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When Grammy Voters Pick the Nominees, Who Will Benefit?

BY PAUL GREIN

After decades of having “secret” review committees determine Grammy Award nominations in an ever-increasing number of categories, it’s majority rule again at the venerable awards show. So the nominations for the 64th annual Grammys may look a bit different when they’re announced later this year: Expect fewer surprise omissions of records that met the usual benchmarks for commercial and artistic success and cultural impact, and fewer head-scratching inclusions of projects that didn’t make a significant impression. And when the next outrage does inevitably occur, the Recording Academy can now skirt blame by pointing to an easy-to-understand nomination process that puts power back in the hands of the 11,000-person voting membership.

The academy board of trustees’ April 30 vote to disband nomination-review committees — whose membership, but not existence, was kept secret — walks back a decades-old practice that frequently stirred controversy and was at odds with the academy’s professed desire for transparency.

The process started in 1989, when the first nominations-review committee was added in the classical field. By 2020, it was implemented in 59 out of 84

award categories. The major turning point came in 1995, when the committee approach was adopted in the Big Four categories — album, record and song of the year, and best new artist — after **Tony Bennett** and The Three Tenors both scored album of the year nods the year prior, while alternative rock and hip-hop artists that dominated the era were left out.

The idea was that the creatives and executives deemed genre experts who made up the 15- to 30-person committees would be less likely than the general membership to vote for sentimental favorites, big names or bestsellers. In the first five years, this benefited acts such as **Pearl Jam**, **The Smashing Pumpkins**, **Radiohead**, **Garbage** and **TLC**, all of whom received album of the year nominations. Over time, however, the committee also seemingly bypassed front-runner pop acts including **Justin Timberlake**, **Ed Sheeran** and, most recently, **The Weeknd**, whose hit album *After Hours* and its smash single, “Blinding Lights,” failed to receive even one nomination this year. In an ironic twist, committee oversight was implemented to keep the Grammys from seeming out of touch; now it’s being abandoned for the same

(continued)



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reason.

Since 2018, academy leadership has aggressively focused on increasing membership diversity, primarily through recruitment: After adding 1,345 new voting members last year — about 12% of its total — the academy reported that people from traditionally underrepresented (nonwhite) communities now account for 27% of overall membership (up from 25% the year before), and people who are 39 or younger account for 28% (up from 25%). Women account for 26% (the same as the year before).

Now the academy is also planning a new review process that's likely to disproportionately weed out older members. As part of the April 30 vote, the academy will begin requiring existing members to reapply for membership. By the end of 2021, over 90% of members will have undergone the requalification process, with a goal, according to a statement, of "ensuring that the voting body is actively engaged in music creation." Whereas academy membership had previously been for life, members will now have to show that they have accrued one new credit within the past five years and that music remains their primary career.

A younger, more diverse membership will be less likely to snub acts like The Weeknd, and probably won't pick as many surprise nominees like [Jacob Collier](#) (whose 2020 album of the year nod had many Googling his name) or [Black Pumas](#), Tank and the

Bangas and [Yola](#) (who all notably edged out [Lewis Capaldi](#) from 2019's best new artist class). But don't expect drastic changes: As the broadest genre, pop will likely continue to dominate, while hip-hop's growing influence is sure to continue and country may move up the ranks thanks to the academy's sizable Nashville membership.

While the review committees became controversial, they did consider genre, gender and racial diversity, albeit imperfectly. That oversight won't exist now, and the academy can only hope that an increasingly diverse membership can deliver results that make sense to both the industry and fans.

Looming over the change is the search for a permanent academy president/CEO after Deborah Dugan was ousted in January 2020 after less than six months in the position. That hire is expected to be made by the end of May or early June. This will likely be the last major action that [Harvey Mason Jr.](#) will oversee as interim president/CEO (although he's expected to be elected to a second term as chair). With the 13-month eligibility period for the 64th awards already about two-thirds finished, the academy needed to move now to enact this change for the 2022 honors.

And then there's The Weeknd, whose name will forever be linked to this decision, even though a task force had been considering a proposal to disband nomination-review committees since last summer,

according to an academy representative — months before this year's nominees were announced. "The Grammys remain corrupt," The Weeknd tweeted Nov. 24. "You owe me, my fans and the industry transparency." The academy just took a big step in that direction. 📺

Pulling Back the Curtain on Alexander Shustorovich, Classical Music's International Man of Mystery

BY FREDRIC DANNEN

On the morning of April 15, 2009, Elizabeth Sobol was flipping through *The New York Times* in her Miami Beach apartment when a headline and photo stopped her cold.

"You son of a bitch," she said.

Sobol, managing director of [IMG Artists](#), one of the world's premier classical music

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MUSIC MOVES
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▶ IN BRIEF

talent agencies, was looking at a picture of the agency's 47-year-old chairman, Barrett Wissman, in a story titled, "[Hedge Fund Executive](#) Guilty of Securities Fraud." Wissman, a Texas financier and classical pianist, had purchased IMG Artists for \$7.5 million in July 2003, two months after the death of the previous owner, legendary sports impresario Mark McCormack. Originally a division of parent company IMG, which also operated businesses in sports, media and modeling, IMG Artists was an international firm with an A-list roster that included conductor [André Previn](#), pianist Evgeny Kissin, violinist [Itzhak Perlman](#), soprano [Renée Fleming](#) and flutist [James Galway](#). But McCormack's unexpected death had thrown the company's future into jeopardy. Wissman, a fashionably stubbled bon vivant with a taste for linen suits and fine wines, had been welcomed by the staff of IMG as a savior. He seemed ideal — a wealthy financier with musical talent.

But, as Sobol learned from the *Times*, Wissman had lately enhanced his wealth by illegitimate means. He and two New York state political operatives had conspired to direct billions of dollars from the state's pension fund to private investment firms in return for kickbacks. Wissman had personally made millions from the pay-to-play scheme and was awaiting sentencing.

Angry and incredulous, Sobol picked up the phone and called Wissman at his

home in Dallas. "You couldn't even give me a heads up this was coming?" she said. Sobol demanded that he assemble the New York staff for a morning meeting, get on the speakerphone and explain what his guilty plea meant for the company's future. "And then," she added, "you are going to ask the staff for forgiveness."

Wissman obeyed, but he faced bigger problems than winning back the good graces of his staff. If he did not appease the New York state attorney general's office, he was looking at up to four years in prison. To avoid that fate, he testified against his co-conspirators and investment firms that had awarded kickbacks — and paid \$12 million in penalties and forfeitures.

IMG Artists felt the financial repercussions. "We were already undercapitalized," says a former senior manager. "And once Barrett's assets were frozen, there came a point where we were holding back payments to artists."

Finally, in 2011, Wissman sold part ownership of the agency to a minority shareholder. At first, the staff knew little more than his name: Alexander Shustorovich. "We could find nothing, and I mean nothing, about him on the web," says Alec Treuhaft, then an IMG senior vp, apart from Shustorovich being a Russian-born U.S. citizen who had made his fortune in what sounded like an arcane field, publishing scientific journals. Wissman insisted he would remain in full

control, and all but characterized Shustorovich as a silent partner. "Barrett told us, 'You'll never see him,'" recalls Treuhaft.

It didn't work out that way. Before long, the staff was summoned to meet Shustorovich at IMG's New York office, and he confounded expectations. "We pictured some greying guy in a rumpled suit," says Treuhaft. Instead, they encountered a tall, slender, preppy-looking man in his mid-40s. "He was much more vital than we had imagined, more so than Barrett." Shustorovich, who turns 55 in June, projected intelligence — he had graduate degrees from Harvard's law and business schools — but little charm and less tact. "He showed up without having any idea who was who and talked about everything we were doing wrong," says Treuhaft.

In the decade since, Shustorovich has conspicuously elbowed Wissman aside. "Alex is very much running the show," says Ian Smallbone, former managing director of IMG in Europe. Wissman, 58, is designated chairman and Shustorovich president/CEO, but those are not legal corporate titles. Shustorovich says he now has majority control of the privately held company. Wissman claims his stake and Shustorovich's are equal. The two men do not appear to agree on much, and their mutual distaste is palpable. Wissman will not speak of it on the record; Shustorovich has no such qualms.

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Building on this platform, *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone* will be joining together for the entire month of June to celebrate love, acceptance, diversity and what it means to be queer in music. All month long, *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone* will be the go-to destination for music and entertainment Pride content. Leveraging our iconic voices within music and culture, *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone* will curate a mix of engaging video and social content featuring thought-provoking panels, heartfelt performances, and glam tutorials – all fostering a community of consumers and influencers in celebration of LGBTQIA+.

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bed with a guy like this?" says Shustorovich of his fellow shareholder. "I thought he'd done his penance. He presents himself like he's a nice guy, and a lot of people fall for that crap. Now that I've got to know him better, I've learned to be more careful."

Shustorovich says he recently had to sue Wissman in New York State Supreme Court for failing to repay a large personal loan. Wissman is currently suing Shustorovich in the same court for allegedly overcharging the agency for rental space in a New York townhouse Shustorovich owns.

A brawl at the top was once inconceivable at IMG Artists, but the company bears little resemblance to the collegial agency founded in 1979 by two former school teachers. For a quarter-century, says co-founder Edna Landau, "We ran our office like a family." The camaraderie was such, she adds, that "nobody ever left." The era of Wissman and Shustorovich changed all that. During their reign, senior managers have departed en masse — including Sobol, who had risen from intern to U.S. managing director — taking with them decades of institutional memory. They also took artists. When Charlotte Lee, a 17-year IMG veteran, left in 2015 to start her own boutique agency, Itzhak Perlman went with her.

Many of the managers who quit grumbled about Wissman, but said the tipping point was Shustorovich. Classical artist managers are not called agents because they provide

services well beyond booking, and bond tightly with their artists, but Shustorovich, former staffers claim, was too imperious to see managers as other than interchangeable. "He immediately gravitated toward the fiscal inefficiencies of the business," says Lee. "In a normal corporate context, good for him. But this is not a normal business." She adds: "We used to call him 'The Oligarch.'"

Shustorovich has heard the criticism before, and says, "I don't know that there's much I could have done differently." He has a reputation for blunt talk, but not for talking to the press, and his *Billboard* interview is his first ever with a music publication. "Alex is a difficult person to get information on, and shrewd about keeping himself out of the limelight," says Smallbone. Though now a major player in the business of classical music, he remains an elusive presence in that world. He has been equally coy about his other ventures, which, in addition to publishing scientific journals, include Russian media, advertising and real estate interests. "I'm the opposite of Elon Musk. I try not to be the frontman," he says. Learning about facets of his complicated life — Yeltsin-era wheeler-dealer, uranium broker, million-dollar Trump donor — required interviews with knowledgeable sources, supplemented by court filings and other documents, public and private. Many details about Shustorovich appear here for the first time in English, or anywhere.

Say what you want about Shustorovich, he has continued subsidizing IMG Artists with his own money at a time when COVID-19 has devastated classical-artist management. "I told our people from the beginning of the pandemic, 'I will keep our business afloat,'" he says. Not every artist-management company has been so lucky. IMG is surely now the world's largest classical music agency, following the unforeseen collapse of its biggest stateside rival, Columbia Artists Management. Last August, the music world was staggered by the news that Columbia had been felled by the pandemic and was shutting down for good. For decades, Columbia Artists was the king of agencies, the looming giant across the street from Carnegie Hall. Its client list filled page after page of the trade magazine *Musical America* — without even including its roster of conductors, which Columbia did not deign to publish. There was no need. Columbia's all-powerful boss, Ronald Wilford, seemed to control almost every major orchestra leader in the world. When Zubin Mehta resigned as music director of the New York Philharmonic in 1991, the Philharmonic board simply asked Wilford to replace him, and he inserted Kurt Masur. The business had never before seen a kingmaker like Wilford, and probably never will again.

When Wilford died in 2015, he left a successor, Tim Fox, who held no voting stock. Columbia was owned by Wilford's

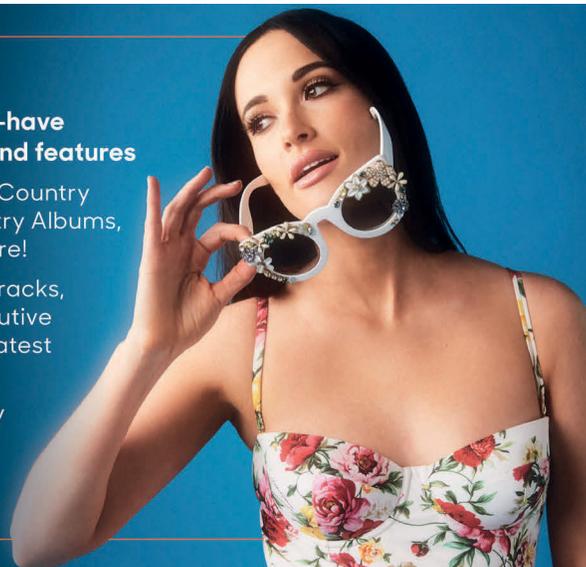
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On June 5th, *Billboard* will publish its fourth annual Indie Label Power Players List. This special feature in advance of Indie Week (6/14-6/17) and the 10th Anniversary Libera Awards will profile leading executives at top independent record labels, publishing companies and distribution companies. Positioning themselves as the driving force behind the success of independent music, these executives contribute to the independent music sector and to the world of music at large.

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widow and other private shareholders, who preemptorily shut the company down, effective Aug. 31, 2020, after making their intentions known via email just two days earlier. Even top managers at the agency did not see it coming. “Stunning and sad and scary,” sums up David Lai, co-president of boutique management agency Park Avenue Artists. “If a behemoth like Columbia Artists can fold so easily, what does that mean for the rest of us? This is like our Lehman Brothers.”

Another dramatic announcement came less than two months later, this time involving IMG’s other biggest competitor in the United States, Opus 3 Artists. Headquartered in New York, with a satellite office in Berlin, Opus 3 is the lineal descendent of the agency founded in the 1920s by impresario Sol Hurok. In October, Opus 3 disclosed that it had been 100% acquired by the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, the first time a nonprofit institution has bought a for-profit artist agency. David Foster, the longtime president/CEO of Opus 3, says that during the pandemic, “Our income shrunk to about a seventh or eighth of what it was,” and 40% of the staff was let go. Had it not been for the sale to SFCM, Foster admits, “We might have gone the way of Columbia.”

Now, with Columbia gone, IMG’s only rival for size is the London-based classical agency HarrisonParrott. But IMG has a greater global reach, with 10 offices in seven countries. It also has more diversity, with departments for dance, jazz and world music, and touring attractions that include the occasional outlier, such as an Aretha Franklin tribute show. Classical music remains the core of IMG, with a roster hundreds deep, including stars such as pianists Leif Ove Andsnes and Mitsuko Uchida, vocalists Susan Graham and Lawrence Brownlee, violinists Hilary Hahn and Sarah Chang, and conductors Semyon Bychkov and Franz Welser-Möst.

IMG’s sheer size and international scope are advantageous for booking and touring, and having offices in many different countries creates a valuable intelligence network. But classical artists rarely sign with an agency merely because it is big. Opus 3 is a prime example — though half the size of IMG, its roster, which includes edgy

conductors Marin Alsop and Teddy Abrams alongside stalwarts such as cellist Yo-Yo Ma, is considered sexier.

Not surprisingly, the San Francisco Conservatory was not the only suitor for Opus 3, but Foster says it was the most appealing one. SFCM president David Stull, the architect of the Opus 3 purchase, says the benefits of the acquisition for the conservatory are manifold. Stull foresees Opus 3 providing invaluable career mentoring to students, and booking students to appear at clients’ concerts as guest soloists. He also wants to take full advantage of SFCM’s new Bowes Center, a \$200 million performing arts complex and recording studio, complete with classrooms and dormitories. SFCM will invite Opus 3’s clients to Bowes to record, perform, and give master classes — a creative way of drawing topflight musicians to campus in the manner of artists in residence.

Though Opus 3 will remain an autonomous for-profit company, profit is by no means a high priority for the new owner. “We didn’t buy Opus 3 with the idea that it will be a financial asset,” Stull says. “We purchased it in the hope that it will be an artistic and educational asset.” It is a unique business model for classical artist management, and the industry is watching to see how the partnership will work.

Today, artist management companies are among the last remaining for-profit organizations in classical music. Record labels are another example, but their margins are slimmer than they were in the heyday of the CD. “Record deal advances are zero percent of the business now,” says Michael Benchetrit, president of Minerva Artists, an agency he founded in October after the collapse of his previous employer, Columbia Artists. The fee structure for classical management in North America is a standard 10% for opera and media and 20% for concerts and recitals. The financial returns tend to be unexceptional. “The pay is modest,” says Treuhaft. “The real compensation is psychic.” Concur David Lai: “You don’t go into this business unless you love music.”

Indeed, many artist managers started out as musicians. Nicholas Mathias, a London-based manager who works as a private consultant in an exclusive arrangement with

IMG Artists, began his career as a violinist with the Bournemouth Symphony. Today he handles mostly conductors, including Sir Antonio Pappano and Vladimir Jurowski. Mathias has a broad understanding of repertoire, and his expert guidance illustrates why classical artists bond with their managers and not with the agencies that employ the managers. He can tell a guest conductor what to perform and what to avoid in order to make a good first impression on an orchestra. “For debuts, Mahler’s First [Symphony], Prokofiev’s Fifth, Dvorak’s Seventh rather than his Eighth or Ninth, and Rachmaninoff’s *Symphonic Dances*, are good choices,” he says. “You must never do Bruckner for a debut — too risky.”

Another distinctive feature of classical music management is the long lead time for performances. Opera companies and symphony orchestras plan their seasons years in advance — sometimes four and five years out. Or at least they used to. COVID-19 has created a logistics nightmare. “At the moment, I’m working as hard as ever,” says veteran manager Kathryn Enticott — not on booking events, but on rescheduling them.

For now, star violinist [Joshua Bell](#) is not complaining about the postponements. After 30 years of nonstop touring, he is finally getting the sabbatical he had craved, and is practicing Bach, shooting hoops, raising chickens and playing with his sons. But when his touring schedule resumes, he tells Billboard, “It’s going to be like fitting Tetris pieces together.”

Bell’s equanimity is not the norm. “The artists are extremely depressed,” says Benchetrit. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it.” Even with the increasing pace of vaccination, and the growing likelihood of indoor concerts by the fall, classical artists are anxious about the future. Sports fans will likely return to large arenas — but will older music fans crowd back into opera houses and sit through six hours of *Götterdämmerung*? Will international orchestral tours — one of the most popular but also among the most complicated and expensive of classical events — resume as before? No one is sure.

As of mid-May, live classical performances in the United States were sporadic



2021

GERARDO ORTIZ 10TH ANNIVERSARY

Gerardo Ortiz is one of Latin music's most defining artists of the last decade, scoring a total of ten No. 1s on the Billboard Regional Mexican Airplay chart, over 22.3 Million followers on social media, and an astounding ONE BILLION and counting views on VEVO. The two-time GRAMMY® nominee and one-time Latin GRAMMY®, is one of the architects of the alternative corrido movement and one of the most award-winning singers of Regional Mexican music in the past years.

In recent years, Ortiz has winning a number of awards including twenty seven Billboard Latin Music Awards, twelve Premios Lo Nuestro, earning four Platinum records and five Gold records as certified by the RIAA, and selling out festivals, dance halls, and arenas across the United States and Mexico.

He breaks schemes with each production, after his successful 9th studio album, "Más Caro Que Ayer" was released in February 2020 he placed at #1 on Apple Music's "Mexican Music" chart. His first single titled popular charts followed by the hit single "Otra Borrachera", the band version that reached #1 on México's Monitor Latino "Popular" chart, and #1 on the Billboard's "Regional Mexican Airplay" chart. Starting a new decade and commemorating his 10th career anniversary, Gerardo Ortiz celebrates with the debut of his production "Décimo Aniversario" (10th studio album.)

Join Billboard in congratulating Gerardo Ortiz on his remarkable career over the past 10 years.

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and livestreaming income was negligible, and the classical industry was anxiously awaiting the Metropolitan Opera's planned reopening in late September. If the Met, the nation's largest performing arts organization, makes a successful comeback, it augurs well for live classical performances in the United States. Internationally, the outlook varies by country: For example, Australia has effectively resumed its classical concerts, but foreign artists have to endure a two-week quarantine before being allowed to perform there.

Shustorovich thinks a fall recovery is "optimistic," adding that IMG's budget is based on the expectation that bookings for 2021 will be only 25% of pre-COVID-19 levels. "I think that was our estimate last year, but it came in at 10%."

Whatever the long-term economic impact of COVID-19, the classical music business will go on, because prestige drives the business more than profit. It is the reason sports marketing mogul Mark McCormack took ownership of IMG Artists in its early years, and let it run at lower margins than the rest of his empire. "Mark understood that the sports business had good names, but never the level of prestige of a classical music business," recalls one of McCormack's former deputies. When IMG sponsored a 1988 production of *Aida* at Earl's Court in London, "Prince Charles and Princess Diana showed up. They wouldn't have come to a golf tournament."

The prestige factor cannot have been lost on Shustorovich, who has been known to chauffeur prospective clients around New York City in a Rolls-Royce. He says he invested in IMG Artists "because I believe classical culture is very important," and speaks animatedly of culture having enriched his life. But he does not deny that being CEO of a big performing arts agency lands him in social settings with other business leaders — many of them, like himself, immensely wealthy. Shustorovich has been labeled a billionaire in the Russian press, though his name has never appeared on *Forbes'* annual list. "If I made an effort to be on the list, I probably could," he says. "I don't disclose my net worth. Is it substantial? Yes."

He did not grow up with money. "My childhood experience in the Soviet Union was living in a communal apartment with lots of neighbors," he says. "There was one common bathroom for everyone, and you had to stand in line." He found escape from the drudgery when his parents, Evgeny and Maria, took him to cultural events. "Being brought by my parents to the Moscow Conservatory, or to the Bolshoi Theater, was like traveling to a different world." The feeling stayed with him years later, when he attended his first opera at the Met in New York, where he recalls "walking into a venue full of beautiful people in a beautiful setting with glowing chandeliers."

Evgeny was a master chemist, and a member of the prestigious Soviet Academy of Sciences, but as a Jew in Soviet Russia, his opportunities for advancement were limited. During the 1970s, the USSR, bowing to social pressure, allowed nearly a quarter-million Jews to emigrate, but the application process was maddeningly capricious. Evgeny applied for himself and his wife and son, and they received their exit visas after only four months. Evgeny's brother waited 10 years.

Alexander Shustorovich, age 11, and his parents arrived penniless in New York in 1977. Soon the family of three was living in Ithaca, N.Y., where a philanthropic couple, Suzanne and Jaime Hecht, lent a hand to Russian émigrés. The Shustoroviches were "the first family we helped," Suzanne recalled years later in an interview with the *Ithaca Journal*. "They were just such wonderful people." Evgeny joined the research department at Eastman Kodak in 1979, and the family moved to Rochester, N.Y. Maria, who had taught high school mathematics in Moscow, learned English and then American sign language in order to accept a full-time teaching position at Rochester's National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

Alexander earned a bachelor's degree from Harvard University, followed by a J.D. from Harvard Law School and an MBA from Harvard Business School. Remarkably, while taking postgraduate courses, Shustorovich was shuttling between the Soviet Union and the United States. There were opportunities

for him in Russia, and he was a young man in a hurry.

During a trip to the USSR in 1989, Shustorovich met British-born John Evans, today IMG Artists' chief operating officer, and then international director of Bob Guccione's General Media — the publisher of *Penthouse*. Evans wanted to launch a Russian edition of General Media's pop-science magazine, *Omni*. Shustorovich had befriended Yuri Osipov, a high-ranking official at the Academy of Sciences, of which Evgeny Shustorovich had been a member. (Alexander says his father never met Osipov until years later.) The Osipov connection would prove invaluable. By September, General Media had entered a joint venture with the academy to distribute Russian *Omni*.

On Dec. 26, 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved, and Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian Federation, ushered in sweeping economic reforms, privatizing state-owned industries in a way that created once-in-a-lifetime business opportunities for the well-connected. For Shustorovich, there was a much bigger prize to be gained than the *Omni* deal. The academy published hundreds of scientific journals, for which universities and corporations paid hefty subscription fees — especially if they were translated into English. Shustorovich had to have been aware that British media magnate Robert Maxwell had built his empire out of the profits of his first company, Pergamon Press, a publisher of scientific books and journals. By 1992, with the backing of General Media, Shustorovich had launched his own publishing firm and, like Maxwell, given it a Greek name — Pleiades. He set his sights on the academy's journals.

