CKAY

Nigerian born artist CKay was originally signed to local label Chocolate City in 2015. Four years later, as part of its expansion across Africa, Warner Music Group entered into an innovative, long-term partnership with Chocolate City.

The deal included investment as well as distribution, label services, access to Warner’s global network and, crucially, the option to ‘upstream’ artists in which all parties saw exceptional potential.

CKay was one of the first artists to take that route, and now, after his track ‘Love Nwantiti’ blew up around the world last year, he is set to become a career artist on the global stage.

Alfonso Perez-Soto, President, Emerging Markets, Warner Music, says: “While he was at Chocolate City we helped out with certain features, we were very aware of his talent and his progress – and also of his desire and ambition. So we took the decision to upstream him and ramp up the support, to build his brand.”

‘Love Nwantiti’ was actually released in 2019 and was followed by a flurry of remixes all aimed at different territories with a wide variety of featured artists.

Temi Adeniji, Managing Director of Warner Music South Africa and SVP, Strategy, Sub-Saharan Africa, says: “We saw huge potential in the track, and we were always looking beyond just Anglo/American markets.”

Two of the remixes, one featuring Nigerian singer Joeboy and Ghanaian singer Kuami Eugene and one featuring Moroccan rapper ElGrande Toto, gained serious global traction and the song has now been a Top 30 hit in the USA, Top 3 in the UK and No. 1 in various territories across Europe, Africa and even in India, where local repertoire traditionally dominates.

Perez-Soto says: “For us, it isn’t and has never been about one song. ‘Love Nwantiti’ is a fantastic track and a huge hit, but it fits into a much bigger strategy. Even before it broke, I was saying, ‘This guy can be our Ed Sheeran’ – I mean, why not? CKay’s a great artist, but he’s also incredibly smart and really open, he really listens and collaborates; we’re building a great partnership with him.”

Adeniji adds: “We are truly thinking of him as a global artist, and a lot of times, previously, African artists haven’t been given that opportunity because labels haven’t been able to grasp the concept that this is music and culture that is capable of transcending borders.

“CKay and ‘Love Nwantiti’ obviously had a moment on TikTok, but we were always focused on moving on from that, on translating that virality into meaningful consumption on DSPs and laying the foundations for a long-term career pop artist. And we did that in conjunction with our affiliates from around the world from day one.”

Perez-Soto concludes: “CKay is a result and reflection of our strategy in Africa: We think local. We are on the ground and we establish partnerships with companies that are embedded in the culture, but we also always think global and we always think big.

“African music is already global. It is at the root of all popular music. So why is there not going to be a major superstar coming from Africa and succeeding at the level of a Bruno Mars or a Drake? I think CKay could be that superstar.”