

T W O

R A I N M A K E R S



DARCUS BEESE

OBE

An Island Life

“I’ve always been a fan of the music that you sign what makes you excited, what’s different—not what’s in the marketplace now.” That’s Darcus Beese explaining his A&R philosophy in a 2012 interview with *The Guardian*. His most celebrated signings—**Florence + the Machine**, **Mumford & Sons** and, above all, the uniquely gifted **Amy Winehouse**—make it abundantly clear that this **Island Records** lifer and current label chieftain walks it like he talks it. During a career spanning more than three decades, Beese has become renowned for finding and nurturing innovative artists whose music has stood apart on the radio and the charts.

“Darcus is as passionate today about his artists and team as the day we first met,” **Universal Music U.K. chairman/CEO David Joseph** said in *Music Week* last year. “He embodies the maverick spirit which has always set Island apart as a label.”

Joseph’s recent comment to *HITS* was more personal. “If you ever find yourself wondering what words and thoughts are going through his mind,” he mused, with obvious affection, “they will be ‘radical,’ ‘truth,’ ‘culture,’ ‘I’m feeling this,’ ‘I’m not feeling this,’ ‘legacy,’ ‘family,’ respect,’ ‘chicken and fries.’ And it’s often a combination of all of these, beautifully blended together.”



“YOU CUT ME AND I BLEED ISLAND. I WOULDN’T WORK ANYWHERE ELSE.”



Top: Beese with Jessie Reyez and manager Ruiz Mauricio; bottom: with Sean Paul; opposite page: with Chris Blackwell and Ted Cockle

“Twelve years ago, we went on a historic run together that included Amy Winehouse, Florence + the Machine, Jessie J and so many others,” Republic head **Monte Lipman** proudly proclaimed earlier this

summer. “I will forever be indebted to Darcus Beese.”

Like sportsmen of yore who spent decades in a single team’s uniform—**Ted Williams** with the Red Sox, **Kobe Bryant** with the Lakers, **Ryan Giggs** at **Manchester United**—Beese has spent his entire career under the Island palm

tree. Climbing from intern to assistant to A&R exec to label head, first in the U.K., now in the U.S., Beese has emerged as Island’s go-to man, a presence not unlike the label’s founder, the legendary music man **Chris Blackwell**.

“If someone picks up the next chapter of the Island Records book, I want



“DARCUS IS SPECIAL. HE HAS EXCELLENT TASTE AND A PERSONAL STRATEGY OF INSTILLING CONFIDENCE IN WHOEVER HE WORKS WITH. HE’S BEEN WITH ISLAND RECORDS FOR 30 YEARS AND HASN’T AGED A BIT.”

—CHRIS BLACKWELL

there to be a chapter in there for the era that I lead Island in, and that means, as much as I gave you some microwave food, I gave you some good, good food too,” Beese told *SBTV.com* in 2015. “Some people want to be **Simon Cowell** and others want to be **Chris Blackwell**—I want to be **Chris Blackwell**.”

And in 2018, after being named President of Island in the U.S., he told *Music Week* that he’s had his chances to leave, but he has no interest in going elsewhere. “You cut me and I bleed Island. I wouldn’t work anywhere else.”

His ambition to maintain and advance that legacy means signing art-

ists who would change music and, in some cases, the world. **Bob Marley**, **U2**, **Grace Jones**, **Tom Waits** and **Traffic** called Blackwell’s label home between its start in 1958 and his sale to **PolyGram** in 1989. He landed the first international ska hit with **Millie Small**’s “My Boy Lollipop,” introduced

the world to reggae with *The Harder They Come* and released enduring music from Nick Drake, Cat Stevens, King Crimson and scores of others.

In his book *Grime Kids*, DJ Target, a member of Pay as You Go and the East London collective Roll Deep, wrote of meeting Beese when his group was being courted by various labels in the early 2000s. “Darcus was very different to everyone we had met so far. Firstly, being a west Londoner, he had swag. His musical background was legit too, and he just got it. He understood where we were coming from and where we were trying to go.”

Beese noted in that 2018 interview with *Music Week*, “All record companies do what we do, but there’s something about working at Island and the type of acts that we allow ourselves to sign and want to be successful with. There’s an unseen force here that enables people to have the freedom to do that.”

