

A portrait of Michelle Jubelirer, a woman with long brown hair and bangs, wearing a black leather jacket. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a window and some furniture.

# MICHELLE JUBELIRER THE HEART OF CAPITOL MUSIC GROUP



*Michelle Jubelirer, Sir Lucian Grainge, Sam Smith and Steve Barnett*

On Grammy night Feb. 8, 2015 at L.A.'s Staples Center, Capitol Music Group truly arrived. The behemoth built by Steve Barnett and a team headed by COO Michelle Jubelirer swept the Big Four categories: Best New Artist, Record and Song of the Year (for rookie breakout Sam Smith) and Album of the Year (for veteran Beck). It was a night of exhilaration for the Tower Team and a vindication of the vision they'd toiled assiduously to realize in the preceding years. For Jubelirer, it was a landmark experience, as the focused, intense process she'd joined two years earlier became a fusillade of champagne corks and confetti.

Jubelirer, who was tapped in late 2020 to co-head the company (as President/COO) in tandem with Jeff Vaughn as successors to Barnett, is in many ways a quintessential new-school leader—artist-friendly, forthright, politically progressive—but with a style all her own.

She has long described herself as a “rocker chick,” and her wardrobe runs the gamut of black—with a trademark leather jacket in place of the typical power blazer. This is the outward manifestation of her down-to-earth, creatively unconventional approach.



Top, with Jody Gerson; bottom, with Michele Anthony; right, with Aaron Bay-Schuck and Eric Greenspan

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As Barnett’s first pick for his Tower team and a key steward of his vision, she has been a strong booster of Capitol acts—including Sam Smith, Halsey, Lewis Capaldi and Beck—and CMG’s productive affiliates, notably Ethiopia Habtemariam’s Motown, Coach K and P’s Quality Control, Jacqueline Saturn’s Caroline, Elliot Grainge’s 10K Projects and Toby Andrews and Jeremy Vuernick’s Astralwerks.

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She worked in the label system early in her professional life and then exited to become an artist attorney—making a name for herself as both an inventive, outside-the-box dealmaker and a fearsome negotiator. The skills she honed during that chapter of her career ultimately led to a new—and much bigger—label opportunity at Barnett’s Tower.

It’s been a bit of a winding path for Jubelirer—one that began, of all places, in Altoona.

**F**or much of the populace in small-town Pennsylvania, high school is life’s peak experience—a whirlwind of football

games and wrestling matches, pep rallies and bonfires, where 11th grade prom dates become post-graduation husbands, with a possible detour to Penn State or one of the nearby colleges. Your hometown is where you were born and raised, and where you will raise your own family. For Jubelirer, watching her mother navigate her own career—after being widowed when Michelle was three—instilled in her a drive to succeed. Her mom became a head of special education and ultimately an elementary school principal.

Jubelirer reminisced to *HITS* in 2015 about high school years spent “listening incessantly to Nirvana’s *Nevermind* and Pearl Jam’s *Ten*, dreaming of one day leaving Altoona and having a career in the music business.”

“I was studious, very social and outspoken,” she recalled of her youth to *Music Business Worldwide*. “Those characteristics have not gone away. I knew from a relatively young age that I wanted to stand out and be heard. My sole motivation for graduating at the top of my high school class was so that I could speak at the graduation ceremony: I wanted to tell everyone that they should not be constrained by growing up in our small town.”

For college, Michelle ventured 450

miles south from Altoona to Chapel Hill, N.C., where she earned a B.A. in Political Science and Economics from the University of North Carolina in 1995. While pursuing her law degree from Fordham University, she was hired in the mergers and acquisitions department of white-shoe firm Simpson, Thacher and Bartlett in NYC, two years prior to her 1999 graduation.

