

A&R: DISCOVERING AND DEVELOPING ARTISTS AND THEIR MUSIC IN 2023

At the core of a record company's DNA remains artist and repertoire (A&R) – the discovery and development of artists and their creative vision. The processes, platforms and skills involved in A&R continue to evolve and expand, albeit with recognisable fundamental roots which still show through.



Rouge photo courtesy of Warner Music South Africa

Jean-Sebastien Permal, VP for A&R, Continental Europe and Africa, Sony Music Entertainment, discusses artist development as the ultimate partnership between record company and artist – and also stresses the pervasive importance of long-term thinking. He says: “A successful artist and A&R relationship starts with a mutual understanding of what we are trying to accomplish from the get-go.

“That's why we like to have in-depth conversations and ensure we have the same understanding and chemistry with an artist and their teams right at the start. Because our job is to work for the artist, and we can only do that when we understand who they are and where they want to go.

“Once an artist has signed to us, they entrust us with their career, with their life goal and our job is to fight for that goal as hard as they do. And to adapt to them, because we are here to service them, not the other way around. We want artists to know that about us, even before they sign.”

He also outlines the strengths of a record company when faced with the sheer volume of music being uploaded daily across streaming platforms. “The need to grasp the attention of audiences is incredibly challenging and that's where the value of a record label comes into play, because we help artists cut through that noise using our expertise and all the tools at our disposal.”

An integral piece of what record companies offer, in terms of discovering and positioning new artists, is still the experience and expertise of the A&R team.

Konrad von Löhneysen, Managing Director, Embassy of Music, explains, “That side of what we do as an A&R department has never changed when we are discovering new artists. Right from the start we have to ask ourselves – ‘What do you hear in the music? What do you see in the artist? What is the special position this will have in the market and who is supposed to listen to it? Where can this artist go?’

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The single biggest shift in A&R has been in how and where artists are discovered. In some instances, artists can be seen and known around the world in days based on a single track or a short-form video measured in seconds rather than minutes.

For record companies though, this is still the starting point of a much longer game. **Nick Burgess, Co-President of Parlophone UK,** recounts the story of breaking Sam Ryder [see full Case Study on page 24]. Sam had blown up on TikTok, and Burgess says that was how he first came to the label's attention. But that wasn't why he was signed.



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Managing Director,
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He says, “We're not a label that signs TikTok cover version artists. We set up some studio sessions and 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 early on, we just thought, this is what we're in business to do: sign and develop artists like Sam.”

The pre-existence of a large Tik-Tok audience played very little part in that development, “Someone who loves a song and wants to listen to it 100 times is not the same person



Angele photo by Manuel Obadia-Wills

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 just jump across from one platform to another.

“The reality was that we had to do the same job as we do with every artist: develop them, be patient, think long-term. We had to build Sam's career and this whole project as organically and authentically as we would with any other artist.”

Kabiru Bello, VP, Global A&R, Warner Music Group, links back to a wider point about the increasing strength of homegrown talents – and how a connected, global company can make a difference to an artist or track with unrivalled speed and scale.

“There's been a huge shift with local music having significant impact in domestic markets. It's something to which we pay close attention and share with our A&Rs around the world. As a team, we participate in A&R meetings across the regions to know what they have and are looking for in terms of artists, songs, collaborations, and this way our A&Rs around the globe stay connected to build bridges for our artists.

“My strategy is to be the global bridge for our A&Rs, where I want to keep them very close and make sure we catch the momentum with ideas, to act fast and activate our teams

globally to amplify them and take things to next level.”

Access to these global networks also facilitates artists with the potential to create cross-cultural collaborations. This in turn can help domestic artists reach wider global audiences. Bello continues, “We have a broad network of artists, producers and writers around the world to draw from, which helps an artist find the right connections. Our A&R team will work with an artist to come up with an idea to collaborate to help increase their audience and global exposure.

“Of course, that relationship has to be authentic, and we approach each collaboration case-by-case. A good example of Latin and European music working together is the track *Dancarina*, a collaboration between two Latin artists, Anitta and Pedro Sampaio, and the French artist Dadju. It was the first collaboration between French and Brazilian artists that did well here and reached the Top 10 in France and #1 on the French Airplay chart.”

Permal agrees, “As a company we try to bring our artists together. For example, if one of our German or Nigerian artists goes to Paris, we want them to meet our French artists or producers because you never know what could come out of that partnership.” ♦