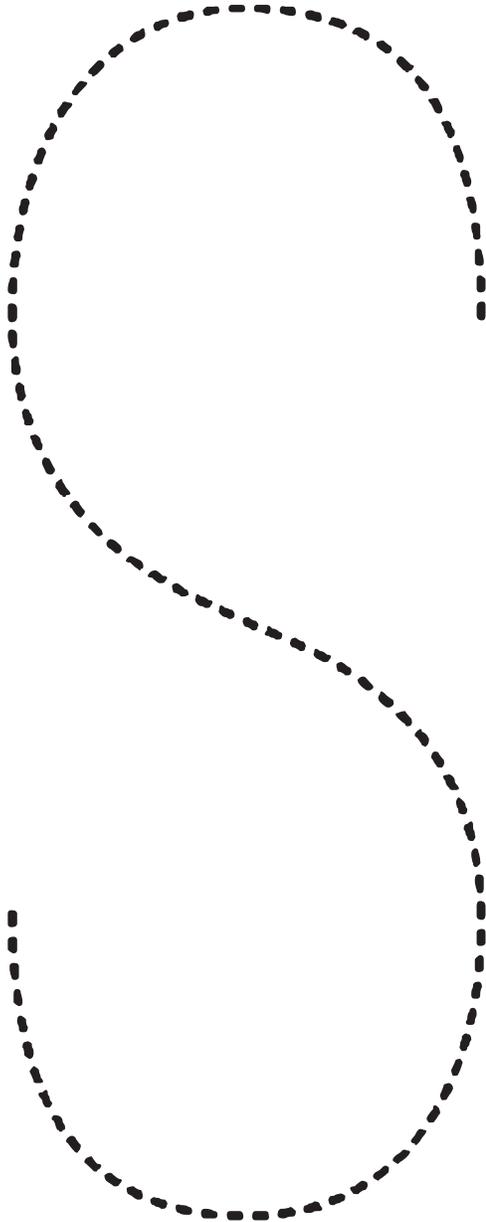


Rob Stringer

The Heat-Seeking Missile



ome execs enjoy the trappings of power, the pomp and circumstance of office. Rob Stringer is not one of these execs.

The **Sony Music** boss is never happier than when he's in the back of some tiny club, checking out a fledgling artist. Indeed, his obsession with A&R has guided his career and been a key focus of his tenure thus far as a label group head.

"It's all I've ever wanted to do since I was seven," he told U.K. paper *The Independent*. "I can look bands in the eye, still to this day, and not have my purity questioned on that level."

Stringer's advantage over the competition is that he has the innate ability to identify and sign top talent. As **Columbia Records'** Chairman/CEO, he was the dominant label head when it came to closing the top acts, especially the rock artists of the era; his pedigree was impeccable.

Subsequently, during his first year as Sony Music chieftain, Stringer's anointment of **Ron Perry** and the returning **David Massey**, along with his abiding confidence in **Peter Edge**, are indicative of his firm belief that a label's top dog should be a creative exec.

"I've known Rob for a long time and respected what he's done at Columbia Records," Edge told us recently. "He's been in the day-to-day business of running a label for years, so he understands everything that's going on, and it's super-valuable to have his insights. He's a music guy, which I really love, because you can have great musical conversations with him and he just gets it. He's also an aggressive player; his support is enabling us to make these deals and go for it."

There's something about Rob that's reminiscent of the golden age of the rock raconteur—those passionate free spirits who ran the business in the U.S.





ROLLING IN THE DEEP, AND ALSO THE DOUGH: *With Adele and Doug Morris*



With Steve Barnett, Beyoncé and Jay-Z

and the U.K. during the mid- to late 20th century. Like his forerunners, he can look an artist in the eye and feel comfortable about the commitment he's making, because he *believes* in the artist and the commitment he's making. Now, of course, Stringer's mandate is far broader, and his global plate is overflowing with responsibilities. Even so, he remains focused on instilling that same feeling in all those who work for him. And if he has the first meeting with a prospective signing, the

artist in question may well pass on taking a subsequent meeting with any of the others who are in pursuit, according to a top U.S. manager.

