BOB DOYLE & ASSOCIATES

This spring, Doyle, 73, returned to the nation’s capital with Garth Brooks, his client of over 30 years. Honored as the youngest recipient of the Library of Congress’ Gershwin Prize for Popular Song in 2020, Brooks was next inducted into the Kennedy Center Honors’ Class

of 2020 in a belated ceremony in May. After staying connected to fans with two CBS TV specials with wife Trisha Yearwood and his weekly Facebook Live series, *Inside Studio G*, Brooks is now preparing to hit the road again, having sold over 50,000 tickets in under 30 minutes for a July stadium show in Salt Lake City, according to Doyle. “I hope it is indicative of the demand for entertainment after the pandemic,” says Doyle. The country superstar is also spreading his wings, narrating and executive-producing a docuseries on national parks for *National Geographic*.
ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA “Think twice. What you post will be there for a long, long time.”

Martha Earls
OWNER, EFG MANAGEMENT;
CO-OWNER, 1021 ENTERTAINMENT,
DEMASIADO PRODUCTION

Earls diversified her portfolio during the pandemic to include a production company, Demasiado, alongside long-time management client Kane Brown. “Although it was hard, we adapted to the times and had success,” she says, citing Brown’s ACM Awards music video of the year win in April for his inclusive “Worldwide Beautiful.” In February, Earls also helped launch Brown’s new record label, 1021 Entertainment, a joint venture with Sony Music Nashville (which has signed Restless Road), as well as his publishing joint venture with Sony Music Publishing Nashville. “Kane is the best A&R that I know and is always first to discover someone new, especially on social media,” she says.

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA “Be authentic. Be yourself. Don’t try to follow or chase trends. Just be open and honest with your fans.”



Keith Urban and Mickey Guyton



Clockwise from top left: Tiera, Roberts, Sacha, Spencer, Amber, trio Chapel Hart and Marks.

Rising And Shining

A new generation of young Black women artists are making Nashville take notice — and creating music on their own terms

BY ANDREA WILLIAMS

BEFORE 2020, MIKO MARKS' CAREER arc looked like those of many of the Black women who had tried to make it in Nashville before her own mid-2000s arrival: supremely talented vocalist-songwriter makes valiant push toward mainstream country music but ultimately gets rebuffed by the industry's resistance to broaden beyond white and mostly male artists.

Then came the pandemic and a national reckoning with racial inequity, during which Marks put out her first new music in 13 years — and she finally felt heard. In March, she released *Our Country*, which won broad critical acclaim. Asked whether she could have ever anticipated such recognition, Marks responds emphatically: "Absolutely not."

To get to that point, Marks had to leave Nashville. But her triumph is inspiring a new generation of Black female country artists in and around Music City — led by Brittney Spencer, Ashlie Amber, Sacha, Reyna Roberts, Tiera and trio Chapel Hart — who are now poised to make the most of every opportunity that comes their way. And given the shifting conversations in country music around inclusion and diversity, those chances to be heard seem more plentiful than ever.

The first time Spencer performed music from her EP *Compassion* was in March, with, remarkably, The Roots as her backing band. When she sang "Sorrows Don't Walk No More," it felt like both a once-in-a-lifetime thrill and a perfect emblem for her skyrocketing career. "It has been a whirlwind, a wonderful one that I honestly never saw coming," she says. Spencer has been welcomed into writing rooms with a who's who of Nashville's creative

community, including Maren Morris, Amanda Shires, Jimmie Allen, Brandy Clark and Jason Isbell, and in May, she made her Grand Ole Opry debut.

She is also among CMT's 2021 Next Women of Country, which for the first time honors multiple artists of color. Her co-honorees include Roberts, who will join Dierks Bentley for his Seven Peaks Festival and whose single, "Stompin' Grounds," was featured on ESPN's *Monday Night Football*; Canadian singer Sacha, who was recently named iHeartRadio's Future Star and whose single "Standards" reached No. 43 on *Billboard*'s Canada Country chart; and family trio Chapel Hart, whose members are filming a reality TV pilot focused on their budding career, even as they embark on their first national tour. "It's exciting, and it's fast," says the band's Danica Hart. "Those are the two words that best describe this past year."

For all of these women, "successful" could define it as well — though perhaps depending on who's doing the defining. They've all enjoyed support from the media and have been added to digital service providers' playlists. But the traditional indicators of mainstream success — signing a record and/or publishing deal — have mostly remained elusive for them. (Tiera, a 2020 NWOC graduate who signed a publishing deal through a partnership between hit songwriter Nicolle Galyon's Songs & Daughters/Big Loud and Warner Chappell Nashville, is the exception.)

Though a few of these artists and their managers do recount meetings they've landed with labels and publishers, they also recall their disappointment when those meetings did not lead to offers. "We can never be on

the same platform as Carrie Underwood, Kelsea Ballerini and Maren Morris if they don't sign us," says Amber, who has amassed nearly 40,000 Instagram followers, almost 30,000 monthly Spotify listeners and a feature on *The Bobby Bones Show*. "Things are changing; they're featuring us in articles and doing things like that. But the true change has to happen with the gatekeepers."

But driven by their undeniable talent and ambition, these women also aren't waiting around for doors to open. Instead, they're focusing on what they *can* do. "It'll stress me out if I think about the issues within the industry," says Spencer. "Of course we know they're there, but I still have to be an artist. I still have to be me in the meantime. And for me, that is what power looks like right now: being in control of who I am and what I'm able to do."

Initially, says Hart, her band "wanted to jump on a label and have them say, 'OK, this is what we see for you guys.' But a few showcases later, we're doing so much on our own that gets to be authentically *us*. And I'm realizing the importance of our independence."

Amber takes a similar view. "I claim power for myself because I have not a single person telling me what I can and cannot do," she says. "I don't have somebody telling me that I should cover up my cleavage or straighten my hair because it's more commercial. I take pride in the fact I'm rocking my cornrows, and you will not tell me otherwise."

Given the history of Black women in country music, this perspective makes sense. In the mid-1970s — just a few years after Linda Martell became the highest-charting Black woman in the genre's history when her "Color Him Father" rose to No. 22 on Hot Country Songs — another group of Black women seemed poised for stardom in country. Lenora Ross was signed to RCA (Charley Pride's label), while independent artists Ruby Falls, Barbara Cooper and Virginia Kirby were booking shows and media interviews on their own. By the dawn of the '80s, however, they had all but disappeared from the scene.

More recently, Mickey Guyton's 2011 signing to Capitol Nashville and her historic 2020 Grammy nomination have been seen as some progress. But even Guyton has still faced a steep climb. Despite finally separating her voice from industry expectations, she struggles for acceptance from country radio and endures a regular onslaught of racist slurs. Guyton continues to encourage the artists following in her footsteps, but for these reasons, she's also nervous for them.

"When I was onstage at the CMT Awards listening to Linda Martell's story, I almost broke down in tears because so many of her stories are my stories," she says. "And I'm terrified that there will be other Black women in country who will also share my stories."

There are reasons to believe the buzz surrounding these young women will manifest in real investments, though, as well as meaningful support — including from staff and executives who look like them — that can further propel their careers. "I feel like I'm at a point where, with labels and publishers, we can do something really special," says Sacha. "Somebody needs to recognize the opportunity [in signing us]."

Veteran Marks puts it plainly: "We're at a point now where folks are taking notice, whereas before, they weren't," she says. "It was like, 'Give it some time and she'll be gone.' But right now, there's enough momentum going forward for women of color in country music that it can't be stalled out. It's too powerful."



From left: Liepis, Bannen, Palmer and Bryan photographed by Robby Klein on May 21 in Nashville.

Apple Music Seeks Fresh Air

Nashville executives Jay Liepis and Michael Bryan hope to make country radio more inclusive with the genre's most diverse slate of programming yet

WHEN JAY LIEPIS AND MICHAEL BRYAN WERE tasked with developing programming for Apple Music Country — the streaming service's first country radio station — they used terrestrial radio as a road map.

"We just did everything they weren't doing," says Liepis, head of music business partnerships for Apple Music Nashville. "It was about inclusion and diversity. It was about gender balance ... everything that country typically seemed to struggle with."

More so than other genres, success for country artists has long been tied to radio airplay. Historically, though, country radio has been one of the least diverse parts of the music industry. A 2019 study from the University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative found that only 16% of artists across *Billboard's* year-end Hot Country charts were women; people of color and queer members of the genre were recognized even less on radio playlists.

"WE HAVE TO SHINE A SPOTLIGHT IF WE'RE EVER GOING TO MAKE THE CHANGE THAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN."

—Bryan

made her the first Black woman to hit the Hot Country Songs chart in 20 years. On the show — named for Black country pioneer Linda Martell's 1970 debut album — Palmer amplifies Black, Latino and Indigenous artists, and the first season focuses specifically on women of color.

Bryan also gave the artist Tiera free rein over two programs — *The Tiera Show* and *Soundcheck Radio* — after viewing her experiences as a Black country singer on Instagram. Female hosts remain in the minority on country radio, but Apple Music recruited singer Kelleigh Bannen to host its first-ever country show, *Today's Country*, in 2019, and she still helms the station under the new Apple Music Country banner.

Black singer-songwriter BRELAND, whose 2019 country-trap hit "My Truck" pushed boundaries, continues to supply *Land of the Bre Radio* listeners with more genre-bending songs. And on *PROUD Radio With Hunter Kelly* — country radio's first LGBTQ+-themed regular broadcast — veteran journalist Kelly interviews queer country and Americana artists like Brandi Carlile and Waylon Payne on topics such as their coming-out experiences.

Those sessions run alongside exclusive shows from artists Jimmie Allen, Kelsea Ballerini, Dierks Bentley, Luke Bryan and Carrie Underwood, among others. (Morgan Wallen's *Happy Hour Radio* was pulled after a video of the up-and-comer using a racial slur surfaced in February, further igniting conversations about enduring racism in the country music industry.)

Apple Music Country aims to reach as far as possible, and as with all Apple Music radio offerings, the channel is available in 165 countries.

"Hopefully, this goes beyond our ecosystem and helps fuel the next version of country music in Nashville," says Bryan. "It's one of the most meaningful things that I think most of us have ever done in our careers."

—TATIANA CIRISANO

Ann Edelblute

OWNER, THE HQ

Collaborations with Loretta Lynn, John Legend, Reba McEntire, David Bisbal and others marked a busy year during which HQ client Carrie Underwood released her holiday album, *My Gift* (with an accompanying HBO film), and her first Christian album, *My Savior*. Both of them debuted at No. 1 on Top Christian Albums. Planning for Underwood's first residency, *Reflection*, starting Dec. 1 at the new Resorts World Las Vegas, and continued expansion of her fit52 fitness app and athleisure clothing line CALIA were also priorities. "We remained incredibly busy," says Edelblute, "in spite of the challenges the world has faced over the past year."

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "Be your authentic self."

Kerri Edwards

PRESIDENT, KP ENTERTAINMENT

Edwards' long-term client Luke Bryan recently celebrated several career milestones: Last December, the singer was named *Billboard's* country artist of the 2010s for placing 11 No. 1s on Hot Country Songs and eight No. 1s on Top Country Albums during the decade. In April, he took home the ACM Awards' entertainer of the year trophy — his third time earning the top honor. Edwards also worked with the *American Idol* judge to co-execute-produce a five-episode series, *Luke Bryan: My Dirt Road Diary*, for Amazon Prime's IMDb TV, which is slated to air later this year.

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL CONTINUE "I wish I could say, 'More sleep,' but I know that's a lie, so bring back traveling and live shows. Ready!"

Chris Kappy

CHIEF NAVIGATION OFFICER, MAKE WAKE ARTISTS

"By sacrificing and making pivots, we grew to be a stronger management company," says Kappy, 48, who decided to forgo a salary while he charted a course through the pandemic. Make Wake added five new employees, and they were busy. Luke Combs claimed the top artist spot, as well as the top two albums on *Billboard's* 2020 year-end country charts, and landed his 11th straight No. 1 on Country Airplay with "Forever After All"; Niko Moon scored a Country Airplay and Hot Country Songs No. 1 with "Good Time"; Hailey Whitters' Pigasus Records inked a deal with Big Loud/Songs & Daughters; and Drew Parker signed with Warner Music Nashville.

I DISCOVER NEW COUNTRY ARTISTS BY "Empowering my team to find them. Anyone in the company can present artists, and that has been so helpful in letting everyone know they have a voice."



Carrie Underwood

Marion Kraft

CEO/ARTIST MANAGER, SHOPKEEPER MANAGEMENT

Kraft, 56, and her ShopKeeper team embraced big plays for clients Miranda Lambert — who holds the record for the most ACM Awards with 34 trophies — and Ashley Monroe, whose new album, *Rosegold*, departs significantly from her usual sound. Lambert's latest set, *The Marfa Tapes*, a lo-fi collection of tunes with collaborators Jack Ingram and Jon Randall, was released in tandem with a film and an *Austin City Limits* performance. As always, Kraft's managerial moves were buffered by simple advice for clients: "Be yourself."

ARTIST I MOST WANT TO SEE LIVE WHEN TOURING RETURNS "My Chemical Romance. I think they are supposed to play Bonnaroo this year."

Clint Higham

CO-OWNER/PRESIDENT, MORRIS HIGHAM MANAGEMENT

Dale Morris

CO-OWNER, MORRIS HIGHAM MANAGEMENT

Morris Higham's management clients scooped up several recent awards, from Carly Pearce's ACM and CMA wins to Old Dominion taking home its fourth group of the year trophy at the ACMs and third from the CMAs. The firm also achieved sales of 200,000 cases of Kenny Chesney's Blue Chair Bay rum line, which the country superstar launched in 2013. "As an independent liquor brand, that was huge," says Higham, 49, who believes the brand's authenticity helped its success. The ways music is marketed and sold have changed significantly since Morris started in the business 40 years ago, but Higham notes that one thing remains the same — "the necessity for good songs and artistry."



From left: Watkins, Marshall and Marsh.