In September 1992, 19 prestigious Academy of Sciences journals previously translated and published by the American Institute of Physics came up for grabs. AIP executive director Kenneth Ford could not believe that Shustorovich, a non-scientist in his mid-20s, bankrolled by the publisher of *Penthouse*, was in contention for the rights. He complained about Pleiades to the British magazine *Nature*, which ran an article about the controversy, alongside a cartoon of a leering magazine salesman telling a customer, "If you want something

billboard



2021

COUNTRY POWER PLAYERS

Billboard's eighth annual Country Power Players issue will profile the people who have driven another solid year for the country music industry, generating billions in sales, streaming and publishing. This special feature will highlight the top executives, artists and changemakers who kept the music playing during an incredibly challenging year, as well as coverage of the changing face of country music.

Advertise in *Billboard's* Country Power Players issue to congratulate this year's honorees while reaching key decision-makers who are driving the music business.

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stronger, I've got the Journal of Experimental and Theoretical Physics under the counter." Ford was not going to surrender to Pleiades without a fight.

"I was in my office on Long Island, talking to Shustorovich on the phone," Ford recalls today. "He was in Russia and was telling me why he expected to get those contracts, and why I should bow out. I was so angry I was shouting. I suspect I'm not the only person in the world to have shouted at Shustorovich." AIP ultimately held on to the 19 journals. "It's a miracle we prevailed, because Pleiades had political connections and clout," Ford says. "But scientific loyalty triumphed."

In the long run, Shustorovich triumphed. Today, Pleiades is the world's largest publisher of translated Russian scientific journals, with an estimated 90% of the market, and Shustorovich is Pleiades' principal, if not sole, owner. In 2016, the company entered into a worldwide distribution partnership with European giant Springer Nature — publisher of the very magazine that 25 years earlier had mocked Pleiades in a cartoon. "Pleiades is a big company, and Alex has become very wealthy as a result," says Evans.

The Russian press has accused Shustorovich of monopolizing a state industry, and exploiting his business ties with the academy and Yuri Osipov. "My detractors make it sound like the fairy godmother came to me and gave me some big business," he says. "It's a competitive industry — we have over 100,000 authors' rights contracts every year — and no one person could control that volume of people, including Mr. Osipov.

"Was he a relevant person at the time? Yes," says Shustorovich of Osipov, who nine days before the dissolution of the Soviet Union became the academy president.

While publishing scientific journals made Shustorovich's fortune, Osipov and other powerful friends supported him in a venture of far greater significance: Megatons to Megawatts, the program that paid Russia around \$17 billion to destroy over 30,000 nuclear weapons, creating enough reactor fuel to provide, for two decades, 10% of all the energy consumed in the United States. It was arguably the most consequential busi-

ness transaction of modern times — Russian warheads meant to obliterate American cities ended up lighting them — and Shustorovich wanted in. His involvement disrupted and ultimately threatened the success of the entire program. From corporate boardrooms to the U.S. State Department, the question was repeatedly raised: What is he doing in this deal?

One person asking that question was the man who conceived Megatons to Megawatts and for 20 years helped hold it together, Massachusetts Institute of Technology physicist Thomas Neff. In October 1991, U.S. and Soviet scientists and Soviet officials met at a hotel in Washington to discuss a dire problem: What would become of the Soviet nuclear arsenal after the USSR was dissolved? Tens of thousands of warheads would be spread out over vast independent territories, and the dying Soviet empire was so broke that Viktor Mikhailov, head of the USSR nuclear program, could not even pay the security personnel guarding the weapons. Warheads could fall into the hands of rogue states or terrorists. During a break, Neff found Mikhailov chain-smoking in a corridor, and made a proposal. If Mikhailov could collect and dismantle Soviet weapons, the highly enriched uranium from the warheads could be blended down into nuclear reactor fuel worth billions of dollars. Intrigued, Mikhailov asked how much uranium he could sell. Neff took a gamble and proposed a huge number: 500 metric tons. Mikhailov believed he could provide that amount.

Neff's big idea changed the world. The Megatons to Megawatts agreement was cosigned in February 1993 by Mikhailov and William F. Burns, a retired U.S. major general. It was dubbed the "HEU deal," shorthand for highly enriched uranium. By then, Yuri Osipov had introduced Shustorovich to Mikhailov, who now ran Minatom — Russia's Ministry of Atomic Energy — and whose support Shustorovich needed to get in on the HEU deal.

Mikhailov did give that support, and even attended Shustorovich's Harvard Business School graduation, prompting the Russian media to depict Shustorovich as Mikhailov's "godson." Mikhailov debunked the idea, tell-

ing *The Wall Street Journal*, "He's a Jew and I'm a Russian, so it's impossible." Neff points out that Osipov was a frequent visitor to the household of Boris Yeltsin, and suspects that when Mikhailov threw his support behind Shustorovich, "He might have just been following orders."

The Megatons to Megawatts program was negotiated to run for 20 years — 1993 to 2013 — as a commercial enterprise backed by two governments. Tenex, the overseas trading company of Minatom, was selected as Russia's executive agent, while the United States assigned the U.S. Enrichment Corporation (USEC), a business division of the Department of Energy.

Shustorovich first popped up in the HEU deal in 1994. That year, a new joint stock company called Matek was formed by a group of Russian and American partners, including the Russian Academy of Sciences and American aerospace company Allied-Signal. Matek claimed in a press release that it could accomplish "more rapid conversion of weapons grade uranium to peaceful purposes." Viktor Mikhailov supported the idea of Matek replacing Tenex as the Russian executor of the HEU deal, even though Matek was 20 percent American-owned. The Matek board consisted of corporate leaders and senior government officials — and Alexander Shustorovich, who was listed as Matek's vice chairman.

Neff, acting as a back-channel intermediary between the U.S. and Russia to help keep the program on track, was baffled. Who was this young man who, by Neff's calculations, stood to gross perhaps \$360 million as part owner of Matek? Neff recalls thinking that the instructions to give him a central role in the HEU deal "had to have come from above, likely far above." In time, Neff saw evidence that the Yeltsin family, Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, and oligarch Boris Berezovsky were supporters of Shustorovich. Neff never met Shustorovich in person — he dealt directly with other Pleiades associates — but remembers a Russian official describing him as "a guy who can get up your ass without grease."

The Matek deal was opposed by Vladimir Potanin, an oligarch with close ties to Anatoly Chubais, Russia's deputy prime

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minister, and the pushback was enough to undo the plan. Shustorovich was far from deterred. In January 1996, he registered a new Delaware corporation called Pleiades Group, not to be confused with his publishing company. Pleiades Group's stated goal was no less than to buy the U.S. Enrichment Corporation, which was about to go private — the biggest government enterprise to be sold since Conrail. If Pleiades acquired USEC, Shustorovich would become the U.S. executive agent in the HEU deal. And if he had influence with Minatom (and therefore Tenex) through his association with Osipov and Mikhailov, he could conceivably control both sides of the deal. It was, Neff says, "a breathtakingly audacious scheme."

It was unclear how Pleiades would scrape together the financing for the acquisition, but Shustorovich had a bigger problem. The Clinton administration was aware of his ties to Minatom, and there were prohibitions against USEC being sold to a foreign agent. Shustorovich needed to dispel the idea that he was one. Two weeks before he incorporated Pleiades Group, he managed to meet President Bill Clinton as one of 15 invitees to a coffee klatsch in the White House Map Room. It is unlikely the HEU deal was brought up, but Shustorovich no doubt endeavored to make a good impression. He had come as the guest of a business friend, Democratic donor Ronald Oehl.

Shustorovich was, in fact, a lifelong Republican. In 2000, he disclosed in a press statement to Russian newspaper *Obshchaya Gazeta* that at 18 he had cast his first vote for Ronald Reagan. (He also wryly noted that on the day he was born, a relative wrote a letter for him to read as an adult, instructing him how to be a good Communist.) For the HEU deal, he needed U.S. political allies, and it made sense to court influential Republicans. His first such business ally was Max Kampleman, formerly President Reagan's chief arms negotiator — but Kampleman soon became uneasy over Pleiades' Russian ties, and opted out.

Then Shustorovich met Georgette Mosbacher, a socialite, cosmetics entrepreneur, and author of the motivational book for women, *Feminine Force*. She was also the wife of Robert Mosbacher, former secretary

of commerce to President George H.W. Bush. Georgette did not respond to interview requests from *Billboard*, but in 1996 she told journalist Andrew Cockburn that Shustorovich had been introduced to her as someone who could help her sell her Borghese cosmetics line in Russia. He agreed to assist, she explained to Cockburn, provided her husband joined his company. In October 1996, Robert Mosbacher became chairman of Pleiades Group. James Baker IV, son of the former secretary of state, also was hired as Pleiades' corporate counsel.

Pleiades now had more credibility with the U.S. government — "a clean bill," Robert Mosbacher told *The Wall Street Journal* — but by then buying USEC had taken a back seat to other moneymaking opportunities in the HEU deal. The natural uranium content of the nuclear fuel shipped by Russia was a state asset, just like gold. Under the terms of the Megatons to Megawatts agreement, it had to be replaced with ore warehoused in the United States, or its equivalent sale value — an estimated \$4 billion over the span of the program. The broker for that uranium stood to make a handsome profit, while helping Russia replenish its near-empty coffers. Cameco, a Canadian uranium trading company, made a bid to be sales agent, as did Cogema, a French nuclear company. Pleiades, which had no experience in the uranium market, also put itself in the running.

In a March 1998 article headlined "Uranium-Gate," the Russian business daily *Kommersant* reported what happened. "The Minatom leadership opted for the Pleiades company, previously unknown to anyone. It is led by the Soviet émigré Alexander Shustorovich...who does not like to appear in public.... No one knows how Shustorovich charmed the leaders of Minatom." Under the terms of an April 4, 1997, agreement between Pleiades and Tenex, Pleiades would store the uranium for two years in anticipation of market prices going up and Russia getting more money. But in reality, Neff says, there was no reason to expect prices to rise. Meanwhile, Pleiades could conceivably borrow money against the stockpile, while the Russian Federation got nothing. "Incomprehensible," an unnamed Minatom

employee told *Kommersant*. The newspaper stated: "Without any guarantees of payment, Russian state assets worth about \$700 million will be kept at Alexander Shustorovich's disposal."

Whether or not the \$700 million estimate was accurate, Pleiades had thrown a monkey wrench into the HEU deal. Yeltsin was under pressure, and the Clinton administration was alarmed. Naseer Hashim, senior vp of Pleiades, asked Neff to lend his support. (Hashim did not respond to interview requests for this article, but he told *Der Spiegel* in 1996 that he and Shustorovich had gotten into the HEU deal "to do God's work.") Neff was not disposed to help Pleiades. On March 8, 1998, he wrote a memo to the office of Vice President Al Gore, and reported: "There is no money from [the natural] uranium because Minatom chose to do business with inexperienced friends of Russian officials when it could have done a good deal with major western companies that could pay immediately."

By that time, Pleiades' status in the HEU deal was already imperiled. A week earlier, Yeltsin had summoned Mikhailov to his office and asked for his resignation. There was speculation that Mikhailov was pushed out of Minatom because of the Pleiades controversy, although he denied it. An increasingly hostile Russian press had taken to calling Shustorovich "uranium boy." Mikhailov's replacement, Yevgeny Adamov, no fan of Pleiades, essentially tore up the company's April 1997 agreement with Tenex, and ultimately made a joint deal with the Canadian and French firms, in addition to a Germany-based uranium broker.

The long delay in Russia receiving money for the natural uranium took its toll. At a Moscow summit on Sept. 2, 1998, Yeltsin informed Clinton that Russia was pulling out of Megatons to Megawatts. Clinton asked Yeltsin to give him a chance to find a solution. The following month, even though the program was not supposed to use public funds, Congress approved paying Russia \$325 million for two years' worth of natural uranium, saving the HEU deal and putting an end to Pleiades' involvement.

Shustorovich was not ready to give up, and he initiated a round of lawsuits, all of

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them unsuccessful, including a \$1 billion suit against the Russian government filed in Stockholm. Pleiades went after Tenex in New York federal court for allegedly breaching its 1997 agreement. A U.S. lawyer for Tenex says, “Shustorovich was smart and strategic, but his agreement was not what he claimed.” The judge, Thomas Greisa, appeared to concur, commenting from the bench that the purported contract struck him as “a head walking around without a body.” Then the Clinton administration weighed in with a statement of interest requesting that the Tenex case be dismissed on national security grounds. “That was extraordinary,” the lawyer says. “The state department policy is never to intervene at the district court level.” When all was said and done, Pleiades’ role in the HEU deal helped precipitate a U.S.-Russia diplomatic crisis and arguably cost U.S. taxpayers \$325 million.

Today, Shustorovich’s account of the HEU deal differs radically from the accepted historical record. “Thomas Neff may think otherwise, but I’m the person who brought the Megatons to Megawatts idea to the Russian government,” he says. “I had a conversation with Mikhailov in 1991, and I say, ‘What do you think of this intellectual idea?’ He likes it. And I was the guy on the ground making it happen. Neff was nowhere in the picture.” Neff calls that “nonsense,” and adds, “He’s trying to self-aggrandize, as usual.” Neff’s role in Megatons to Megawatts won him the coveted Leo Szilard Award for “outstanding accomplishments by physicists in promoting the use of physics for the benefit of society.”

Though no longer in business with Robert Mosbacher, Shustorovich maintained a lasting friendship with Georgette, who described him in a *Wall Street Journal* interview as “like a brother to me.” She was skilled at handling the press, but inadvertently brought Shustorovich some unwanted publicity. In August 2000, just before the GOP convention nominated George W. Bush for president, Shustorovich, at Mosbacher’s urging, wrote the RNC a check for \$250,000. Through a clerical error, the check bounced. Shustorovich offered to replace it with a certified check, but by then the RNC had made inquiries and learned about the uranium

controversy. His money was refused. A *New York Post* headline read: “A Fat 250g ‘Donation’ to GOP Goes A’Bouncin’.”

Shustorovich had an even harder time ducking the spotlight in Russia, where his business ventures included the broadcast franchise for FashionTV, which fed into his status as a conspicuously eligible bachelor. He was often photographed escorting models, and his wedding engagement in 2005 made him fodder for Russian gossip columns.

Shustorovich’s fiancée, Ksenia Sobchak, was a blond society girl dubbed “Russia’s Paris Hilton.” She was the daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, the first post-Soviet mayor of St. Petersburg, who held the dubious honor of being the teacher and political mentor of Vladimir Putin. Ksenia’s notoriety was of a different kind. She hosted *Dom-2*, a long-running reality TV show marked for its vulgarity, and occasionally acted in Russian B-movies (she was Eva Braun in a 2008 spy caper called *Hitler Goes Kaput!*). Later, she became a political activist and worked to rehabilitate her image, a transformation even some Russian opposition leaders thought genuine.

Sobchak told *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, a Russian tabloid, that she met Shustorovich on Feb. 19, 2001, at a concert in honor of her father on the first anniversary of his death. (Putin had wept at Anatoly’s funeral.) Shustorovich “courted me for a year, then we began to live together,” said Ksenia. They shared an apartment on Tverskaya Street, the most expensive shopping street in Moscow. Shustorovich proposed in 2004, and a wedding was set to take place in St. Petersburg on July 1, 2005. He would be 39, and she, 24.

Sobchak decreed the wedding would be “simple,” by which she meant 300 guests at the Konstantin Palace, a bridal gown from fashion designer Valentin Yudashkin and a wedding-reception band hired for \$200,000: the Pet Shop Boys. One week before the ceremony, the wedding was called off. The official reason given by the Konstantin Palace was that a close relative of the groom had died, and the family was sitting shiva. The real explanation, according to the gossip pages, was that Shustorovich’s

family disapproved of the bride. Sobchak, for the record, said she decided she was too young. She has since married twice, and has a son from the first marriage. Shustorovich remains a bachelor.

Shustorovich’s engagement to the daughter of Putin’s mentor led to speculation about a Shustorovich-Putin connection. The evidence is not there. For one thing, Sobchak’s political activism started to be taken seriously when she began to speak out against Putin; and in March 2018, as a member of the Civic Initiative Party, she was one of 69 candidates who opposed him in the presidential election – a decision, she claimed in interviews, that displeased him, although as journalist Masha Gessen put it, “no one gets on the ballot in Russia without Putin’s permission.” (Putin’s chief political rival, Alexei Navalny, was kept off.) Sobchak garnered 1.68 percent of the vote.

The question of a Shustorovich-Putin connection was examined and dismissed by investigators in the course of Robert Mueller’s probe of Russian interference in the 2016 election. Shustorovich had sent a \$1 million check to Donald Trump’s inaugural committee – this time his money was accepted, no questions asked. He thereby became one of six Russian-born million-dollar donors invited to an exclusive, black-tie “Chairman’s Global Dinner” on the eve of Trump’s inauguration. (Warner Music Group owner [Leonard Blavatnik](#) was another.) An FBI inquiry into whether men with supposed Kremlin ties were reporting their private conversations with Trump to Russian intelligence proved a dead end. All that is certain is that for \$1 million, Shustorovich, who once described himself as a “political junkie,” got to break bread with the president-elect. Georgette Mosbacher, who knew Trump from her New York socialite days, reaped a more tangible benefit from his election: he made her ambassador to Poland.

No one could have imagined an owner like Alex Shustorovich when IMG Artists was getting started. In the late 1970s, Charles Hamlen, a French teacher and sometime pianist, had a stint as a page turner for a chamber music series, where he heard performers grumbling about their managers.

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Artists wanted to be listened to, instead of being told what was best for them. Around that time, Hamlen met Edna Landau, a former choral instructor at New York's High School of Music and Art. "We had this incredible bonding — two school teachers, idealistic about wanting to help artists, caring more about ethics than money," says Landau. They launched Hamlen/Landau Management in 1979.

Elizabeth Sobol, a young pianist, joined as an intern. The Hamlen/Landau office was "a small basement apartment on W. 85th Street in Manhattan, with plywood furniture," recalls Sobol. "The phone rang maybe three times a week — and two of those times it was Charlie's mom." The outgoing calls were relentless. "I'd hear Charlie and Edna trying to book artists nobody ever heard of, with nothing to go on but pure passion. When they'd finally nail a \$500 contract for pianist so-and-so to play in Paducah [Ky.], they would literally do a dance of joy."

In 1982, Hamlen saw a 14-year-old violinist named Joshua Bell perform with the Philadelphia Orchestra after winning a national competition. Bell lived in Bloomington, Ind., with his father and mother — a research psychologist and therapist, respectively. "Charlie and I got in the car — we didn't have money to fly in those days — and drove to the Bells' farmhouse," says Landau. Joshua appreciated the effort. "It said a lot," he remembers. Bell signed with the small agency, but only after reassurances from Hamlen. "My psychologist parents had a heart-to-heart with Charles," Bell says. "They told him, 'We don't want him to overdo it; we want him to be a kid.' He was very sympathetic. They could see he was not in this just to make money." Hamlen developed Bell at a deliberate pace. Many other prodigies were pushed too hard and burned out; Bell built a career. In October 2018, two months after Hamlen died of leukemia, Bell gave a memorial concert in his honor.

Hamlen/Landau now had a future star, but no marquee names and no big earners. Few in the business took the agency seriously. In the early 1980s, classical management was dominated by two large firms — Ronald Wilford's Columbia Artists and ICM Artists, the company that would one day become

Opus 3. Hamlen/Landau was dwarfed by those competitors and constantly on the edge of insolvency. At one music festival, says Landau, "Charlie and I camped out in a tent." She recalls thinking, "We can't go on like this."

While Hamlen and Landau were struggling to keep the lights on, another company owner was on his way to becoming a billionaire: Mark McCormack, the man credited with inventing the sports marketing business. As a student athlete at The College of William and Mary, McCormack had dreamt of becoming a golf pro, until a varsity tournament encounter with another student athlete, Arnold Palmer, made him rethink his ambitions. McCormack instead got a law degree from Yale and went on to practice law in Cleveland. In 1960, he and Palmer crossed paths again and, over a handshake, Palmer became his first sports client. McCormack made Palmer a millionaire several times over through endorsement deals. Other sports clients, including Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Rod Laver and Martina Navratilova, followed by the handful. McCormack understood that maximizing TV coverage for his clients meant greater fame and earnings. He was the largest producer of televised sports outside the networks, and to boost coverage he created his own tournaments. McCormack's International Management Group would soon make him, according to *Sports Illustrated*, "the most powerful man in sports."

Despite his success, McCormack sensed a gap in his expanding business empire. IMG had become a marketing consultant to major corporations — and corporations were interested in the arts. McCormack credited a 1983 golf outing with soprano Kiri Te Kanawa, one of opera's greatest stars, as his inspiration for moving IMG into classical music, about which he was largely ignorant. Te Kanawa advised McCormack that the first thing he needed to learn was that at a concert or opera, the break was called "intermission," not "halftime."

It remained for McCormack to find managers who knew the classical business. Through a friend, investment banker James Wolfensohn, then-chairman of Carnegie Hall, he learned about Hamlen and Landau.

The two managers were flown to London as McCormack's guests at Wimbledon — the tennis tournament was an IMG client — and summoned to meet the sports impresario at a townhouse. They were nervous. "We walked up a very long staircase to meet Mr. McCormack for the first time," says Landau. "I looked at Charlie and said, 'Everything's going to be fine,' because I found out [French composer Hector] Berlioz once lived in the same townhouse." She took that as a good omen.

The meeting went well. It was decided that McCormack's corporation would acquire Hamlen/Landau and rename it IMG Artists — a big brand name for what was still a tiny agency. Landau recalls one remark by McCormack that terrified the two managers, however. "He looked at us and asked, 'Do you know who Ronald Wilford is?'" Of course they did. "I'm going to put him out of business," said McCormack.

Mark McCormack liked to be first at everything. Tall and blond, he had an Ivy League bearing — until you sat across from him in a negotiation. Then he became the man the sports industry called "Mark the Shark." His daily schedule was a rigorous to-do list broken down into 15-minute segments. McCormack could consult one of his yellow legal pads and tell you where he would be at a given moment six months' hence. At the end of a workday, after checking off every item on his legal pad, he went to sleep, or, as his second wife, tennis doubles player Betsy Nagelsen, put it, "accomplished rest." In his bestselling book *What They Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School*, McCormack owned up to being "very demanding of myself," and consequently "very demanding of our management executives."

No one at IMG Artists believed McCormack was too tough. "Mark liked the business, he liked the people running it, and he was super supportive," recalls one of his former deputies. Artist managers who worked at the agency during McCormack's reign remember him fondly. "Those 20 years under Mr. McCormack allowed us to grow without counting nickels and dimes," says Sobol.

One day in 1985, Sobol picked up the

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office phone, and a man claiming to be Itzhak Perlman asked for Charles Hamlen. Sobol thought it was a gag — the violinist's baritone voice was easy to imitate — but the call was genuine. Perlman's manager, ICM Artists president Sheldon Gold, had died of heart failure at 55, and Perlman had heard good things about Hamlen and Landau. He was also a sports fan who was familiar with McCormack. By the following year, Landau was Perlman's manager, and IMG Artists had its first household name. More eminent artists followed, including pianists André Watts and Evgeny Kissin.

Though now a player, IMG Artists remained a small agency. McCormack still had ideas of unseating Ronald Wilford's Columbia Artists. In an interview with British music journalist Norman Lebrecht, McCormack derided Columbia as "an American outfit." The IMG parent company, he pointed out, had offices on five continents.

McCormack saw an opportunity to outflank Columbia in 1989, when Harold Holt Ltd., then the largest classical agency in Britain, was looking for an investor to offset its financial troubles. He made a tentative bid to buy Holt, but, before closing the deal, asked one of his department heads to go over the agency's books. Late the following year came a new, markedly lower bid. "The rest of the board was outraged," says Stephen Wright, then Holt's youngest director. "To me the revised bid stood to reason."

When McCormack's offer was officially rebuffed, Wright quit Holt for IMG, taking around 25 staffers, including virtually all of Holt's orchestral touring department, and many illustrious artists. The IMG roster now had top-tier conductors — the glory of any classical management agency — among them Mariss Jansons, Neville Marriner and John Eliot Gardiner. IMG Artists was no longer a boutique. "We got what we wanted," McCormack told Lebrecht, "the most profitable part of Holt's business...and their most talented person in Stephen."

Wright insisted on IMG paying Holt a six-figure settlement to help keep his former agency afloat, but hard feelings persisted for years. "I was seen as the bad guy," he says. (Holt did survive, and today is Askonas Holt, one of Britain's leading arts management

agencies.)

As IMG Artists grew, a notable percentage of senior management positions in the United States were held by women. Romana Jaroff, one of the few managers from the McCormack era still with the agency, says the company joke was that IMG stood for "It's Mostly Girls." By the mid-1990s, Hamlen/Landau's first intern, Elizabeth Sobol, had risen to associate director, and on her own initiative had begun building IMG's dance department. Her first dance client was the choreographer Bill T. Jones. In 1996, she wanted to sign one of the earliest hip-hop dance companies, GhettoOriginal Prods., but to land the deal, IMG had to agree to co-produce the troupe's forthcoming off-Broadway show, *Jam on the Groove*.

