

R A I N M A K E R S   2 0 2 0



A professional headshot of Jeff Harleston, a Black man with short, dark hair, smiling warmly at the camera. He is dressed in a dark grey suit jacket, a white collared shirt, and a blue and white patterned tie. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# JEFF HARLESTON

## THE MULTITASKER

In January of 2020, months before he would become a central figure in the music industry's reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement—and shortly before he was appointed interim head of the Def Jam label—Jeff Harleston was honored by the legal community for consistently going above and beyond his role as a label lawyer. He became the first Black attorney acknowledged with the Entertainment Law Initiative Service Award, an annual citation handed out during Grammy Week.

In the time since he received this recognition, the man who began his career investigating government misdeeds has returned to advocacy, fighting to make the industry more just as co-head, with Motown boss Ethiopia Habtemariam, of UMG's Task Force for Meaningful Change.

The demanding Task Force duties and the leadership of Def Jam supplemented Harleston's already robust corporate role—alongside CFO/EVP Boyd Muir—which he performs in bringing Universal's myriad deals to fruition. As UMG boss Sir Lucian Grainge's General Counsel and EVP of Business & Legal, Harleston has played a fundamental part in the negotiation and codification of everything from artist and executive pacts to major partnerships with the likes of Spotify, Apple, TikTok and Tencent, not to mention all litigation. Yet he has consistently found the time and energy to take on additional responsibilities.

Harleston's steady professionalism, strategic smarts, dedication and ethic of service have been a through line in his career. And long before he was given oversight of the label group's Task Force, he was celebrated by his colleagues as a persistent, persuasive voice for diversity and inclusion.

**T**he ELI honor for the industrious multitasker, closing in on 30 years at UMG, was primarily for his work outside the office. It's an extraordinary CV. For



Harleston and Sir Lucian Grainge

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starters, he has chaired the T.J. Martell Foundation and sat on the boards of MusiCares, the RIAA, SoundExchange and the nascent National Museum of African American Music.

Furthermore, in what he has called one of his proudest moments, he was a founder of the Universal/Motown Fund, a \$2 million endowment dedicated to providing financial assistance to artists active from the '50s to the '70s. Beyond his work with those organizations, he mentors UMG employees from around the world, emphasizing the cultivation of diversity and inclusion.

In presenting the ELI award, Grainge declared, "UMG would not be the company it is today without Jeff's insights, instincts and expertise. Jeff is so much more than just a brilliant attorney with an ear for talent and a mind for business: He's also a man who never forgets that—beyond any transaction—it'sulti-

mately the artists who matter most."

"Jeff has always been a champion of emerging voices," Grainge added. "It's why he always invests in building long-term relationships. And it's why, even in the toughest negotiations, he always seeks to find a win-win for everyone. But Jeff's contributions extend far beyond UMG. He mentors. He volunteers. Of course, Jeff does all this very quietly, which makes [the] award for distinguished service all the more meaningful."

**F**ive months after the award presentation, Harleston would take that ethic of service to the next level. With Motown head Habtemariam, he was put in charge of the Task Force for Meaningful Change, a group assembled in response to the crisis that erupted after George Floyd's death at the hands



*With Marc Byers, Ethiopia Habtemariam, Berry Gordy Steve Barnett, Michelle Jubelirer and Bruce Resnikoff*

of Minneapolis police in May. In addition to grappling with the biz's response to such horrors and the systemic racism that drives them, the Task Force also sought to address and change the industry's own structural inequality.

"There are the issues around Black artists and the contracts that they signed, or in some instances probably didn't even sign, and the way that they were treated on the business side," Harleston told *HITS* after the task force was formed. "The importance of that legacy may not be readily apparent to someone in 2020. But it's very important that the record industry understand and appreciate the connection."

"All this is part of why our artists are looking at us to see what we're going to do to make it better. We have two constituencies that matter the most to us: our artists and our employees. And these are the issues that have to be addressed."

**P**olitics were the Boston native's first calling. After graduating from Boalt Hall School of Law at UC Berkeley, his first high-profile work was as an Associate Independent Counsel during the



investigation and prosecution of the Iran/Contra scandal. He also worked as a litigation associate at the firm of Covington & Burling in Washington, D.C.