'There's Still A Lot Of Work To Be Done'

A year after opening up to *Billboard* about their experiences in Music City, three of Nashville's (still) few prominent Black executives reflect on how much has — and hasn't — changed

BY GAIL MITCHELL

CANDICE WATKINS HOPED THE beginning of 2021 would feel like a fresh start — a long-awaited calm to process a year that brought the murder of George Floyd, nationwide social-justice protests and a racial reckoning across the music industry. "Then February came," she says, "and I experienced a whole new level of 'survival mode.'"

Watkins, vp marketing at Big Loud Records, is referring to the video made public that month of Morgan Wallen screaming the N-word (among other expletives) outside his Nashville home. For Watkins, who is Black, the ensuing furor hit home on another front: Wallen is part of the artist roster she works with at Big Loud. A week after the story broke, she met with Wallen in person — at his request — for a frank conversation.

"I didn't know if I'd walk out angrier and more hurt than when I walked in," recalls Watkins. "But no stone was left unturned in that conversation; it was deeply honest. I've encountered direct racism multiple times, and never has a white man had the remorsefulness to apologize to me. There are 30-, 40-, 50-, 60- and 70-year-old men who owe me that apology. So it's not lost on me that a 27-year-old was able to do what others in this business have failed to."

She declines to share further details of their talk and says she neither condones nor minimizes what Wallen did. Still, based on that conversation, Watkins was able to forgive him. "But I can't forget," she adds. "Now comes the hard work to repair, rebuild trust and make a positive

impact. I hope he continues to do the deep work to educate himself and grow."

Last August, Watkins — along with fellow Black executives James Marsh and Rakiyah Marshall — spoke to *Billboard* about their experiences in Nashville. Nearly a year later, Black artists have more visibility and recognition in Music City than ever: Mickey Guyton became the Grammys' first Black female solo country nominee, Kane Brown was the Academy of Country Music Awards' first biracial individual winner for video of the year, and Jimmie Allen became the ACM's first Black new artist winner. The three top country award shows had Black or biracial co-hosts for their latest installments: Darius Rucker for the Country Music Association Awards, Guyton for the ACM Awards and Brown for the CMT Awards. But as Watkins, Marsh and Marshall tell it, the needle hasn't moved as perceptibly for Black executives.

"I'm still one of the few higher-ranked Black music executives working in Nashville," says Marsh, national director of radio and streaming for Warner Music Nashville. But with the pandemic subsiding and the Wallen incident and Floyd murder trial "putting more gas back on the fire" for change, Marsh — who is co-chair of his company's in-house diversity, equity and inclusion task force — says he sees a dedicated push toward ensuring people of color get a platform to speak to important issues and a fair shot at jobs and promotions.

"The pandemic slowed things down," continues Marsh, "so, to be fair, we need another year of watching and im-

proving. I can't say what's happening at other companies — but we're digging deep here as best we can to change the culture of country music and Nashville."

Marshall agrees that "there's still a lot of work to be done for anyone of color that has to coexist in this genre." So last November, she took matters into her own hands. After spending a little over three years as creative director at BMG Music Publishing, she founded Back Blocks Music, a publishing and artist development firm she also leads as CEO. "I've always had an entrepreneurial spirit," says Marshall. "When it came down to asking what I needed to do to continue growing in my career, I couldn't get any feedback. So I decided to bet on myself, and it has been incredibly rewarding. By paving my own way, I can more clearly see how to get a seat at the table with the other decision-makers, thereby allowing me to better discover and elevate the unique voices we have in the music industry."

All three executives acknowledge some encouraging recent steps forward: labels and corporations donating to varied Black community organizations and initiatives; and Spotify's launch of the Frequency service, which features Black country artists like buzzy newcomers Brittney Spencer and Tiera. But a year from now, the trio agrees, sustainable progress will come from changes on the ground level of the industry.

For Marsh, that means not pigeonholing Black country artists or executives. "To get better as an industry, we have to retrain A&R, retrain radio and retrain listeners," he says. Watkins sees a need for an entirely new moral compass to emerge in a genre that, she says, "has been willfully apathetic and complicit when it comes to racial injustice. Time will tell if there has truly been a galvanized reckoning that changes the tide or if it's a trendy, performative PR moment."

Marshall breaks it down to an even more basic directive: Hire people who are good at what they do — and happen to be of color. "Being Black is a gift," she says. "And we are so powerful when we get to focus on our craft, not only in country but all music. Give us that chance. Then the haters will have to pay attention, because there will be nothing left for them to do." **b**

Danny Nozell
CEO, CTK ENTERPRISES

Nozell's client, Dolly Parton, has stayed extraordinarily busy during the pandemic, including donating \$1 million toward creating the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine and releasing *A Holly Dolly Christmas*, which debuted at No. 1 on Top Country Albums. Her latest collaboration — on a signature flavor of Jeni's Ice Cream, Strawberry Pretzel Pie — “sold 50,000-plus units and is back-ordered until September,” says Nozell, with half of the proceeds benefiting Parton's Imagination Library, which has provided free books to children monthly since 1995. “It broke [the Jeni's website] within minutes.”

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA “Use all the free global marketing to your advantage.”

Jason Owen
PRESIDENT/CEO, SANDBOX ENTERTAINMENT; CO-PRESIDENT, MONUMENT RECORDS

Shepherding such high-profile acts as Kelsea Ballerini, Dan + Shay, Little Big Town, Midland and Kacey Musgraves through the pandemic has kept Nashville impresario Owen busy, but he and his staff met the challenge. “We are stronger as a team and better than ever,” he says, even launching Sandbox Succession, which oversees the estates of artists such as Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash. Next up: a new Musgraves album — her first since taking home the Grammy for album of the year in 2019 — that will be released through a new partnership between Universal Music Group Nashville and Interscope Records.

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL CONTINUE “Not attending award shows.”

John Peets
FOUNDER/PRESIDENT, QPRIME SOUTH

Peets' management clients enjoyed a successful year, both with hits from Ashley McBryde (“One-Night Standards”) and Eric Church (“Hell of a View”), and with culture-shifting moments from Church — who completed his COVID-19 vaccination for the cover of *Billboard* magazine — and Brothers Osborne, whose frontman, T.J. Osborne, came out as gay in February, a significant milestone in the country music community. “I am in awe of my talented team who continue to work relentlessly, allowing us to release six country albums during COVID,” says Peets, 54, including Church's three-album set, *Heart & Soul*.

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL CONTINUE “We have learned a lot over the months on how to stay connected to one another — we have gained glimpses of a better overall work-life balance. We should maintain this going forward, but I do believe there is great benefit in being together in a physical space, especially in a creative business where inspiration cannot be scheduled.”

Scott Siman
PRESIDENT, EM.CO

In August 2020, Siman steered the release of his longtime client Tim McGraw's 15th studio album, *Here on Earth*. The set debuted at No. 1 on the Top Country Albums chart, earning the country veteran the honor of having a chart-topper in each of the past four decades. “You can count on one hand the people who have accomplished that feat,” says Siman. “It was challenging on so many levels, but we adapted and found ways to connect with fans. We all thought the album would help people cope.”



Dolly Parton (center)

Clarence Spalding
PARTNER, MAVERICK

Spalding's proudest accomplishment was a basic one: The management conglomerate navigated the pandemic without furloughing any employees. Darius Rucker, who wrote his last two singles over Zoom, co-hosted the CMA Awards with fellow client Reba McEntire, who appeared in CBS' *Young Sheldon* and the movie *Barb & Star Go to Vista Del Mar*. McEntire also sang the Diane Warren-penned end theme to *Four Good Days*, which opened in April, and superstar Jason Aldean announced his August return to the road.

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA “Take a deep breath. Does the post have any value other than stroking your ego? I really don't give a rat's ass what you had for dinner last night.”

Janet Weir
OWNER, HOUSE OF 42; MANAGER, RED LIGHT MANAGEMENT

Weir, whose clients include Maren Morris and Ryan Hurd, celebrated last year when Morris' “The Bones” became a 19-week No. 1 on Hot Country Songs and enjoyed crossover success, topping the Adult Contemporary and Adult Pop Airplay charts. In November, she earned CMA Award wins for song and single of the year for “The Bones,” as well as her first female vocalist trophy. During the 2021 ACM Awards, Morris earned her second female artist of the year honor, while “The Bones” won song of the year.

► **MULTISECTOR**

Seth England
PARTNER/CEO, BIG LOUD
Joey Moi
PARTNER/PRODUCER, BIG LOUD
Craig Wiseman
PARTNER/SONGWRITER, BIG LOUD
Austen Adams
COO, BIG LOUD
Candice Watkins
VP MARKETING, BIG LOUD

Big Loud flagship artist Morgan Wallen's *Dangerous: The Double Album* spent 10 weeks atop the Billboard 200 this year — the first title to spend its first 10 weeks at No. 1 on the all-genre albums chart since Whitney Houston's *Whitney* in 1987. That triumph was marred when Wallen's use of a racial slur was caught on video, leading Big Loud to temporarily suspend his contract and radio stations to drop his music from their playlists in the short term. Through the touring pause, Big Loud has helped artists including Chris Lane, HARDY and Sean Stemaly build their careers while leading Jake Owen to his third No. 1 on Country Airplay since his moving to Big Loud in 2017. “I really believe nearly every artist on the roster grew careerwise” this year, says England.

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA “Always be yourself. Fans love true authenticity, not perfection.” —England

“Our bands were built on the road. They love to perform live — to interact with the fans — and we believe in the power of that human exchange.”

—JOHN PEETS, Q PRIME SOUTH

Eric Hurt

VP A&R, EMPIRE NASHVILLE

Heather Vassar

VP MARKETING, EMPIRE NASHVILLE

EMPIRE Nashville launched in 2019 as an expansion of the San Francisco-based company known for its hip-hop savvy. Under Hurt and Vassar, the label/publisher has shown sharp instincts for country signings. The label released Willie Jones' debut album, *Right Now*, which includes the Black empowerment anthem "American Dream," setting up Jones' jump to Sony Music Nashville. Singer-songwriter Tenille Arts on EMPIRE-affiliated 19th and Grand Records made her first showing on the Billboard Hot 100 with "Somebody Like That," which also reached No. 3 on Country Airplay. Americana artist Waylon Payne (named for his godfather, Waylon Jennings) has created a buzz with his album *Blue Eyes, the Harlot, the Queer, the Pusher & Me*.

Rakayah Marshall

FOUNDER/CEO, BACK BLOCKS MUSIC

Formerly creative director at BMG Music Publishing, Marshall launched Back Blocks Music last November. The label, publisher and artist development firm's signee, Lily Rose, went viral on TikTok with "Villain," leading to a joint venture with Big Loud and Republic Records in January. "Lily trusted my brand-new company to release 'Villain' right before the holidays, and it reached No. 1 on the

iTunes all-genre chart," says Marshall, 29. Of the track's No. 36 peak on Hot Country Songs, she adds, "I'm so grateful for the foundation and tone it set for my business that I didn't see coming."

DISCOVER NEW COUNTRY ARTISTS BY "Being on any and every social platform. The next rising artist could be one swipe away on a lazy Saturday. If you fight against the ever-evolving platforms, you could be missing someone special."

► LIVE**Scott Bailey**

PRESIDENT, OPRY ENTERTAINMENT GROUP

Dan Rogers

VP/EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, GRAND OLE OPRY

From hosting the 55th and 56th ACM Awards at its Grand Ole Opry House and Ryman Auditorium venues to keeping the Grand Ole Opry operating throughout the pandemic and building out its new TV network, Circle, Opry Entertainment Group has had many notable accomplishments over the past year. Bailey attributes the success to "the amazing job our employees have done to keep all our venues open and host some of the most incredible shows with restricted audiences while keeping everyone safe."

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "Be authentic, read again, and

"The artist I most want to see perform once touring comes back is anyone who gets me in a club, theater, arena or stadium with friends and helps bring the community back together."

—RICH SCHAEFER, AEG PRESENTS

Willie Jones



read one more time before pressing Send. Once you hit Send, it never goes away." —Bailey

Louis Messina

CEO, MESSINA TOURING GROUP

Having been at home in Austin for a year, Messina can't hit the road fast enough. Clients including Eric Church and Kenny Chesney have announced tours for 2022, while country icon George Strait will resume his *Strait to Vegas* residency at Las Vegas' T-Mobile Arena in August, followed by a headlining slot at ACL Fest in October. "It's going to be a little crowded out there on the road," he says, "but the stars will shine, and we have the brightest stars of all."

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "Don't."

Brian O'Connell

PRESIDENT OF COUNTRY TOURING, LIVE NATION

Julie Matway

COO, COUNTRY NATION, LIVE NATION

Patrick McDill

VP COUNTRY MUSIC TOURING, LIVE NATION

After over a year without shows, Matway, 43, is preparing for the return of live music in the country sector and getting tours and festivals back on the road. "I am stoked to be part of the awakening," she says. Live Nation is planning nearly two dozen country tours for 2021, includ-

ing those for Luke Combs, Jason Aldean, Chris Stapleton, and the relaunch of country festivals like Michigan's Faster Horses. Adds Matway: "I look forward to all of the new projects that our teams have been working so hard on."

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "Spread love. Stay human." —Matway

Rich Schaefer

SENIOR VP GLOBAL TOURING, AEG PRESENTS

Adam Weiser

VP GLOBAL TOURING, AEG PRESENTS

In April, AEG Presents announced Kane Brown's Blessed & Free tour — one of the first arena outings that will begin since the outbreak of the pandemic. The 35-date trek, which starts in September, will visit 29 NBA arenas, including a sold-out show at Los Angeles' Staples Center. The promoter also rescheduled dozens of tours, including Dan + Shay's The (Arena) Tour, which is now set for the fall. "The commitment to get our industry back was first and foremost," says Weiser, "and that includes a plan to get everyone back to work quickly and safely."

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "To be authentic. We're in an age where we are fed so much content, and being yourself and relatable gets attention." —Weiser

ALAN JACKSON

WHERE HAVE YOU GONE

"Jackson returns this week with *Where Have You Gone*, a new studio album where the plain-spoken wordsmith sings about fatherly love, once-in-a-lifetime loss and the barn-burnin' honky-tonk music that remains near his heart."