"I called Mr. McCormack's secretary and asked to see him," says Sobol. "The secretary asked, 'What is the smallest amount of time you require?' I said, 'Seven minutes.' She said, 'Be on the corner of 74th and 5th at 2:07 p.m. His limo will pull up and you'll get in. You will have exactly seven minutes.'" The car arrived on cue; Sobol was dropped off at 2:14, with permission granted.

McCormack continued to push himself, and friends warned he was rushing headlong to an early grave. In January 2003, he had a coronary and went into a coma. Four months later, he was dead at age 72. He left behind a company overleveraged from ambitious expansion plans. IMG's top executives, Bob Kain and Alistair Johnston, laid off employees, closed offices and divested assets. After 20 years of stable ownership, IMG Artists was up for sale.

One month before McCormack went into the hospital, he spoke to Wright, then the managing director of IMG Artists Europe. "He said, 'There's someone I want you to meet,'" recalls Wright. "'He's a Texas businessman and a pianist. I'm thinking of bringing him in as a minority shareholder.'" But, McCormack told Wright, he had no qualms about turning the investor down "if you're against the idea."

The businessman was Barrett Wissman. "I met Barrett a couple of times," says Wright, "and didn't like him. But by then, McCormack was in a coma." Wissman's \$7.5 million purchase of IMG Artists in July

2003 was 50% above the next-highest bid. (Parent company IMG's sports, modeling and other businesses were sold in 2004 to private equity firm Forstmann Little and today are jointly owned by Endeavor and Silver Lake Partners. Endeavor also owns a small stake in IMG Artists.)

Wissman's official biography states that he began performing as a concert piano soloist at age 11, graduated cum laude from Yale in economics and political science, and earned postgrad degrees in music from Southern Methodist University and the Accademia Chigiana in Italy. In 1985, he landed a Wall Street job; two years later, his father died, and he went home to Dallas to run the family business, a collection of modest-sized companies that sold household goods and other products. In the 1990s, Wissman founded a money management firm, HW Partners, with Clark Hunt, a Dallas schoolmate and the grandson of oil billionaire H.L. Hunt. "The investment management business was pretty successful," says Wissman. Within a decade, he had homes in Dallas, Montana, St. Croix and Tuscany.

At a 1996 concert at London's Wigmore Hall, Wissman was, as he later said in an interview, "swept away" by the soloist, Nina Kotova, a 26-year-old Russian cellist and former catwalk model. As a child, Kotova studied at the Moscow Conservatory and showed early promise, but fell on hard times at 15 when her father, a virtuoso double-bassist, died suddenly. She moved to the United States and found herself in New York, too broke to afford a cello. That problem was solved when she aced an audition at the Ford Modeling Agency, and began appearing in the pages of *Vogue* and *Mademoiselle* and working for design houses such as Chanel and Ungaro. Kotova quit the runway when a British management company landed her the Wigmore Hall gig, her solo debut. Her concert included a self-penned work called "Sketches from the Catwalk." She got mostly good reviews.

Soon after Kotova's London concert, Wissman began courting her. He bought her an engagement ring with a gemstone "the size of your watch face," in the words of one newspaper columnist, and the 1673 Stradivarius cello that had once belonged to Brit-

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ish cello legend Jacqueline du Pré. Wissman and Kotova were married June 30, 2001, on his Montana ranch.

Once Wissman bought IMG Artists, he and Kotova got to work developing a new line of business for the agency: lifestyle festivals — a melding of music, wellness, wine, haute cuisine, and fine arts in a vacation setting. The debut event, in 2003, was the Tuscan Sun Festival in Cortona, Italy. Well-known artists played at reduced fees, says one former IMG staffer, “in exchange for good wine, good food and free spa services in a beautiful place where there were no music critics.” The success of Tuscan Sun led IMG to establish lifestyle festivals in California’s Napa Valley; Boca Raton, Fla.; and Singapore. Movie stars were frequent guests. “I have to hand it to Barrett,” says Sobol. “Those festivals were really brilliant.”

They also provided showcases for Kotova, leading some industry observers to suggest that Wissman had bought IMG to advance her career. “Not at all true,” he says. “It would have been a lot less difficult to make a major donation to a symphony orchestra and have her play a series of concerts.” Kotova was aware of the suggestion; last August, she wrote on her Facebook fan page, “I used to play at every festival [and] that used to infuriate a lot of women in the classical music management business. I once heard that I wasn’t supposed to do it all: to be a performer and to be an Artistic director of a festival at the same time. Why not?”

The festivals that Wissman and his wife had shepherded at IMG now appear defunct, apart from the one in Napa Valley, which is no longer associated with Wissman. Industry observers point to this as the clearest indication of his diminished role at the agency. Not so, says Wissman, who adds, “I have significant projects in the works, including two or three lifestyle festivals, one of them very significant.” At this time, he says, he is unable to elaborate.

Wissman says he bought IMG Artists for one simple reason: “I am a huge fan of the classical music world and a passionate lover of the arts in general. In fact, I love it almost too much. I don’t get to play concerts anymore because I’m a perfectionist. A concert takes me three months of work, and I don’t

have time.” He adds, “I was never a genius, but I was considered a fine musician.”

There is no disagreement about his talent. “He plays quite well,” Joshua Bell says. Moreover, says former IMG senior vp Alec Treuhافت, Wissman has a discerning ear — a useful quality in the co-owner of a talent agency. Sobol adds, “Despite everything Barrett put us through” with the pension fund scandal, “he always cared about the music. He loves the artists for their artistry. In my mind, that’s his redeeming quality.”

Wissman lost points with the staff for having what was perceived as an inflated sense of himself. Some say it’s an attribute that he and Shustorovich shared, making their eventual clash inevitable. Wissman’s godmother, Rachelle Klepak, since deceased, told *D Magazine* in 2009, “There was something that made him feel that he was better than everybody else, smarter, more talented.” Wray Armstrong, a former department head for IMG in London, found Wissman’s ego hard to take. At a concert at the Great Hall of the People for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, “Barrett tried to force himself backstage,” recalls Armstrong. “He was shoving the guards, saying, ‘Don’t you know who I am?’ Of course, they didn’t.”

The pension fund scandal humbled Wissman. Embarrassing details kept emerging, such as Wissman rewarding a co-conspirator by investing in his movie project, a low-budget comedy called *Chooch* — Italian for “jackass” — which featured a slapstick donkey ride and a romance in a Mexican brothel. The scheme’s alleged mastermind, Hank Morris, a powerful consultant to the New York state comptroller, ended up serving over a year in the state penitentiary. In a closed hearing on Feb. 3, 2009, Wissman pleaded guilty to one felony and one misdemeanor. Judge Lewis Bart Stone admonished him that unless he cooperated fully with ongoing cases and paid the negotiated \$12 million settlement, “all bets are off,” and he could expect to do time. Three and a half years later, Stone permitted Wissman to withdraw his felony plea, and he walked out of court a free man convicted only of a misdemeanor.

The public relations problem that resulted from Wissman’s conviction was ad-

dressed in June 2009, two months after the scandal broke, when Charles Hamlen, who had left IMG in 1993 to start an AIDS charity, was brought back as chairman. (Edna Landau had voluntarily retired in 2007.) Hamlen’s appointment was a cosmetic move — Wissman retained control of the agency — and did not last long. In October 2011, Wissman announced he was returning as chairman.

Just five months earlier, a reluctant Wissman had sold a minority position in IMG to Shustorovich at a deal-closing in Rome, Italy. “I had previously said no to him several times,” Wissman says.

Shustorovich says his investment in IMG grew out of his decision, in 2007, to finance the Metropolitan Opera’s revival production of Prokofiev’s *War and Peace*. As a consequence of his gift, his mother, Maria, served on the Met’s board of advisory directors for four seasons — an apotheosis for an opera lover. Shustorovich considered it payback for his parents taking him to concerts as a child. “I never went to music school, and I don’t play any instruments,” he says. “My parents were the people who put this appreciation of music in me.”

His patronage led to him meeting the female lead of *War and Peace*, soprano Anna Netrebko, then an IMG client. Through Netrebko, he met her manager, Jeffrey Vanderveen. In 2009, Shustorovich says, “Jeffrey asked for a lunch with me. He saw me as a guy putting money behind culture, and he said, ‘There’s a chaotic situation at IMG, with Barrett and all his financial issues, and the company is not doing well.’ He told me royalties to artists weren’t being paid, which was outrageous. He said, ‘IMG’s got a unique position in the market, and it can fail if somebody doesn’t come in and sort things out.’”

Shustorovich says when he first invested in IMG, he believed “cash alone would fix the problems,” and had no intention of trying to run the company. The staff had a different impression.

Damage control. That was the mission Alec Treuhافت set for himself after Shustorovich spoke to the New York staff. One of the top vocal managers in the business, Treuhافت had left Columbia Artists for IMG in 2000,

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bringing with him vocalists such as Renée Fleming, Susan Graham, Audra McDonald and David Daniels. It was apparent to Treuhaft that Shustorovich seemed neither to know nor care who he was. “He immediately said several things that made all the kids, my assistants, think they were going to lose their jobs,” he recalls. Shustorovich showed an equal lack of deference to Elizabeth Sobol. “After less than two minutes, he started talking over me,” she says.

Mark McCormack had written books disapproving of business-school orthodoxies; Shustorovich adhered to them — including the value of basing corporate decisions on data, a concept foreign to artist management. “We went through every MBA model of how to run our company when Alex came in,” says Romana Jaroff, who worked with Treuhaft in the vocal department. “There were planning meetings to discuss KPI’s — key performance indicators. Imagine being an artist manager for 25 years and being told all of a sudden you have to do it differently.” Jaroff, who remains with IMG, says, “I didn’t take it personally.”

Treuhaft did. In 2013, after he and Jaroff worked overtime for weeks compiling data, they were handed spreadsheets based on those numbers. The calculations were wrong. “The projected income of one of my clients was 60% of the correct figure,” says Treuhaft. “This was information we all walked around with. I can tell you to this day how much Renée Fleming earned in 2002.” He adds, “I lost my temper and walked out, slamming the door.”

Sobol quit the same year, after more than three decades with the agency. Today she is director of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. “IMG was my whole life, my heart and soul,” she says. “I imagined the last working breath I took would have been for IMG. But I decided for the health of my soul I could not continue.”

David Lai, who was hired to replace Sobol, left after two years to run his own management agency, Park Avenue Artists. Joshua Bell went with him, although he is still managed in Europe by IMG Artists. Bell’s bookings are handled by Charlotte Lee, the 17-year IMG veteran who quit in 2015 to create Primo Artists, taking Itzhak

Perlman. (Lee and Lai departed IMG within a month of one another, and remain close colleagues.) Lai is vague about his reasons for leaving; Lee is blunt about hers. “Shustorovich didn’t get that the talent of IMG was us, the senior managers and the staff,” she says. “He thought artists could just be assigned to someone else if their manager departed. He learned the hard way once we all left, and the Perlman and Bells went with us.”

The lesson was learned in time to avert disaster. Two London managers, Nicholas Mathias and Kathryn Enticott, were given sweetheart deals to prevent them from leaving the fold. They now manage their artists as independent contractors in exclusive arrangements with IMG Artists, which provides back-office support. Mathias and Enticott collectively handle around 30 top conductors and instrumentalists. Losing those artists would have been a gut punch to the agency.

Shustorovich puts a different face on the Enticott and Mathias deals. “I think of it as profit sharing,” he says. “It was improper to be paying them a few hundred thousand a year for business that was worth a lot more.”

For his part, Shustorovich says he just wants IMG Artists to pay for itself or make a modest profit, as it did pre-COVID-19. “I don’t draw a salary or take expenses out of the company,” he says, adding that his investment in the agency has run into tens of millions of dollars. “It borders on charity.” Some of the money put up, he says, was to compensate artists for unpaid royalties during the period of Wissman’s financial difficulties. Asked whether the open conflict between him and Wissman will eventually lead to a parting of the ways, Shustorovich says, “It is what it is. He’s a shareholder now.” He adds, “Time will tell.”

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Vivendi Sets Date for Universal Music Group Spinoff

BY GLENN PEOPLES

Shares of Universal Music Group will begin trading on the Amsterdam Euronext market “before or by” Sept. 27, parent company Vivendi revealed on Wednesday (May 12). Vivendi’s proposal for the UMG share distribution will be put to a vote at the company’s shareholders’ meeting on June 22.

Vivendi’s largest institutional shareholders “have been calling for the split or distribution” of UMG to better reflect the fast-appreciating value of its music division, according to Wednesday’s report. Vivendi’s own valuation suggests UMG is being grossly undervalued: on Wednesday, Vivendi’s market value on Wednesday was 32.4 billion euros (\$39.11 billion), slightly below Vivendi’s estimate of 33 billion euros (\$39.84 billion) for UMG — even though UMG accounted for 45.8% of Vivendi’s first-quarter revenue.

The shares distributed in the dividend will account for 60% of the share capital and voting rights of Universal Music Group. Based on the 33 billion euros valuation, the holders of 91.63% of Vivendi’s shares would receive 60% of UMG’s share capital — meaning 1% of Vivendi share capital receives 0.655% of UMG’s share capital.

A consortium of investors led by Tencent owns 20% of Universal through two investments at a 30 billion euros valuation. Vivendi will keep the remaining 20% of shares and retain “at least 10%” of UMG’s share capital over the long term. However, Vivendi “continues to receive expressions of interest from potential investors” and may sell some of its UMG shares either before or after the distribution of UMG shares. □

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Like the Stars It Launched, Hollywood Records Has Grown Up, Too

BY MELINDA NEWMAN

There was a time when Disney Music Group's Hollywood Records was primarily associated with the Disney Channel's homegrown stars: Miley Cyrus, Demi Lovato, the Jonas Brothers and, more recently, Sabrina Carpenter.

When *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* star Olivia Rodrigo made her debut on Geffen Records in early 2021 — coincidentally, around the same time that Carpenter departed for Island Records — it seemed like Hollywood, much like the stars it raised, might be going through growing pains. But just like those artists, the 22-year-old label has simply grown up, and in a newly expanded Disney musical universe, its reach extends further than ever before.

In 2019, Disney acquired 20th Century Fox, ushering in a major shift for Hollywood. The imprint trimmed its artist roster by roughly 30% to around 20 artists, making way for a wealth of new musical releases associated with incoming franchises. “We expect our volume [of releases] is going to increase about four or five times over the next three to five years,” says Disney Music Group president Ken Bunt. “Our traditional theatrical and direct-to-streaming releases are ramping up dramatically.”

Disney does not disclose financials for its music business, but Bunt says 2020 was DMG's most profitable year yet. *Billboard* estimates that its U.S. revenue last year (excluding synchronization) was between \$125 million to \$150 million, with significant additional revenue coming from outside the United States. (DMG has put out the music from *Frozen*, for instance, in 45 languages.)

Walt Disney Records and Hollywood — both of which are distributed in the United

States by Universal Music Group, which licenses DMG releases around the rest of the world — had operated independently for a long time. But, since Bunt took over DMG in 2012, they've combined staffs and share most resources. “We have a dedicated artist marketing team [at Hollywood], but our digital sales team works everything,” says Bunt, noting that at digital service providers, for instance, soundtracks and artists alike are promoted by one team.

Each imprint has a unique focus, though. Walt Disney Records releases music related to Disney-branded properties including Walt Disney Animation, Disney+ and Pixar (whose *Soul* just won the Academy Award for best original score), as well as Lucasfilm. Hollywood's roster includes individual artists, as well as the music from content produced by 20th Century Fox, National Geographic, Hulu, Marvel, ESPN, ABC and more. (After three years of awarding the winner of ABC's *American Idol* a contract, Hollywood recently ended that affiliation; it is still home to season 20 winner Laine Hardy.)

Talented, young multihyphenates from Disney's franchises like Sofia Carson, Olivia Holt and Latin sensation TINI still populate Hollywood's roster, and Bunt describes Rodrigo's Geffen signing as more disappointing than debilitating. “We wanted to sign her, to be honest,” he says, and typically, DMG has first option on signing artists from Disney Channel shows; Rodrigo, along with co-star Joshua Bassett, who signed with Warner Records, were rare exceptions to that rule. Still, DMG reaps some benefits of their sudden mainstream success. The new music they perform as part of *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*' second season, which premieres May 14, will arrive weekly on Walt Disney Records.

Hollywood already has lucrative long-term success stories. For two decades, DMG has owned Queen's masters in North America. A perennial seller, the legendary band and Hollywood got a major boost in 2018 from the *Bohemian Rhapsody* soundtrack, which has earned 2.55 million equivalent album units in the United States, according to MRC Data.

Its relationship with a younger rock act

has also proved fruitful. Breaking Benjamin, which has landed eight albums on the [Billboard 200](#) and 16 top 10s on the mainstream rock chart, signed to Hollywood 20 years ago and has repeatedly renewed its deal. “My experience [has been] nothing but great,” says frontman Benjamin Burnley. “They've never tried to change the music, never tried to change what we wanted to do.” As the label's flagship rock act, he says, Hollywood has “really put in the work [at radio] and [understands] how we want to express our message. That's really important to us.”

Since 2015, Hollywood has also partnered with S-Curve Records to work Andy Grammer, We the Kings and AJR to pop radio formats. (It has worked in tandem with S-Curve's promo staff since 2018.) “We're a really good fit,” says Steve Greenberg, S-Curve Records founder and AJR's manager, noting that the relationship has yielded nine platinum singles. “They treated the records as their own.”

Walt Disney Records' Disney-branded streaming playlists, which rely heavily on music from films like *Moana*, *Frozen* and *The Lion King*, have become a financial windfall for DMG, too: Worldwide, music from Disney TV and film averages 3 million streams per day, according to Bunt. But more significantly, Disney owns its master recordings and publishing. “We're in a unique position,” says Bunt. “Other companies might not own all the publishing, or maybe it's split across seven writers. We own everything 100%.” (As work-for-hires, composers' works belong to Disney, which usually gives back the writers their royalty share.)

Now, Bunt and his team are looking to the next phase of expanding Disney's musical universe. Hollywood's roster will grow slightly to around 25 artists, including recent signee Area21, the duo of Dutch DJ-producer Martin Garrix and American producer Maejor. Bunt also emphasizes that while the Disney Channel is “still an important piece of the Disney company,” it's far from the only one capable of producing music. “Look at what Disney+ is now,” he says. “There will be more talent that we will want to sign.”

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In April, Hollywood artist Alt Bloom released a song in conjunction with NatGeo's Disney+ series *Planet Possible*. Bunt sees opportunities for alt-rock band Joywave, whose vocalist, Daniel Armbruster, is a big hockey fan — fortuitous, considering Disney's new rights deal with the NHL. Around Juneteenth, Hollywood will partner with ESPN and its sports/culture site The Undefeated to release *Liberated* — the third volume in its *Music for the Movement* series — as part of a Black music initiative. And toward the end of the year, the label will have another potential gold mine on its hands: the soundtrack to Steven Spielberg's highly anticipated remake of *West Side Story*.

For good reason, Bunt looks across the Disney spectrum and says he sees nothing but possibility: "Our playground is just so big."

Additional reporting by Ed Christman.

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License to Thrive: Olivia Rodrigo Zooms Ahead After 2021's Biggest Breakout Hit

BY ANDREW UNTERBERGER

There are only a few boxes left to unpack in Olivia Rodrigo's new home in Los Angeles. On top of everything else going on in the life of the world's busiest 18-year-old, the star singer-songwriter-actress just moved out of her parents' house. "Yeah, it's very weird," she says over Zoom from her living room in April. "I turned 18, and then I came back and finished my album and moved out and everything. So it was all a very condensed growing-up experience."

Rodrigo is happily nesting in her new digs, which she nervously but excitedly re-

fers to as "my first, like, own house, sort of, situation." But she won't have time to get too comfortable. "We're traveling a bunch, this month and the next month," she says. "So I'm trying not to get too settled anywhere."

That's understandable, because the month Rodrigo has ahead of her is exhausting just to think about. On May 14, *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, the popular Disney+ show on which she stars as talented but insecure theater kid Nini Salazar-Roberts, launches its second season. A week later, she'll release *Sour*, her full-length debut album and one of the year's most anticipated releases, through the revamped Geffen Records. Plus, at some point, she'll probably have to find time to graduate high school. "I have like a month left of senior year, and I've sort of been neglecting that," she says. "Because I've been off making my album, I sort of forgot I was a high school student."

All of this is happening quickly for Rodrigo, in large part because her official debut single — the midtempo breakup ballad "drivers license" — was the kind of runaway hit that demands to be capitalized on. The brilliantly detailed tearjerker struck an immediate chord with listeners everywhere and went viral on TikTok as Internet speculation about its real-life inspirations added fuel to the fire. By the end of its first weekend, it was already the biggest new smash of 2021, breaking Spotify records for daily plays both nationally and globally. It then debuted atop the [Billboard Hot 100](#), where it spent eight weeks at No. 1 — unprecedented for an artist with only a couple of TV soundtrack credits to her name. Rodrigo went from promising Disney starlet to bona fide pop star almost overnight.

One viral hit is no guarantee of continued stardom, however, especially in the age of TikTok, when listeners often get attached to a song without bonding with the artist behind it. Rodrigo has already departed from the playbook of past Disney stars — unlike [Miley Cyrus](#), [Demi Lovato](#) and [Selena Gomez](#), she skipped a stint at Disney-owned Hollywood Records and went straight to a major label. But the path to artistic independence is not clear-cut, especially when the sheer phenomenon of her success (spawn-

ing fan theories, think pieces and parodies in short order) could very easily drown out the art itself.

Despite the challenges ahead of Rodrigo, no one around her seems particularly worried about her coming down with senioritis. Her work ethic is already the stuff of legend, both on the set of *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* and at her label. "I honestly don't think she sleeps," says Nicole Bilzerian, executive vp at Geffen. "She sets the bar for us. We definitely have to rise to the occasion and work as hard, if not harder, to make all of this happen."

That focus and ambition also inform her songwriting — which, despite her list of accomplishments, remains both her primary artistic calling card and her top career priority. "She's never satisfied," says Dan Nigro, her *Sour* producer and co-writer. "With Olivia and I's dynamic, there's a constant, like, 'What if we tried this? What if we changed all the pianos out and made them guitars? What if we rewrote the lyrics?' No song feels like it's done."

Rodrigo's team is betting that she has the presence, the talent and the fortitude to use "drivers license" as a springboard to greater things — and come into her own as a singer-songwriter in the classic sense. "It's the music, and that's what people are connecting to, but I think that people believe in her," says John Janick, chairman/CEO of Interscope Geffen A&M (IGA). "She's the real deal. And that's why she's going to be a global superstar who's going to be around for a long time. Because she gets it — but she also has the drive and wants to win."

Over the course of our conversation, Rodrigo raves about her infatuation with all sorts of musical subjects: vinyl records, the Grammy Awards, [Jack White](#), [Taylor Swift](#)'s recently released *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*. But while she may have many obsessions, she's perhaps most obsessed with, well, being obsessed.

"I am just *obsessed* with all types of music," she says, even though she can't help but give an eye roll at her own overexuberance. "You know how somebody's like, 'Oh, what kind of music do you listen to?' And they're like, 'I like all music!' And you're like, 'OK,

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that gives me nothing.' But I truly am!"

Rodrigo's inextinguishable excitement for music is one of the most striking things about her. Along with certain wardrobe choices (like the *Twilight: Eclipse* shirt she wears during our Zoom call) and a habit of responding to questions that catch her off guard with a gleeful but slightly anxious giggle, it's a reminder that the wise-beyond-her-years songwriter is still a teenager.

"She's a young adult now, but I remember being struck and moved by how ordinary the conversations were [between her and her castmates] in between takes," says Tim Federle, creator and showrunner for *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*. "All the insecurities and all of the self-doubts and all of the dreams that every kid out there has, Olivia has and had them too. And she happened to strike gold where her dreams met a perfect intersection of her abilities."

Rodrigo inherited her earliest musical obsessions from her parents: Jennifer, who is German and Irish, and Christopher, from whom Rodrigo gets her Filipino heritage. (Rodrigo calls the recent wave of violence against Asian Americans in the United States "heartbreaking," adding that "we all need to keep speaking out against these injustices in the world.") Growing up in Temecula, Calif., she would go record shopping with her mom, a third-grade teacher. Although Rodrigo describes her mother as "the sweetest woman ever," Jennifer gravitated toward metal, punk and '90s alternative rock. Those influences, mixed with Rodrigo's fondness for [Lorde](#)'s emotionally layered pop anthems and the vivid storytelling of country music, began to influence her own songs, which she started writing as a tween.