To say that this man, who was born to do A&R, has worked his way to the top of his field from the very bottom would be understating the scale of his ascent. He grew up in the Fulham section of southwest London, the son of an immigrant father from Trinidad who worked as a broadcaster and an activist, while his mother was a member of the British Black Panthers. As a youngster, he collected Marvel and DC comics, loved The Specials, reggae, soul and calypso. He did well enough in school to graduate early and start a career in hair styling. Among his music industry clients was Lincoln Elias, the man who’d signed one of his favorites, Terence Trent D’Arby. “It was the first time I’d met someone black who worked in the music industry,” Beese told *The Guardian*. He could see himself fitting in.

The first entry-level job he landed was as a tea boy for the then-independent Island. Along with making tea for his bosses, he collected and delivered dry cleaning and drove the top brass around London. He then worked in the promotion department and was eventually made an assistant. In the early 1990s, he was upped to A&R director, and he survived the merger of Universal and PolyGram that, in the U.K., allowed the label to stand alone, in contrast to the merger in the U.S. of Island and Def Jam.

Island U.K.’s releases in the 1990s were



Top and bottom: the guy with the most cake—Darcus makes his dreams come true.

big on new alternative acts—PJ Harvey, Pulp, The Cranberries. In the documentary *Keep on Running: 50 Years of Island Records*, the producer/rapper Tricky, who signed with the label in 1995, said, “I knew I could get freedom. I knew I could do what I wanted to do.”

That jibes with Beese’s approach to A&R.

“I look for people that want to stand for something, want to do something irrespective of what anyone else thinks,” Beese told *iMusician* in 2015. “I like people that don’t ask me permission to exist. I like people that don’t stand there waiting to give me a CD after a seminar. I like people that say, ‘Check me out online; look at my video on YouTube.’ Rizzle Kicks existed online before we came along, Jessie J existed before—you Googled her and half her album was online—Mumford & Sons had already put out two EPs on their label, Disclosure had “Latch” before we signed them, Florence had already put out ‘Kiss With a Fist’ and ‘Dog Days’ on indie dance label Moshi Moshi.”

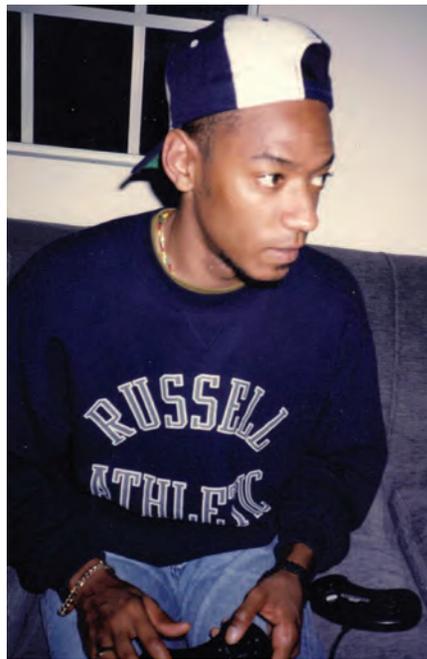
Beese didn’t hit the charts with one of his signings until Sugababes registered a #1 in 2002 with a cover of the Adina Howard hit “Freak Like Me.” He then went on a remarkable string that included the signings of Winehouse, Taio Cruz, Dizzee Rascal, James Morrison, Robbie Williams and others who would dominate charts in Blighty and often cross over in the States.

The artist he was most closely aligned with, though, was Winehouse, a musical supernova who stormed the world with her brilliant second album, *Back to Black*, which Island released in October 2006.