- USA TODAY

"Every bit as affecting, *Where Have You Gone* is the quiet superstar's rebuke to those who would forget the roots of where this music comes from."

- HITS

"...Where Have You Gone, a sprawling 21-track compilation that finds the Country Music Hall of Fame member reflecting on the state of his beloved genre, paying tribute to his late mother, and, in some songs, simply having a honky-tonking good time."

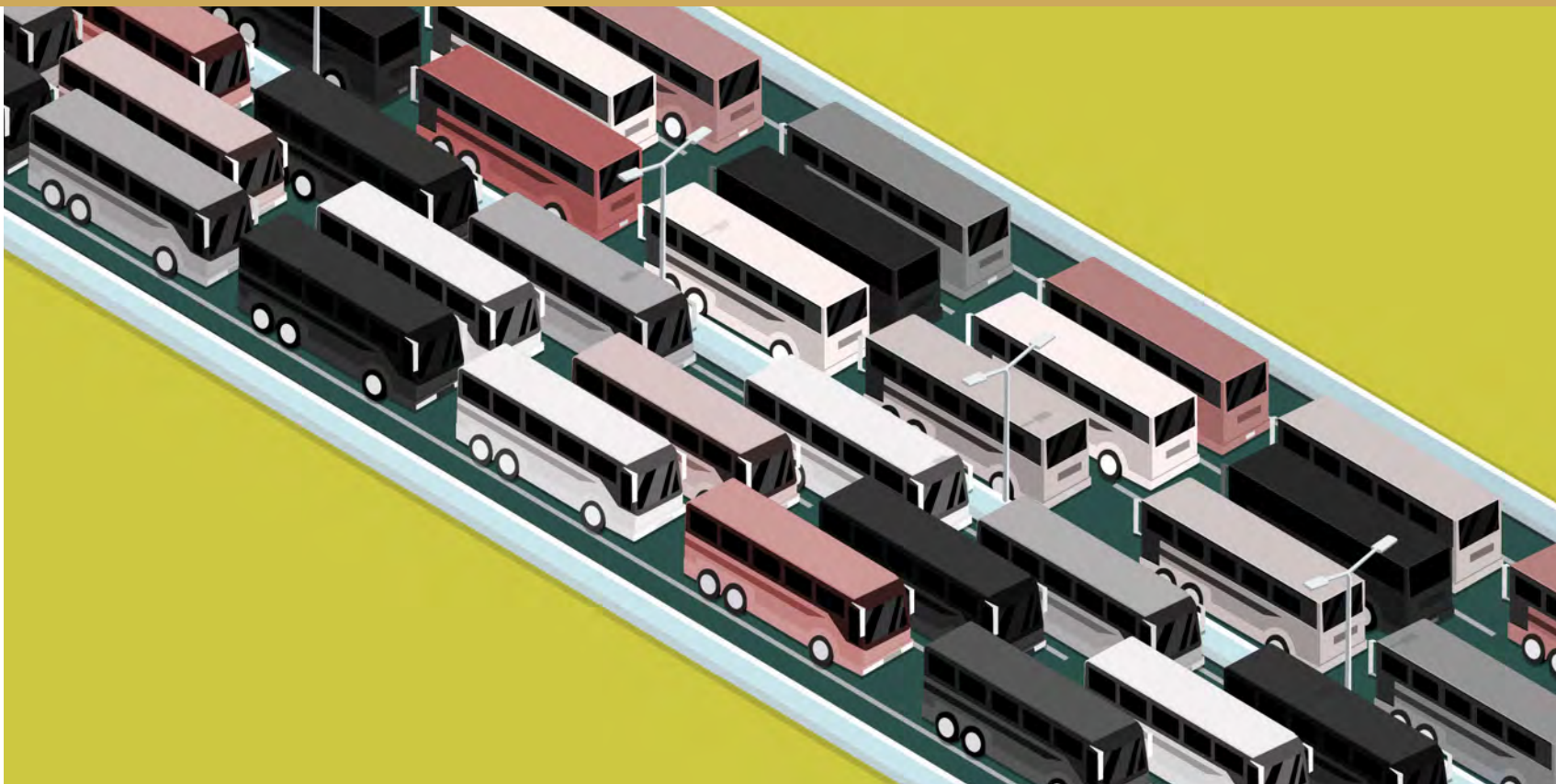
- ROLLING STONE

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15th Top 10 Album on Billboard 200

#1 Country Album in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada

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On The Road Again

Country artists are leading the way back to live, flooding the market with tours, residencies and festivals — and making some promoters fret about oversaturation

BY DAVE BROOKS

BOBBY REYNOLDS LIKED EVERYTHING coming across his desk. The senior vp for AEG Presents in Las Vegas knew that as the coronavirus pandemic waned, many major artists would be eager to get back to work — and as he began to book shows for the new Resorts World and Virgin hotels, he found managers and agents especially accommodating.

What he wasn't expecting was just how many A-list acts he'd juggle at once: in November, two nights of Old Dominion at the Cosmopolitan, as well as Luke Bryan and Carrie Underwood residencies at the Resorts World theater; in December, Luke Combs at T-Mobile Arena and Little Big Town at the Virgin Hotel's theater. "It's good to be creating a lot of opportunities for people who haven't worked in a while," says Reynolds. "But then you look at all the shows you're booking, and you realize, 'Wow — it's going to be a lot of work to sell and stage all these shows.'"

With the pandemic hopefully in the rear-view mirror, country music is playing a key role in driving the concert business' comeback. Twelve major country music tours — each expected to draw at least 10,000 fans — will visit Los Angeles before Thanksgiving, while Dallas begins a stretch in late July in which a major country show is set for every weekend through October. (In 2019, less than one-third of major concerts during that same time period were by country artists.)

So far, ticket sales have been strong — but the brisk business is also starting to fuel concerns about overheating the market before a recovery can truly get underway. As the post-pandemic demand for shows approaches a record high, promoters now face a quandary: cash in on a bull market — and hope not to be left holding the bag if that market becomes too saturated.

"Based on the numbers I'm seeing, superstar artists are going to have a great year," says promoter Louis Messina. "But if I wasn't sure about an act, I might reconsider taking them out on the road or pushing the envelope too much on ticket prices." For artists that, pre-pandemic, were ready to make the leap to a larger venue tier, that could mean sticking to less ambitious rooms in a year with plenty of promise but little certainty.

Fears of oversaturation in country touring go back decades, predicated on the idea that the amount of money consumers will pay to attend a wide variety of concerts — megastars on arena and stadium tours; other acts playing smaller venues, festivals, state and county fairs, and rodeos — is fairly static and that too many shows at once in one market could cannibalize one another's ticket sales. Promoters in the genre typically take pains to space out shows "to give each other as much room as possible," says talent buyer Brock Jones of 191 Touring. "It was a courtesy to your colleagues, but it was also smart business."

That pipeline of shows that dried up amid COVID-19 is about to be flooded and may prove those old assumptions wrong. Combs, Old Dominion, Maren Morris, Dierks Bentley, Thomas Rhett, Brad Paisley, Chris Stapleton, Ashley McBryde and Scotty McCreery will all hit the road before the Fourth of July. After that, Garth Brooks relaunches his 2020 stadium tour, Reba McEntire revives her arena tour before returning to her Las Vegas residency with Brooks & Dunn, George Strait comes out of "retirement" for the 10th year in a row to play Vegas and headline the Austin City Limits Festival, and Willie Nelson relaunches his touring festival Outlaw Country. Blake Shelton, Kelsea Ballerini, Tanya Tucker, Brothers Osborne, Lady A, Eric Church, Kane Brown, Keith Urban, Kip Moore, Little Big Town and Dan + Shay are also due to tour.

So far, refund requests for rescheduled 2020 shows

have been low, and "ticket sales are increasing across the board in nearly every category," says Bryan Perez of AXS Tickets, the second-largest ticketing company in North America. That's in large part thanks to Nashville's most powerful marketing tool, FM radio, which last year continued to promote a new group of acts preparing to launch their touring careers. Meanwhile, promoters plotting outings were increasingly able to utilize data from a growing streaming audience. According to MRC Data, country listenership surged 21.4% during March and April 2020, and the genre's overall market share of streaming music grew from 6.9% pre-COVID-19 to 7.5% post-lockdown.

In some promoters' view, that adds up to little reason for oversaturation concerns. "Looking at the year ahead and worrying that people are going to be burned out on too many A-listers hitting the road seems counter-productive," says Canadian promoter Jim Cressman of Invictus Entertainment.

But beyond navigating ticket sales, promoters may face another challenge: traversing a daunting map of states with wildly variable COVID-19 restrictions. A number of them, including New York and California, will require proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test at least 72 hours in advance for indoor events of 5,000 people or more, while states like Florida and Texas have virtually no restrictions and are considering outlawing mandatory vaccine requirements. (With Canada only just coming out of lockdown, most tours plan to skip the country until next year.)

There's also potential for a short-term labor shortage: The pandemic reduced the number of available roadies and techs, many of whom found new work over the past year. Now, with dozens of artists on the road at the same time, promoters worry about a shortage in stage and sound equipment that could drive up costs for tours that are already operating on thin margins. Higher costs also make financial planning more difficult, says Messina, especially if ticket sales slump. Still, as with plenty of others like him, those concerns haven't dulled the promoter's eagerness to return to his business.

"I'm optimistic but realistic," says Messina. "There absolutely is a ceiling — anyone who thinks there isn't a finite amount of money that can be pulled out of the marketplace is wrong. But we also can't be afraid to take risks and get back on the road." **b**



Leslie,

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Stacy Vee**VP TALENT, GOLDENVOICE**

After two years of pandemic postponements, Stagecoach's next lineup will be its best yet, promises Vee. The Indio, Calif., country music festival, held at the Empire Polo Club, will return in April 2022 and highlight the current landscape of country music while also "shining a bright light on what it has the potential to be," she says. "It will be my proudest moment." Though a lineup has yet to be announced, Vee makes it clear she would love to see Brothers Osborne there or anywhere else. "*Skeletons* begs to be listened to live from the front row, dancing shoes on," she says of the duo's 2020 album.

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I**WILL CONTINUE** "Virtual Pilates and appreciating the small things."**AGENCIES****Sloane Cavitt Logue****HEAD OF CROSSOVER OF THE NASHVILLE OFFICE, WME****Michael Jasper****BRAND PARTNERSHIPS AGENT, WME****Shari Lewin****PARTNER, WME****Aaron Tannenbaum****PARTNER, WME**

WME spent the last year securing major deals for its clients, including virtual branded performances for Brad Paisley, Kane Brown and Thomas Rhett, who teamed up with Bud Light. Brown also extended his Dr Pepper deal for an additional year, and Paisley scored a deal with Publishers Clearing House that resulted in a series of TV commercials.

The agency also helped bring Dolly Parton and Squarespace together for a Super Bowl LV ad that plugged Parton's fragrance, Scent From Above. Lewin, 35, says she closed more deals in 2020 for country artists than ever before. "It was a challenging year," she says, "but we were busier than ever, working hard to find new revenue streams for our clients in the absence of touring opportunities."

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON**SOCIAL MEDIA** "Remain consistent.

Creating and posting a steady stream of content and having a uniform voice is key to creating an artist's brand on social media." —*Jasper*

**Marc Dennis
Darin Murphy****CO-HEADS OF THE NASHVILLE OFFICE,
CREATIVE ARTISTS AGENCY****Jeff Kronos
Kylan Sharpe****MUSIC AGENTS, CREATIVE ARTISTS AGENCY**

In a year with virtually no touring, CAA's country music group grossed over \$11 million from private events alone. In addition to deals involving podcasts and non-fungible tokens, the agency negotiated book contracts for Carrie Underwood, Brett Young, Kelsea Ballerini, Tim McGraw and more while landing partnerships between Sam Hunt and Visible, Darius Rucker and the Texas Lottery, Jon Pardi and Chevy, and Kip Moore and Ford Bronco. "Surviving and making it through a global pandemic should be highlight enough," says Sharpe, "but we are super proud of how much we've accomplished during this time."

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL**CONTINUE** "Cooking at home. It has helped me save money and lose weight. I also hope that we will continue a lot of

"The amount of deals we've seen in nontraditional markets like podcasts, literary opportunities, non-fungible tokens and other areas has been staggering."

—**KYLEN SHARPE, CREATIVE ARTISTS AGENCY**

the video conference meetings. There is a lot of fat that we've trimmed from meetings, and I hope we keep that up in the future." —*Sharpe*

Jonathan Levine**EXECUTIVE VP/MANAGING EXECUTIVE,
WASSERMAN MUSIC****Mike Betterton****SENIOR VP, WASSERMAN MUSIC****Lenore Kinder****SENIOR VP, WASSERMAN MUSIC**

In April, Casey Wasserman's lifestyle marketing and management firm completed its purchase of Paradigm's North American music division, giving executives in

Wasserman's Nashville office not just a new employer, but a refreshed outlook on their work, which includes booking clients Kenny Chesney, Blake Shelton and Kacey Musgraves. "Wasserman Music is a new company and a new start for us, and that itself is an achievement," says Levine, 59. "We have a renewed passion to build incredible careers and empower artists to create the culture."

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL**CONTINUE** "Seeing how torn our country and society became and the division that remains, to further the unrelenting pursuit of inclusiveness with every step and every action." —*Levine***Curt Motley
Lance Roberts****AGENTS/NASHVILLE MUSIC LEADERSHIP,
UTA****Josh Garrett****AGENT, MUSIC, UTA**

In the year of live music's great pivot, Motley applauds UTA's music department for finding new areas of growth amid the shutdown through "securing innovative brand partnerships, drive-in tours and virtual experiences." After the major agencies cut salaries at the beginning of the pandemic, in September 2020, UTA became the first to reinstate full pay, a move that Motley says emphasizes the company's "clear, decisive vision, with the needs of the employees always coming first." In early June, UTA opened its new Nashville headquarters in the former downtown Carnegie Library.

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL**CONTINUE** "Making craft beer." —*Motley*

The 2019 Stagecoach Festival in Indio, Calif.