Her first chance to write professionally came on *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, where she was cast by Federle, who wasn't aware of her songwriting abilities. Federle realized he needed a song for Rodrigo's character at the end of a mid-first-season episode. He found out about the diaristic original songs Rodrigo was posting on Instagram and asked her to try writing it herself.

"I sent Olivia this email, being like, 'I

think Nini needs a song, and I think you should be the person who tries to write it,'" says Federle. "And I remember three days later, Olivia was sort of sheepishly like, 'I've got a little something, do you mind if I show you?'"

That "little something" was "[All I Want](#)," a piano ballad about being repeatedly let down by significant others, which blew Federle away, and landed in episode four of the first season. Though the song was one of many featured in that season — and far from the showiest or most prominently placed — it was the one that became a hit on TikTok, crossing over to the Hot 100 in early 2020. "I didn't even have TikTok at the time. I was like, 'What's this thing? Why are people making stuff that's [just a few seconds] long?'" Rodrigo says with a laugh. "But that song is how Interscope found me."

"You just knew right away — her personality, her vision, her talent as a songwriter and as a singer," says Janick of his first meeting with Rodrigo. "She had all of the pieces that we look for in an artist. We knew right away that we wanted to sign her."

Still, it took six months, as Rodrigo was being courted by multiple other majors at the time. "It has always been important for Olivia as a songwriter and artist to be able to separate herself from the characters she has played on TV," says manager Kristen Smith. "When the time came to look at labels, we were lucky enough that we had created the freedom for her to be able to meet with different potential partners who would be the best fit for Olivia."

An industry source tells *Billboard* that Rodrigo's camp proposed to at least one company that it pay roughly \$10 million to sign her, but Janick ended up signing her to Geffen for closer to \$2 million, the source says; neither Geffen nor Rodrigo's reps commented on the terms of the agreement.

In the end, Rodrigo says Geffen had the right pitch for her. "All the other major labels were like, 'Oh, you could be a star,'" she recalls. "And I remember going into Interscope for the first time and [Janick] telling me, 'We love your songwriting. We think you're a great songwriter, and that's the most important thing to us.' And I remember being like, 'Oh, OK, this is where

I'm supposed to be.'"

Janick saw Rodrigo as a potential new face of the resurgent Geffen — once home to iconic '80s and '90s artists like [Aerosmith](#), [Guns N' Roses](#) and [Nirvana](#) — which officially relaunched in 2017 as part of the IGA family. The label's rap-heavy roster now boasts streaming stars [Lil Durk](#) and [Rod Wave](#), but few pop singer-songwriters, and no one with a hit the size of "drivers license." "As we rebuild it, it's hyperfocused on her and turning her into a global act," says Janick. "[She's one of] those artists who move culture and are going to be career artists."

So far, Rodrigo says she's very happy with the fit. "I really just trust and value their input," she says of the team at Geffen. "I've done a good job of surrounding myself with people who are really honest with me and can help me make my music instead of just being like, 'Yeah, you're perfect!' Because I hate that. Like, that's my least favorite thing in the whole world."

In early April, Rodrigo posted a snapshot of a parking ticket she had recently received from the city of Los Angeles to her Instagram story: "damn this driving s—t isn't all fun and games," read the quippy caption. "I parked on street cleaning day," she explains a few weeks later, still incredulous at her own naiveté. "I remember being like, 'Huh, nobody's parked on this street. Oh, well!' So stupid."

Writing one of the most popular songs of all time on the subject of driving tends to mean you'll forever be associated with motor vehicles. For her part, Rodrigo's fine with her pop cultural place behind the wheel — some young fans even write to her asking for advice about their own driver's tests. "Driving in the car is like my favorite thing — any time I'm stressed out, I just get in the car and drive around aimlessly and listen to music or something," she says. (She says a few car companies have reached out about using the song in commercials, though no such licensing deals have been struck to date.)

Though Geffen announced her signing only three days before the song's release, Rodrigo first played them "drivers license" last August. The label was immediately tak-

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en with it. “When ‘drivers license’ came in, we were like, ‘Whoa, we got one here!’” says Sam Riback, co-head of A&R at IGA. “Obviously we didn’t know the level of bigness, but we knew it’d do well.” Rodrigo, however, says she was convinced of the song’s power when she played it for her father in — where else — the car: “I could just see the tears under his sunglasses — and I like, never see my dad cry, ever. I was like, ‘Oh, OK, maybe I did something here.’”

Seeing people react to her music in person is still a novelty. Apart from a lone TV performance on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, Rodrigo experienced her debut smash mostly through stat updates and celebrity co-signs viewed on her phone — she was ensconced in Utah, under strict COVID-19 protocols, while filming the second season of *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*. “While everything was happening, I was literally doing the same thing [as always],” she says. “Going to set, doing my statistics homework and then going to sleep.”

“Drivers license” wasn’t a song that needed much of a promotional boost from Rodrigo. It received countless covers and reinterpretations, both through scores of amateur musicians on TikTok and more established artists like pop-punk social media star Jxdn. *Saturday Night Live* even **dedicated an entire skit** to the song — on Rodrigo’s 18th birthday, no less — with a bar full of male cast members discussing the song’s lyrics and belting along to its towering bridge. “It was really crazy to see [how much] it started to impact culture,” says Matt Morris, part of Geffen’s A&R team. “People where I’m from were talking about it — people reaching out to me that I hadn’t talked to in 10 years.”

The song was also inescapable in the headlines. Fan theories quickly circulated that it was written about Rodrigo’s rumored relationship and breakup with co-star Joshua Bassett and his supposed new flame, fellow singer-actress Sabrina Carpenter. Rodrigo never commented publicly on the matter — “to me, that’s really the least important part of the song,” she told *Billboard* in January. But subsequent single releases from Bassett (“Lie Lie Lie”) and Carpenter

(“Skin”) appeared to come at least partly in response to Rodrigo’s song, turning the “drivers license” love triangle into one of the biggest entertainment stories of early 2021.

That buzz was hardly quashed by Rodrigo’s follow-up single in April, the wistful but seething “deja vu,” which appeared to be a thematic continuation of her breakout hit — down to Rodrigo’s disappointed sighs in the second verse about her ex’s new girl: “another *actress*.” Returning to that subject matter was not necessarily a safe choice: It further churned the gossip mill and risks typecasting her as, in her words, “the heart-break girl.”

There’s much more where that came from on *Sour*, which has no shortage of additional heartbreak on its 11 tracks. “At first I was like, ‘I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to be pigeonholed,’” says Rodrigo. She even tried to balance out *Sour* with some sweeter-skewing love songs. In the end, though, it wasn’t worth fighting inspiration. “I’m a songwriter who writes from a place of authenticity and truth,” she says. “And truthfully, love and happiness and everything weren’t feelings that I was feeling at the time. And what’s the point of putting out a record if it isn’t something that you feel is important to say to people?”

If listeners got déjà vu of their own from Rodrigo’s second single, they certainly didn’t mind: It debuted at No. 8 on the Hot 100, making her the first artist ever to debut both of her first two official singles in the top 10. “When you have a monster song, sometimes it takes up all the oxygen for your second release,” says Riback. “In this case, ‘deja vu’ has held up fantastic.”

Lee L’Heureux, executive vp and GM at Geffen, feels confident that the rumors and tabloid fodder around Rodrigo’s early songs won’t be a big part of their legacy. “It’s the songs that are really resonating with people,” he says. “Any other sort of story that somebody wants to make of it, that’s not what people will be talking about down the line.”

Besides, any notions that Rodrigo has already shown all she has to offer won’t last more than 12 seconds into *Sour*. That’s when album opener “brutal” swiftly transitions from a fluttery string intro to a stomping,

distorted-guitar crunch — an homage to her mother’s ’90s alternative favorites and a bold opening statement that, of course, Rodrigo says she’s “obsessed” with, too. The song’s pivot comes by request of Rodrigo herself, who is first heard on the album giving instructions in the studio: “I want it to be, like, *messy*.”

Those instructions were for Dan Nigro, who got his start in the 2000s indie rock band As Tall as Lions before becoming a go-to collaborator for left-field pop artists like [Carly Rae Jepsen](#) and [Conan Gray](#). Though he co-wrote and produced all but one song on *Sour*, he describes their early sessions as bumpy but promising. “We both knew that there was something really special there,” says Nigro. “I feel like it took about two to three months — a couple of days a week of us getting together. We did a real deep dive into exploring the sonic palette of every song we were working on before we kind of decided on, ‘Oh, this is how it should be.’”

Originally, Geffen planned for Rodrigo to release an EP. Instead, unsatisfied with the scope of the shorter project, she focused on making a full album that was “truly reflective of what I can do.” (It’s also good business sense: Plenty of viral-breakout artists have taken their time working up to an album only to lose the momentum.) Rodrigo, in fact, can do quite a lot: *Sour* includes ballads, folky torch songs and sung-rapped freakouts. One song starts off like a menacing [Billie Eilish](#) creeper, then explodes into an early-[Paramore](#)-style rave-up. For an artist whose early praise often focused on comparisons to other acts, *Sour* is exceptional at subverting listener expectations.

As with other close writer-producer partnerships in recent years — Eilish and FINNEAS, Lorde and Jack Antonoff — the album works because the songs are so gut-punching. A lyrical detail like Rodrigo decrying her ex and his new flame “watching reruns of *Glee*, being annoying, singing in harmony” (in “deja vu”) hits not only because the image is so specific, but also because she and Nigro cleverly double her vocals on the last three words so she’s “in harmony” with herself.

The album has plenty of drama for fans

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to nibble on, but what Rodrigo really excels at with these songs is building her own pop universe — something Taylor Swift, her songwriting idol, would be proud of. Swift has, in fact, said as much publicly on Instagram, where she offered “drivers license” a valuable early co-sign, and in a handwritten letter to Rodrigo.

“I don’t want to divulge too much because it’s really sweet and personal,” says Rodrigo of the note. “But she talks a lot about how, I think, you make your own luck in the world. And when you do kind things to others, good things come your way...” She trails off, worried that she’s not doing the writing justice. “I don’t know, she put it so eloquently, and when I say it now... it’s not as cool.”

In February, Rodrigo spent her 18th birthday in L.A., hanging out on the beach and getting her Tarot cards read in Malibu with her best friend. “The Tarot card lady predicted some good things happening in my life,” says Rodrigo, laughing at the timing. “She was talking about, like, success and celebration. She might’ve saw the *Billboard* charts that day or something.”

With just two singles, Rodrigo has pulled off the kind of four-quadrant approval very few artists can achieve in 2021 — dominating not just streaming but also the airwaves, topping *Billboard*’s [Radio Songs](#) chart and crossing over to a half dozen formats. In order to capture as big an audience as possible, Geffen is taking a long-term approach to promoting *Sour*. “We’re really looking at: ‘What does it look like for Olivia for the next 12 to 18 months?’” says Janick.

That means more music videos and singles, her own *Saturday Night Live* appearance on May 15 and, when it’s safe, Rodrigo’s first headlining tour — her first time playing her own songs anywhere, for anyone besides her mom. (She got her first vaccine dose the day before her *Billboard* cover shoot: “So if I look tired as hell, that’s probably why.”) But her team wants her to take some time off first. “Booking a vacation is really important,” says Smith. “We’re making sure we’re taking into account all aspects of her as a human being, not just as an artist.”

Rodrigo is already dreaming about her future beyond *Sour*. She’s still making music in the studio, but what she’s most looking

forward to is collaborating with other artists, particularly as a writer. “The second the album cycle for this is over and I’m not traveling, that’s the one thing that I want to do so bad,” she says. “I always said that I wanted to do that: Maybe when I was, like, 30 or something and I had kids — I’d stop making music and just write for other people. Because I just love songwriting. I love songwriting more than putting out songs.”

There are few artists operating at her level who are fantasizing about slinking back into the writing credits. But Rodrigo seems a little ambivalent about the glare of imminent stardom.

“To a certain degree, having really commercially successful music means that lots of people are really affected by your music and really like it, and that’s awesome in and of itself,” she says. “If my music becomes really commercially successful, that’s incredible, and that means I did a good job. But some of my favorite artists are not commercially successful, and that doesn’t mean that they’re any less amazing.”

“The answer is I don’t know,” she concludes, sounding at peace with not having all the answers. “But I’m really just truly enjoying myself, and I love that I get to do this for a living. And it’s super cool that people want to listen.” Maybe they’ll get a little obsessed themselves.

This story originally appeared in the May 15, 2021, issue of [Billboard](#). 

Discord to Expand Clubhouse Rival With Discovery Page & Ticketing

BY TATIANA CIRISANO

Audio, video and text chat platform Discord is bolstering its Stage channels feature for hosting audio-only events, the company announced on its sixth anniversary Thursday (May 13), first by adding a

discovery page for those events and eventually by introducing ticketing.

On the free-to-use platform, Discord’s 150 million monthly active users create and join servers focused on one topic or community, where they chat within channels. But unlike with regular channels, users who join Stages are automatically muted and there are no entering or exiting sounds. Users can tap a button to ask to speak, after which the speakers designated as moderators can choose whether or not to grant that person speaker ability.

Stages launched in March. Now, Discord hopes to help users find events that interest them with the Stage Discovery page, launching globally to all users in June. At Discord’s first-ever press event earlier this week, Discord director of engineering **Sumeet Vaidya** told *Billboard* that his team is working on a ranking algorithm for the page: “There will be a whole bunch of features they take into account, whether it’s a server that you’re in, or some of your friends are listening to the stage.”

One caveat is that Stages are only available for servers which the creator designates as a “Community,” a category which has stricter safety and moderation requirements. When inside a Stage, users will see a “Join Community” tab on the top-left corner encouraging them to check out the server hosting the Stage, which they can do without leaving the event.

Next, Discord plans to introduce Stage ticketing. The feature is currently in private beta with a small testing set of communities, and the first ticketed events will go live this week. Hosts will be able to create and schedule events in advance and set their own ticket prices.

For now, events are capped at 1,000 users, but Vaidya says that this limit is “purely technical” and that he hopes to expand it to 10,000 users by the time the Stage Discovery page launches. He declined to specify when the feature will roll out wide to all users, nor how the company will split ticket revenue with hosts, which is still being decided. “This is an experiment, so we’ll be testing things out in the short term,” he added.

Stage Channels enter a rapidly-growing market for audio-only chat, a field currently

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led by invite-only app Clubhouse. Twitter [launched](#) its audio chat feature Spaces publicly earlier this month, with plans to introduce ticketing; Spotify [acquired](#) the parent of sports talk app Locker Room in March; and Facebook is said to be building a Clubhouse competitor as well.

Discord was originally geared towards gamers when it launched in 2015, but pandemic lockdowns helped double Discord's user base and triple its revenue in 2020 compared to the year prior. Now, the company says 78% of active users either use Discord primarily for non-gaming purposes or a combination of gaming and other purposes, up from just 30% in late 2019, and there are more than 19 million active servers on the platform.

That expansion includes the music industry, where artists like [BLACKPINK](#), [Playboi Carti](#) and [Twenty One Pilots](#) as well as record labels like Anjunabeats and Monstercat use Discord to build fan communities, host ask-me-anything events and share exclusive content. When [Travis Scott](#) launched his Cactus Jack server on April 27, nearly 100,000 users joined — a new record for a server launch day, according to Discord — and he has since held merchandise sweepstakes within the server and more.

Concurrent with today's announcements, Discord is also debuting a tweaked logo and new "Imagine a Place" campaign, which encourages people with all kinds of interests to find belonging on Discord. It follows Discord's first stab at a brand repositioning in June 2020, when the platform introduced a new and inclusive slogan, "Your place to talk."

"All the amazing — and even strange — ways you've been using our service inspires us every day," co-founders [Jason Citron](#) and [Stan Vishnevskiy](#) write in a new [blog post](#) announcement. "Discord has become a place for study groups, karaoke nights, plant parenting advice, learning about cryptocurrencies, and simply a place to talk and hang out with your people wherever they are." 📌

Influence Media Buys Stake in Julia Michaels' Song Catalog

BY CHRIS EGGERTSEN

Influence Media Partners, a music and entertainment fund dedicated to investing in the recording and publishing rights of songs, with an emphasis on female artists and songwriters, has acquired a portfolio of select copyrights from the catalog of Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter [Julia Michaels](#), it was announced today.

The acquisition includes Michaels' publishing stake in songs performed by [Selena Gomez](#) ("Bad Liar," "Hands To Myself"), [Justin Bieber](#) ("Sorry"), [Ed Sheeran](#) ("Dive"), [Janelle Monae](#) ("Make Me Feel"), [Nick Jonas](#) ("Close with Tove Lo"), [Hailee Steinfeld](#) ("Love Myself"), [P!nk](#) ("Barbies"), [Linkin Park](#) ("Heavy" with [Kiiara](#)), [Gwen Stefani](#) ("Used To Love You"), [Britney Spears](#) ("Do You Wanna Come Over?"), [Fifth Harmony](#) ("All In My Head [Flex]" with [Fetty Wap](#)) and [Maroon 5](#) ("Help Me Out").

Also included are Michaels' publishing stakes in several of her songs as a solo artist, including "Issues," "I Miss You" (with [Clean Bandit](#)), "Carry Me" (with [Kygo](#)) and "Friends" (with Justin Bieber and [Blood-Pop](#)).

Financial terms of the deal were not disclosed.

The Michaels acquisition is the second from Influence Media's music fund with the Municipal Employees' Retirement System (MERS of Michigan), which boasts \$100 million in initial capital to invest in the recording and publishing rights of commercially proven songs. Its first joint acquisition, of select copyrights from songwriter [Ali Tamposi](#)'s catalog, was announced in April.

"Like Carole King, Sia and Bruno Mars before her, Julia Michaels belongs in the pantheon of great songwriters who can

write classics for themselves as well as other artists," said [Lylette Pizarro](#), founder and co-managing partner of Influence Media, in a statement. "We've wanted to be in business with Julia since the days we were first founded in 2018, and are thrilled that her team took a chance on us in what was a very competitive deal-making process."

Added Michaels, "I'm excited to team up with Lylette, Lynn and the Influence Media team to put some of my favorite songs from the first chapter of my career into the trusted hands of two badass female execs. I'm excited and proud that my music will continue to touch new people for years to come through their expertise."

Michaels signed a publishing deal with Universal Music Publishing Group in February. Her full-length debut album, *Not In Chronological Order*, was released April 30.

"Even in 2021, it's extremely rare in the music business to work with an all-female team on a deal of this magnitude on both sides of the table," added [Lynn Hazan](#), co-managing partner of Influence Media. "Working with Julia, her manager Beka Tischker, her attorney Renee Karalian and our counsel Lisa Alter to bring this partnership to life has been a delight every step of the way. Julia is one of the most influential artists of the past decade, and we couldn't be more honored to be entrusted with her fantastic catalog." 📌

Why the Music Industry Should Embrace 'Hybrid' Conferences in '21 (Guest Column)

BY DMITRI VIETZE

Every phase of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a pendulum of despair, uncertainty, and hope. While the live music industry continues to face an economic catastrophe like never seen before, music industry events

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have also faced unprecedented challenges — to a lesser extent thanks to a tradition of webinar-like online business events.

It is moments of uncertainty that continue to make sound business decisions tough for organizers of our favorite music industry events. Even with vaccines getting administered at faster-than-expected rates in many parts of the United States, several other factors still leave us unclear on when and how much people should be together in larger groups. COVID variants are emerging with little information on the speed of their spread and their resistance to the currently available vaccines. The lasting power of vaccines is still untested fully; and it's unclear whether a given population will reach herd immunity in the three-month window in which a vaccine typically lasts. Finally, parents with children too young to receive a vaccine are still unclear whether they will put their unvaccinated children at risk if they attend a concert or industry event.

The challenge for conference planners is to decide what will be allowed or desired at a future date. When thinking about the nebulous future, it's easy to say, "I can't wait for that conference to be in person again! The sooner the better!" But the organizer has to face uncertain realities and decide whether to commit to the great expense of a physical venue and catering, travel budgets, and even the type of programming — in person or online — before they know what the local ordinances will be, what the CDC recommendations will be, and what the market's appetite will be at that future date. Not to mention whether international badge-holders will be able to land in the host country of an event.

For all of these reasons, I think industry events taking place through the end of the year are best planned as hybrid events; balancing the certainty and safety that online events allow with the excitement and irreplaceable connection of the opportunity to be near humans with whom you want to network, build relationships, and do business. But there is a common assumption about what a hybrid event is, and I think that common assumption is too limited.

Most people assume a hybrid conference in 2021 is a live conference with a certain

amount of social distancing and masks, while livestreaming sessions to the broader world. Though more interactive than the pandemic-era industry standard of (staid) pre-recorded sessions we have seen up until now, that is an uncreative vision of a hybrid event for our era, requiring even more staffing and investment while only capturing a fraction of the actual event experience. But what if we flip the hybrid model on its head? To balance the positive attributes of both online and IRL conferences, here is what I think music industry conferences should embody in 2021:

- **Online keynotes and panels for focus and access.** By putting presentations online, attendees do not have to choose between hanging out in the hallway, bar, or exhibit hall and missing the presentations that let them check the pulse of the industry or best practices on stage. It's also more efficient, allowing attendees to quickly hop between sessions to find the right fit, without disrupting the live event. Online sessions also mean conference organizers do not need to foot the bill of multiple rooms (which usually come with an added cost of a catering and sleeping room minimum) and overpriced A/V vendors, without knowing whether attendees will show up at all. Friends in the industry have said online conferences this year have allowed them to attend many more sessions than they normally do at IRL conferences.

- **Online networking for speed and global reach.** If it's done correctly, speed networking can be more focused and more efficiently than in real life. At real person conferences, newcomers can spend hours trying to figure out where their networking targets are, and then have to wade through a crowd at a reception, exhibit hall, or bar for a five second chance to exchange business cards. With chatroulette style speed networking, we've heard from people who could meet 70 or more people for five minute video chats in a single day! In addition, online industry events have done more than any advancements in travel or commerce to bring the world closer together, giving access to innovators anywhere on the connected planet to industry insights and networks for the first time.

- **Virtual world exhibit booths for a glimpse of the future.** Having an exhibit booth in real life requires a lot of real estate; another risky expense without knowing how many paying attendees will really show up to a conference. Some reliable meta-verse platforms have emerged for a solid schmooze-friendly exhibit hall with built-in video sharing for demos; and many do not require a VR headset. This virtual alternative means exhibitors don't have to spend days on their feet, nor need to be exposed to so many people physically passing by with their coughs, sneezes, and breath converging from all over the world. Furthermore, for music industry pros who are excited to learn about the convergence of gaming and music, why not get your avatar's hands dirty and experience the sense of virtual thereness to fully understand what emerging generations are experiencing for many hours of the day?

- **In person experiences for making human connections in the open air.** Once presentations, formal networking, and exhibit halls can be accomplished safely online or in a metaverse, the only thing missing is that almost spiritual, trance-inducing experience of being together with like-minded humans. While hotels and convention centers are efficient for in-person events, if what you really want to emphasize for your in-person component of your industry event is closer to Burning Man than a locked door timeshare pitch session, why not bring it outside or into less traditional spaces with open air flow and sunshine? It's time to come up with methods to facilitate recon-nections with conference friends in spaces best suited for hanging out. Why not rent a carousel, partner with a rooftop bar, or have a blockchain meetup on a beach? Life's too short to be stuck in a hotel basement. Finally, by planning a less formal meetup at this moment in time, conference organizers can monitor local and international health conditions and add on more meetup locations as you get closer to the event, pivoting in a way that hotel and convention center contracts typically won't allow.

At some point in the near future, we can ask the question: what aspects of online conferencing should stay? But until then, there

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is a creative path to find the perfect hybrid that allows for the right amount of risk and the advantages of what we learned during the socially distanced pandemic.

*Dmitri Vietze is director of the [Music Tectonics Conference](#), an annual conference that explores the new terrain at the epicenter of music and technology. After two years successfully navigating LA wildfires and pandemic pivots, the MT team is holding the 2021 conference on October 25-27 on two innovative online platforms and Nov. 2 in-person in Los Angeles. Dmitri is also host of the weekly *Music Tectonics Podcast* and founder/CEO of the music tech PR firm *rock paper scissors, inc.*, which has combined cutting edge technology and deep storytelling to help clients crystallize their missions in compelling ways and amplify them in innovative ways since 1999. *

Showx Lets Artists Sell Tickets Directly to Fans

BY TAYLOR MIMS

New app Showx is putting artists in control of their own ticketing. Launching today, the Showx platform allows independent artists the ability to sell tickets directly to fans and grants artists access to fan's email data.

"Musicians controlling ticketing and owning the data of their fans is about more than a business opportunity. It's the right thing to do," said Showx founder **Lincoln Foley Schofield** in a release. "Sustainable careers are built on the relationship artists have with their fans, and our goal is to use technology to remove all barriers to this relationship."