Despite describing her law degree as “the ultimate shield [against gender discrimination],” Michelle recounted some unsettling details from her tenure at the firm to MBW: “Early on in my career there, I had my first annual review. And I, someone who only ever wears black, oddly had a white shirt on. This rainmaker partner, who was giving me my review, took a bottle of water and emptied it down my shirt. Then he looked at me and said, ‘Now we’re ready to start your review.’ I crossed my arms across my chest and I just said, ‘Let’s go.’ Shocking, right? It’s power, pure and simple. He’s showing me that he has power over me. It taught me, very quickly, that in order to succeed as a woman, I was going to have to work harder and smarter than anyone else.”

In 2003, she at last made her first move back into the music biz, as counsel for Sony Music Entertainment in New York. As she told *HITS* in 2013, “I came

from the middle of nowhere, didn't know anyone and had tremendous school loans. I'd done my research and knew that people from Sony Music's legal department, such as Clive Davis, had gone on to run companies."

While she recalled having "zero contact" with future boss Barnett (then a top exec at Epic) during her Sony tenure, she did form one key alliance at this point that would prove long-lasting.

**“**It was two months into my job when I got a phone call: ‘Michele Anthony would like you to come to her office to meet.’ I went around to the other lawyers and asked, ‘Is this normal? Is this what she does?’ Everyone said no. Nobody had ever met her. I went and met with her. She told me, ‘I heard that I would really like you, and you’ve reminded a few people of a younger version of me. I wanted to make sure that we knew each other, and I’m here if you ever need anything.’”

Jubelirer says she reached out to Anthony when, in 2005, she decided to make the move back to a law firm—King, Holmes, Paterno and Berliner—where Anthony had served. “I also didn’t want to be a lawyer at a record company anymore. It was boring,” she says. “There were too many rules. We

stayed in touch.”

She would go on to become a partner at the firm, building a client roster that included Kesha, Pharrell, Odd Future, Frank Ocean, Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Slipknot, Tori Amos, Marilyn Manson and Grimes, among other artists who re-defined what was considered mainstream.

In 2012, Barnett first approached Jubelirer about leaving King Holmes for a high-ranking post at Capitol Music Group. “We had contact when I negotiated some fairly aggressive deals as an artist lawyer with Columbia,” she remembered to *HITS*. “Particularly Odd Future, which was a ‘different’ deal, to say the least; on that, I think Steve said, ‘I wanna meet this lawyer who did the Odd Future deal.’ When I was in New York, we had a lengthy meeting. Then I dealt with him on *The Neighbourhood*, and we stayed in touch. When he called about this gig, it was completely out of the blue. I was shocked.”

Her propensity for approaching artist deals from a fresh perspective clearly factored into Barnett’s master plan. After four months of spending time with him and getting to understand his vision for the company, she joined as EVP in 2013.

“I don’t think I realized when I

took this job the extent to which we’re almost moving a mountain,” she reflected to *HITS* that same year. “But one thing I *did* know was we had to try to change things, because the way things are going in the record industry just isn’t working. So this new model is a well-thought-out plan to do things differently.”

Of Barnett’s leadership, she added, “Not trying to blow smoke, but I’ve never been more inspired than since I started working for him. It’s exhausting but inspiring. He’s a kind of visionary ‘coach,’ with the goal of moving our team toward a shared dream and vision. He’s extremely inclusive; it’s all about teamwork. As trite as this may sound, I feel like I’m at the Wharton School of the music industry now.”

As Barnett told *HITS*, “Michelle brings an innovative approach to Capitol Music Group that reflects her intense passion for music and her experiences as a forward-thinking representative for cutting-edge artists. She is well known and highly regarded for conceiving trend-setting deals that align perfectly with her artists’ distinct creative visions.”

As an advocate for artists, she recognized that the friction that had historically existed between labels and artists was no longer viable in a climate where breaking artists is secondary to breaking songs. As EVP, her responsibilities included overseeing Astralwerks, Blue Note, Caroline and Harvest, as well as business and legal affairs, A&R admin and release planning.