COUNTRY POWER PLAYER



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The Road Goes On Forever

Charlie Daniels died last year — but his son wants to make sure his music, and legend, live on

CHARLIE DANIELS PLAYED his last show before the pandemic on March 13, 2020, at the Mark C. Smith Concert Hall in Huntsville, Ala. Hunkered down at home in Mt. Juliet, Tenn., he spent the following months telling anyone who would listen — his son, journalists — that he couldn't wait to get back on the road, where he still played up to 140 dates a year, an ambitious schedule for any artist, much less an 83-year-old.

"He was champing at the bit to get back on the road," says Charlie Daniels Jr., who worked for his father for two decades in various capacities.

Before that could happen, though, Daniels suffered a hemorrhagic stroke on July 6 and died later that day in a Hermitage, Tenn., hospital.

Now, close to a year later, Daniels Jr., the singer's only child, and other members of Daniels' team are planning to preserve the artistic legacy of the country legend, who had left a will — he is also survived by his wife, Hazel — but hadn't done much estate planning.

"We had no idea this was coming," says Daniels Jr. "After the initial shock, we had to start trying to sort through it all."

That means reviewing Daniels' holdings, including royalties, recordings, instruments and equipment, for tax evaluation. "There's a lot of work to be done," says David Corlew, who worked with Daniels since 1973, managed him since 1989 and had run Blue Hat Records with him since 1997. "It took us 50 years to build what Charlie represented, so we're not going to unravel it anytime soon."

Daniels is best known for his ferocious fiddle playing and Southern rock barnburners like "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," (his lone No. 1 on *Billboard's* country chart), "The South's Gonna Do It" and "Long Haired Country Boy," but also was a

star musician who played on Bob Dylan's *Nashville Skyline* and toured with Leonard Cohen. He was an unapologetic iconoclast who performed at President Jimmy Carter's inauguration but later leaned far right politically.

On July 16, Blue Hat will release *Duets*, Daniels' first posthumous collection (initially available as a Walmart exclusive), which combines the 2007 album *Deuces* — which included collaborations with Dolly Parton, Darius Rucker and Brad Paisley — with previously released duets, including one with Garth Brooks. "Charlie always liked dedications on every album," says Corlew, "and we decided we would dedicate this one to the greatest duo of all — him and Hazel."

That's only the beginning of Daniels' vault, which Corlew estimates contains at least 40 master recordings, including multiple previously unreleased tracks, that Daniels owned, as well as decades' worth of Volunteer Jams, the now-legendary concerts Daniels hosted from 1974 to 1996 at various venues around Nashville. Those shows featured a wide range of artists, from Billy Joel and James Brown to Don Henley and John Prine.

Daniels Jr. is also working with Sony to release or reissue recordings from Daniels' 1975-91 stint on Epic, especially *Honky Tonk Avenue*, an unreleased concept album Daniels recorded in 1984, when he was moved from Epic in New York to the company's Nashville division. "The powers that be in Nashville didn't think it was commercial country enough," says Daniels Jr.

He has also set up Charlie Daniels Brands to house licensed product partnerships, including a line of meats from Tyler County Market that launched shortly after Daniels' death. "Some people saw it as 'They're just trying to capitalize on Dad's death,' not knowing you can't put a deal like this together overnight," says Dan-



Daniels in 1997.

iels Jr. "It had been going for years." He also stepped in after his father's death to record an audio version of *Let's All Make the Day Count*, a devotional book from HarperCollins that expanded on some of Daniels' tweets and paired them with Bible verses. That recording is expected to arrive before the end of the year.

In addition, Daniels Jr. is keeping his father's memory alive on Daniels' Soapbox blog, now dubbed Soapbox Jr., where he shares thoughts on his dad and muses about a possible non-fungible token of Daniels' fiddle. Next up? Daniels Jr. is considering a podcast based on his father's career. Other ideas include pursuing a documentary, a musical based on "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" that would include other Daniels songs and a symphonic tour of his music. Also on the wish list: a museum in Daniels' beloved Mt. Juliet next to a new shopping center named Charlie's Place.

More immediately, the 2021 Volunteer Jam, scheduled for Aug. 18 at Nashville's

Bridgestone Arena, will reunite Daniels' band for a tribute that will also feature Ricky Skaggs, Randy Travis and Alabama. A portion of the proceeds will benefit Daniels' veterans assistance charity, the Journey Home Project.

There's still hard work to do, though. Daniels' estate shuttered his touring operation, laying off 25 staffers, and it's in the process of selling some of his work and personal items through the music memorabilia company Rockology. Among the items available: Daniels' and Hazel's custom-made rings from their 1999 celebrity golf classic (\$3,300), his bass boat (\$5,995) and the pleather couch from his studio (\$995). Nearly every item holds a memory.

"We have 4,000 pieces of equipment we need to sell, but it's hard for me to walk into that studio," says Corlew. "It's heart-tugging. There's this sentimental aspect to every part of this wind-down. Everywhere you look, there's Charlie."

—MELINDA NEWMAN

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► MEDIA

Johnny Chiang

**COUNTRY FORMAT COORDINATOR/
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS, CMG HOUSTON,
COX MEDIA GROUP**

As a major-market programmer still invested in breaking new artists, Chiang's recent successes include Ingrid Andress' "More Hearts Than Mine" and Lainey Wilson's "Things a Man Oughta Know." "Our competition isn't just another radio station or company; we compete with everyone — Spotify, SiriusXM, YouTube," says Chiang, 52. "When ratings go down, the tactic of not playing new music just doesn't work today. We need to stress the one advantage we have over the [digital service providers], and that's our live and local engagement."

I DISCOVER NEW COUNTRY ARTISTS BY "[Listening to] my 10-year-old daughter Skylar."

Charlie Cook

**VP COUNTRY, CUMULUS MEDIA;
OPERATIONS MANAGER, CUMULUS
NASHVILLE; PROGRAM DIRECTOR, WSM-FM**

Mike Moore

**PROGRAM DIRECTOR, WKHX-FM ATLANTA,
CUMULUS**

Mike Preston

**PROGRAM DIRECTOR, KSCS-FM/KPLX-FM
DALLAS, CUMULUS**

Paul Williams

**DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMMING,
WESTWOOD ONE, NASHVILLE; PROGRAM
DIRECTOR, WKDF-FM NASHVILLE**

Preston joined Cumulus Media's Dallas powerhouse combo, KPLX and KSCS, in March 2020, just in time to navigate the COVID-19 crisis. "I'd rather forget most things that happened in the pandemic," he says. One thing that kept Preston busy was "checking our streams on smart speakers every day. Our stations are TLR [total line reporting], and it's critical the stream is actually a matching simulcast of the terrestrial signal." Preston keeps track of his terrestrial radio peers and the streaming charts, and relies on his record company relationships when it comes to finding new music. And, he adds, his stations are "rebounding nicely."

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "Think twice before you hit the 'post' button. Then think one more time." —Preston

RJ Curtis

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COUNTRY RADIO
BROADCASTERS/CRS**

In February, the broadcasting organization held its first virtual Country Radio Seminar, aka CRS, featuring an extra day of programming, the debut of its Streaming Summit and interviews with Luke Bryan, Luke Combs, Barry Gibb,

Maren Morris and Brad Paisley. "It was more complex than a physical event, but we sustained the brand while retaining the collegial atmosphere and camaraderie that CRS is famous for," says Curtis, 62, who will be inducted into the Country Radio Hall of Fame. "The personal, one-on-one engagement is CRS' secret sauce, and it was served up in large, satisfying doses — yes, even online."

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL CONTINUE "Reading. I've had my nose in a book every day since last March. I've set a goal of reading a biography on every U.S. president — I'm almost halfway there."

Rod Phillips

**EXECUTIVE VP COUNTRY PROGRAMMING
STRATEGY, IHEARTCOUNTRY, IHEARTMEDIA**

Gator Harrison

**IHEARTCOUNTRY BRAND COORDINATOR/
SENIOR VP PROGRAMMING NASHVILLE,
IHEARTMEDIA**

Bobby Bones

**VP/CREATIVE DIRECTOR, IHEARTCOUNTRY;
HOST, THE BOBBY BONES SHOW, COUNTRY
TOP 30 WITH BOBBY BONES, IHEARTMEDIA;
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, WOMEN OF
IHEARTCOUNTRY, IHEARTMEDIA**

Cindy Spicer

**PROGRAM DIRECTOR/ON-AIR HOST, WFOS
TAMPA, FLA.; WQIK JACKSONVILLE, FLA.,
IHEARTMEDIA**

Phillips, a 25-year programmer, has guided iHeartMedia's 150-plus country stations since 2015, as well as Bones' popular syndicated morning show. As the pandemic recedes, he's excited about live events and concerts coming back, including "the iHeartRadio Music Festival returning live in Las Vegas in September," he says. "And we are on the verge of announcing our plans for the return of a live iHeartCountry Festival later this year."

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "Don't take it too seriously, ignore the haters, and give the fans some insight into your personal life at the level that makes you comfortable." —Phillips

JR Schumann

**SENIOR DIRECTOR MUSIC PROGRAMMING,
SIRIUSXM**

Storme Warren

**HOST, THE STORME WARREN SHOW, EXIT
209 WITH STORME WARREN**

Live programming is a vital part of SiriusXM, but Schumann, 39, says the company pivoted "on a dime" to virtual events in 2020 with Stagecoach Weekend, a concert livestream in partnership with GoldenVoice held April 24-26, the dates of the canceled country festival Stagecoach. The event featured performances and Q&As by sidelined artists including Dustin Lynch, RaeLynn and Jon Pardi broadcast on its channel The Highway. "The word 'no' or the phrase 'we

can't' were never options," says Warren. "In an environment void of live entertainment, we continued our mission of connecting the artists with the fans."

ARTIST I MOST WANT TO SEE LIVE WHEN TOURING RETURNS "Oh, this is easy. I've already got my tickets for Genesis!"

—Schumann

► STREAMING

Beville Dunkerley

**HEAD OF COUNTRY, INDUSTRY AND ARTIST
RELATIONS, PANDORA/SIRIUSXM**

Jen Danielson

**HEAD OF COUNTRY PROGRAMMING,
PANDORA**

With livestreams available on multiple platforms during quarantine, Pandora switched to delivering buzzy virtual events like Pandora LIVE Powered by Women during Women's History Month in March that included a multigenre panel featuring Lauren Alaina. "The discussion really acted as a wake-up call to the

inequalities that women, and especially people of color, continue to face in this business," says Dunkerley. Pandora also debuted genre-specific modes hosted by superstars like Chris Stapleton, Eric Church and Thomas Rhett, who talk new music and hand-pick songs.

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL CONTINUE "Elastic waistbands."

—Dunkerley

Margaret Hart

**HEAD OF NASHVILLE LABEL AND INDUSTRY
RELATIONS, YOUTUBE**

Copeland Isaacson

**HEAD OF NASHVILLE ARTIST RELATIONS,
YOUTUBE**

In October, the company established the #YouTubeBlack Voices Fund and earmarked \$100 million to elevate Black creators' voices and stories. Nashville singer-songwriter Joy Oladokun is among the artists in the program's inaugural class. YouTube's two main Nashville representatives "are thrilled to help her build a thriving, sustainable career on YouTube," says Isaacson.

Ingrid Andress



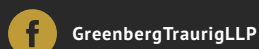
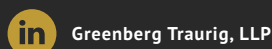
GREENBERG TRAUIG CONGRATULATES JESS ROSEN

on being named to Billboard's 2021
Country Power Players list for the
6th consecutive year.

We celebrate this well-deserved
recognition, and applaud your
dedication to your clients and the
country music industry.



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MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL

CONTINUE “Walking meetings. I love to grab an iced coffee and meet a partner at the park for a walking meeting. It’s a permanent addition to my weekly schedule.”

Jay Liepis

GLOBAL HEAD OF COUNTRY, APPLE MUSIC

Michael Bryan

HEAD OF APPLE MUSIC COUNTRY, RADIO, APPLE MUSIC

(See story, page 50.)

Kelly Rich

COUNTRY MUSIC LEAD, AMAZON MUSIC

Emily Cohen

GLOBAL PROGRAMMING LEAD FOR COUNTRY, CHRISTIAN, FOLK AND AMERICANA, AMAZON MUSIC

Among the artists participating in livestreams on Amazon Music over the past 14 months are Keith Urban, Eric Church, Gabby Barrett, Florida Georgia Line and Luke Combs. In September, Amazon Music partnered with Twitch to expand its livestream audience, leading Amazon to continue its prominent role in the country genre. “The share of country streams on Amazon Music continues to be more than two times the industry average,” says Rich.

ARTIST I MOST WANT TO SEE LIVE WHEN

TOURING RETURNS “Thomas Rhett. His new songs take me back to when he was initially signed to the Valory Music Company, and that is where I first fell in love with his music.” —**Rich**

Brittany Schaffer

HEAD OF ARTIST AND LABEL PARTNERSHIPS, NASHVILLE, SPOTIFY

Mary Catherine Kinney

STRATEGIC MUSIC PARTNERSHIPS LEAD, NASHVILLE, SPOTIFY

Rachel Whitney

HEAD OF EDITORIAL, NASHVILLE, SPOTIFY

Spotify broadened its support of country artists through the launch of the Indigo playlist, “where we made space for music that hasn’t traditionally fit into mainstream country, like Americana,” says Schaffer, as well as highlighting different country subgenre projects like *The Marfa Tapes* from Miranda Lambert, Jack Ingram and Jon Randall. The platform also involved a wide range of established and emerging artists in marketing campaigns around its playlists, including social campaigns and billboards. “Spotify has always focused on how we empower artists and labels to engage with their fans in more meaningful ways,” says Schaffer, “and the last year has seen us further accelerate those efforts.”