Showx believes that artists give up the control of their fan data when they pursue ticketing through a venue or promoter. Through the new ticketing platform, artists will have greater access to their fans to develop new markets and keep fans engaged.

Musicians can set a date and city for each performance without a venue listed. Showx

provides the musician a link to sell tickets to each performance, which can be easily shared on social media and through email. As fans buy tickets, venues receive alerts of the ticket counts and determine whether they want to book that date or not, reducing venue risk.

Showx also gives artists a chance to network and build through the app's professional musician social media platform, access to a database of venue contacts, aid in the creation of content for social media or selling merchandise.

For venues, Showx can provide passive notifications whenever a meaningful amount of tickets for a particular show or artist has been sold in their city. Venues can also proactively search for bands and post open show dates within the app so musicians can see what nights they can still book. Venues can also use Showx for opening act verification, allowing musicians that want coveted opening slots for well-known musicians to prove they can sell tickets before confirming.

The Showx app can be found through the [Apple Store](#) or on [Google Play](#). 

TuneCore Names Dan Rutman Director of U.S. & Canada

BY TATIANA CIRISANO

TuneCore has named **Dan Rutman** director, U.S. & Canada, the independent digital music distributor announced today (May 13).

Rutman is the founder of independent label Solitaire Recordings, and has also held roles at Remote Control Records and Sneak Attack Media. In his new position, he will lead business development opportunities for both acquisition-based strategic partnerships and brand partnerships across TuneCore's key industries, as well as oversee Canadian artist relations and partner-

ships as the head of TuneCore Canada.

"Dan's unique experience positions him as an individual that can tackle both business relations and creative brainstorming adeptly at a very high level," TuneCore co-head and chief revenue officer **Andrea Gleeson** said in a statement. "His understanding of artists is palpable and is already netting the company multiple new partnerships."

Rutman has already scored his first strategic partnership for TuneCore with music technology startup Groover, a marketplace where independent artists can promote themselves to tastemakers and music industry professionals. On the marketplace, TuneCore provides independent artists with advice and best practices across topics like marketing and release planning.

"As the rise of the independent artist becomes the prominent narrative within the music industry, I feel very fortunate to be entrusted to this position at TuneCore; a company that exists at the nexus of music and tech," Rutman said. "I'm thrilled to build TuneCore's brand and core offering through creative and commercial strategic partnerships."

TuneCore, which was acquired by Paris-headquartered music company Believe in 2015, has paid out over \$2 billion to artists. Earlier this week, TuneCore began its initial public offering (IPO) process, with plans to raise €500 million (nearly \$608 million) to finance its growth strategy of building "the leading global artist digital development platform." 

Live Nation to Open 5,000-Cap Venue in Houston

BY TAYLOR MIMS

Houston is getting a brand-new music venue this November. Live Nation has revealed plans for the 5,000-capacity Terminal venue, housed in the city's latest major downtown development project: POST

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Houston.

“The Terminal will be a great addition to the live music scene in Houston giving artists and fans more options to connect at concerts,” said Venue Nation president **Sherri Sosa** in a release. “We look forward to the Terminal bringing hundreds of shows to the city once it opens its doors, not only delivering some great live music but also creating new jobs for the community.”

The Terminal will be an anchor in the transformation of the historic former Barbara Jordan Post Office into a hub for culture, food, shopping and recreation. The venue was designed by firm OMA and led by OMA partner **Jason Long**.

The venue was designed so that when artists stand on The Terminal’s stage, in their line of site, guests will literally appear to “wallpaper” the room with virtually no visible blank spaces or gaps as all balcony aisles and walkways have been designed at angles so that the artist only sees people (or seats).

The Terminal will combine industrial materials such as fiberglass grating, polycarbonate and aluminized fabric with an array of ephemeral multi-colored lighting effects to create a machine for spectacle.

Above the general admission space, there will be seated balconies called “Tribune Tiers” that have been designed and constructed to provide fans with an intimate viewing experience, despite not being on the floor of the venue.

The Terminal’s show scheduled is expected to be announced in July. 📍

Maren Morris & Miranda Lambert Are Top Nominees for 2021 CMT Music Awards

BY PAUL GREIN

Maren Morris and **Miranda Lambert** are the top nominees for the 2021 CMT Music Awards, which will air Wednesday, June 9. Each received four nominations: female video of the year, collaborative video of the year, and two nominations each for video of the year.

Kelsea Ballerini and **Kane Brown**, who are set to co-host the show, each received three nominations, as did **Little Big Town** and **Mickey Guyton**.

Guyton is a first-time CMT Music Awards nominee, as are Dylan Scott, Hailey Whitters, HARDY, Lainey Wilson, Margo Price, Nathaniel Rateliff, Niko Moon, Noah Cyrus, Parmalee, Ryan Hurd, Tyler Hubbard and Willie Jones.

The first round of nominees for the video of the year award includes 14 acts, including Carrie Underwood, who has won in the category eight times, more than anyone else. She is nominated this year for “Hallelujah,” a collaboration with John Legend. Underwood is the most-awarded artist in CMT Music Awards history with 22 wins.

Legend isn’t the only non-country artist to receive a nomination this year. Elle King, Halsey, Rateliff, Cyrus and P!nk are also nominated.

Five of the six nominees for CMT performance of the year — which is awarded to a musical performance on a CMT television show, series or variety special — went to sequences from last year’s CMT Music Awards. The one exception was Rateliff and Price’s performance of “Twinkle Twinkle” from *CMT Crossroads*.

The 2021 CMT Music Awards, which bills itself as country music’s only entirely fan-voted award show, is set to air Wednes-

day, June 9, at 8 p.m. ET on CMT. The show will be simulcast on MTV, MTV2, Logo, Paramount Network and TV Land.

The two and a half hour show will feature breakthrough video of the year nominees Dylan Scott, Hailey Whitters (featuring Little Big Town), HARDY, Lainey Wilson, Niko Moon and Guyton. Additional performers will be announced as a later date.

The show is executive produced by CMT’s Margaret Comeaux and Switched On Entertainment’s John Hamlin and Amy Lin Johnson. Executives in charge of production are Jackie Barba and Heather D. Graffagnino.

Voting is now open at vote.cmt.com. 📍

Pervis Staples of Staple Singers Dead at 85

BY ASSOCIATED PRESS

Pervis Staples, whose tenor voice complimented his father’s and sisters’ in the legendary gospel group **The Staple Singers**, has died, a spokesman announced Wednesday. He was 85.

Pervis Staples died May 6 at his home in Dalton, Illinois, according to Adam Ayers, a spokesman for Staples’ sister, Mavis Staples. The cause of death wasn’t given.

Pervis Staples sang gospel songs with his father, the guitar-playing Roebuck “Pops” Staples, and sisters Mavis, Yvonne and Cleotha in Chicago churches before gaining a national following when they began recording songs such as “So Soon,” “If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again,” “Will the Circle Be Unbroken,” and “Uncloudy Day” for Vee Jay records in the 1950s.

The group gained fame in the 1960s by singing music that urged change on a variety of social and religious issues. The Staple Singers gained a huge audience with their first No. 1 hit, “I’ll Take You There” in 1972 and followed with top 40 hits “Respect Yourself,” “Heavy Makes You Happy,” and “If You’re Ready (Come Go With Me).”

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However, Pervis' last album with The Staple Singers was their first for Stax Records, "Soul Folks in Action" in 1968. The album featured new songs such as "The Ghetto" and their interpretations of tunes like Otis Redding's "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay" and The Band's "The Weight." He went on to manage the girl group The Emotions and operated a popular nightclub, Perv's House.

Pervis Staples was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame with his family in 1999. The group also received a lifetime achievement award from the Grammys in 2005.

Mavis Staples, the lone survivor of the group, said in a statement that her brother's childhood was filled with wonderful experiences.

"He liked to think of this period of his life as setting the stage for all that he wanted to do in life," she said. "Some of Pervis' best friends as a youngster included Sam Cooke, Lou Rawls, and Jerry Butler. Pervis and the guys would stand under the lamp posts in the summertime singing doo-wop songs."

Despite the success of Rawls and Cooke, Roebuck Staples routinely rejected offers to the group to record rhythm and blues, saying it was in conflict with his faith. However, it was with the nudging of Pervis Staples that the group compromised by performing message music in the 1960s, performing at music festivals around the country.

Pervis Staples was born November 18, 1935 in Drew, Mississippi. He and his family moved to Chicago for economic opportunities. That is where Roebuck Staples started teaching his children gospel songs to entertain them and occupy their time.

Pervis Staples was preceded in death by his parents, Roebuck and Oceola; and three sisters, Cynthia, Cleotha, and Yvonne. He is survived by his six children, seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. Funeral services will be held Monday in Chicago. **B**

Jimmy Buffett On Getting Back to Playing Live: A Pirate Looks at 75

BY MELINDA NEWMAN

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S. last year, it will surprise no Jimmy Buffett fan that the son of a sailor thought of a boating analogy as he considered how to navigate through the shutdown.

"The pandemic comes along and I'm gin-clear focused on the things that I actually can do, and the things that I can't do I can't whine about," he tells *Billboard*. "It's like you getting on a boat: If there's a storm, you can't go back to the hotel and order Eggs Benedict. You gotta get your a— through the storm. So that's what it was kinda like."

As the storm clouds begin to lift in much of the country, Buffett is primed to return to what he loves best: playing live. The man whom [Bob Dylan](#) has called one of his favorite songwriters simply says, "I consider myself more of a performer than anything."

Tomorrow, he will start a four-night stand (May 13-14, 17-18) at The Pavilion at Old School Square in Delray Beach, Fla., not far from his home in Palm Beach. The reduced seating allows for around 850 people per show— seated in fenced four-person pods. Tickets for all four shows at the open-air venue sold out in around 10 minutes.

Buffett calls the concerts "spring training" for when his summer job resumes — playing full-capacity shows, rescheduled from last year — in July. He played (and filmed) two shows at the Belly Up Tavern in Solana Beach, Calif. for an invited crowd of 40 people in April, but, otherwise, the Delray Beach concerts will be his first in 14 months, and his excitement is palpable.

Buffett's brand may be escapism, but he's built his empire and life on two pillars that embrace responsibility. "I was always raised to be not a hater. And I was always raised with noblesse oblige — to give back if you're

lucky enough — thanks to my parents," he says. "I just try to stick to those two things. I was taught not to hate in the segregated South. And I was taught to give back and I'm trying to teach my children the same thing."

Sandwiched between paddling on the ocean to start his day and an omelette for breakfast, Buffett chatted with *Billboard* over Zoom about getting back on the road, his time as a *Billboard* reporter 50 years ago, and what a pirate sees when he looks at 75 (the answer includes a trip to Antarctica).

What has your pandemic life been like?

I wound up places that I could. I wound up stuck. I mean, everybody's life stopped. I was 10 minutes from going to St. Bart's for the boat races that I do every year. And I wound up taking my kids, two of whom live in California, back, and I stayed [in Malibu] from March until May. And then I went home to Sag Harbor [N.Y.] and stayed there from May until September. And then I went down to St. Bart's, which at that time, there was no COVID there and I could go there.

I was working in all three places. I got little studios everywhere, so I was generating content and working on things and staying in touch with the band... The silver lining of this whole thing was I would have never spent that much time with my grown kids for the rest of my life. We're all with each other, but we're vagabonds, we're nomads and everybody's everywhere, but you know, six months with them was great.

Other than proximity, how did you pick The Pavilion at Old School Square for your re-entry to touring?

I've been looking at places I knew were making a really concerted effort to make sure everybody was safe. I saw this little place down in Delray, and I had friends that were recommending it to me. Dave, he's one of my contractors on my house, he's a Telecaster player. A great guy. He goes to all the shows. I said, "You go and tell me what you think."

So fans have your contractor to thank?

Yes. We were looking at Key West, but Key West was sketchy. They had volunteer security (*laughs*). Yeah. I've been doing this awhile.

Because of restrictions, it's one of the

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smallest audiences you've played for in decades. Does it take you back?

I think that you always have to look at when it wasn't like this, and when you had to play [small venues] and never forget that it can all go to hell in any minute, and never forget to duck. You know, those are the two things you had to [learn] coming out of clubs. And they stuck with me and, on occasion, you have to use those.

What were rehearsals with members of the Coral Reefer Band like, after not playing together for so long?

We utilized a little technology and so Mac [McAnally] and Eric [Darken] were in Nashville and they Zoomed into us and then Mike [Utley] and Robert [Greenidge] and I were together, but it was so much fun. I mean, that's my other family. It's like coming back from the war or something, you know, everybody's crying on the dock.

What do you do before a show to get pumped?

I'm usually going out and looking at the crowd first. I want to know who's out there before the lights go down. [After that], I can only see the first 10 rows [and] I've got to use that 10 to project to the rest of the people. So that's kind of my game plan.

How do you do that without people recognizing you?

There's always a little sliver [through] the curtain back there. You can get over there and look out and see, but it's still so exciting to me to get up there and do it.

You stayed in touch with your fans, the Parrotheads, through the pandemic with weekly Zooms for first responders, the Nothin' But Time virtual tour of vintage concerts and the video series (and resulting album) produced by your daughter Delaney, *Songs You Don't Know By Heart*, which featured you talking about and acoustically performing lesser-known fan favorites. How did that come about?

Delaney, who's a filmmaker, and a friend of hers from school, Dylan Orenstein, who works for us, were looking for programming or something that could keep people entertained. They said, "What about when you were playing, songs you didn't play and let fans do a set list?" They went online, maybe margaritaville.com or wherever,

and said, "Make up a set list of what you want Jimmy to play. We'll see if we get him to play them through the pandemic." We had like 10,000 set lists within the hour. Everyone voted, and we compressed them into a set list of songs you don't know by heart. And then Delaney filmed them. She was a tough interviewer (*laughs*).

In the episode with the song "Tin Cup Chalice," you talk about leaving Nashville and going to live with Jerry Jeff Walker in Coconut Grove in the early '70s. How different would your life and sound have been if you'd never left Nashville to go Key West?

I thought about that [recently], because we're going down to do the tribute for Jerry Jeff in June in Luckenbach, because he was such an instrumental part of my career and my performing life. It was a critical time when I really needed a shot in Miami to break in and the guy booked it the wrong week. I was stuck with nothing to do and little money to do it. He took me in. We worked on his car while I waited for my gig and then after the gig was over, he said, "Let's go to Key West." We got it in his '47 Packard and he drove me down there. I thought to myself, "What if we had just gone to Alabama Jacks had a beer and gone back to Miami?"

It changed your life.

Absolutely.

But you've always kept one foot in Nashville. Waylon Jennings, Merle Haggard, Lefty Frizzell all cut your music early on. And you've recorded with likeminded artists like Kenny Chesney, as well as Alan Jackson, Toby Keith, Martina McBride. Do you pay much attention to country now?

I do. When contemporary country took it to the beach, obviously we were a big part of that. And the other band was The Eagles. I am surprised that it's still staying on this long now. I figured they'd be over the beach... I tend to veer more to artists like [Kacey Musgraves](#), Lukas Nelson, people like that that are not writing hits for radio. They're really writing, like Harlan Howard said, those three-chords-and-the-truth kind of songs.

Last May you released your first album**of new material in seven years, *Life on the Flip Side*. It came in at No. 2 on the Billboard 200 and No. 1 on Top Country Albums. Do you still care about chart positions?**

Yeah! C'mon! Who gets to do that? You know, if not for [Lady Gaga](#), I would have [topped] them both, and that would have been fun. The best thing about it is I own the record company.

So you get every bit of the money!

Every bit of it!

You turn 75 on Christmas Day. So what does a pirate looks at 75 look like?

I'd like finish this rock and roll book I'm working on. It's based on when we went to Montserrat and did the [1979] *Volcano* album. I'm making it fictitious, but it's based on that whole episode, which you can't believe the s—t that happened. I still can't. There are so many stories and I file them away. It's a funny book, but it's a real rock 'n roll book. It's not a miserable experience, let's just say.

I kept writing some songs, and so instead of some 75th anniversary thing — I don't want to do that — I'd rather put another album out. I've got five songs now. I like what I'm doing. It's a little more kind of down island — authentic Creole and Trinidadian and Calypso kind of influences are in it.

Your writing days go way back.**You're *Billboard's* most famous alumnus, even though you had to resign as a Nashville reporter when your first album came out in 1970. For our 125th anniversary, we ran a review you wrote of Isaac Hayes.**

Isaac Hayes!

Yes, at Nashville's Municipal Auditorium. You were very positive. Evaluate yourself as a critic.

I can never give anybody a bad review because I knew how hard it was to get up there. Now, there has to be something toxic that [a review] says, but I can never do it because I knew how hard it was. I know performers who are scared to death to get up there and still do it. And I go, "Why are you that scared to get up there?" I mean, you should be doing something else if you get scared to go up there. It's one of the greatest joys you could ever have on planet earth to me. 📺

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Hipgnosis Songs Buys Nirvana, Aerosmith Mixing Engineer Andy Wallace's Catalog

BY LARS BRANDLE

Hipgnosis Songs continues its splurge, this time snapping up the catalog of Grammy Award-winning producer, mixer and engineer Andy Wallace.

The hitmaking music man has worked with many of the biggest names in rock, from Aerosmith to Blink-182, Bruce Springsteen, Coldplay, Foo Fighters, Linkin Park, Guns N' Roses, Jeff Buckley, Paul McCartney, Prince and more.

Since launching his career in the 1980s, he's earned credits on albums with more than 120 million sales, including Nirvana's *Nevermind*, Jeff Buckley's debut *Grace* and Rage Against The Machine's self-titled LP.

Over time, Wallace has notched seven Grammy nominations, winning best engineered album (non-classical) in 1998 for *The Globe Sessions*, and shaped some of the most recognizable songs of all time.

Wallace had his first major hit back in 1986 when he mixed and engineered the Run D.M.C. vs Aerosmith song "Walk This Way." The iconic rap-meets-rock crossover hit peaked at No. 4 on the Billboard Hot 100 and has chalked up nearly 150 million streams.

Hipgnosis Songs acquires 100% of the producer, mixer and performance royalties in Wallace's catalog, which spans 17,242 songs and includes 78 No. 1s.

Billboard estimates the value of Wallace's catalog at between \$12 and \$14 million based on a projected three-year revenue average of \$790,000 annually at a 15-18 times multiple.

According to a Hipgnosis statement issued to the London Stock Exchange, Wallace's revenue in 2020 topped \$874,000, up from \$784,000 in 2019, with the bulk of that

money generated in the U.S. (60%).

Financial terms of the deal were not disclosed.

"The records that I have worked on and the incredible artists that I have had the opportunity to work with throughout my career are very dear to me," Wallace says in the statement announcing his new arrangement. With Hipgnosis and its founder Merck Mercuriadis, he continues, "I'm fully confident that this substantial body of my work will be in the best of hands moving forward."

Wallace is represented by Mark Beaven and Andy Kipnes at Advanced Alternative Media, Inc.

The acquisitive Hipgnosis has recently bought the rights of producers Jimmy Iovine and Bob Rock, Colombian singer Shakira and rock legends Neil Young and Lindsey Buckingham, among others, and reportedly landed the Red Hot Chili Peppers song catalog in a deal said to be worth \$140 million to \$150 million. **B**

How Shelley FKA DRAM's Path to Self Discovery Helped Build His Comeback

BY YOH PHILLIPS

James Baldwin's 1974 novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, has a passage about pursuing a career in music that is still relevant today: "She was twenty and had come to realize that, though she had a voice, she wasn't a singer; that to endure and embrace the life of a singer demanded a whole lot more than a voice."

Musicians who come to this realization — they all eventually do — must make a choice: Accept all that comes when a career becomes a life to endure, quit show business like the character in Baldwin's book, or change with intention, rebuilding yourself from the residue of a dream deferred.

For R&B singer-songwriter Shelley,

formally known as multi-platinum rapper **DRAM**, enduring or quitting wasn't considered. There was only one choice to make: start anew, and begin again. This is much easier at the bottom when you're without a name, but after becoming a notarized artist, starting over is a different story.

Still, Shelley was willing to take the risk. "I wanted this more than I was afraid of it," the Germany-born, Hampton, Virginia-raised singer-songwriter tells *Billboard* over Zoom, following the April 29th release of his sophomore album, the semi-eponymous *Shelley FKA DRAM*.

Although it's been written in every interview, what can't be understated is how much D.R.A.M. — an acronym that stood for "Does. Real. Ass. Music." — accomplished in a relatively short time.

His 2014 breakthrough single, "**Cha Cha**," was a summertime sensation beloved by all. *Pitchfork* called it, "A song that sounds better, and giddier, and brighter, the more you play it, and feels good in 15-second snippets; in four minutes; right now, for the rest of the summer, and beyond." Then there was the 2016 follow-up, "**Broccoli**," a **7x platinum-certified** mega-single that peaked No. 5 on the Billboard Hot 100 and was nominated at the 59th GRAMMY Awards for best rap/sung performance.

These back-to-back moments of internet virality positioned the newcomer with the big voice and a bigger personality to be an on-the-pulse hitmaker in an ever-evolving streaming age. One who could produce giddy fluorescent anthems that moved bodies, blurred genres, and inspired memes.

Status-changing opportunities followed his breakout singles and well-received projects, as well as life-affecting habits. This duality of widespread success and private burdens brought the man born Shelley Massenburg-Smith to a professional and personal crossroad.

By Fall 2017, soon after The DAMN Tour with Kendrick Lamar and Travis Scott ended, so did phase one of his career. The world didn't know it yet, but Smith knew DRAM was done. Entering 2018 came the decision to reemerge as an R&B and Soul artist under his birth name to better present, in both art and identity, the maturing musician Shelley

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knew himself to be.

“You have to understand,” he explains. “I’m basically stepping back out as a brand new artist. I left everything that DRAM did on the table. This is me moving on, and moving past.”

Not everyone has the stomach to hit reset in a business that doesn’t always support starting over. “The bravery [to risk starting fresh] came from the desire for the reward more than the risk,” Shelley explains. “When I say reward, I’m talking personally. I’m talking about knowing I truly put out exactly what I wanted to put out. So whatever comes from this project is exactly what I want from it.”

When asked what advice would he give someone who is ready to change but is also afraid to leave everything on the table, Shelley candidly replies: “Man, look. There’s nothing worse than going about your life doing something that deep down you really don’t want to do. Or carrying on a message, or a persona you don’t feel connected to anymore. So once you feel that, and if the bad outweighs the good by holding on, you have to go back to the drawing board. There’s nothing wrong with that.

“I’m not saying that’s the thing to always do,” he quickly adds, “Sometimes you have to look at your situation and if it’s more beneficial to your life to continue on, do that, but bro, as soon as you feel you want to change for yourself, you have to make that, for yourself. Because the only one who has to live with that choice is you.”

Shelley FKA DRAM is the outcome of Shelley returning to his own drawing board three years ago. The ten tracks that comprise this long-awaited follow-up to his 2016 debut, *Big Baby DRAM*, distinguish how, in the quiet years of him away, a sophisticated vocalist with quiet-storm concepts and sensual songwriting has replaced the freewheeling rapper of cotton candy melodies.

“Maybe 60 or 70 records were made,” remembers Shelley when asked to tally the number of songs created while making the album. “The thing is, I’m a workaholic... but I know quality beats quantity. If I wanted to drop 50 songs, I could, I’m physically able to do it. But as far as my artistry and what I

really wanted to get across for coming back out I couldn’t have side distractions, the album had to be very stated.”

The standout H.E.R.-featured “Lay You Down,” was the first record, made in 2018, that Shelley and his core brain trust — Josh Abrams and Oligee [Oliver Goldsetin] of Pulse Recordings, and GRAMMY-winning producer Alan Watt (lead producer on “Lay You Down”) — made that matched what he envisioned his comeback would sound like. They continued conceptualizing a mature, contemporary take on rhythm and blues until Shelley FKA DRAM grew from that idea to a complete album.

Completeness, for the artist formerly known as DRAM, is what he believes will give his latest offering a lasting sustainability with listeners. He crafted each song intentionally to stand alone as individual records, but also, when heard together as a collection, they’re made to complement each other, like an anthology of love songs sequenced to be one concise story.

“A genuine expression of oneself through song,” he describes the feel-good, palette-cleansing music, before deciding on a better answer: “It’s me. It’s a piece of Shelley.”

The Duo Behind 2021 Brit Awards Sets From Olivia Rodrigo, Arlo Parks & More Reveal How They Came Together

BY LYNDSEY HAVENS

The creative direction duo behind Tawbox — Chris “Bronski” Jablonski and Amber Rimell — describe this year’s Brit Awards as “pretty emotional” considering that 2020’s ceremony was the last big pre-pandemic event in the U.K.