"Rob is a great partner whom I've enjoyed working with over the past 11 years," **Jonathan Dickins**, Adele's long-time manager, tells us. "The term 'artist-friendly' gets bandied around way too easily, but it is something that absolutely can be used to describe Rob and the way he supports and empathizes with artists."

Stringer's obsession began quite early. In 1976, the 14-year-old—dazzled by **David Bowie** and stirred by punk—started sneaking into shows at **Friars Aylesbury**, the coolest nightspot in his Buckinghamshire town. It was there he bore witness to the righteous racket of **The Clash** and was forever changed. Shows by **Tom Petty**, **U2**, **The Ramones**, **Talking Heads**, **Blondie**, **XTC**, **The Stranglers** and other breakouts of the era electrified him.

Stringer has been in the Sony system for a staggering 33 years—a hair longer than this wretched publication has existed. After graduating from Goldsmith's College, he entered as an A&R and marketing trainee at the London outpost of CBS Records, while his older brother Howard, who would one day become the first Westerner to helm Sony Corp., was an exec at CBS News. His marketing mentor was Nick Rowe, but it was Tim Bowen—who came to the Blighty office from New York—who moved him into A&R. His grounding in these two skills, Stringer later told *Music Week*, was vital for the “mixture of creativity and common sense” it bestowed. “A&R is schizophrenic,” he mused, “and for me to have a bit of schizophrenia in my makeup at that time was good. In marketing you can maybe end up a bit too rigid, especially once you’ve been doing it a while. A&R is not that—it’s lonely, it’s subjective and it’s far from rigid.”

His tenure at CBS saw Stringer exercising both his creativity and good sense in inking George Michael, Paul Young, Manic Street Preachers, Alison Moyet, Deacon Blue and Bros. He was tapped as Managing Director of Epic U.K. in 1992, two years into Tommy Mottola’s reign at the mothership; by 2001 was Chairman of Sony U.K. That move opened his eyes to the costs of being the boss.

“Running a label was in my comfort zone,” he recalled to *Music Week*’s Dave Roberts, “so I, perhaps foolishly, thought running a company would be an extension of that. But it was very, very different and very, very difficult,” in large part because he was removed from what he loved best: the day-to-day work of signing and developing artists.

“I didn’t handle that as well as I’d have liked,” he continued, “because I didn’t expect it and I just didn’t think about it enough. I ended up spreading myself too thin and it was much harder than I thought it would be, that’s the honest truth. But that’s a good thing in a career: Why should it always be easy? It won’t, that’s for certain. And I learned as



SYCO, KILLER: With Simon Cowell



“CHURCH” GOERS: With Hozier, Doug Morris and Greg Linn

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GRAMMY GANG: With Sylvia Rhone, Calvin Harris, Camila Cabello, Diplo and Ron Perry



BLIGHTY BEAT: With Jason Iley

much in that period as I did in any other.”

The next several years would be tumultuous ones. “A lot of people didn’t want me to win,” he told Roberts, “because of what I represented.” Still, he agreed to cross the pond and step into the role of Chairman of Sony Music U.S. While the new gig gave him “the chance to reinvent myself,” he noted years later, “I walked into a firestorm.”

Still, he acknowledges, he didn’t get the gig because things were going well there, but “because it was screwed up.” Removing an entire stratum of management, he made a big bet on a crew of young execs who, he felt, reflected better values than their predecessors. When Sony bought Bertelsmann’s 50% of the merged company in 2008, the new entity was dubbed Sony Music Entertainment. Stringer, now holding the title **Columbia/Epic Label Group Chairman** under **Rolf Schmidt-Holtz**, oversaw several deals during this period that would become fundamental to the company’s success going forward—notably the signing of Adele to Columbia and a deal with brilliant A&R man **Simon Cowell’s SYCO** that would bring in, among others, the mighty **One Direction**.