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL

CONTINUE “Carving out quality time with my family and not feeling guilty about it.” —**Schaffer**

► **PUBLISHING****Mark Brown**

SENIOR VP/GM, ROUND HILL MUSIC NASHVILLE

Established in 2014, Round Hill’s Nashville office represents writers such as Ashley Gorley, Jimmy Robbins, Zach Crowell and Katie Pruitt. In 2020, the publisher released “over 380 cuts — up more than 100 from 2019,” says Brown, 64. Gorley has earned 43 No. 1s on Country Airplay and Hot Country Songs combined. But it was Maren Morris’ latest hit, “The Bones” — co-written by Robbins with Morris and Laura Veltz — that had the biggest impact, earning song of the year wins at the ACM, CMA and BMI Pop awards and spending 19 weeks at No. 1 on Hot Country Songs. “Somehow, the worst year ever became our best year ever,” says Brown.

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON

SOCIAL MEDIA “Always remember that anything you post will be there forever, and although you may be able to take it down, it will always be out there. Don’t be stupid.”

Stephanie Cox

SENIOR VP CREATIVE, NASHVILLE, KOBLAT

Cox signed and developed clients including Nashville-based independent music publisher Plaid Flag Music, which earned its first two-week No. 1 radio hit in May with Jake Owen’s potential wedding staple “Made for You,” which was co-written by former Plaid Flag writer Benjy Davis. In January, she also helped sign Mae Estes to the Plaid Flag roster, before her single “Roses” racked up 1.2 million U.S. on-demand streams.

ARTIST I MOST WANT TO SEE LIVE WHEN

TOURING RETURNS “Eric Church.”

Rusty Gaston

CEO, SONY MUSIC PUBLISHING NASHVILLE

Thanks to multigenre hits like Gabby Barrett’s “I Hope” (featuring Charlie Puth) in 2020, Sony Music Publishing’s Nashville outpost carried momentum into its February rebrand, in which the top global publisher dropped “ATV” from its name. The change, says Gaston, 45, “reflects our renewed focus on inclusivity and our songwriter-first approach.” In February, Sony signed Kane Brown to a worldwide publishing deal, and will also house the country superstar’s new publishing company, Verse 2 Music. Gaston’s plans for 2021? Live music. “The most important thing is that our songwriters are finally able to get back on the road again.”

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL

CONTINUE “Morning hikes with artists, songwriters and employees to connect one-on-one.”



Ashley Gorley

“There are so many amazing opportunities to discover new talent, including friends, colleagues, social media, radio, live events, digital service providers and many more. I strive to use every single way possible.”

—RUSTY GASTON, SONY MUSIC PUBLISHING

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CAIT MURPHY
LEIGHANNA SMITH

TRACY GOLDENBERG
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ETHAN HELMS
AUBREY SCHWARTZ

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AND TO ALL OTHER
2021 BILLBOARD COUNTRY POWER PLAYERS

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Country Radio Confidential

What makes a hit now? In large part, the programmers behind the terrestrial airwaves, guided by data, audience and gut

BY STEVE KNOPPER

YOUTUBE AND SPOTIFY may reliably push songs up the charts, but for country music in particular, terrestrial radio still rules. That means that the program directors for the 2,200 country stations in the United States wield unique power: They can break potential stars, keep superstars atop the charts and support or ignore the many critically acclaimed women artists still struggling for playlist slots. Their decision-making process may seem shrouded in mystery, but it's anything but arbitrary. They draw on gut instinct, but also rely upon callout research and streaming service data. "We're not an art form," says one of five country radio PDs who spoke anonymously for this story. "We're a business."

A MALE PD IN THE SOUTH How would you describe your station's relationship with labels?

Labels are always imploring radio stations — and now they have DSPs [digital service providers] to help them — to help break new artists. You want us to take chances on those, we will. But you can't flip it around and tell us that just because a mediocre song from an established artist happens to be No. 12 on the chart, it's time to play it heavy now. You can't have it both ways.

What public streaming data is useful? I have callout [research], and I use Airplay Intel, MScore and [Nielsen's] Portable People Meter. Callout comes back and our audience says they hate a song? We have to listen to them. But if people are seeking it out on streaming, if Shazams are high, that gets our attention. Digital consumption probably goes into our decision-making process about 25% to 30%.

For some time now, country radio has been criticized for not playing enough female artists. Are you addressing this at your stations?

When this became a topic, I was happy. It should be something we

discuss. But I do feel progress is being made. Gabby Barrett has made a pretty big splash. Tenille Arts just had a No. 1 single [on Mediabase]. Priscilla Block is doing well. Lainey Wilson — this is a lady who sounds *country*, and the song ["Things a Man Oughta Know"] is doing well. Is it fast enough for everyone? No, but we are moving in the right direction.

A FEMALE PD AT A WEST COAST STATION

How do you decide whether to add a song?

If I like it. Sometimes the lyrics are so silly but you go, "Man, that is such a cool groove." And sometimes there's no groove at all; it's kind of a torch song, but the story is so magnificent. That's how I feel about "Where I Find God" by Larry Fleet. On the balance, it's, "Do I like the song? Does it viscerally hit me?" Whether it's uptempo or downtempo, or a female singing it or a male — if I like it, then we go from there.

Do you ever like a song but reject it because it isn't a fit for your station?

I've definitely done that. I've been doing this long enough to know, "Yeah, that's not going to work," or "I like it but it's probably got too much pedal steel," or "It's got too much rap in it." The new Florida Georgia Line and Nelly record ["Lil Bit"] — I think it's cool, I really do, but it doesn't sound anything like the radio station. No way would I ever add it.

How do you respond to the criticism that country stations don't play enough female artists?

They're just simply wrong. W-R-O-N-G. It's simply not true that women don't get played on country radio. If there's a disparity, it may be because we don't get as many female records as we get male. We don't. Period. End of story. I don't know why [labels] are not signing more women.

A MALE PD FOR A TOP-RANKED STATION IN THE SOUTHEAST

How did your playlist change through the pandemic?

It got tighter and tighter. I didn't cut the number of songs; I slowed down moving things through so the end result was fewer adds. I'm really happy with where we sit with the songs right now. They're familiar.

Why take that approach?

People stopped using radio at the same level [during the pandemic]. Songs weren't getting as familiar as fast. Songs weren't getting burnt as fast. What I didn't want was people coming back to the radio station in six months and [thinking] it sounded like a different station.

How do you decide what's "familiar"?

A top portion of the playlist belongs to the audience. We don't move on from hit records until the audience wants to move on from hit records. The middle of the chart is mine, and the bottom of the chart is my music director's. If the audience isn't getting tired of the records at the top, then there's no room for records at the bottom.

And how did labels respond to the tightening playlist?

They loved it! No, they didn't. It used to be that from No. 45 or 50 down, most [songs] looked like they were struggling. Now everything from 30 down looks dead. You've got superstars struggling. We've got too many records, too many record labels, too few people making decisions, and everything is stagnant.

A MALE PD WHO PROGRAMS A SMALL RADIO GROUP IN THE SOUTH

How do you decide what songs to add to the playlist?

The first thing you look for: Is the quality good enough to be on the air? The other thing I listen for is content. Is it a strong lyric? How well-crafted is the song? Is it too long to play? Is it an established act?

Does it sound different in a good or bad way? There's a lot of nuance.

How influential is data from DSPs?

While we do pay attention to those things, it's not as important as others — like my own gut. We could look at something and it's got a million views, but we don't know where those views came from, where those people are, if they're 6 years old or 30, if they're men or women.

You removed Morgan Wallen's music from the playlist, like most other stations, after he was caught making a racial slur on video. When did you add it back?

A month and a half, two months ago. This world is about forgiveness, and his fans have forgiven him. I think he'll be back stronger than ever and he'll learn from that mistake he made.

A MALE PD FOR A HIGHLY RATED STATION IN THE NORTHEAST

What kind of songs do you gravitate toward?

I need my radio station to sound bright, like people are having a good time — to sound like my town. Sometimes at first listen, you're like, "That's a smash." Sometimes it takes a little while. Or the mood of the audience changes. Or Luke Combs comes out with his first hit and you're blown away for 12 songs in a row.

Have you added Morgan Wallen back to the playlist?

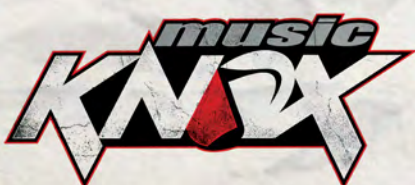
We took a pause for a moment. You have to look at what your corporate policies are. Some stations are loosening now. Some people are not quite ready yet. We're still waiting. At the end of the day, we have to be good citizens and good people.

What's the song of the summer?

Old Dominion's "I Was on a Boat That Day." That's going to be a smash. It sounds like a party. 🎉



MUSIC KNOX
CONGRATULATES
**COUNTRY
POWER
PLAYER**
MICHAEL
KNOX



Michael Knox**SENIOR VP NASHVILLE, PEERMUSIC;
FOUNDER, MUSIC KNOX RECORDS**

Under Knox, peermusic ranked among the top 10 publishers on *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs Publishing Corporations chart for 2020. In May, the publisher signed a global deal with Lee Greenwood to administer his hits, including "God Bless the U.S.A." Knox also leads the imprint Music Knox Records, a venture with BMG; hosts and produces the United Stations syndicated radio show *Knox Country 360*; and continues to produce Jason Aldean.

Shane McAnally**FOUNDER/OWNER, SMACKSONGS;
CO-PRESIDENT, MONUMENT RECORDS**

Two-time Grammy-winning songwriter McAnally's publishing company, SMACKSONGS, reports that it has placed 52 No. 1s since its 2012 founding, with recent hits for Lady A, Sam Hunt and Darius Rucker. "Our group of young writers are killing it in every way," he says. McAnally and Sandbox Entertainment's Jason Owen also revived Monument Records (Walker Hayes, Caitlyn Smith) as an imprint for Sony Music in 2017, which he says recently hired a promotions staff — "a product of our marketing team making so much headway in the streaming field."

I DISCOVER NEW COUNTRY ARTISTS BY

"Mostly word-of-mouth from fellow writers and artists that I work with but also what my kids love, because I know they know what's coming."

Mike Molinar**GM, BIG MACHINE MUSIC**

Thanks to the success of writers like Laura Veltz, Jessie Jo Dillon and Ryan Hurd, Big Machine Music ranked No. 2

on *Billboard's* 2020 Hot Country Songs Publishers chart. "This would be amazing for an indie to rank so high in any year, but especially in a pandemic, where it was enough to just survive," says Molinar, 44, who was inducted into Middle Tennessee State University's College of Media and Entertainment Wall of Fame in April. The pandemic gave Molinar abundant time to spend with his 3-year-old and 8-month-old sons. "Now that I know what I'm missing," he says, "I want to preserve as much time with them as possible."

ARTIST I MOST WANT TO SEE LIVE ONCE

TOURING RETURNS "Genuinely, every artist we've had a hit with. We've had a ton of radio hits in the last year that my team, the writers and I have never heard performed live."

Chris Oglesby**SENIOR VP CREATIVE, NASHVILLE, BMG**

While celebrating publishing clients like Carly Pearce, who won single of the year and music event of the year at the Academy of Country Music Awards in April for the No. 1 Country Airplay hit "I Hope You're Happy Now," her duet with Lee Brice, Oglesby also pays attention to streaming and social media using platforms such as TikTok "like I would a writer's night." Also, BMG writers Emily Landis and Jim McCormick also penned Gabby Barrett's "The Good Ones," which spent four weeks at No. 1 on the Hot Country Songs chart and led Country Airplay for three weeks.

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL

CONTINUE "Walking while on the phone."

Troy Tomlinson**CHAIRMAN/CEO, UNIVERSAL MUSIC
PUBLISHING GROUP NASHVILLE**

Driven by increased subscription and



streaming growth, revenues for UMPG were up 6.9% for the first quarter of 2021 over the same 2020 period, thanks in large part to a strong showing by Tomlinson's Nashville division. Over the past 15 months, signings included Luke Combs, Kenny Chesney, Brandi Carlile and Dave Cobb, while a number of its writers, such as Ian Munsick and Bexar, have signed major-label deals. Tomlinson's succinct explanation of his company's ongoing success: "Very simply, growth across every key performance indicator."

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL

CONTINUE "Keep a gratitude journal. I took too much for granted pre-COVID-19."

Ben Vaughn**PRESIDENT/CEO, WARNER CHAPPELL
MUSIC NASHVILLE**

Warner Chappell's up-and-coming writers like Niko Moon and Parker McCollum landed Country Airplay No. 1s, while Priscilla Block and Mickey Guyton gained new audiences in breakthrough years for both artists. "They're all honest, authentic writers who draw from their own personal experience to

connect with music fans," says Vaughn. "It's great to see their voices and lyrics making an impact."

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL

MEDIA "To have as authentic of a voice on social media as you do in your music."

**▶▶ PERFORMING
RIGHTS****Clay Bradley****VP CREATIVE, NASHVILLE, BMI**

In March 2020, Bradley returned to BMI to lead its Nashville creative department and its partnership/events team. Earlier in his career, he spent seven years with BMI and subsequently was founder/CEO of Eclipse Music Group, an artist development and publishing company. This year he has re-signed Eric Church, Miranda Lambert, Ross Copperman and Thomas Rhett and is committed to promoting diversity on Music Row. "Nashville is long overdue for a reckoning with its past," says Bradley. "I love highlighting Music City and all of the genres we represent, especially during this pivotal moment."

"Just remember these posts will live forever. It's like a tattoo. Do you really want a butterfly on your lower back when you're 80?"

**—SHANE McANALLY, SMACKSONGS,
MONUMENT RECORDS**

Congratulations to our partners Derek Crowover, Tiffany Dunn and Denise Stevens, as well as all of our friends on *Billboard's* 2021 Country Power Players list.

We salute your extraordinary professional achievements and unwavering dedication to the firm and your clients throughout the music industry.



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CONGRATULATIONS MICHAEL KNOX

ON BEING PICKED AS ONE OF THE COUNTRY POWER PLAYERS THIS YEAR



"THANKS FOR BRINGING ME TO CRAZYTOWN 22 YEARS AGO. IT'S BEEN A HELLUVA RIDE!"