“Once the show started and you could hear this roar of an audience from back-stage, you’re like, ‘Oh my god, we have not heard that in 15 months,’” says Bronski. “It was amazing.”

This year, Tawbox creative-directed three of the show’s performances: [Olivia Rodrigo](#), [Arlo Parks](#) and [Headie One](#). “Our first performance of the night was Olivia, and we were standing with her manager and label, and you could hear gasping in the audience — that magic was back,” continues Bronski.

After launching in 2012, Tawbox scored its major break working with [Stormzy](#) in 2017. Now, the pair is working on the creative direction for his upcoming headlining slot at Reading and Leeds Festival this August. In spite of so many years and so much success, both Bronski and Rimell say it doesn’t feel like they’ve been doing this for nearly a decade, largely because, as Rimell says, “We’re always evolving. We’re constantly working towards the next thing and how we can progress from the last thing that we’ve done.”

Below, Tawbox breaks down how its three 2021 Brit Awards performances came together.

Olivia Rodrigo

One of Bronski and Rimell’s first Zoom calls was in fact with Rodrigo and her team. They say it didn’t take long to develop the idea for this performance — for which the 18-year-old wore a red Dior dress and delivered a more stripped-down rendition of the hit, standing mostly still in front of her mic — but that one thing became clear: The rising singer loves butterflies.

Considering Rodrigo’s past use of projections in photoshoots and, most notably, on the back of her neck in the “Drivers License” music video, working in that format — with the help of holographic and augmented reality technology — made perfect sense for her performance at the Brits.

Bronski says the butterflies took on new meaning as the idea developed, noting while it started with her being within this box surrounded by them, “towards the end it felt like the butterflies were breaking free, kind of going with the heartbreak story of the song.” Adds Rimell: “We took her inspirations and created this world for a live TV

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performance. And that being her first one [for an award show], we really wanted to make it really special for her.”

Arlo Parks

To celebrate the January release of Arlo Parks' acclaimed debut album, *Collapsed in Sunbeams*, the singer created a link on her website for fans to submit videos or voice memos directly to her. So before Bronski and Rimell started to ideate what Parks' Brits performance might look like, they listened to them all. “We wanted to open with these beautiful audio moments from fans that brought everyone together,” says Rimell, adding that they used the video floor to help dramatize the opening top shot. “Her performance very much was about ‘This is hope for everybody.’”

From that opening scene, the rest of the performance played out like a tightly packaged story. While there's a shining sun displayed on-screen through the first half of the song, when Parks delivers a spoken-word verse she added just for the Brits, the sun goes down and leaves the artist illuminated by the moon. The goal, says Bronski, was “to let her have that moment with the audience at home, before that epic shot where the camera just flies backwards and the new sunrise appears. The moon accentuates the start of a new time, a new journey, new post-pandemic era — however you want to interpret that.”

Adds Rimell: “That's a hard thing — especially when young, new artists coming up are put on the O2 arena stage — to have an audience, which is great, but knowing you've also got to connect to the millions at home. It's finding that balance.”

Headie One

Since Headie One was one of the Brit Awards' first bookings, Bronski and Rimell were able to get an early start on piecing this “intricate” performance together. They say they were largely inspired by the once-in-a-lifetime setup in which there were limited tables and chairs and no pit of fans surrounding the stage. “We were like, ‘This is probably the only time that we'll get to use the whole of the arena floor ... Let's do it,’” recalls Rimell. As a result, the pair managed to design a performance that took at-home viewers on a journey down the middle of the

entire space thanks to a robotic camera.

Using the full space also allowed the pair to create four distinct environments within the performance. First, there was the opening shot of the boombox (which now sits in Bronski and Rimell's car), decorated to look like the Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham where Headie grew up, placed in front of drill originators Original Farm Boys. Next, there was the Virgil-Abloh-designed box, plastered with negative news headlines about drill music as well as Headie's lyrics, from which the artist delivered his opening bars. Then there was the “ridiculous corridor” Tawbox built for AJ Tracey to join Headie in as the pair performed a politically fueled new verse together. And finally, Headie One was joined by Young T and Bugsey, plus dozens of dancers, to close out the set.

“After we've given the audience this mad ride, we did want to ground the performance at the Brit Awards,” says Bronski. “So we went for a super clean, slick, choreographic element on the main stage to finish it off.”

Selena's Music Sees an Uptick on YouTube After Netflix Series Part 2 Premiere

BY GRISELDA FLORES

After Netflix premiered part 2 of *Selena: The Series* on May 4, [Selena Quintanilla](#)'s music saw an uptick in views on YouTube, according to the platform.

Specifically, the Grammy-winning artist's catalog experienced a 70% spike May 8 compared to prior average daily views in 2021. The series — which documents Selena's extraordinary journey from playing small gigs with her family's band to becoming a chart-topping Latin icon — had a similar effect on her music's chart activity.

Back in December, when part 1 of the series made its debut on Netflix, the Texas-born singer-songwriter scored her first entry on *Billboard*'s [Latin Pop Albums](#) chart since 2016, thanks to the original series' soundtrack, which bowed at No. 8 on the tally (dated Dec. 19) and features classics such as “Baila Esta Cumbia,” “La Carcacha” and “Como La Flor.”

The resurgence of Selena's music both on YouTube and on the *Billboard* charts isn't an anomaly. Biopics inspired by the lives of Latin music icons are [propelling their music](#) back onto and up the charts.

“These stories are not only helping fans rediscover music from their favorite Latin musicians, but are also creating a whole new generation of fans that are hearing some of this music for the first time,” says **Francisco Ramos**, vice president content Latin America at Netflix. “It confirms that great music is timeless and binds generations together!”

When it comes to Selena specifically, “she transcends cultures, ages and borders and it is amazing that new generations of fans are getting to know her and her music,” adds Ramos.

Who's Up for a Liquid Death? Live Nation Signs Deal for Canned Water

BY DAVE BROOKS

Is Live Nation's sustainability agreement with Liquid Death a risky partnership?

On one hand, the agreement gives the mega concert promoter distribution rights and equity in a fast-growing mountain water brand that uses aluminum to help eliminate single use plastics, a key sustainability initiative for Live Nation. With an investor list that looks like a festival lineup, the agreement also gives the promoter proximity to artist backers including [Wiz Khalifa](#), [Machine Gun Kelly](#), [Steve](#)

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Aoki and **Tony Hawk**.

On the other hand, the company is called *Liquid Death*. The brand name and art direction are the clever creation of former agency creative director and copy writer **Mike Cessario** and pay homage to America's punk, thrash and metal scene.

The nearly three-year-old, Santa Monica-based startup sells water from the Austrian Alps, but *Liquid Death's* innovation is that it packages its water in 16.9 ounce aluminum cans, usually reserved for large beers and malt liquor beverages. Aluminum is much easier to recycle than plastic and more than 80% of aluminum cans in circulation have been recycled at least once.

The partnership is the latest from Live Nation's Green Nation sustainability charter, launched in 2019. LN has set a goal of aiming to phase out the sale of single-use plastics at all owned and operated venues and events. *Liquid Death's* still and sparkling mountain water lines will serve as the exclusive water option at more than 120 Live Nation owned and operated venues and festivals across the U.S.

Investors include The total Series C funding was \$15 million.

"We've always run *Liquid Death* like it's a band, so getting to partner with Live Nation is a huge milestone and honor for us," says Cessario, co-founder and chief executive of *Liquid Death* in a press release. "Music has been a huge part of our DNA since the beginning. We can't wait to get back to live shows, support our favorite artists, and help kill plastic water bottles at concerts."

Live Nation chief executive **Michael Rapino** said, "we're all ready to be back at live events, and as we return we want to continue taking steps to be more sustainable."

Live Nation recently commissioned a study of live music fans, and results showed that sustainability was one of the top causes they care most about. Plastic pollution was the number one issue for music fans, which 86 percent saying they reduced their usage of single-use paper and plastic products.

Liquid Death donates 10% of the profits from every can sold to nonprofits who are helping to reduce plastic-related pollution

and bring clean drinking water to those in need. 📍

Ambar Lucid Signs to 300 Entertainment as New Song Drops

BY TATIANA CIRISANO

300 Entertainment is welcoming 20-year-old singer-songwriter **Ambar Lucid** onto its roster, the independent label announces today (May 13), concurrent with the release of her new track "Get Lost in the Music."

Born in New Jersey to a Dominican mother and Mexican father, Lucid began writing songs in her mid-teens. She built buzz on SoundCloud for her dreamy, indie-pop sound and bilingual lyrics that often dealt with hardship, such as "A letter to my younger self," penned about her father's deportation when she was a child. A few months after she released her April 2020 debut album, *Garden of Lucid*, 300 Entertainment partner **Rob Stevenson** discovered her music on a Latin playlist.

"I was looking specifically for an artist combining world musical styles in a way I hadn't heard before," Stevenson tells *Billboard*. "I heard her voice and style and it blew me away."

Meanwhile, Lucid hadn't planned to seek out a record deal. "When I was younger, I definitely had a more villainized perception of labels," she says. "But as I started actually meeting people and talking to people in the industry, I realized that there are a lot of amazing people who are actually caring towards artists and just want to see them flourish."

When she met members of the 300 team virtually in late 2020, "I got to hear about how much they wanted to work with me and how passionate they were about my music," she says. When it came time to decide whether to sign with the label, she turned to her trusted tarot cards.

"My tarot cards told me that the group of people associated with this label were willing to listen to me, and that my experience would be determined based on really expressing my needs and what I wanted," she says. That gut feeling was confirmed when she finally met the team last weekend at 300 co-founder and CEO **Kevin Liles'** house, where they celebrated with cake.

At 300, which was just name-checked on *INC Magazine's* 2021 list of best workplaces in the U.S., Lucid joins a roster that includes **Megan Thee Stallion**, **Young Thug** and **Gunna**.

"Ambar is joining a team of risk-takers," Liles says. "Independence is in our DNA. We have a clear vision of how to support and nurture Ambar as she continues her musical journey. She has the freedom to be a creative artist with a family supporting her every step of the way."

The signing is also a moment of validation for Lucid, who was once told that she would never reach success with bilingual music. "It makes me think about where I could have gone had I taken that terrible advice," she says. "My job is to make sure I reach out to kids and tell them, 'Don't believe anybody who is trying to limit you and put you in a box.'"

She is doing just that with "Get Lost in the Music," her upbeat new **track** out today which was inspired by an experience taking psychedelic mushrooms while hiking. The song explores her journey toward self-acceptance, a theme she'll continue to probe on her upcoming EP out June 18.

"The songs on this EP represent a version of myself where I am proud to be who I am and I acknowledge my experiences for what they are, without any shame," Lucid says. "I'm unapologetically me."

Listen to the new track below, and stay tuned for the music video dropping later this afternoon. 📍

The Deals: Bitski Raises \$19 Million; deadmau5 Launches Label

BY CYDNEY LEE

Bitski raised \$19 million in Series A funding from investors across entertainment, sports, music and gaming. The NFT platform allows brands to create and sell NFTs through its platform as well as encouraging their clients to sell through their own channels.

Some of Bitski's investors include Jay Brown, co-founder of Roc Nation, [Jay-Z](#), Serena Williams, senior executives across TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter and Adobe, and more.

"I'm so excited to be able to play a small role investing in a company that is doing some really incredible things in the commercialization and accessibility of digital goods," said [Andrew Gertler](#) of AG Ventures and Bitski investor. "Lead by an incredible founder in Donnie, Bitski has from day one had a firm vision as a platform, and is fast becoming a destination for brands and developers to plug into and easily transact in this new frontier of e-commerce."

Bitski serves large brands including Adidas's debut NFT release with #1 NFL draft pick Trevor Lawrence and WWE's NFT drop with The Undertaker.

"I think of NFTs as a platform. Like web browsers in the late 90s, most NFTs are barely scratching the surface of their true potential," said [Donnie Dinch](#), CEO of Bitski. "NFTs unlock an imaginative, new design space for interacting with digital content. The implications around ownership and programmability are the most exciting technical developments we've seen in years."

Extreme Music, **deadmau5** and **mau5trap** launched **beathau5**, a specialist EDM licensing label. Brokered by UTA, the deal will allow the Grammy-nominated producer to create his own music library.

The new label will include five albums compiled by deadmau5 as well as contributions from mau5trap artists Jay Robinson and Maison Ware. Each release will be followed by NFTs created by a visual artist who is yet to be announced.

"Extreme is an excellent partner to get our selections in the hands of the right people. We're looking forward to working with them and providing the sonic beds for memorable placements to come," said deadmau5, whose real name is Joel Zimmerman.

"We're excited to help deadmau5 and mau5trap grow by entering the music library space, and Extreme Music is the ideal partner for this new collaboration," added UTA Executive [Rich Statter](#). "They have extensive experience in working with leading talent, and their first-class music is a sought-after product for industry professionals."

K-pop star **KATIE** signed with **ICM Partners** for worldwide representation excluding Asia.

KATIE rose to fame following her participation in South Korean television singing competition show *K-pop Star 4*. After her performance of "Where You Need To Be," the singer garnered 4 million views on South Korea's video-sharing site Naver TV Cast and ultimately won the season. In 2019, she released her debut EP *Log* with a remixed version of "Remember" featuring [Ty Dolla Sign](#).

"We are pleased to represent these amazing two artists, KATIE and [redacted], showing our commitment to the K Pop genre, as we continue to grow in this rapidly evolving sector," said [Jon Pleeter](#), Vice President of Concerts for ICM Partners.

BBR Music Group/BMG signed [Alexander Ludwig](#) to a global recording deal.

"I've been drawn to Country music since I was handed my first guitar at nine years old," said Ludwig. "Life is about the journey and I am so grateful to take these next steps in music with Loba, BBR Music Group/BMG and the community in Nashville and want to thank them for taking a chance and believing in me. I can't wait to share this music that represents a taste of what I love about Country music."

Ludwig is slated to drop his debut

self-titled EP on May 21. The record was produced by songwriters Kurt Allison and Tully Kennedy, who are also members of [Jason Aldean](#)'s band. The musician is also an actor, starring in films such as *Lone Survivor*, *The Hunger Games* and *Bad Boys for Life* and shows like *Vikings* and *Heels*.

Show Dog Nashville signed Texas singer/songwriter [Kimberly Kelly](#).

The musician joins [Clay Walker](#), [Krystal Keith](#) and [Toby Keith](#) on the label. She already has an EP and two independent albums under her belt, and is slated to drop her new album under the label later this year.

"She sings country music with emotion and range," said Toby Keith. "I am big on songwriters and her talent impressed me. She's a songwriter that has something to say."

"I'm thrilled to have a nod from Toby and the Show Dog team, and for the opportunity to make more music! Toby has done things his way, and I feel like I've tried my best to do the same," Kelly said. "I'm looking forward to having this great team behind me. I'm grateful David Macias [Thirty Tigers] came across my last ep, and believed in it and me enough to introduce me to Toby and the label."

LiveXLive plans to acquire the print edition of **Modern Drummer Publications Inc.**, the world's most read drum magazine. The deal is expected to close by June 30, 2021.

The acquisition will expand LiveXLive's growing list of distribution platforms (Modern Drummer's podcast, Modern Drummer Festival and pay-per-view events) as well as enhance Modern Drummer's brand.

"Modern Drummer is an outstanding addition to LiveXLive's family of franchises. Together with David Frangioni and his team, I am confident that we can substantially grow *Modern Drummer*'s business, brand, and reach," [Robert Ellin](#), LiveXLive's chairman and CEO. "It fits perfectly into our flywheel business model by adding original content, live events, pay-per-views, podcasts, subscribers, and NFT opportunities from their vast archive of material. Our future is rooted in offering specialized content and this alliance fortifies our position in

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the marketplace.”

Audio streaming service **Deezer** invested in live music streaming startup **Dreamstage**, speeding up growth and expanding operations.

Dreamstage has delivered over 50 live shows and offers artists the opportunity to go beyond ticket sales and brand sponsorships by selling merch, VIP experiences and raising donations. The investment will expand the company’s range of content and grow market share.

“We believe that DREAMSTAGE is the best live music platform on the market today. It’s well placed to become the ultimate online music destination for both fans and artists. Music fans can finally enjoy an authentic concert experience that is more than just a video call,” said Deezer’s CEO **Hans-Holger Albrecht**. “DREAMSTAGE and Deezer share a vision of supporting talent across a wide variety of genres. Live shows provide musicians with crucial revenue opportunities during these challenging times. This aligns closely with our mission to connect artists with their fans through our Originals projects, recorded sessions and editorial content.”

“DREAMSTAGE is rapidly developing as a leading premium player in the thriving streaming concert business, creating unique moments for artists and fans to connect across the globe,” added **Thomas Hesse**, CEO of DREAMSTAGE. “We are excited to join forces with Deezer who share our vision to innovate and capture this massive new opportunity. Together, we will nurture and propagate the emerging Live Music Video format, and help artists grow and delight virtual audiences everywhere. We are thrilled and honored to transform live music for the long term with Deezer as a visionary entrepreneurial partner.”

Beggars Group announced a partnership in a new music supervision, licensing and composition company **Colourbox Music**.

Based in London and LA, the company specializes in music for film, TV, advertising and gaming. Colourbox will work with Beggars to provide new opportunities in composing to their artists, writers and composers.

“We wanted to create a much broader

offering for our clients around our work in film, TV and advertising and are excited to partner with the Beggars Group - one of the world’s most respected and valued independent music companies,” said Colourbox founders **Ben Turner** and **Simon Astall**. “We’ve really enjoyed the process of collaborating with them in the past, and we are very aligned on a new company which will act independently of Beggars but have access to their catalogue, composers and artists to create new opportunities in this creative landscape.”

“As our artists and songwriters have become increasingly involved in projects across film, television, advertising and video games, music supervision has been something we have been exploring for a while now,” added Beggars CEO **Paul Redding**. “When Ben and Simon approached us to develop a new company that was much more than a traditional supervision company, it was an easy decision. They have a proven track record and it became immediately clear that their talent would integrate brilliantly with our record and publishing companies to deliver new opportunities for our artists and writers alongside developing an exciting new part to our global business.”

Music.com announced four new series to extend the company’s first person, artist-driven content. The episodes will include artist-penned articles, live storytelling and an archive of curated, tagged and indexed video song stories.

The company tapped artists from Republic Records for each series. Those artists are Shaylen, Lund, JESSIA, Social House, Peach PRC, Ayzha Nyree and more.

“In Republic, not only did we find the right new artists – each are undeniable stars – but they are also each easy to root for and fans will love the stories they share,” said **Chris Brannen**, head of artist and label relationships at MUSIC.COM. “We found a kindred spirit in the team at Republic. In the end, we are all incredibly focused on finding ways to put the spotlight on new artists. The unique spotlight that MUSIC.COM can shine is ignited by stories.”

8 Pound Gorilla Records signed **Saul-Paul, Elliott Park** and **Imagination Movers**. The label is the children’s music

division of comedy label 800 Pound Gorilla Records. Each artist is slated to release new projects under the new label this year.

WME signed **Kidd G**. Dubbed “**country music’s next emo rap star**” by *The New York Times*, the rising artist has amassed over 1.5M monthly Spotify listeners and gained attention after his viral “Letter to Juice,” where he paid homage to the late rapper **Juice Wrld**. He is slated to release his debut album this summer.

Capitol Music Group, Motown Records and **Verizon’s 5G Labs** have partnered on an emerging tech-slash-emerging artist program with will utilize 5G and multi-access edge computing to help up-and-coming artists reach fans in new ways.

Under the deal, three Capitol and Motown music artists will use advanced content production technologies at Verizon’s 5G Lab in Los Angeles – including a 5G-powered virtual production stage, volumetric capture studio, game engine technology and a host of Extended Reality (XR) production tools – to bring their creative visions to life. The program will additionally host technology collaborations with Capitol and Motown emerging artists throughout the year.

The first event in the series, which launches May 14, will be an immersive concert experience with Motown artist **TheHxlliday** performing his new EP *The Most Beautiful Disaster*. The performance – which will also leverage Supersphere’s Arc-Runner, a platform that eliminates the need for post-production by inserting creative graphics and lighting in real time – will be available in 180-degree live streams on TheHxlliday’s YouTube and Facebook pages, in addition to Oculus Venues and Verizon’s 5G Labs website. 📺

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Caleb Kennedy Exits 'American Idol' Over Controversial Video

BY KATIE ATKINSON

Top five *American Idol* finalist Caleb Kennedy is leaving the show after a video surfaced of him sitting next to a friend in what looked like a Ku Klux Klan hood.

While *Idol* and ABC haven't yet commented on the video or his exit, Kennedy took to social media to say he won't be on the show any longer because of the controversial clip.

"Hey y'all, this is gonna be a bit of a surprise, but I am no longer gonna be on *American Idol*," the 16-year-old singer tweeted Wednesday (May 12). "There was a video that surfaced on the internet and it displayed actions that were not meant to be taken in that way. I was younger and did not think about the actions, but that's not an excuse. I wanna say sorry to all my fans and everyone who I have let down.

"I'll be taking a little time off social media to better myself, but saying that, I know this has hurt and disappointed a lot of people and made people lose respect for me," his note continues. "I'm so sorry! I pray that I can one day regain your trust in who I am and have your respect! Thank you for supporting me."

Billboard can confirm that Sunday's episode will now include the top four finalists and one contestant will be eliminated.

Two of seven contestants were eliminated on this past Sunday's show, putting Kennedy in the top five for season 19. He was set to perform an original song on this Sunday's show as the contestants were [mentored by iconic producers](#). One of those mentors is four-time BMI songwriter of the year Ross Copperman, who marveled at the talent of the teenage Kennedy and praised the depth of his songwriting in an interview with *Bill-*

board before the controversy. "He really knows who he is as an artist," Copperman said of Kennedy.

Kennedy's mom, Anita Gay, spoke to South Carolina's [Spartanburg Herald-Journal](#), telling her local paper that the video was made when Kennedy was 12 years old and that he and his friends were imitating a horror movie, not the KKK. "I hate this has happened and how Caleb is being portrayed by people online," Guy told the paper. "This video was taken after Caleb had watched the movie *The Strangers: Prey at Night* and they were imitating those characters. It had nothing to do with the Ku Klux Klan, but I know that's how it looks. Caleb doesn't have a racist bone in his body. He loves everyone and has friends of all races."

See Kennedy's post below: [📺](#)

Jack Harlow Addresses Deadly Louisville Nightclub Shooting: 'My Heart is Broken'

BY GIL KAUFMAN

J[ack Harlow](#) posted an emotional message a day after his DJ, Ronnie Luciano (born Ronnie Tyshon O'Bannon), turned himself in after a Kentucky grand jury indicted him on murder and tampering with evidence charges tied to a deadly nightclub shooting in the rapper's hometown of Louisville. The May 1 shooting at the city's Ultra Lounge — where Harlow and his crew were hanging out before the Kentucky Derby — resulted in the death of a woman named Kasmira Nash, 37, and non-life-threatening injuries to a male victim.

"My heart is broken by the events that occurred over Derby weekend," Harlow wrote in an Instagram Story reposted by a reporter for Louisville's WDRB. "My heart breaks for Kasmira, her children, and ev-

eryone else touched by this tragic death. My heart breaks for my city, a place that's been through too much pain already. I've been in touch with Kasmira's family during this unimaginably painful time, and I'm grateful to them for keeping the lines of communication open."

O'Bannon is part of Harlow's Private Garden crew and the "What's Poppin'" rapper was seen on video near his DJ in the nightclub during the shooting according to [local media reports](#). The Associated Press reported that Nash was working at the club during a Derby party when the shooting happened and police said she died at the scene from a gunshot wound.

"Nothing can reverse what happened," Harlow added. "Too many lives have been changed forever, My life will remain committed to making Louisville a better place."

See Harlow's statement below: [📺](#)

Roc Nation Pairs With American Greetings For Custom Card Line

BY DAN RYS

Roc Nation has entered into a partnership with American Greetings for a line of greeting cards, digital e-cards and virtual paper cards, the two companies announced today (May 13). The plan is for the greeting card company to be able to leverage Roc's music client roster to create a line of products in what's being describe as a first-of-its-kind partnership with a music company.

"When we were introduced to the leaders at American Greetings and began discussing the idea of customized greetings, both on behalf of Roc Nation and its artists, we felt like it was a natural fit," Roc Nation's president of business operations and strategy **Brett Yormark** told *Billboard* in explaining how the deal came together. "It is an unexpected category that in many respects, given the breadth and depth of our

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talent, gave us a [different] way to reach new audiences.”

Initially, the partnership — described as covering multiple years and multiple artists — will be part of American Greetings’ “[Celebrity SmashUps](#)” line of digital cards, where customers can get personalized messages and custom lyrics from the likes of [Dolly Parton](#), [Michael Bolton](#), [Smokey Robinson](#), [Donny Osmond](#), [Shaq](#) and the Naked Cowboy. Eventually, a line of physical cards that will be found in stores, as well as virtual paper cards, will follow.