Despite the merger, the integration of Sony and **BMG** cultures was contentious, with the faction loyal to Stringer sparring (and, by some accounts, openly warring) with the crew reporting to **RCA/Jive** boss **Barry Weiss** and his consigliere, **Ivan Gavin**.

In 2011, former **UMG** chief **Doug Morris** replaced Schmidt-Holtz as new head of **SME**. Morris moved quickly to reshape the group’s leadership with a decided A&R focus. This meant putting **L.A. Reid** in charge of **Epic**, **Peter Edge** atop **RCA** and moving Stringer into a Co-Chairman role with **Steve Barnett** at **Columbia**, Stringer as **CEO** and **Barnett** as **COO**.

Columbia was surging at the time, notably on the strength of **Adele’s 21**, which bowed at #1 and went on to sell a staggering 11m+ and bring her six **Grammy** trophies (including the top three categories). Along with **1D**, she was the wind beneath **Columbia’s** wings as it took the marketshare lead. In late 2012, **Barnett** was tapped by **Lucian Grainge** in the wake of **UMG’s EMI** acquisition, settling in as head of **Capitol** and leaving his longtime friend and partner as sole **Columbia** chief. The following year, thanks in large part to collaborators **Pharrell** and **Nile Rodgers**, the Stringer-signed **Daft Punk** became a monster. Then came **Pharrell’s** own

universally beloved smash “Happy.”

“I can hustle with the best of them,” Stringer told us in 2013. “I can roll my sleeves up and argue against any other label to try and get an artist.”

In 2011, nearly five years before he launched **Patriot Management**, **Ron Laffitte** witnessed the Stringer magic firsthand as he was shopping a deal for Pharrell, his then-new client. “We were out playing really good tracks for people from what would become the *G I R L* album,” Laffitte recalls. “Rob heard a couple of things and called me up, saying ‘I need to meet with you and Pharrell immediately. I’m flying to L.A., we’re going to have lunch and I want to make a solo album deal with Pharrell Williams; this is his time,’ Rob said. ‘He’s a genius, and he’s making records that we need to put out and the world needs to hear. This is a guy whose cultural impact

should be on the level of Jay-Z and Justin Timberlake. I want to help get him there, and I have an idea about how to do it.’

“Before we sat down to have lunch with Rob, I said to Pharrell, ‘I’m going to ask you to just listen. Rob’s got a vision to share and you’re a visionary, so oftentimes you dominate the conversation because you have clarity of purpose. But I’d like you to give Rob the opportunity to tell you where he’d like to go because *he* has clarity of purpose.’ So when we sat down for lunch, Rob was like, ‘So what’s going on?’ and Pharrell says, ‘Nothing.’ Rob questioned, ‘Nothing?’ and Pharrell said, ‘Ron told me I’m just supposed to listen to you [laughs].’ Rob said, ‘OK, here goes.’

“It was incredible to be part of the process, because he was so clear,” Laffitte marvels. “This deal was all Rob Stringer—100%. He was the only one who had anything to do with it.”

In addition to his newest stars, mean-

while, Stringer notched successes with label annuities like **Barbra Streisand**, **Tony Bennett**, **Bruce Springsteen** and **Neil Diamond**, nurtured unorthodox stars like **Susan Boyle** and **Il Divo**, hooked up a pact with **Jack White’s Third Man Records** and quietly developed a stunning new project with Bowie. “I see myself as the curator of a modern art museum,” he reflected in his *Music Week* profile. “You don’t own it. You have all these masterpieces, but you want to put some brand-new art in there—you want to make it multidimensional.”