-JASON ALDEAN

Mike Sistad**VP, NASHVILLE MEMBERSHIP, ASCAP**

In 2020, Sistad led his team in moving both ASCAP's Christian Music Awards and Country Music Awards to social media during the pandemic, while ensuring that talent development activities, such as The ASCAP Foundation's Nashville songwriting workshops and ASCAP's Guidance From Publishers for Songwriters program, could take place online. Writers he has signed to ASCAP over the years include Chris Stapleton, Kelsea Ballerini, Old Dominion, Brothers Osborne, Carly Pearce and Matt Stell.

Kelli Turner**PRESIDENT/COO, SESAC RIGHTS MANAGEMENT**

Last summer, in the wake of calls for racial and social justice, the Nashville-based Turner joined senior executives across SESAC and sister companies Harry Fox Agency and Rumblefish to create a diversity and inclusion network. In October, Turner assisted in SESAC signing Jon Nite, whose multiple No. 1 co-writes include Gabby Barrett's multiformat smash, "I Hope." Nite joins other Nashville songwriters including Jimmie Allen, Lee Brice, Blanco Brown, Niko Moon and Hillary Scott on SESAC's roster.

► BUSINESS, BRANDS AND ASSOCIATIONS**Tatum Hauck Allsep****FOUNDER/CEO, MUSIC HEALTH ALLIANCE****Shelia Shipley Biddy**
COO/CERTIFIED SENIOR ADVISER, MUSIC HEALTH ALLIANCE

Celebrating its eighth anniversary in January, the Nashville nonprofit Music Health Alliance surpassed \$63 million in health-care cost savings for 15,000 music industry professionals across the nation, says Allsep. As with many nonprofits, MHA faced the challenge of finding alternative funding during the pandemic since its two primary sources of revenue — events and music industry donations — dried up. In addition to receiving a PPP loan, MHA formed a relationship with Spotify's COVID-19 Music Relief Program, which matched donations to MHA to support its COVID-19 relief programs and resources. During COVID-19, the alliance also launched two mental health funds in partnership with Music Biz, The Scars Foundation and the CMA Foundation. Separately, Allsep created the Facebook resource Tennessee Vaccine Hunters to help improve information and access regarding vaccines.

Lori Badgett**Diane Pearson****SENIOR VPS/TEAM LEADERS, ENTERTAINMENT DIVISION, NASHVILLE, CITY NATIONAL BANK**

In addition to helping clients obtain PPP loans during the COVID-19 crisis, the bank stepped up its charity and humanitarian activities in 2020, according to Badgett and Pearson. The bank donated \$2 million to help colleagues, clients and communities facing the challenges of the pandemic and \$360,000 to the Equal Justice Initiative and the NAACP Legal Defense and Education fund, and also invested over \$13 million in a wide range of organizations including MusiCares, ACM Lifting Lives and the Music Health Alliance. Pearson adds that CNB is also implementing new programs around diversity, equity and inclusion.

ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "Be true to yourself and be authentic. That's what country music does best: showcase the artist's true self and identify with their fans." —**Badgett**

Julie Boos**OWNER/BUSINESS MANAGER/CHAIRMAN, FBMM**

"Relentless" is how Boos describes the challenges of the past year, as the business management firm she leads helped "successfully navigate my clients through a world of no touring, which equates to significant lost revenue, so they can live to fight another day." Beyond her focus on the finances of her clients, which the firm keeps confidential, Boos says she has spent "a lot of time educating myself, asking questions and mostly listening to what it is to be Black in the country music industry today, and the world at large, and discovering ways I can be a better ally to my friends and colleagues living that reality."

Jeremy Holley**Laura Hutfless****CO-FOUNDERS, FLYTEVU**

In May, entertainment marketing agency FlyteVu supported Musicians on Call, the nonprofit that brings music to hospital patients, to create an online prom featuring Blanco Brown, Rita Ora, We the Kings and other artists. It secured a Dolly Parton performance for FlyteVu client Cracker Barrel's sponsorship of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and also created exclusive branded holiday content with Carrie Underwood, Maddie & Tae and Runaway June. Through its FlyteVu Fund, the company donated \$10,000 to Nashville's National Museum of African American Music, which opened earlier this year.

Andy Moats**DIRECTOR OF MUSIC, SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT, PINNACLE FINANCIAL PARTNERS**

Pinnacle has emerged as a leading player in music asset financing, with the bank's team writing up \$500 million in music publishing and record label loans from October through March alone, according to Moats. "What started as a small Nashville-focused effort has grown into a large national and even international entertainment practice," says Moats, who is also a founder and partner in August's Music City Grand Prix, a new three-day race and concert series.

I DISCOVER NEW COUNTRY ARTISTS BY "Listening to the songwriting community. If the songwriters are buzzing about an artist, then I know they should be on my radar."

Kerry O'Neil**PARTNER, O'NEIL HAGAMAN; CO-FOUNDER, BIG YELLOW DOG MUSIC**

O'Neil pulls double duty as a founding partner of the entertainment business management firm and as the co-founder, with Carla Wallace, of the publisher, label and artist development company. O'Neil Hagaman helped its clients navigate a pandemic-fueled economic downturn by mining the value of their intellectual property while also helping keep clients ready to tour when markets reopen. Big Yellow Dog successfully upstreamed several of its artists to major-label deals, according to O'Neil, while growing its synch and label business.

MY NEW PANDEMIC HABIT THAT I WILL CONTINUE "Taking more time to appreciate all the wonderful people in our community who make life bearable and meaningful."

Lou Taylor**FOUNDER/CEO, TRI STAR SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT GROUP**

Business management clients seeking Taylor's financial expertise come from the worlds of film, sports and all genres of music — and those from the country music community include Florida Georgia Line, Reba McEntire, Chase Rice, Orville Peck and Parker McCollum. As she and her team helped artists financially weather the pandemic, one of Taylor's goals has been to help clients create and build new revenue streams outside their current careers — a strategy that proved prescient during the past year.

Sarah Trahern**CEO, COUNTRY MUSIC ASSOCIATION****Tiffany Kerns****VP COMMUNITY OUTREACH, COUNTRY MUSIC ASSOCIATION; EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CMA FOUNDATION**

Under Trahern and Kerns, the CMA created the Music Industry COVID



The campus of Belmont University in Nashville.

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THE MOST FREQUENTLY CITED ALMA MATERS OF THE 2021 CLASS OF HONOREES

Belmont University**Nashville***Enrollment: 8,428***California State University, Northridge****Northridge, Calif.***Enrollment: 39,179***Georgetown University****Washington, D.C.***Enrollment: 19,593***Middle Tennessee State University****Murfreesboro, Tenn.***Enrollment: 21,721***Tennessee State University****Nashville***Enrollment: 8,081***University of Alabama****Tuscaloosa, Ala.***Enrollment: 38,100***University of Arkansas****Fayetteville, Ark.***Enrollment: 27,559***University of Kentucky****Lexington, Ky.***Enrollment: 29,402***University of Tennessee****Knoxville, Tenn.***Enrollment: 29,460***Vanderbilt University****Nashville***Enrollment: 13,131*

Enrollments source: U.S. News & World Reports



ROUND HILL MUSIC
CONGRATULATES

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2021
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MARTHA EARLS



YOUR TEAM



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Support initiative, which has committed \$3 million to multiple nonprofits, including Music Health Alliance and Porter's Call. When the pandemic forced the cancellation of CMA Fest 2020, Trahern and executive producer Robert Deaton created ABC special CMA Best of Fest. In June, the CMA extended its relationship with ABC for the CMA Awards and other programming through 2026.

Damon Whiteside
CEO, ACADEMY OF COUNTRY MUSIC
Lyndsay Cruz
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ACM LIFTING LIVES

The Academy of Country Music held two ACM Awards shows in seven months after the 2020 edition was delayed by the pandemic from April to September and then the 2021 event was held on schedule in April. Whiteside, 48, hails both shows as "ground-breaking due to the format of being at

several of Nashville's most iconic music venues for the first time in our history" and airing primarily live performances. Meanwhile, Cruz oversaw the ACM Lifting Lives COVID-19 Response Fund, which raised and distributed \$3.65 million to those in need in the country music industry.

ARTIST I MOST WANT TO SEE LIVE WHEN TOURING RETURNS "Eric Church. After his past two performances at the ACM Awards, I can't wait to see him in a large venue packed with fans." —Whiteside

► **LEGAL**

David Crow
Mike Milom
PARTNERS, MILOM HORSNELL CROW
KELLEY BECKETT SHEHAN

During the pandemic, Crow, 47, focused on negotiating and drafting

joint venture agreements to launch several new publishing, management and artist development companies for clients, as well as oversaw several significant master and music-publishing catalog sales. Partner Milom says the COVID-19 lockdown also forced the firm to help clients (whom the firm declines to name) find new pandemic-proof income streams to replace typical revenue generators such as touring, including "creating signature products through joint ventures with established brands" and setting up arrangements for paid livestreams.

MY ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "Be mindful of the potential security issues involved. Artists can unintentionally give away their location, their home address and other sensitive information that can create issues if they have a stalker." —Crow

Derek Crownover
Tiffany Dunn
Denise Stevens
PARTNERS, LOEB & LOEB

Last year, Loeb & Loeb represented Grammy-winning hitmaker Hillary Lindsey in a co-publishing deal with Concord that includes a creative venture to jointly sign and develop new songwriting talent. Most significantly, Concord acquired an interest in Lindsey's formidable back catalog, which includes co-writing credits on hits such as Carrie Underwood's "Jesus, Take the Wheel," Little Big Town's "Girl Crush" and Keith Urban's "Blue Ain't Your Color."

MY ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "Type it out, then call your manager, publicist and lawyer before you hit send." —Crownover

Rusty A. Jones
ATTORNEY, LAW OFFICES OF RUSSELLA.
JONESJR. AND ASSOCIATES

Jones represents Garth Brooks, Trisha Yearwood, Tim McGraw and Toby Keith, whose respective performances boosted the morale of their fans during the pandemic. The lesson of the past year? "Patience," says Jones. "We've all had to be patient during this unprecedented period. In a world that we normally live in where everything is going at the speed of light, all of a sudden we've all had to put on the brakes. Like they say, [patience] is an acquired taste... especially in this business, where we're going 100 miles an hour all the time."

MY ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "Don't print it if you don't want it repeated."

Joel Katz
SENIOR COUNSEL, BARNES & THORNBURG
Katz, who joined Barnes & Thornburg

as senior counsel in March, successfully renegotiated a new TV contract for the CMA Awards with ABC. He is also the attorney for several top Nashville executives, including Scott Borchetta at Big Machine Label Group, Mike Dungan at Universal Music Group Nashville, Randy Goodman at Sony Music Nashville and John Esposito at Warner Music Nashville. He has also been engaged by Ken Robold and Steve Hodges for their employment extensions with Sony Music Nashville.

Jess L. Rosen
SHAREHOLDER/CO-CHAIR, ATLANTA
ENTERTAINMENT AND MEDIA PRACTICE,
GREENBERG TRAURIG

Rosen believes in heading for "where the puck is going, not where it is at the moment," a philosophy that positioned his firm well to help its clients during the pandemic. With a roster that includes Brad Paisley, Kacey Musgraves and Kenny Chesney, the lawyer (and jazz guitarist) says being adaptable during a challenging 2020 helped the practice meet clients' needs as they prepare to ramp back up in 2021.

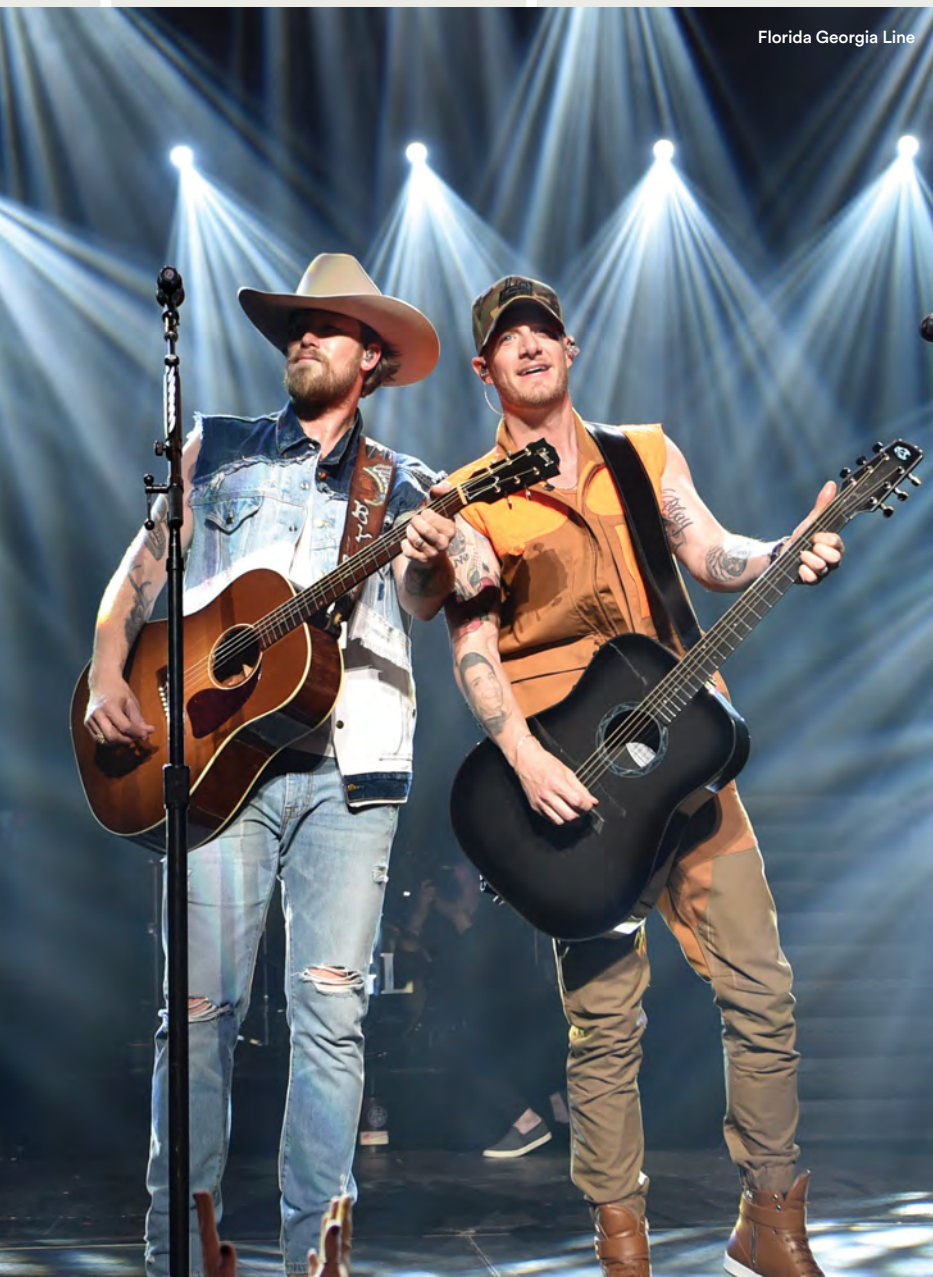
MY ADVICE FOR ANY ARTIST POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA "The days of what you had for lunch — as we emerge from quarantine — should be over. Tell us about the world you want us to be living in, what you want your music to give people. Make those posts matter."