“We build relationships with leading global companies and we’re thrilled to add American Greetings as our greeting card licensee,” said **Tom Caravella**, managing director for Roc Nation United, a strategic licensing alliance between Roc Nation and United Entertainment Group, in a statement announcing the deal. “Roc Nation United is focused on creating innovative ways for artists and athletes to connect with their fans, and this new relationship with American Greetings is a great opportunity to do so in a very special and entertaining way.”

It’s unclear with Roc Nation artists will be participating, or to what extent, or what those cards and “SmashUps” may end up looking like. But American Greetings has a track record of getting into the music space; in addition to its “SmashUps” collaborations, its partnership with Robinson — [brokered by Primary Wave](#) — involved creating a new holiday just for the veteran crooner, while it inked a partnership with [Taylor Swift](#) in [late 2009](#) for a line of greeting cards and stationary that ran through the release of her album *Red*. Even further back, AG [struck deals with](#) Def Jam, Concord and Univision on ringtones, mobile phone wallpapers and e-cards, among other things aimed at the then-nascent mobile market.

“This partnership is an exciting and important part of our mission to inspire people to connect and help them make others feel special, whether that’s on a birthday or anytime they’re moved to share some happiness, laughter and love,” said American Greetings executive director of direct-to-consumer business **Rob Matousek** in a statement. “This announcement and the

opportunity to collaborate with Roc Nation and their incredible artists is also a reflection of our commitment to creating authentic content that is relevant and accessible to everyone.”

Trae Tha Truth to Receive Change Maker Award at 2021 Billboard Music Awards: ‘It’s Not In Me to Stop’

BY HERAN MAMO

Rapper [Trae Tha Truth](#) will receive the Billboard Change Maker Award at the 2021 Billboard Music Awards, Dick Clark Productions and NBC announced on Thursday (May 13).

The award honors an artist or group that speaks truth to power through their music, celebrity and community. Trae Tha Truth is being recognized for his philanthropic work and social justice advocacy. He is the second-ever recipient of the Change Maker Award, after [Killer Mike](#) of hip-hop duo [Run the Jewels](#) received the [inaugural accolade](#) at the 2020 BBMAs.

“Trae exemplifies what it means to be the change you want to see,” Datwon Thomas, BBMAs consulting producer and *Vibe* editor-in-chief, said in a statement. “He is always in a city near you, helping those in need after natural disasters, fighting for justice after tragic events and giving supplies to families to make it to another day. His name ‘Tha Truth’ fits perfectly with who he is as a community activist and we are honored to celebrate his tireless efforts and giving spirit.”

The 40-year-old rapper, who has been regarded as a hometown hero in Houston, has brought significant relief to his city over the past two decades. Following Hurricane Harvey in 2017, he founded the nonprofit

The Relief Gang, which provides natural disaster relief to families in need. In 2008, Houston Mayor Bill White marked July 22 as “Trae Day” to honor the rapper’s work within his local community. But his work extends beyond Houston, as Trae traveled to Minneapolis in April to support the family of his friend George Floyd during the trial of ex-police officer Derek Chauvin, who was held responsible for Floyd’s death and [found guilty of murder](#) and manslaughter. In July 2020, Trae and fellow rapper [Cordae](#) were [arrested](#) in Louisville, Ky., for protesting outside Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron’s home demanding justice for Breonna Taylor after she was killed by police.

“I don’t look to take the title of an activist. I just look to be Trae. That’s just me,” he tells *Billboard* in a new interview. “I’m the type of person that don’t stop. I can go for years at a time nonstop. And a lot of people feel like it can wear me down and take me out. But I feel like I’m built for it, because I’m so used to it. So when everybody else is tapped out or stressed, it’s normal to me because I have become that rock. I just don’t know how to tap out. And maybe that’s why it shocks a lot of people because they look, like, ‘Hey, you was just here today. Now you somewhere else tomorrow.’ It’s not in me to stop. I just do what I do.”

Trae is further committed to his work by turning his Change Maker Award into a charitable item. The BBMAs is partnering with Trae to offer the first-ever awards show [non-fungible token \(NFT\)](#), which will be available for purchase during BBMAs weekend via [Bitski](#) for a limited time. Proceeds from the Trae Tha Truth Change Maker Award NFT will be donated to [Angel by Nature](#), Trae’s nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting and uplifting the Houston community.

Hosted by Nick Jonas, the 2021 Billboard Music Awards will air live from the Microsoft Theater in Los Angeles on May 23 at 8 p.m. ET/5 p.m. PT on NBC.

Below, Trae talks to *Billboard* about how it feels to receive the Change Maker Award ahead of the 2021 BBMAs, the other title he has accepted, and how his late friends George Floyd, [DMX](#) and [Nipsey Hussle](#) in-

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spire him to keep going long after they're gone.

What was your reaction to hearing that you will be honored at this year's BBMAs with our second-ever Change Maker Award?

It's an honor to be recognized at the level that they are to come reach to somebody like myself that's in the field every day and still on the frontlines. Definitely an honor and a humbling experience just being appreciated. You don't really do things like this for those reasons, but it's a bonus when people do actually value what you do.

What does being a Change Maker mean to you?

I definitely want to change the direction, change the narrative, change the situation, and on top of that, change lives for a lot of people. Not only that, change the culture. There's so many ways I change, whether through the relief work, whether fighting on the frontlines, whether it's just being up for the people, whether it may be the music, whether it may be the accomplishments or coming where we come from where people are not expected to make it or even expected to even reach a certain level of status.

You went to Minneapolis recently to support George Floyd's family during the trial of Derek Chauvin, who was convicted on all three charges of his murder. Following the verdict, you've expressed joy in Instagram videos because of the justice served in Floyd's case. How do you continue to choose joy when you see pain in the communities around you?

I'm numb to pain. I deal with that 99% of the time. But when you have a relationship with the big homie up above, which is God, in every situation He sends to you, it's a lesson and it's a blessing. So even in all the bad that comes my way, I just find the way to understand what was the lesson that I learned out of that, and what's the blessing that comes about? So we make the best of these situations to find some type of joy, some type of breath of fresh air, because we don't tend to get it. Even in that situation is crazy. Everything in that case showed openly that he was guilty, guilty, guilty. But until that moment of them announcing it, me and his actual blood family still all felt

nervous, like there's a chance we could be stripped of it. But it turned out to be the way that it was, and that was a well-deserved, joyful moment. ... That was my homeboy, for real for real. So it was a little more personal with him as far as fight-wise. I fight for everybody, but for him, it was different because we felt helpless watching him lose his life when we can't be there to do anything.

May 25, 2021, two days after the 2021 BBMAs, will mark the one-year anniversary of the death of George Floyd. What is one thing you want the world to remember about your friend and who he was as a person and one thing you want the world to remember about what happened to him and what has continued happening to Black Americans?

George had a real big heart. Man, he was all about peace, non-dramatic, non-confrontational. He was actually gentle. Any video you ever find of George, you gon' see him positive, happy, laughing. You're never really gonna see anything of the negative sort. He was one of the first few that would comfortably bring the Bible to the 'hood to teach somebody young. We all have our history, we all have our pasts. We don't deny that. But I feel that's what made him who he was. A lot of us who go through what we go through, them situations build our character to make us who we are. So I definitely want people to know he has a heart, definitely a heart like no other. And he always been supportive of me the way I've been supportive of him. And I think this situation, man. ... God already had it written out how He wanted things to go. And I think He made it to where this situation was the situation to wake up the world, because it is a lot of situations going on, there's a lot of people that's not getting justice. But you got to realize when it came to this trial, everybody was tired, everybody was just like, "We steady losing left and right. They're not gonna do nothing to allow us any type of hope." And I believe God showed that it is possible, and this is just the start.

I read in a previous interview that George came up to you before you received a humanitarian award in Houston back in 2017 and said, "We're going to change the world one day?"

It's a crazy situation, right? So we can go from George Floyd to DMX. With DMX, man, there's a light around you. I don't know what it is, but I just see the light always. So it's crazy for me to always come across people, even down to my brother Nipsey [Hussle], [he] was a little brother to me. So a lot of people that people really start to understand later on in life, what they were, these are all my close people, man. ... I feel like maybe it's a piece of each one of them that continues to find its way inside of me, that continue to make me stronger and accomplish more things because I haven't stopped. And I don't think I'm planning on stopping no time soon.

They literally loved me to death as well as I loved them to death. It's pressure, but I'm built for it. ... It's so crazy people are bringing them up, and when they bring them up, they always find something within that one that's similar to me, as well as I'm similar to them. So each one of them have their own piece of me as well as I have my own piece of them. I didn't accept it at first. Me and **T.I.** argue all the time, we're like brothers, and he's like, "Man, what you're doing is way bigger than this music. Stop worrying about the music. What you're doing for the people is so much more." And I used to be like, "Bro, don't tell me that. You're just trying to make me stop rapping, and I'm not trying to hear that." **Usher** would come tell me, "Man, bro, what you're doing is inspiring." **Puffy**: "Man, Trae, don't stop what you doing. Nobody's doing it like you." **Busta Rhymes**: "Bro, we've got to give you your flowers while you're still here." ... I'm still gonna do what I love to do, which is my music and everything else. But I'm a little more comfortable now to where it doesn't rub me the wrong way when people say that now. I guess it's kinda like, I don't even want to say falling into your calling, but I just accept what I'm capable of doing. I don't know what my calling is.

What qualities do you attribute to someone being known as a hometown hero?

Now that's one title I've accepted ... because I know for a fact anything happening, I'm on the way. If I'm somewhere across the world and there's something happening in

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Houston, nine times out of 10, I'm gonna do my best to get back. And if I can't get back, I feel helpless. You could be heroes in so many different ways. At the end of the day, I just care. They need somebody to care, to feel them, to understand where they coming from, to comfort their situation as opposed to discredit their situation. They know that I'mma fight. Even if it's a battle I'm not gonna win, I think they respect that to the max because they know one thing for sure, he gave it his all for us. ... And you can never gain the trust of the people not being solid. You can never gain the trust of the people not being consistent and not showing where your heart really is. The most powerful tool that I have is I'm one of the ones that the people trust. They'll be willing to walk to the end with me.

I remember I was out there, I was at DMX's funeral. And an older lady come up to me and she grabbed me, she like, "Man, I just wanted to touch you to see what you feel like." I'm looking at her like, "What the f--- are you talking about?" I'm always respectful. And she was like, "Man, I watch everything you do. You are probably our only modern-day hero across the world right now. I want to see what your skin feel like." Things like that, when you see people with tears in their eyes, that's a different type of feeling. But it's also a different type of responsibility too. ■

Kara DioGuardi's New Singing Competition Puts Mental Health in Focus

BY CHRIS EGGERTSEN

At 12 p.m. ET today, the winner of *Sing It Forward* – a virtual singing competition created by Grammy-nominated songwriter and former *American Idol* judge **Kara DioGuardi** and presented by her non-profit,

Inspired Nation – will be revealed during a livestream hosted on the Warner Music-owned platform [Cover Nation](#) by YouTube music creator Kurt Hugo Schneider.

For DioGuardi, *Sing It Forward* isn't merely a competition; it's also a way to pair the mentorship of burgeoning artists with charitable causes. In addition to giving the eight semi-finalists a platform from which to launch their careers, *Sing It Forward* will act as a vehicle to spread awareness and raise funds for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) – specifically, its formation of a Youth Ambassador Academy, which will help young people advocate for their mental health and well-being. It's an issue that dovetails nicely with Mental Health Awareness Month and also, DioGuardi stresses, one that speaks to the plight of young artists making their way in a difficult industry.

"Some of the greatest songs out there were born of our artists' struggles," DioGuardi tells *Billboard*. "So as an industry, I think it's really important that we look forward [to] helping our artists with their mental health and their wellness – that that becomes something that is on the forefront of all of these record companies' minds when they're signing talent today."

Sing It Forward's eight semi-finalists (Jay Alan, Conor, Sydney Sherwood, Cameron Lane, Alexander Hensley, Jessa Pontier, Govan and Janie) were chosen from around 1,000 entrants who posted an original or cover song to YouTube, TikTok or Instagram with the hashtag #SingItForwardChallenge while explaining why the song was important to them. The winner will receive a raft of prizes, including a summer scholarship to the prestigious Berklee College of Music; an A&R advisory session with Atlantic Records A&R president **Pete Ganbarg** (also one of the competition's judges, along with DioGuardi and Berklee songwriting department chair **Bonnie Hayes**); a \$1,000 cash gift card; one year of free music distribution on Level; and the opportunity to host a livestream session on Cover Nation, the Warner Music-owned YouTube creator community which is hosting the competition.

Importantly, semi-finalists are also receiving virtual guidance from artist

mentors including Alex Gaskarth and Jack Barakat of [All Time Low](#), Charlotte Lawrence, [Grandson](#), [Ingrid Andress](#), [Lzzy Hale](#), [Pink Sweat\\$](#), [Tayla Parx](#) and Corby Besson and Jack Avery of the pop band [Why Don't We](#).

Sing It Forward is a re-branded version of New England Sings, an in-person competition and charity fundraiser DioGuardi launched via Inspired Nation in 2016. Held annually at the Ogunquit Playhouse in Maine, New England Sings was designed to inspire young people living in the region (ages 12 to 21) to follow their dreams while also using their voices for good by getting involved with youth-focused charities.

After the pandemic forced the cancellation of New England Sings' 2020 iteration, Ganbarg came to the rescue by introducing DioGuardi to Cover Nation, which helped her reframe it as a virtual (and national) event. In addition, Cover Nation's parent company, WMG, put \$25,000 toward the competition, lent several of its artists as mentors and made a donation to NAMI alongside Inspired Nation (Cover Nation also encourages viewers to give by hosting a donation button for the organization [on its website](#)).

"We're happy to host Kara and Inspired Nation's event to shine a light on mental health and the benefits of mentorship and guidance within the creative community," said **Scott Cherkin**, senior vp, global consumer acquisition & retention at Warner Music Group in a statement. "Cover Nation brings together some of the most talented and creative people across social media and provides a space for community and connection. We're excited to foster that support network and help these incredible artists move their careers forward."

DioGuardi's work in the non-profit sphere highlights her belief in the power of music to forge connections and change lives. "Music is even more important than it ever has been, because when you connect to an artist's experience...it almost becomes a form of therapy feeling like someone else out there has gone through what you've gone through," she says. In 2016, she founded Inspired Nation to help aspiring artists connect with music industry mentors while

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encouraging them to use their gifts in meaningful ways. She also created and funded the Phoenix Rising Music Program at Phoenix House, an “expressive arts therapy program” through which she oversaw the construction of five recording studios designed specifically for individuals, families and communities affected by addiction.

Through *Sing It Forward*, DioGuardi is doing her part not only to lift up the next generation of artists, but to encourage them to similarly focus their talents and energies on the things they believe in.

“I’ve always been in awe of youth,” she says. “I think they have so much more to say and so many great ideas, and we don’t...turn towards them and say ‘What do you think?’ We don’t give them a say [and] we don’t give them a platform to voice what they believe in. And I think we should.”

The *Sing It Forward* finale airs at 12pm ET today on [Cover Nation](#). Donations to NAMI can be made [here](#). 📺

BTS, Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga & More to Appear in ‘Friends: The Reunion’ HBO Max Special

BY HERAN MAMO

BTS, Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga and more will be featured on the upcoming *Friends* reunion special with the original cast of the beloved ‘90s sitcom, [HBO Max](#) announced on Thursday (May 13).

Friends: The Reunion will premiere on the streaming service Thursday, May 27, which coincides with the one-year anniversary of HBO Max’s launch that first signaled *Friends* would be removed from Netflix. [Jennifer Aniston](#), [Courteney Cox](#), [Lisa Kudrow](#), Matt LeBlanc, [Matthew Perry](#) and [David Schwimmer](#) will

return to the TV show’s original soundstage on the Warner Bros. Studio lot in Burbank, Calif., for an unscripted celebration of the Emmy-winning comedy series, which went off the air 17 years ago on May 6, 2004.

Other A-listers who will make guest appearances in the special include David Beckham, James Corden, Cindy Crawford, Cara Delevingne, Elliott Gould, Kit Harington, Larry Hankin, Mindy Kaling, Thomas Lennon, Christina Pickles, Tom Selleck, James Michael Tyler, Maggie Wheeler, Reese Witherspoon and Malala Yousafzai.

HBO Max aired a [reunion special](#) for the [Will Smith](#)-led cast of equally beloved ‘90s sitcom, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, in November 2020 to commemorate the show’s 30th anniversary.

See the official teaser for *Friends: The Reunion* below before it airs on May 27 exclusively on HBO Max. 📺

Mavis Staples to Receive Independent Icon Award at A2IM Libera Awards

BY PAUL GREIN

Soul and gospel great [Mavis Staples](#) is slated to receive the independent icon award at the 2021 A2IM Awards, which are set for June 17. Staples is the seventh recipient of that award, following Naughty By Nature, Nick Lowe, Funky 4 +1, Alejandro Escovedo, Suzanne Ciani and John Prine.

As lead singer for [The Staple Singers](#), Staples achieved stardom on Stax Records with such classic hits as “Respect Yourself” and “I’ll Take You There.” Two of the group’s singles, “I’ll Take You There” and “Let’s Do It Again,” reached No. 1 on the [Billboard Hot 100](#). In recent years, Staples has recorded critically acclaimed music with Jeff Tweedy, Ben Harper, Run

the Jewels, Arcade Fire and Hozier, among others.

The American Association of Independent Music (A2IM) also announced the performers for this year’s event — Grammy-nominated rock and soul duo [Black Pumas](#), Grammy-winning hip-hop artist [Lecrae](#), 2021 Brit Award winner Arlo Parks, three-time Grammy-winner [Fantastic Negrito](#), Grammy nominated singer Lido Pimienta, Malaysian singer-songwriter [Yuna](#), and the Memphis-based Stax Music Academy Rhythm Section.

“We are grateful to have such a stunning and diverse array of artists perform at this year’s A2IM Libera Awards,” Richard James Burgess, A2IM CEO, said in a statement. “... We are proud to use this platform to showcase and honor some of the brightest lights in the independent music world.”

The A2IM Awards honor “the hard work and boundary-breaking vision of independent artists.” The awards will be presented by Merlin and streamed exclusively on YouTube for the second year in a row. Fans can watch the show on A2IM’s official [YouTube channel](#) on June 17 starting at 6 p.m. ET. This year’s show is produced by The Control Room.

The Libera Awards are sponsored by Merlin, ADA, Spotify, YouTube Music, Amazon Music, Ingrooves, The Orchard, Mitchell, Silberberg & Knupp LLP, Qobuz, Redeye Worldwide and Virgin Music.

[Sweet Relief](#) returns as A2IM’s official charity partner for the Libera Awards. All proceeds raised during the show will be donated to career musicians and music industry professionals in need. Fans can donate directly to Sweet Relief on the Libera Awards [watch page](#) via the YouTube Giving donate button.

“Every year, the A2IM Libera Awards are a fantastic opportunity to showcase the immense talent that flows from independent artists — and this year is no exception,” said Jeremy Sirota, Merlin’s CEO, in a statement.

The Libera Awards are the culmination of Indie Week, the largest independent music conference in the world, set to take place from June 14 to 17. Indie Week, which will be held virtually for the second year in a row because of the COVID-19 pandemic, is

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sponsored by SoundExchange.

RSVP to the Libera Awards by visiting A2IM's [YouTube page](#) or by visiting [liberaawards.com](#). 📺

Demi Lovato Will Take Fans Into a New Dimension With '4D' Podcast

BY HERAN MAMO

Demi Lovato announced Wednesday (May 12) that she's coming out with a new podcast next week called *4D With Demi Lovato*.

The Grammy-nominated pop star partnered with Cadence13, OBB Sound and SB Projects on her latest project, which will explore the themes of identity, mental health, creativity, LGBTQIA+ rights and more. Lovato came out as [pansexual](#) during *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast in March, saying, "I'm part of the alphabet mafia and proud." Chelsea Handler, Jane Fonda and Jameela Jamil are some of the noteworthy celebrity guests she'll have on the podcast. Jamil [previously invited Lovato](#) to her *I Weigh With Jameela Jamil* podcast last spring to discuss her 2018 overdose and eating disorder.

"My new podcast #4DWithDemi will start rolling out weekly episodes every Wednesday starting May 19th!!! I'm SO excited for you guys to listen & get to know each of my special guests from the fourth dimension," she wrote on Twitter promoting her new podcast.

4D With Demi Lovato will premiere May 19 on Apple Podcasts, Audacy, Spotify and all podcasting platforms. New episodes will air every Wednesday, as well as their accompanying video versions on her YouTube [channel](#).

"I'm going to share what's on my heart and in my mind through conversations with very special guests," she said in the minute-long promotional trailer. "We'll dive

into identity, creativity, social movements. We'll explore questions about our universe, our communities and ourselves. No matter who you are, how you identify or what you believe, we should all be living life in 4D."

Michael D. Ratner, OBB Media founder, president and CEO, is teaming up with Lovato once more on the podcast after he directed the four-part [YouTube Originals docuseries](#) *Dancing With the Devil*. Her manager Scooter Braun of SB Projects will also be credited as an executive producer on the project. Lovato and Braun will also executive produce her new UFO investigation limited series on [Peacock](#) titled *Unidentified With Demi Lovato*, which she announced Tuesday.

"Building upon the success of the documentary, we couldn't be more thrilled to partner again with Demi through our audio division, OBB Sound, and continue to champion Demi's voice using the powerful medium of audio," Ratner said in a press release. "We have incredible partners on this show in both SB Projects and Cadence13, and look forward to sharing this project with the world."

Watch the *4D With Demi Lovato* trailer below. 📺

DJ Khaled's 'Every Chance I Get' Debuts in Top 10 on Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs

BY TREVOR ANDERSON

You know the drill: It's "another one" for [DJ Khaled](#). This time, the hitmaking producer lands a 17th top 10 on *Billboard's* [Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs](#) chart as "Every Chance I Get," featuring [Lil Baby](#) and [Lil Durk](#), debuts at No. 10 on the list dated May 15. The song comes from his latest studio album, *Khaled Khaled*, which starts at No. 1 on both the [Billboard 200](#) and [Top R&B/](#)

[Hip-Hop Albums](#) charts.

"Chance" heads all the Khaled cuts in the streaming race. The track begins with 17.8 million U.S. streams in the week ending May 6, according to MRC Data. The sum allows for a No. 9 entrance on the [R&B/Hip-Hop Streaming Songs](#) chart. In the sales market, "Chance" registered 2,000 song downloads in the same window and arrives at No. 17 on [R&B/Hip-Hop Digital Song Sales](#).

For Lil Baby, "Chance" secures his 13th top 10 on Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs, and second of 2021, after a featured turn on Drake's "Wants and Needs" peaked at No. 2. Lil Durk, meanwhile, adds a third top 10 to his ledger. It's also his second this year, following a guest spot on Pooh Shiesty's No. 6 hit "Back in Blood."

"Chance" leads eight new *Khaled* *Khaled* tunes on the Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart. Here's a full rundown of the new additions:

No. 10, "Every Chance I Get," featuring Lil Baby & Lil Durk
 No. 13, "Sorry Not Sorry," featuring Nas, Jay-Z & James Fauntleroy
 No. 17, "I Did It," featuring Post Malone, Megan Thee Stallion, Lil Baby & DaBaby
 No. 25, "Let It Go," featuring Justin Bieber & 21 Savage
 No. 33, "Body in Motion," featuring Bryson Tiller, Lil Baby & Roddy Ricch
 No. 37, "Big Paper," featuring Cardi B
 No. 46, "Thankful," featuring Lil Wayne & Jeremih
 No. 47, "We Going Crazy," featuring H.E.R. & Migos

In addition, the album's two previously released songs – "Popstar" and "Greece," both of which feature Drake, reached Nos. 3 and 6, respectively, in 2020. 📺

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Lil Tjay's 'Calling My Phone' Tops Rhythmic & Rap Airplay Charts

BY TREVOR ANDERSON

Lil Tjay crosses off a dual milestone this week in his *Billboard* chart career as he lands his first No. 1 on a radio chart — twice over. The rising rapper's "Calling My Phone," featuring 6lack, climbs to No. 1 on both the [Rhythmic Airplay](#) and [Rap Airplay](#) lists, dated May 15.

On Rhythmic Airplay, "Phone" steps to the summit in its 11th week, with a jump from No. 3. The single gained 17% in plays at monitored U.S. rhythmic radio stations in the week ending May 9 to become the format's most-played song in that week, according to MRC Data. That double-digit percent gain, notably, represents the week's largest percentage gain among the chart's 40 songs. "Phone" dethrones Justin Bieber's "Peaches," featuring Daniel Caesar and Giveon, after the latter's one week in charge.