“I’m very proud of having joined Steve Barnett here at the beginning, when the company was moribund and with only one or two artists who were keeping the lights on,” she noted. “We worked our way out of the cellar to become one of the most successful label groups in the entire industry. I’m sometimes in awe of how far we’ve come, but we make no secret of the fact that we want to be the #1 label group in the business and won’t rest until we are.”

Of the many artists Michelle has

**“We’re living in a rarefied world at CMG, where 50% of our senior staff are women. That’s a testament to all of us for taking steps to ensure that level of diversity. That’s not the reality at most places.”**



Jacqueline Saturn, Sylvia Rhone, Jubelirer and Ethiopia Habtemariam



With Evan Lamberg and Jeff Harleston

championed at CMG, Halsey will always have her heart: “A team of us signed her in the infancy of her career. She had one song out online. You know, when you sat with her, you were in the presence of an unmitigated future superstar. To see her go on to sell millions of albums, and [in February 2019] host and perform on *Saturday Night Live* has been one of the proudest moments of my life. As much as I’m proud of my son, I’m proud of her.”

In 2015, Jubelirer was upped to COO. Barnett had this to say about her promotion: “Her background as an advocate for the artist community is essential to our forward-thinking approach to A&R and for attracting both established and developing talent to the label. Furthermore, she helps ensure that our agreements are artist-friendly, smart and fair for all. Michelle has played a major role in our revitalization and success, and her promotion to COO is well deserved and reflects her stature in the company. We’ve always been flexible in our deals. Michelle really brought that reputation to our company, that you could deal with us, that we were not tied to the past in that regard. As you know, EMI had a horrific reputation in that regard for many years. So that gave us an opportunity, which was really significant for us.”

Also that year, CMG began its joint venture with Quality Control, in tandem with Motown, which would

ultimately produce such gigantic acts as **Migos** and **Lil Baby**. Fruitful collaborations with Saturn’s Caroline and Elliot Grainge’s 10K Projects would also mark the ensuing years.

As with her law-firm clients, what stands out about the artists Jubelirer has championed is their resistance to being pigeonholed; their artistry is given an opportunity to develop under her watchful gaze. Singer/songwriter **Maggie Rogers**, who was nominated for a Grammy for Best New Artist in 2019, is a superb example.

“Ultimately we trusted her, because nobody knows her better than herself,” Jubelirer told *The New York Times*. “It became very clear early on that there was a lot more to her than a viral moment—that she was an artist with a real soul, and something to say, and a modern pop star with a strong female point of view.” She’s been similarly effusive about another artist who’s flourished with her support, **Troye Sivan**.

“For better or worse,” she told *HITS*, “I’m emotionally invested in every artist I ever work with.”

When discussing the shelf life of a pop star, Michelle was asked the key to sustaining a pop career after age 30: “It’s fucking hard, but ultimately it’s all about the songs and ensuring that [the artists] remain authentically themselves. I think it’s a lot more difficult for a female pop star to sustain that level of success in this current environment. We live in an unforgiving world where everyone is on to the new.

Women, whether pop stars or in any kind of outward-facing job, are not allowed to age.”

The 2016 presidential election inspired Michelle to join the board of **Planned Parenthood**, after years as a supporter. As she told *Billboard*, “Aside from giving money, I’ve become more vocal,” she says. “I am using my position as a board member of Planned Parenthood to galvanize interested people behind me in the artist community.”

When asked about the prospects for women in the music business, Michelle responded: “We’re living in a rarefied world at CMG, where 50% of our senior staff are women. That’s a testament to all of us for taking steps to ensure that level of diversity. That’s not the reality at most places. I think it’s going to take about 10 more years to have true equality at the upper echelons of the major music business, whether it’s labels, publishing companies, agencies, any of those entities.”

“Michelle was the first to join me at CMG and has been my partner in revitalizing the company and creating an environment where artists and our employees could thrive,” said Barnett upon announcing the new leadership team. He added that she and Vaughn were “the perfect team to guide CMG into the future.” ■



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