CONTRIBUTORS

Trevor Anderson, Jim Asker, Katie Bain, Dave Brooks, Anna Chan, Ed Christman, Tatiana Cirisano, Mariel Concepcion, Marcus Dowling, Thom Duffy, Chris Eggertsen, Deborah Evans Price, Gary Graff, Paul Grein, Lyndsey Havens, Gil Kaufman, Steve Knopper, Joe Levy, Taylor Mims, Gail Mitchell, Melinda Newman, Jessica Nicholson, Cathy Applefeld Olson, Glenn Peoples, Bryan Reesman, Tom Roland, Micah Singleton, Andrew Unterberger, Deborah Wilker, Nick Williams, Xander Zellner.

METHODOLOGY

Billboard power lists are selective, with honorees chosen by Billboard editors. Nominations for each power list open not less than 120 days in advance of publication. (For a contact for our editorial calendar listing publication dates, please email thom.duffy@billboard.com.) The online nomination link is sent to press representatives and/or honorees of companies previously featured on any Billboard power list, as well as those who send a request before the nomination period to thom.duffy@billboard.com. Nominations close and lists are locked not less than 90 days before publication. Billboard's 2021 Country Power Players were chosen by editors based on factors including, but not limited to, nominations by peers, colleagues and superiors. In addition to nominations, editors weigh the success of each executive's company or affiliated artists as measured by chart, sales and streaming performance. Career trajectory and industry impact are also considered. Unless otherwise noted, Billboard Boxscore and MRCData are the sources for tour grosses and sales/streaming data, respectively. MRCData is also the source for radio audience metrics. Unless otherwise noted, album streaming figures cited represent collective U.S. on-demand audio totals for an album's tracks, and song/artist streaming figures represent U.S. on-demand audio and video totals.





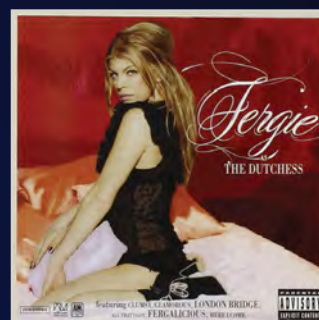
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BILLBOARD COUNTRY
POWER PLAYERS



BLACK EYED PEAS 20 YEAR ANNIVERSARY



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Much Love, Helen Yu

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The Players

From left: Taboo, will.i.am and apl.de.ap of the Black Eyed Peas.



The Black Eyed Peas' New Chapter

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS TOGETHER, THE CORE TRIO OF WILL.I.AM, APL.DE.AP AND TABOO ARE IN THE MIDST OF A SECOND GLOBAL TAKEOVER — THIS TIME, ON THE LATIN CHARTS

BY LEILA COBO



THE STORY OF THE BLACK EYED

Peas is one of relentless hustle. It began in 1988 at Estrada Courts, the housing project in predominantly Chicano East Los Angeles, when 13-year-old will.i.am (born William

James Adams Jr.) met 14-year-old Apl.de.ap (born Allan Pineda Lindo). Will was the self-described “neighborhood dude, the guy who could dance,” while Apl had grown up in the Philippines, where he didn’t speak a word of English. The duo bonded over break dancing and rap battles and started to work on beats together, eventually competing with their own crews.

It was at Ballistics, a Hollywood club for aspiring and established rappers, that the group’s lineup took shape after they met Taboo (born Jaime Luis Gómez). He was a tall kid from the San Gabriel Valley, half Mexican-American, half Native American, and possessed “all unique footwork,” says Apl. They were introduced by their longtime manager, Polo Molina — who at the time was just another teenager immersed in the L.A. freestyle scene. (Molina currently manages the Peas with Seth Friedman.) The trio gigged at local colleges — often getting paid in pizza and gas money — and named

themselves Black Eyed Peas because they envisioned their music as “food for the soul.”

The Peas were an outgrowth of A.T.B.A.N Klann, a group that included Will and Apl that signed a \$10,000 deal with Eazy-E’s Ruthless Records in 1992. But Eazy’s death three years later derailed their plans, and with Taboo now a member, they retooled to a more pop-driven sound and inked a deal with Interscope Records in 1998. Early on, the group performed with rotating guest vocalists such as Kim Hill, Macy Gray and Sarah “Fergie” Ferguson, who became a permanent addition to the group in 2002. During the pop-centric early 2000s, they were assisted by Justin Timberlake in scoring their first No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100, “Where Is the Love?” In 2009, the act was one of the first to recognize the mainstream potential of electronic dance music, and held the No. 1 spot on the Hot 100 for a record 26 consecutive weeks after “I Gotta Feeling” replaced “Boom Boom Pow” atop the chart — more than any other act in the history of the Hot 100.

The group has sold 12.4 million albums and garnered 2.5 billion streams and 48.8 million downloads in the United States, according to MRC Data. The Black Eyed Peas have earned six Grammy Awards out of 15 nominations, including wins for best pop vocal album in 2009 and

consecutive wins for best rap performance by a duo or group for “Let’s Get It Started” in 2004 and “Don’t Phunk With My Heart” in 2005.

As a global act with multicultural roots, the Peas earned endorsement deals and tour support from brands such as Apple, Snickers and Pepsi; and in 2011, they played arguably the biggest stage in music when they headlined the Super Bowl halftime show — a milestone in a career that came to a surprising pause that July when the group announced a hiatus. “They were a real example of a global act,” says J Balvin. “It’s one thing to be big in the States, and we all dream about that, but globalization is something else. It’s when different cultures are translated into our world, and that’s what happened with the Black Eyed Peas.”

A decade later, after moving to Epic Records, the band resurfaced as a bilingual trio with 2020’s *Translation*, recorded in both English and Spanish and featuring collaborations with top Latin stars. The album earned 11 entries on *Billboard*’s Latin Airplay chart and four No. 1s: “Ritmo (Bad Boys for Life),” with Balvin; “Girl Like Me,” featuring Shakira; “Mamacita,” with Ozuna and J. Rey Soul (the Peas’ new female vocalist); and “Feel the Beat,” with Maluma. “Ritmo” also stayed at No. 1 on Hot Latin Songs for 24 weeks. “They said, ‘Black Eyed Peas as a trio? I don’t think they’re going to have success.’ But we had to prove them wrong,” says will.i.am. “Everybody took a leap of faith.”

In June, the group played its first post-quarantine concert for 8,500 fans at FPL Solar Amphitheater in Miami, with upcoming shows in France and Sweden, as well as KXOL Los Angeles’ Latin music festival, Calibash, at the Staples Center in January 2022. The band is also working on a follow-up to *Translation* that will.i.am says will be “an extension, with similar templates, similar vibes, but heightened.”

As the Black Eyed Peas celebrate their 25th anniversary, the founding members spoke about their unique bond and bright second act.

Side Hustles

MEMBERS OF THE BLACK EYED PEAS HAVE CARVED OUT NICHEs IN BUSINESS AND PHILANTHROPY DURING THEIR DOWNTIME FROM TOURING AND RECORDING TOGETHER. WHAT EACH ARTIST HAS BEEN UP TO OUTSIDE THE GROUP

APL.DE.AP

Apl was born clinically blind but received early treatment for his eyes in the United States from the Pearl S. Buck Foundation. The experience led him to found the Apl.de.ap Foundation, which supports Filipino youth by partnering with organizations that focus on computer technology, the arts and eye care. As a coach on *The Voice Philippines*, he has mentored new artists — the group's latest member and female vocalist, J. Rey Soul, competed on Apl's *Voice Philippines* team in 2013 during the series' first season.



TABOO

After battling stage two testicular cancer, Taboo has become an advocate for better health care, particularly in Indigenous communities. His 2016 single, "The Fight," was made in partnership with the American Cancer Society, for which Taboo is a global ambassador. His autobiography, *Fallin' Up*, was published by Simon & Schuster in 2011, and his solo music has appeared in films including *Legally Blonde* and *Coach Carter*. In 2020, he worked with Marvel to develop a new volume of the comic *Werewolf by Night*, which he co-wrote alongside Benjamin Jackendoff.



WILL.I.AM

As a superproducer, will.i.am has racked up credits with Rihanna, Justin Bieber and Britney Spears, among others, earning him seven Grammy Awards, an Emmy and a CLIO Award. He has also served as a judge on *The Voice UK* and *The Voice Australia*. In 2012, he launched an artificial intelligence-focused tech startup, I.am+, based in West Hollywood that helps companies develop human-like customer service experiences. His i.am Angel Foundation, launched in 2009, is devoted to providing scholarships, preparation and opportunities in STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, math) to kids in Los Angeles and earned him the World Economic Forum's 2016 Crystal Award for leadership in creating education opportunities for the underserved. —L.C.



In a way, the Black Eyed Peas began with Apl coming into Will's home after arriving from the Philippines. It seems like such an unlikely friendship.

WILL.I.AM He'd be at my house all the time. It wasn't weird to hang out with somebody who didn't know any English. In my neighborhood, there were people that were from Tijuana and Chihuahua. A lot of my friends didn't know English. But Apl, he was a different type of dude.

APL.DE.AP There was a lot of gang activity, but we were still able to walk around the neighborhood and be neutral. I came with these high-top Converse and polo shirts. I liked Michael Jackson, so I tried to make my hair look like Michael's with a band. I was a mess.

A year after that, you started to make music together, inspired by A Tribe Called Quest and other jazz-rap fusion groups. Was the goal to have a cross-cultural sound?

WILL.I.AM I always made music and rapped at people's quinceañeras and birthday parties with DJ Gus and DJ Gil in our projects. When Apl came, we started going to these Filipino parties in Glendale because he was a dancer.

APL.DE.AP Dance was my first introduction to hip-hop. I saw break dancing in a Pepsi commercial and it blew my mind, so I started researching and practicing it. When I finally met Will, I showed him the "running man" and he said, "Yo, you should start rapping. If you can dance, you can rap." I didn't speak English, man. We would make beats on the tape deck and freestyle over the instrumentals. He said, "Just rhyme anything off the top of your head." I only had one thing in my head — the ABCs in Tagalog [the national language of the Philippines] — and Will says, "You got it, man!"

How did the record deal with Ruthless Records and Eazy-E come together?

WILL.I.AM There was this club called Ballistics. It was like the Hollywood spot for all the teenage actors. Leonardo DiCaprio went there. So Apl and I decided to go to battle. We had a seven-piece crew that was pretty dope called Tribal Nation, and we used to run circles around all the different crews in Glendale. The first time we went we were in line for like an hour. We took the bus to Hollywood then walked to Ballistics on a freaking school night. What was my mom thinking? We're 16, 17 years old. But that changed our lives.

Taboo, your role was more of as a hype man, right?

TABOO I always looked at myself as the showman, trying to get the crowd involved. I learned that from pro wrestling and watching people like Hulk Hogan. I always knew what my energy was on the stage. I was going to transfer that energy even if I didn't say one rap. As long as I controlled that part of the show, I was good with that. I looked at Will and Apl as my guides to be able to find myself as an entertainer, as an MC, as an entrepreneur.

How did your early gigs in Los Angeles kick-start your career?

APL.DE.AP We would shop our demos to different record companies. We were from L.A. but we didn't do gangsta music. So, we had to prove ourselves playing live.

TABOO We built a fan base performing. That's how we got college students who were working at the labels to come check us out.



The Black Eyed Peas with Balvin (right) at the 2020 Spotify Awards in Mexico City.

When you finally signed with Ruthless, you were getting pressure to do alternative careers as well. How did you stay determined?

WILL.I.AM We had a Ruthless Records artist showcase at the Mayan the summer of 1993, and [apl.de.ap's adoptive father] Mr. Hudgens came. Afterward, he sat us down and said, "I've seen your show, and I think you need to go to college. William, I brought Allan to this country to take care of his family and go to college. Allan is your responsibility now." Ap would cry himself to sleep when he was 15. He was real homesick. I always said, "We'll get back to your country. We'll figure it out."

You were looking for a bigger label deal when you got to play your music for Jon Platt, who was then at EMI, correct?

WILL.I.AM He said something that changed my life. He said, "You guys obviously can rap. But these songs just aren't *tangible*." I'm like, all right, whatever tangible means. I was like, "Yo, what does he mean by that?" So I went home, got the dictionary and thought, "This guy wants hooks." That meeting changed my whole writing process. My response was to write the catchiest choruses ever. Fast forward 25 years and check out this text from Big Jon from May 2021: "I'm in the studio with Wisin. He played one of the songs you worked on together. That shit's tangible."

At the time, though, that must have hurt.

WILL.I.AM It's deflating to go in there thinking that you're going to have your life changed and then you get a reality check. But you put your ego in check and then you're like, "All right, well, how do I learn from this?"

And that led you to sign with Interscope?

WILL.I.AM There was a bidding war for us. We had no hits, but we had L.A. buzz. By then, all the college kids knew us. Sony offered us \$1 million but we signed to Interscope for \$400,000. Jimmy Iovine said no matter how many records we sell, we could always make records there.

Iovine left the label in 2014, and five years later you were dropped. Was that disheartening?

