



Sam Ryder photo by Edward Cook

↓ CASE STUDY

SAM RYDER

Sam Ryder was one of the biggest breakthrough UK artists in his domestic market in 2022, scoring a No. 2 single with *Space Man* and a No. 1 album with *There's Nothing But Space, Man*.

The common perception is that his rise was built around two things: TikTok and the Eurovision Song Contest (Sam came second in 2022, with *Space Man*, losing thanks to an overwhelming public vote for Ukraine's winning entry).

Nick Burgess and Mark Mitchell, co-presidents of his record company, Parlophone, know that the real story is rather different.

Burgess says, "Sam did come to our attention via TikTok. And I thought, yes, great voice, great personality, interesting artist proposition, but we're not a label that signs TikTok cover version artists."

He saw enough potential, however, to "get him in a studio, see if he's got the writing chops" that would make the difference and seal the deal. Parlophone set up sessions with Amy Wadge and Max Wolfgang – and the first track to emerge was *Space Man*.

"We signed Sam because we could see he had star quality and that he'd built a connection with his audience, but then you add in the song-writing skill that became so evident so early on and we just thought, this is what we're in business to do: sign and develop artists like Sam."

The first big decision was to avoid the obvious route of releasing *Space Man*. Mitchell explains: "There was the possibility that it would have caught fire and almost run away from us, so that the song actually eclipses the artist, and that's not ideal when you're looking at long-term career development."

Burgess continues, "It helped that Sam was now writing more really beautiful songs, so we could put a handful of them out first, as singles and on EPs, to start building his story. We wanted to let people discover Sam, his voice, his personality etc. in a more gentle way rather than maybe have one track dominate and overwhelm him."

Throughout the process, harnessing and interacting with the TikTok audience was in the mix, but wasn't a central pillar. As Burgess says, "Someone who loves a song and wants to listen to it 100 times is not the same person who wants to listen to 15 seconds of a Whitney Houston cover. The journey from TikTok to sustained streaming success is complex and nuanced. Huge swathes of fans don't jump across from one platform to another."

Mitchell explains Parlophone's next steps, "In the background we set up something called Open Stage – it's essentially an email database through which we could start super-serving the most engaged element of Sam's TikTok audience. We wanted to talk

to the people who were actually interested in Sam as an artist. It was a fraction of his TikTok following, but they were true fans.

"The reality was, we couldn't just convert that audience, we had to do the same job as we do with every artist, which is the job we're here to do: develop them, be patient, think long-term."

Burgess agrees, "We had to build Sam and this whole project as organically and authentically as we would with any other artist. When the mainstream media did start to engage, they would quite often refer to him as a 'TikTok sensation', and that was something we have to fight against rather than encourage. We didn't want that notion to define or overshadow him.

"And then, out of the blue, we got a call asking if Sam would do Eurovision. My initial reaction was, 'Hmmm, I don't know...' But then you look at Måneskin's success the year before; it can be a jumping off point for a global rock act, so why not? The key thing is, they wanted *Space Man*. If it hadn't been about the song and Sam we'd have said no.

"Also, the thing is, we'd sit in meetings and say, 'We just need to get him in people's living rooms, he'll take it from there'. Because we'd got to know him by then, we knew what a fantastic personality he had, how likeable he is, how positive he is; we knew, given half a chance, the British public would fall in love with him – and they did."



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MARK MITCHELL
Co-President, Parlophone Records

The day after Eurovision, Mitchell recalls, "there was obviously a sense of elation – the event had been brilliant and Sam had been as great, but straight away we had to build on it, carry on the momentum. We didn't want Sam to now become 'the Eurovision guy'."

It was decided an album needed to come out before Christmas, with Burgess working closely alongside Sam and his team to meet

the deadline. "We knew he was no one-hit wonder and we wanted to prove it as quickly as possible.

"It was a very intense period. Sam is very exact, he doesn't just turn up do his vocal and leave, he's a proper artist involved in every step along the way.

"And alongside that, everything the label and Sam did together in terms of marketing and promotion really nailed his narrative – because it was authentic, that's why he's so amazing at articulating his story, because it's all Sam. That all helped set the album up as an important debut from a genuinely interesting and exciting new British artist."