"Phone" marks Lil Tjay's maiden visit to Rhythmic Songs as a lead artist. He previously registered two rhythmic radio hits as a featured act, first on Polo G's "Pop Out," which climbed to No. 9 in 2019, and on French Montana's "Slide" (also featuring Blueface), a No. 20 success that year.

Like Lil Tjay, 6lack also records his first Rhythmic leader, after having visited the list on four previous occasions. "OTW," a collaboration with fellow R&B hitmakers Khalid and Ty Dolla \$ign, served as his entrance into the realm and rose to No. 14 in 2018. More hits followed with featured roles on Normani's "Waves" (No. 33, 2019) and Jessie Reyez's "Imported" (No. 19, 2019), and an equal-billed collaboration "Stay Down," with Lil Durk and Young Thug (No. 33, 2021).

The Rap Airplay chart also welcomes its new champ, as "Phone" repeats its 3-1 move to lead the list. There, the single ascends

with a 12% boost in audience in the week ending May 9 and wraps the rule of Pop Smoke's "What You Know Bout Love" after a seven-week stint.

As on Rhythmic Airplay, "Phone" is Lil Tjay's third time on Rap Airplay, after "Pop Out" (No. 5) and "Slide" (No. 19). 6lack, too, nets his third appearance following 2017's "Prblms" and 2020's "Stay Down," both of which peaked at No. 17.

Beyond the new coronations, "Phone" also cracks the top 10 barrier on [R&B/Hip-Hop Airplay](#) through a 14-9 thrust. Its audience impressions lift 9% to 13.2 million in the week ending May 9. With the five-spot chart jump, 6lack achieves his highest-charting track on the chart, after a featured turn on The Bonfyre's "U Say" crested at No. 12 in 2019. Lil Tjay, meanwhile, nears his prior best, the No. 7 showing for "Pop Out" in 2019.

With the milestone radio success of "Phone," the single continues to push new boundaries for both artists' chart careers. The track [debuted at No. 3](#) on the [Billboard Hot 100](#) in February, an arrival that secured the first top 10 for either act, while its simultaneous [entrance at No. 1](#) on Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs gave the pair their first leaders on the latter list. 📺

Seether Scores Second Straight Mainstream Rock Airplay No. 1 With 'Bruised and Bloodied'

BY KEVIN RUTHERFORD

Seether strings together two No. 1s in a row on *Billboard's* [Mainstream Rock Airplay](#) chart for the first time since 2011, as "Bruised and Bloodied" rises 2-1 on the May 15-dated survey.

The coronation follows the three-week

reign of the band's prior single "Dangerous" last October. Seether previously led back-to-back in 2011 with "Country Song" and follow-up "Tonight."

"Bruised and Bloodied" marks the Shaun Morgan-led group's eighth total Mainstream Rock Airplay No. 1. It first ruled with "Remedy" for eight weeks in 2005.

Concurrently, "Bruised and Bloodied" leaps into the top 10 (12-9) of the all-rock-format, audience-based [Rock & Alternative Airplay](#) chart with 2.9 million audience impressions, up 5%, according to MRC Data. It's Seether's seventh top 10 on the list, which began in 2009, and its placement is aided by a smattering of alternative radio airplay in addition to its mainstream rock format success.

"Bruised and Bloodied" is the second single from *Si Vis Pacem, Para Bellum*, Seether's eighth studio album. It debuted at No. 3 on the Hard Rock Albums chart in September and has earned 60,000 equivalent album units to date. 📺

Regard, Troye Sivan & Tate McRae Reach No. 1 on Dance/Mix Show Airplay Chart in Record Time With 'You'

BY GORDON MURRAY

Regard, [Troye Sivan](#) and [Tate McRae](#)'s "You" surges to No. 1 in only its third week on *Billboard's* Dance/Mix Show Airplay chart (dated May 15), tying for the quickest coronation in the survey's 17-year history.

The song jumps from No. 4 a week earlier, after it debuted at No. 13.

"You" is the eighth song to hit No. 1 in as few as three weeks since the Dance/Mix Show Airplay chart launched in August

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2003 (when McRae was a month-and-a-half old). It completes the fastest trek to the top in over a decade, since Taio Cruz's "Dynamite" in August 2010.

The other songs to top Dance/Mix Show Airplay in only three weeks: Selena Gomez & The Scene's "Naturally" (2010); Madonna's "Miles Away" (2008); Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl" (2008); Madonna's "Give It 2 Me" (2008); Madonna's "Hung Up" (2005); and Britney Spears' "Toxic" (2004).

While "You" is the first No. 1 for both Regard and Sivan, it's McRae's second leader, after "You Broke Me First" ruled for five nonconsecutive frames in December-February.

With significant airplay on nearly all core-dance reporters, plus a sampling of top 40 mix show spins, "You" was able to outpace another trio of acts atop Dance/Mix Show Airplay (also sporting a three-letter word title): Joel Corry, Raye and David Guetta's "Bed" dips to No. 2 after three weeks at No. 1.

"You" registered its biggest increases on SiriusXM's BPM (up 32 plays in the week ending May 9), Music Choice's Dance/EDM channel (up 27) and WCPY Chicago (up 20), according to MRC Data. (The Dance/Mix Show Airplay chart measures radio airplay on a select group of full-time dance stations, along with plays during mix shows on nearly 80 top 40-formatted reporters.)

"It's one of those songs that as soon as you hear it, you just vibe with it and catch yourself bumping your head to it," Steve Pereira, Music Choice senior programmer, dance/EDM & Latin, muses of "You." "The production is fun with a side of retro and I feel like everyone can relate to the lyrics in some ways."

"You" holds at its No. 4 high on the multi-metric Hot Dance/Electronic Songs chart, earning top Airplay Gainer honors for a second week, up 67% to 4.7 million radio audience impressions. Concurrently, it climbs 32-30 on the Pop Airplay list. "You" also earned 3.7 million U.S. streams and sold 1,200 downloads in the tracking week.

Looking at the Top Dance/Electronic Albums chart, Flying Lotus takes off at No. 6 with Yasuke. The act's fifth top 10, a run that began when Cosmogramma debuted at No. 3 in 2010, opens with 4,000 equivalent album

units. Flying Lotus' other top 10s are Until the Quiet Comes (No. 2, 2012), You're Dead! (No. 1 for two weeks, 2014) and Flamagra (No. 1, one week, 2019).

On Hot Dance/Electronic Songs, the new set's "Black Gold," featuring Thundercat, scratches out a 42-18 surge, collecting 634,000 U.S. streams.

Also on Top Dance/Electronic Albums, ZHU debuts at No. 11 with Dreamland 2021 (3,000 units). The DJ/producer's sixth entry is his third to hit No. 11, tying for his second-highest position outside of Generationwhy (No. 1, one week, 2016). EPs Nightday (2014) and Genesis Series (2015) also bowed and peaked at No. 11.

ZHU scores the leading debut on Hot Dance/Electronic Songs with the new album's "Yours," with Arctic Lake (No. 16), and also enters with "Sky Is Crying," with Yuna (No. 39), and "Distant Lights" (No. 50). 

Crowder Claims Third Christian Airplay Leader With 'Good God Almighty'

BY JIM ASKER

Crowder, aka singer-songwriter David Crowder, achieves his third No. 1 on *Billboard's* [Christian Airplay](#) chart, as "Good God Almighty" ascends 2-1 on the ranking dated May 15.

In the airplay tracking week ending May 9, the single nudged upwards by 2% to 9.8 million audience impressions, according to MRC Data.

"There are so many truly great songs out there right now, so I am stunned to see 'Good God Almighty' hit No. 1," Crowder tells *Billboard*. "I am so happy and thankful that this song is connecting with folks in such a powerful way."

Crowder wrote the song with Ben Glover and Jeff Sojka. It's the launch single from his

album *Milk and Honey*, due June 11.

As "Good God Almighty" clears the goal posts in its 17th week on Christian Airplay, it completes Crowder's quickest trip to the top. His first No. 1, "Come as You Are," reigned for two weeks in March 2015, taking 29 weeks to reach the apex. "All My Hope" led for two frames in March 2018, wrapping a 30-week journey to No. 1.

On the airplay-, sales- and streaming-based Hot Christian Songs chart, "Good God Almighty" ranks at No. 3 after [soaring 14-1](#) on the chart dated April 24, when it was driven by the arrival of its official video. Lauren Daigle's crossover smash "You Say" dominates the list this week for a record-extending 128th frame.

"Good God Almighty" drew 1.8 million U.S. streams and sold 2,000 downloads in the latest tracking week, ending May 6. 

David Kada Secures Fourth Tropical Airplay Chart Top 10 With 'Se Va Acordar De Mi'

BY PAMELA BUSTIOS

David Kada captures his fourth top 10 on *Billboard's* [Tropical Airplay](#) chart as "Se Va Acordar De Mi" jumps 14-9 on the ranking dated May 15.

The song, the fifth single from Kada's forthcoming album *Así Tenía Que Ser*, rises with a 25% gain in audience impressions, to 1.4 million, earned in the week ending May 9, according to MRC Data.

Before "Se Va Acordar De Mi," the Dominican singer last reached the top 10 with "El Amor De Tu Vida" in August 2020. In total, Kada has placed five entries on the list, including two other chart top 10s: "Estos Celos" (2017) and "Amigo Con Derechos" (Feb 20-dated list).

▶ IN BRIEF

“Se Va Acordar De Mi” was written by Victor Noriega and produced by Victor Waill.

Ricardo Montaner & Juan Luis

Guerra’s First Joint Top 10: Elsewhere on [Tropical Airplay](#), [Ricardo Montaner](#) and Juan Luis Guerra’s first collaborative effort, “Dios Así Lo Quiso,” climbs 17-10 with 1.3 in audience impressions (up 98%).

The jump earns Montaner his first visit to the tally since 2015 with the No. 12 high of “Se Desesperaba (El Carrito Azul).” Previously, he scored a top 10 in 2005 (“Cuando A Mi Lado Estás,” No. 4). In all, Montaner has notched a total of seven top 10s.

Guerra adds his top 10 career count to 21, dating back to “Mi PC,” the six-week winner in 1998. He last secured a top 10 with “Lámpara Pa’ Mi Pies” in 2019. 

Market Watch

A WEEKLY NATIONAL
MUSIC CONSUMPTION REPORT



WEEKLY UNIT COUNT

	Total Streams	Audio On-Demand	Video On-Demand	Album Sales	Digital Album Sales	Digital Tracks	Albums Consumption Units
This Week*	22,095,834,000	19,250,709,000	2,845,125,000	1,914,000	499,000	3,763,000	16,344,000
Last Week	22,087,689,000	19,208,962,000	2,878,727,000	1,900,000	483,000	3,940,000	16,285,000
Change	0.0%	0.2%	-1.2%	0.7%	3.5%	-4.5%	0.4%
This Week Last Year	19,391,719,000	16,479,694,000	2,912,025,000	2,021,000	789,000	5,091,000	14,453,000
Change	13.9%	16.8%	-2.3%	-5.3%	-36.7%	-26.1%	13.1%

*All data measures U.S. activity as of the week ending May 6, 2021. All units counts are rounded to the nearest thousand.

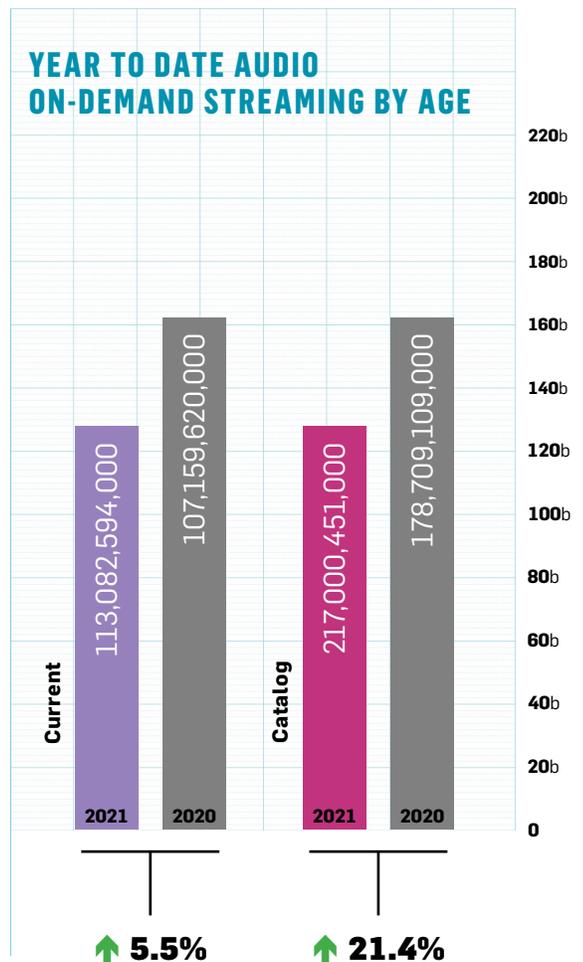
YEAR TO DATE

	2021	2020	Change
Total On-Demand Streams	380,293,181,000	344,383,180,000	10.4%
Audio On-Demand Streams	330,083,044,000	285,868,729,000	15.5%
Digital Track Sales	69,645,000	89,344,000	-22.0%
Album Sales	34,945,000	32,273,000	8.3%
Albums Consumption Units	281,998,000	247,274,000	14.0%

ALBUM CONSUMPTION UNITS BY FORMAT

	2021	2020	Change
CD Sales	12,971,000	13,443,000	-3.5%
Vinyl Sales	12,832,000	6,561,000	95.6%
Digital Sales	9,004,000	12,151,000	-25.9%
Other Sales	137,000	117,000	17.1%
Track Equivalent	6,964,000	8,934,000	-22.0%
Audio On-Demand Equivalent	240,089,000	206,066,000	16.5%

Album consumption units—also known as albums plus TEA plus SEA—consists of album sales; track-equivalent album (TEA) sales whereby 10 tracks equal one consumption unit; and stream equivalent albums (SEA) whereby 1,250 paid and/or 3,750 ad-supported audio on-demand streams (OAD) equal one consumption unit.



DATA FOR WEEK OF 05.15.2021

SONGWRITERS & PRODUCERS

billboard

MAY
15
2021MUSIC BUSINESS
SALES DATA COMPILED BY

HOT 100 SONGWRITERS™

	1	#1 4 WKS	LIL BABY
	2		LIL DURK
TIE	3		DAN NIGRO
TIE	3		OLIVIA RODRIGO
TIE	5		BILLIE EILISH
TIE	5		FINNEAS
	7		DJ KHALED
	8		YC
	9		DAVE BAYLEY
TIE	10		MASKED WOLF
TIE	10		TYRON HAPI
	12		MONEYBAGG YO
	13		OMER FEDI
	14		DABABY
	15		DRAKE
	16		ARIANA GRANDE
	17		REALRED
TIE	18		BELLY
TIE	18		DAHEALA
TIE	18		MAX MARTIN
TIE	18		OSCAR HOLTER
TIE	18		THE WEEKND
	23		POOH SHIESTY
	24		DUA LIPA
	25		POLO G

COUNTRY SONGWRITERS™

	1	#1 8 WKS	ASHLEY GORLEY
	2		LUKE COMBS
	3		JESSE FRASURE
	4		TAYLOR SWIFT
	5		ZACH CROWELL
	6		COREY CROWDER
	7		ERNEST KEITH SMITH
	8		JOSH OSBORNE
TIE	9		DREW PARKER
TIE	9		ROB WILLIFORD

R&B/HIP-HOP SONGWRITERS™

	1	#1 11 WKS	LIL BABY
	2		LIL DURK
	3		DJ KHALED
	4		YC
TIE	5		MASKED WOLF
TIE	5		TYRON HAPI
	7		MONEYBAGG YO
	8		DRAKE
	9		POOH SHIESTY
	10		REALRED

R&B SONGWRITERS™

	1	#1 8 WKS	GIVEON
TIE	2		ANDERSON .PAAK
TIE	2		BRODY BROWN
TIE	2		BRUNO MARS
TIE	2		D'MILE
TIE	6		MOOSKI
TIE	6		WOODPECKER
	8		SEVN THOMAS
	9		VARREN WADE
	10		MANEESH BIDAYE

HOT 100 PRODUCERS™

	1	#1 10 WKS	DAN NIGRO
	2		FINNEAS
	3		DJ KHALED
	4		YC
	5		TYRON HAPI
	6		OMER FEDI
	7		DAMN E
	8		JAY JOYCE
TIE	9		MAX MARTIN
TIE	9		OSCAR HOLTER
TIE	9		THE WEEKND
TIE	12		BRUNO MARS
TIE	12		D'MILE
	14		BLAKE SLATKIN
TIE	15		HARV
TIE	15		SHNDO
	17		DANN HUFF
	18		TRAVIS BARKER
TIE	19		KOZ
TIE	19		STUART PRICE
	21		REALRED
	22		IAMTASH
	23		TAY KEITH
TIE	24		ROGET CHAHAYED
TIE	24		YETI BEATS

COUNTRY PRODUCERS™

	1	#1 5 WKS	JAY JOYCE
	2		JOEY MOI
	3		DANN HUFF
	4		ZACH CROWELL
	5		ROSS COPPERMAN
	6		JESSE FRASURE
	7		SCOTT MOFFATT
	8		JORDAN SCHMIDT
	9		DAVID GARCIA
	10		PAUL DIGIOVANNI

R&B/HIP-HOP PRODUCERS™

	1	#1 1 WK	DJ KHALED
	2		YC
	3		TYRON HAPI
	4		DAMN E
TIE	5		BRUNO MARS
TIE	5		D'MILE
TIE	7		HARV
TIE	7		SHNDO
	9		REALRED
	10		TAY KEITH

R&B PRODUCERS™

TIE	1	#1 5 WKS	BRUNO MARS
TIE	1	#1 5 WKS	D'MILE
TIE	3		HARV
TIE	3		SHNDO
	5		WOODPECKER
	6		NATE RHOADS
	7		BLAQ TUXEDO
	8		SEVN THOMAS
	9		MANEESH BIDAYE
	10		DZL

DATA FOR WEEK OF 05.15.2021

RAP SONGWRITERS™

	1	#1 9 WKS	LIL BABY
	2		YC
TIE	3		MASKED WOLF
TIE	3		TYRON HAPI
	5		LIL DURK
	6		DJ KHALED
	7		POOH SHIESTY
TIE	8		MONEYBAGG YO
TIE	8		REALRED
	10		DRAKE

RAP PRODUCERS™

	1	#1 8 WKS	YC
	2		TYRON HAPI
	3		DJ KHALED
	4		DAMN E
TIE	5		EINER BANKZ
TIE	5		SYNCO
	7		REALRED
	8		SUPAH MARIO
	9		TAY KEITH
TIE	10		DR. LUKE
TIE	10		ROCCO DID IT AGAIN!

DANCE/ELECTRONIC SONGWRITERS™

	1	#1 47 WKS	FALLEN
TIE	1	#1 47 WKS	SAINT JHN
TIE	3		ANTON RUNDBERG
TIE	3		JAMES BELL
TIE	3		JULIA KARLSSON
TIE	3		TIESTO
TIE	7		BROCK KORSAN
TIE	7		CARDO ON THE BEAT
TIE	7		DAVEON JACKSON
TIE	7		KENDRICK LAMAR
TIE	7		KEVIN GOMRINGER
TIE	7		TIM GOMRINGER
TIE	7		TRAVIS SCOTT

DANCE/ELECTRONIC PRODUCERS™

	1	#1 13 WKS	HVME
	2		FALLEN
	3		DJ REGARD
TIE	4		HIGHTOWER
TIE	4		TIESTO
TIE	6		BLOODPOP
TIE	6		BURNS
	8		STEVE AOKI
TIE	9		RITON
TIE	9		THE INVISIBLE MEN

LATIN SONGWRITERS™

	1	#1 8 WKS	EDGAR BARRERA
	2		TAINY
	3		MORA
	4		BAD BUNNY
TIE	5		JHAY CORTEZ
TIE	5		NYDIA LANER
	7		HAZE
	8		CHRISTIAN NODAL
	9		EDEN MUNOZ
	10		ALBERT HYPE

LATIN PRODUCERS™

	1	#1 78 WKS	TAINY
	2		EDGAR BARRERA
	3		MORA
	4		SUBELO NEO
	5		ALBERT HYPE
	6		SANTANA THE GOLDEN BOY
	7		KEITYN
	8		SKY ROMPIENDO
	9		MANUEL LARA
	10		ERICK GUTIERREZ CERVANTES

ROCK & ALTERNATIVE SONGWRITERS™

	1	#1 6 WKS	FINNEAS
	2		BILLIE EILISH
	3		DAVE BAYLEY
	4		TYLER JOSEPH
	5		BLAKE SLATKIN
	6		OMER FEDI
	7		TRAVIS BARKER
	8		MACHINE GUN KELLY
	9		PRINCE
TIE	10		BILLY WALSH
TIE	10		MILEY CYRUS
TIE	10		THE KID LAROI

ROCK & ALTERNATIVE PRODUCERS™

	1	#1 14 WKS	FINNEAS
	2		TRAVIS BARKER
	3		OMER FEDI
	4		BLAKE SLATKIN
	5		DAVE BAYLEY
	6		AARON DESSNER
	7		TYLER JOSEPH
	8		JOEL LITTLE
	9		RYAN METZGER
	10		KBEAZY

DATA FOR WEEK OF 05.15.2021

ALTERNATIVE SONGWRITERS™

	1	#1 10 WKS	FINNEAS
	2		BILLIE EILISH
	3		DAVE BAYLEY
	4		TYLER JOSEPH
TIE	5		BLAKE SLATKIN
TIE	5		OMER FEDI
	7		TRAVIS BARKER
	8		MACHINE GUN KELLY
TIE	9		BILLY WALSH
TIE	9		MILEY CYRUS
TIE	9		THE KID LAROI

ALTERNATIVE PRODUCERS™

	1	#1 17 WKS	FINNEAS
	2		TRAVIS BARKER
TIE	3		BLAKE SLATKIN
TIE	3		OMER FEDI
	5		DAVE BAYLEY
	6		AARON DESSNER
	7		TYLER JOSEPH
	8		JOEL LITTLE
	9		RYAN METZGER
	10		KBEAZY

HARD ROCK SONGWRITERS™

TIE	1	#1 1 WK	JOE DUPLANTIER
TIE	1	#1 1 WK	MARIO DUPLANTIER
TIE	3		BEN THATCHER
TIE	3		MIKE KERR
	5		SHAUN MORGAN
TIE	6		JORDAN FISH
TIE	6		OLIVER SYKES
TIE	8		MASKED WOLF
TIE	8		TYRON HAPI
TIE	10		BEN PHILLIPS
TIE	10		TAYLOR MOMSEN

HARD ROCK PRODUCERS™

	1	#1 1 WK	JOE DUPLANTIER
	2		GREG KURSTIN
	3		ROYAL BLOOD
	4		DREW FULK
	5		SHAUN MORGAN
TIE	6		FIVE FINGER DEATH PUNCH
TIE	6		KEVIN CHURKO
	8		JOE BARRESI
	9		FOO FIGHTERS
	10		WIZARD OF OZ

CHRISTIAN SONGWRITERS™

	1	#1 4 WKS	STEVEN FURTICK
	2		CHRIS BROWN
	3		MICAH KUIPER
	4		BRANDON LAKE
TIE	5		LAUREN ASHLEY DAIGLE
TIE	5		PAUL MABURY
	7		PHIL WICKHAM
	8		CHANDLER MOORE
	9		DANTE BOWE
	10		BART MILLARD

CHRISTIAN PRODUCERS™

	1	#1 28 WKS	JONATHAN SMITH
	2		JASON INGRAM
	3		PAUL MABURY
	4		MICAH KUIPER
TIE	5		JONATHAN JAY
TIE	5		TONY BROWN
TIE	7		CHRIS BROWN
TIE	7		STEVEN FURTICK
	9		JEFF PARDO
	10		TEDD T

GOSPEL SONGWRITERS™

	1	#1 6 WKS	STEVEN FURTICK
	2		CHRIS BROWN
	3		BRANDON LAKE
	4		CHANDLER MOORE
	5		DANTE BOWE
	6		NAOMI RAINE
	7		TIFFANY HUDSON
	8		JAMES INGRAM
	9		ALTON EUGENE
	10		BRIAN COURTNEY WILSON

GOSPEL PRODUCERS™

TIE	1	#1 1 WK	JONATHAN JAY
TIE	1	#1 1 WK	TONY BROWN
	3		JASON INGRAM
	4		CHRIS BROWN
	5		STEVEN FURTICK
	6		KYLE LEE
	7		BEN SCHOFIELD
	8		KENNETH LEONARD, JR.
	9		DANA SOREY
	10		ALLEN CARR