Harleston first entered the music business in 1993, joining MCA Music Entertainment Group as Associate Director of Business and Legal Affairs; he subsequently worked his way up to SVP Biz & Legal. Geffen Records absorbed MCA in 2003 and Harleston became EVP/GM of the label, working with the likes of Mary J. Blige, Nelly Furtado and Angels and Airwaves.

He returned to the corporate parent as SVP of Business & Legal Affairs and was promoted to EVP in February 2011. His work since then has attracted significant attention in the legal community.

From his position of power, Harleston has been consistently focused on opening doors for people who haven't had opportunities and access commensurate with their gifts.

"The music industry is a relatively insular business; oftentimes jobs are filled before anyone even knows they're open. I'm desperate to get people into the pool," he told *HITS* in the summer of 2020. "We have an obligation to provide better training and mentorship opportunities. I've had some terrific mentors in my career, and I know I wouldn't be where I am now without those opportunities. I mentor several people; I think that's part of our responsibility as managers and leaders."

"It's surprising that there haven't been more opportunities," Harleston continued, "particularly when we're coming out of a period over the last several years when Black music, particularly hip-hop, has been one of the most dominant genres. It's driven the streaming revolution. Despite that, executives who have worked in the areas of Black music or hip-hop have not seen the same growth during that period of time. To me, that's quite an indictment."

Since November 2015, Harleston has been General Counsel and EVP of Business & Legal Affairs. He added the title of interim head of Def Jam in February 2020; one of his first moves was to sign Public Enemy to the label they helped build in the 1980s and '90s.



Clockwise from top left: With Steve Booms; Birdman; and Rosemary Carroll; Def Jam Africa logo; with Monte Lipman and Boyd Muir; and Janet Jackson

It was as much a political decision as a musical one. “As we continue to confront inequality and injustice, we need PE’s voice in the national dialogue,” Harleston said at the time of their signing.

He also helped give the label’s brand a new global reach, as the company announced the launch of **Def Jam Africa**. The imprint, with an initial roster of six South African and two Nigerian artists, was to be helmed by the MD of UMG’s Sub-Saharan Africa & South Africa division, Sipho Dlamini.

Harleston’s focus since June 2020 has been on transforming the music industry narrative via the \$25 million fund created by UMG to focus on equality, justice and inclusion.

**O**n the heels of Blackout Tuesday, Harleston told *HITS*, the goal is to play a sustained role in effecting systemic change. He and Habtemariam needed to respond promptly, which meant supporting protesters, but also creating long-term initiatives.

**“WE DON’T NEED TO JUST EMBRACE CHANGE IN OUR BUSINESS. WE NEED TO EMBRACE CHANGE IN OUR COMPANIES, WE NEED TO EMBRACE CHANGE IN OUR LAW FIRMS, WE NEED TO EMBRACE CHANGE IN OUR INSTITUTIONS. EMBRACE IS REALLY THE WORD. BECAUSE ONLY THROUGH CHANGE WILL WE CONTINUE TO GROW AND EVOLVE.”**

“We divided up the workstreams; aid was a big part of it,” he said. “We were set on identifying organizations to get funds flowing immediately.” UMG Africa head Dlamini, as well as execs in the U.K., Canada, Australia, Germany, France, Southeast Asia and elsewhere, were invited aboard to give the Task Force a truly global presence.

“We want to turn the spotlight on ourselves in terms of institutional change,” Harleston continued. “How can we be more responsive not only in terms of diversity, but equity and inclusion in the workforce, with a real focus on opportunities for Black leadership? This is something I’ve been very passionate about for quite some time and have spoken about extensively.”

That passion for meeting the challenges of the times and creating change for the common good was indeed on display that January afternoon when he accepted the ELI award.

“What we have to do and what

we have learned to do is deal with change,” Harleston said in what now seems like a prescient speech. “Change is hard. It can be abrupt, it can be unexpected and it can be painful, but it’s important and it has to happen. We have learned to adapt. We have learned concepts like transparency and how important that is, and we have worked to incorporate that.”

“We don’t need to just embrace change in our business. We need to embrace change in our companies, we need to embrace change in our law firms and we need to embrace change in our institutions. Embrace is really the word. Because only through change will we continue to grow and evolve.

“The only reason our business is strong today is because we figured it out. We didn’t run from it; we didn’t stick our head in the sand. We figured it out.” ■



Leonard Brooks, Cash Money's Ronald "Slim" Williams, attorney Vernon Brown, Harleston