“Do I think we are a destination for sophisticated, tasteful, cool stuff? Absolutely,” Stringer opined in a *HITS* interview. “Of all the majors, we have a very good reputation in that area. I would never rest on my laurels, thinking that we’re the only people like that. But at the end of the day, artists

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—Jonathan Dickins



CHILDISH THINGS: With Peter Edge, Donald Glover (aka Childish Gambino), John Fleckenstein and manager Chad Taylor



DIAMONDS ARE A LABEL'S BEST FRIEND: Celebrating a milestone with Adele, manager Jonathan Dickins and Team Columbia

come out of the experience feeling very good about being here. I'm very proud of that fact."

"Rob always puts the music first—he starts with a song, an artist's vision, a creative idea—and everything follows from there," says **Ian Montone**, Jack White's manager. "His belief in the creative process is his strength, and artists love him for it. He's excellent at making people believe in what he believes, because when he believes, he's unstoppable."

2013 saw Stringer honored as Music Visionary of the Year by the **UJA-Federation of New York**, occasioning the customary array of bagel jokes from us.

In 2014 he received *Music Week's* prestigious Strat Award, which was presented to him by Bowie. "When I first knocked on the door of his office at Sony, New York, you can imagine my surprise

when a member of Daft Punk opened it," the mercurial rock icon recalled in his introduction, adding that after this robot ushered him to a seat, its helmet came off—revealing Stringer.

"This," he said, "is how far I will go for my artists," Bowie continued. "I found out that during the course of that day, Rob had not only guested as an executive third Daft Punk member at a lunchtime gig at a club in Manhattan, but had also led a **Dylanology** symposium at **Barneys** clothing store, sung falsetto on a new London Grammar track and choreographed a touching interpretive dance number to One Direction's 'They Don't Know About Us' for the cast of *Glee*... If you become the object of his enthusiasm, an artist will find a genuine long-term support that is sadly missing in the recording industry."

Stringer's Columbia continued its ascent with another gigantic, Grammy-dominating set from Adele (a Diamond winner by the fall of 2016), Beyoncé's monster, *Lemonade*, and Bowie's devastating swan song, *Blackstar*. All of this success—making Columbia the market-share monster of the year in a walk—served as prologue to the fall announcement that he would be upped to Sony Music CEO.

"Rob is a passionate and competitive executive who understands the importance and value of hits, and like a heat-seeking missile, he locks onto great artists," Morris declared upon Stringer's anointing. "Most importantly, he is one of the finest people I know. And moving forward, Sony Music Entertainment will be in the great hands of Rob Stringer."

The new boss also was also selected to

receive another prestigious trophy, the U.K.'s Music Industry Trusts Award. "He is acknowledged and admired by colleagues, peers and competitors alike," said MITS committee Chairman David Munns OBE. "His remarkable perception of how talent and artistry develop have brought him to the pinnacle of industry achievement."

Meanwhile, one of Stringer's last big acquisitions as Columbia chief, Harry Styles, silenced the skeptics with an accomplished, critically acclaimed solo debut that bowed at #1.

"Rob is a really good music executive," attorney Joel Katz points out, "but one of his most unusual talents is that he is a convincer. He can convince managers and talent of the excellence of Sony Music better than anyone, and convince them to sign with one of his labels. He speaks the language of managers, and he speaks the language of talent."

As Sony boss, one of Stringer's pre-eminent tasks was replacing himself as Columbia boss. True to his A&R roots, he selected former SONGS President and A&R head Ron Perry as the label's new Chairman, while also bringing in Dasha Smith Dwin as Global HR Head. He did what he believed was right by removing L.A. Reid after sexual-harassment claims emerged, empowering Epic prez Sylvia Rhone, and aided newly solo RCA chief Edge as they fortified their teams. By the end of year one, he could point to a sizable bump in revenue, and in year two he's added David Massey as he continues to reshape the company.

Mid-2018 saw Stringer journeying to Tokyo to address Sony Corporate and express his "very optimistic" outlook for the business. It was undoubtedly a proud moment. But we're betting he would've been just as happy in the back of a club. •



LEGENDARY: With John Legend and Chrissy Teigen



IN COLOR: With P!nk, Miranda Lambert and Randy Goodman

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