WILL.I.AM It really hurt, because we could have worked something out. Now we're at Sony, and Jimmy helped us negotiate that deal. He said, "It'd be great if I helped you sign to the label that you should have signed with in the first place. And it would be great if you accept the same amount of money they wanted to give you in 1997." In 1997, they offered us a million dollars, which is not the same as a million dollars today. Jimmy said, "Do you need the money? Or do you want a better back end? Negotiate the best back end you can."

You had always incorporated guest female vocalists, from Macy Gray and Kim Hill to Debbi Nova. But how did Fergie come into the picture?

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WILL.I.AM We like writing songs where it's guy-girl. The record was done in 2002. I was working on Fergie's demo project, and she was only on one song on *Elephunk*, and that was "Shut Up." I had asked Jimmy if we could change our A&R and work with Ron Fair, but his assistant didn't like any of the songs. We went to Record Plant studio and Pharrell [Williams] was there, so I played him "Let's Get It Started" and "Hey Mama." And then Jimmy lovine walks in like, "Whoa, these songs are great, but go look at the magazine rack down on Vine and Hollywood and tell me what you see." There's all these girls on the covers. And he says, "Exactly. Now why don't you put Stacy [Ferguson, aka Fergie] in your group?" It was a long conversation. What are the fans going to think? She's not really part of the cloth.

But you had already worked with Justin Timberlake on "Where Is the Love?," which also ran counter to the culture.

WILL.I.AM Yes. We were already breaking the rules. Fergie sounded great on "Shut Up," so we said, "Let's see how she sounds on 'Let's Get It Started.'" Where were we going to put her? I didn't know. The song was finished. What if we put her just at the beginning — the a cappella line of "let's get started in here." Then we added a part to "Hey Mama." So candles and embellishing was how we finished *Elephunk*. With *Monkey Business*, Fergie was working with us from the beginning. That was the only record I could say we worked from the beginning to the end with no time constraints. That record is a quartet. Then we blow up and management comes to fuck things up. Now we only have Fergie for a little bit.

What do you mean?

WILL.I.AM The idea of divide and conquer comes into play. It was the same tactic that broke up The Fugees, and we had the same management as them back then. We were doing 400 shows a year over 300 days, working with 65 days off from 2003 to 2004. So we took 2008 off and campaigned for [President Barack] Obama. Then we did EDM collaborations with all these DJs. And, then, we only had Fergie for 100 days, including touring and recording, so what do we do? She just wanted to not get burned out, so we had to be smart about maximizing our time recording. Everything she did was treated as samples and chops. We invested a lot of money on

the tour so we could cash in on the next one, but it never happened because Fergie stopped after the Super Bowl.

What is your relationship to Fergie now?

WILL.I.AM She's part of the family. Playing the Super Bowl was a big milestone because at the time that event didn't program contemporary artists after the Janet Jackson wardrobe malfunction. It was between Black Eyed Peas and Bon Jovi, so I flew out to New Jersey with my DJ equipment for the pitch, and told them the Black Eyed Peas have always been safe. We take pride in bringing families to our show. And I did a little DJ set for them.

That gig must have been a real pinnacle.

TABOO The show itself was electric. The stadium was so new and we were coming down from the scoreboard, skinning wires. That was the first time coming down from 200 feet for a show. I was scared.

WILL.I.AM And my uncle played football for the [Atlanta] Falcons. He always wanted to go to the Super Bowl. Going to the Super Bowl with my uncle watching was a big deal for a football family.

What was your goal with your latest album, *Translation*?

APL.DE.AP The way we approached *Translation* was with a DJ mentality. You could just play the whole album and let it roll for a party. Every song is bam, bam, bam.

TABOO It forced us to go back into loving the hunger of the hunt. Going to the Billboard Latin Awards in Las Vegas and meeting Balvin on the red carpet, we were hunting.

WILL.I.AM And Shakira will always be my darling of "no good ideas ever get old," because that song was from 2008. *Translation* did beyond what we thought was possible. Very rarely do people in their 40s get played on top 40 radio. And very rarely does Spanish music get played on top 40. We got four No. 1s in France! They don't play Spanish in France. What we were able to do as a trio when everyone doubted us is amazing.

Will the new album be Latin-inspired as well?

WILL.I.AM We learned a lot from *Translation* — it was too Latin for the gringos and not Latin enough for Latin people. This will have a little less Latin, but hopefully a song we've done with Wisin makes it. We're also working with Anuel, Lele Pons and Saweetie. It's "11 seconds proof," meaning the choruses are 11 seconds. It's the reverse of sampling, where usually a sample is three seconds long and you loop it. Here, every 11 seconds needs to be interesting. We string them together and make a fucking awesome sequence of stuff that I think is 11 seconds proof. We like to make music to fast forward five years. Is that shit still dope? Would you still play it right now, five years later? Hell, yes.

What has been the biggest lesson from your 25 years in the music business?

WILL.I.AM That it's OK to forget about your successes if you want to have success again. You need to fucking be humble, forget the Super Bowl, the Grammys, the World Cup. Be a student and learn. That's what we did. And I was afraid. We put out *The E.N.D.* in 2009 and we didn't think it was going to be that big and it just went everywhere. We played three stadiums in France back-to-back with 80,000 people each night. Then we did *The Beginning* in 2010, and it stopped. We didn't want to stop. **b**

Top Albums

THE BLACK EYED PEAS HAVE PLACED SEVEN ALBUMS ON THE BILLBOARD 200, INCLUDING ONE NO. 1 AND THREE TOP 10s

BEHIND THE FRONT (1998)

The group's debut album is a fusion of samples and live instrumentation that peaked at No. 129 on the Billboard 200 and No. 3 on the Heatseekers Albums charts and includes the singles "Fallin' Up," "Joints & Jam" and "Karma," which featured a sample of Blondie's "One Way or Another."

BRIDGING THE GAP (2000)

The group's reggae- and drum'n'bass-laden sophomore set peaked at No. 67 on the Billboard 200 and included collaborations with DJ Premier ("BEP Empire") and Esthero ("Weekends").

ELEPHUNK (2003)

The Peas' breakout album reached No. 14 on the Billboard 200 in June 2004 and included the pop smash "Where Is the Love?" with Justin Timberlake. The album marked Fergie's debut as a lead female vocalist and was the first to feature four members on the cover.

MONKEY BUSINESS (2005)

The follow-up to *Elephunk* solidified the Peas as one of the top pop groups in the world and reached No. 2 on the Billboard 200 on the strength of the hits "Don't Phunk With My Heart" and "My Humps," which both hit No. 3 on the Billboard Hot 100.

THE E.N.D. (2009)

The most successful BEP album debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard 200 and yielded three Hot 100 chart-toppers. "Boom Boom Pow" ruled for 12 straight weeks only to be replaced by "I Gotta Feeling" for 14. The one-two punch kept the group at the top of the chart for a record 26 consecutive weeks.

THE BEGINNING (2010)

The quick follow-up to *The E.N.D.* peaked at No. 6 on the Billboard 200 and featured two Hot 100 top 10s: "The Time (Dirty Bit)" and "Just Can't Get Enough." The album also marked the band's last collaboration with Fergie.

TRANSLATION (2020)

The bilingual set peaked at No. 52 on the Billboard 200 and at No. 3 on the Top Latin Albums chart, producing two No. 1s on Hot Latin Songs: "Ritmo (Bad Boys for Life)," with J Balvin and "Mamacita" with Ozuna and J. Rey Soul. —L.C.



The Black Eyed Peas with Fergie (left) at the Super Bowl XLV halftime show in 2011.

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(Hillbillies, Spirituals, Cowboy Songs, Etc.)

Special reports received from The Billboard representatives last week show the folk records listed below are currently the most popular folk records on automatic phonographs throughout the nation. These reports stem from all the country's leading operating centers and are averaged together.

POSITION	Last Wk.	This Wk.	Artist	Label
1.			Pistol Packin' Mama	Bing Crosby-Andrews Sisters Decca
2.			No Letter Today	Don Baxter Muskeriff
3.			New San Antonio Rose	Ted Daffan Okeh
4.			They Took the Stars Out of Heaven	Bob Walls Okeh
5.			Rosalita	Floyd Tillman Decca
6.			Try Me One More Time	Al Dexter Okeh
				Ernest Tubbs Decca

The Billboard HOT C&W SIDES

FOR THE WEEK ENDING OCTOBER 26

THREE WEEKS AGO	TWO WEEKS AGO	ONE WEEK AGO	HIGH WEEK	TITLE	Artist, Company, Record Number	WEEKS ON CHART
—	—	—	1	CITY LIGHTS	Ray Price, Columbia 41191	1
—	—	—	2	ALONE WITH YOU	Faron Young, Capitol 262	2
—	—	—	3	SQUAWS ALONG THE YUKON	Hank Thompson, Capitol 4617	3
—	—	—	4	BLUE BOY	Jim Reeves, RCA Victor 7204	4
—	—	—	5	YOU'RE THE NEAREST THING TO HEAVEN	Johnny Cash, Sun 382	5
—	—	—	6	THE WAYS OF A WOMAN IN LOVE	Johnny Cash, Sun 382	6
—	—	—	7	BIRD DOG	Faron Young, Capitol 262	7

Students Put Best Foot Forward As Campus Country Craze Soars

ALICE, Tex. — The surfers of South Texas have "broken their boards" and made the switch to country and western music, according to observers in the area.

A surge of country music ghetlos, dance halls and eaters has taken place, with young people flocking by the thousands to such places as Alice, Kingsville, Skidmore, Corpus Christi, Robstown and other nearby towns to dance to country music.

Not since the heyday of Bob Wills have there been such a large interest among the college set for c/w music.

Charles Moore, general manager of KOPY, Alice, said the area is populated by "kicker" schools, a name given to colleges which lean toward country music. (The name stems from the fact that "young people in the corrals heard this type of music and immediately start kicking up their heels.")

As a result of this move, clubs catered to the surfers are now playing nothing but music of country and western variety.

"They passed right through the surfer and the psychedelic stage," Moore said, "and now they're settled on country."

Students from Texas A & I, Southwest Texas State College, Beeville County Junior College and other schools fill the dance halls in the region, and some of the dances draw crowds from as far away as Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth and Oklahoma City.

KOPY, the "big kicker station" now is programming country music around the clock. KROB, Robstown and KBUC, San Antonio, also are handling a country format.

Moore said that the area's country music promoter's Charley Pride is the

best name in the area, and could fill any dance hall. "But so could Merle Haggard, George Jones, George Hamilton IV, Dave Dudley, or any of a number of big name country artists," Moore added.

However, a local dance band manages to keep the youngsters entertained in lieu of a big name. Al Dean and his band play dances throughout the area, and his performance at the Youth Center in Freer, Tex., every Wednesday night fills the place with more than 1,000 young people. Dean tours the south Texas area.

The VFW Hall in Alice, playing to turnaway crowds, handles 2,500 at its dances with a name artist. Pride is scheduled for the next big dance, Jan. 7. At Kingsville, Hubert's Dance Land continually plays to packed houses, with nothing but country and western music.



CHARLES "PETE" CONRAD, second from left, receives an award from Dan McKinnon, second from right, president of KSON, San Diego, in recognition of Conrad's promotion of country music during his voyage to the moon and back. Looking on are Charley Pride, right, and Faron Young, left.

BIG COUNTRY

BEFORE DOLLY PARTON WORKED "9 to 5" or Johnny Cash walked the line, *Billboard* has been in the saddle, surveying the field of country music. Early on, it struggled to get its due: The magazine's first genre chart, in 1944, tracked Most Played Juke Box Folk Records (Hillbillies, Spirituals, Cowboy Songs, Etc.). But *Billboard* ponied up proper respect as "hillbilly music" grew into a uniquely American art form that shaped pop culture with smooth "country-politan" recordings, *Urban Cowboy* chic and stadium superstars like Taylor Swift.

WHO LET THE DOG IN?

Country cropped up in the Jan. 7, 1928, issue with a photo of early stars Otto Gray & His Oklahoma Cowboys Band that included the group's mascot — a German shepherd named Rex.

COWBOY LIFE DURING WARTIME

"Operators of music machines [are] finding a more generous flow of coins coming in for the

hillbilly and cowboy tunes," according to the Jan. 8, 1944, *Billboard*, in which the genre chart debuted. On top that first week: Bing Crosby and The Andrews Sisters' "Pistol Packin' Mama," a favorite among Marines stationed in the South Pacific. Some heard the sound of home: A dispatch from New Delhi in the same issue reported that "a hillbilly guitar brought life to a weary troopship."

HEARTBREAK AND HITS

By the 1950s, country had grown into a significant cultural force — and a big business. The Oct. 20, 1958, *Billboard* introduced the Hot C&W Sides chart (now known as Hot Country Songs), which was topped by Ray Price's "City Lights." That issue also showed the genre's impact on pop and rock: In one article, the 17-year-old idol Paul Anka hailed Hank Williams as "one of the great [song]writers," while a review said rockabilly queen Wanda Jackson's "Sinful Heart" "could move in the more rural circles," since "the gal gives this bleeder a reading with the heartbreak sound."

HONKY-TONK UNIVERSITY

Even in the psychedelic 1960s, country was big on campus. "The surfers of South Texas have 'broken their boards' and made the switch to country and western music," reported the Dec. 23, 1967, *Billboard*, citing pioneering Black superstar Charley Pride as the region's most popular. Pride's label, RCA, made him and his genre a national priority, "placing heavy stress" on Nashville, according to the June 27, 1970, issue, which noted the "vast importance to the overall industry" of what was once "known as a specialty" field.

SUBURBAN COWBOY

Urban Cowboy and *Coal Miner's Daughter* brought small-town music to the big screen in 1980, and the genre continued to grow after that. "Country radio kept pace with its spectacular growth of the last two years," according to the May 30, 1992, *Billboard*, thanks to burgeoning stars like Garth Brooks and Billy Ray Cyrus. Not everyone joined the line dance, however. A column in the March 28, 1992, issue roasted the "whine of a rock critic" who panned Brooks, suggesting that "record labels could make a fortune if they hired such critics in their A&R departments — and then signed only the acts they hated." —JOE LYNCH



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