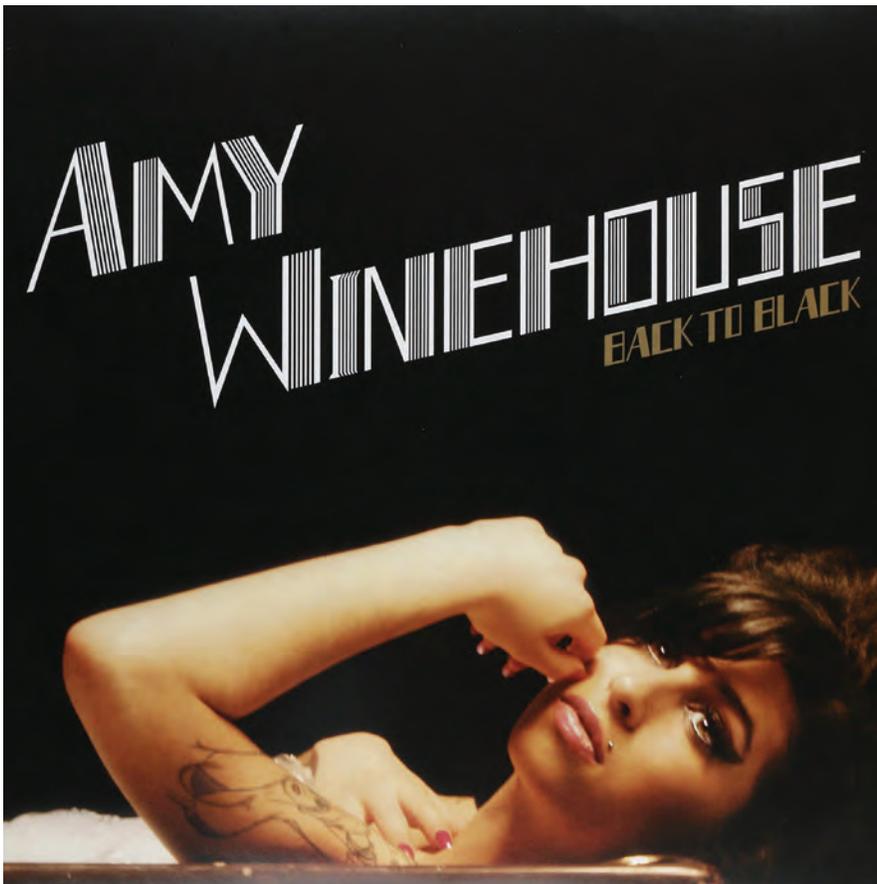
Beese had been on her trail since Simon Fuller’s 19 Management had signed her as a teenage jazz singer; when he heard her demo, he became obsessed.

“I snuck into the 19 offices to find out who was handling her, because they were keeping her a secret,” he told *Spin* in 2007. “I’d never heard a woman who lyrically put the shit together like she did, and I had to have her, so we did the deal. She’s Etta James, she’s Aretha Franklin, she’s Mahalia Jackson, she’s Courtney Love.”

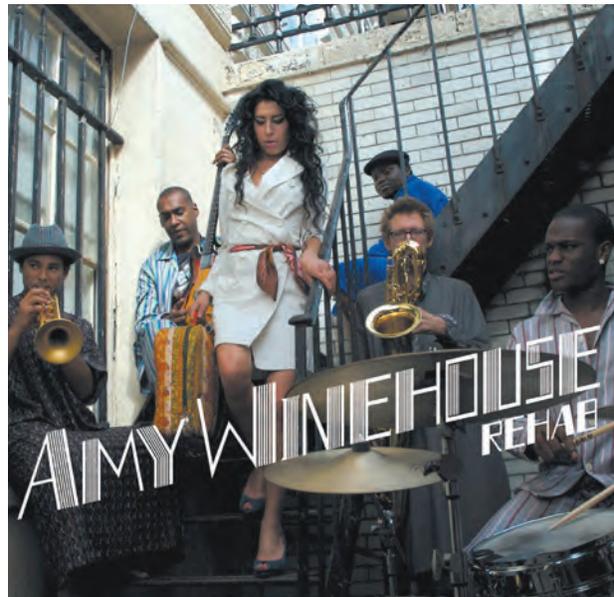
Beese knew that signing Winehouse was just the first step in a complex process. “As much as you believe something is amazing, you’ve got to convince more than the people in your immediate surroundings,” Beese recalled in *Irish Examiner*. “You have to, with the help of your team, convince the



Top to bottom: Beese with Sir Lucian Grainge and Monte Lipman; younger days; showing off his OBE in 2014; with Lisa Stansfield



“THE REASON I THINK ADELE AND AMY WERE SO SUCCESSFUL ON THEIR SECOND ALBUMS WAS BECAUSE THEY SET THE SCENE AND THERE WAS EXPECTATION OF WHAT THEY COULD COME BACK WITH. IT’S CALLED ARTIST DEVELOPMENT.”



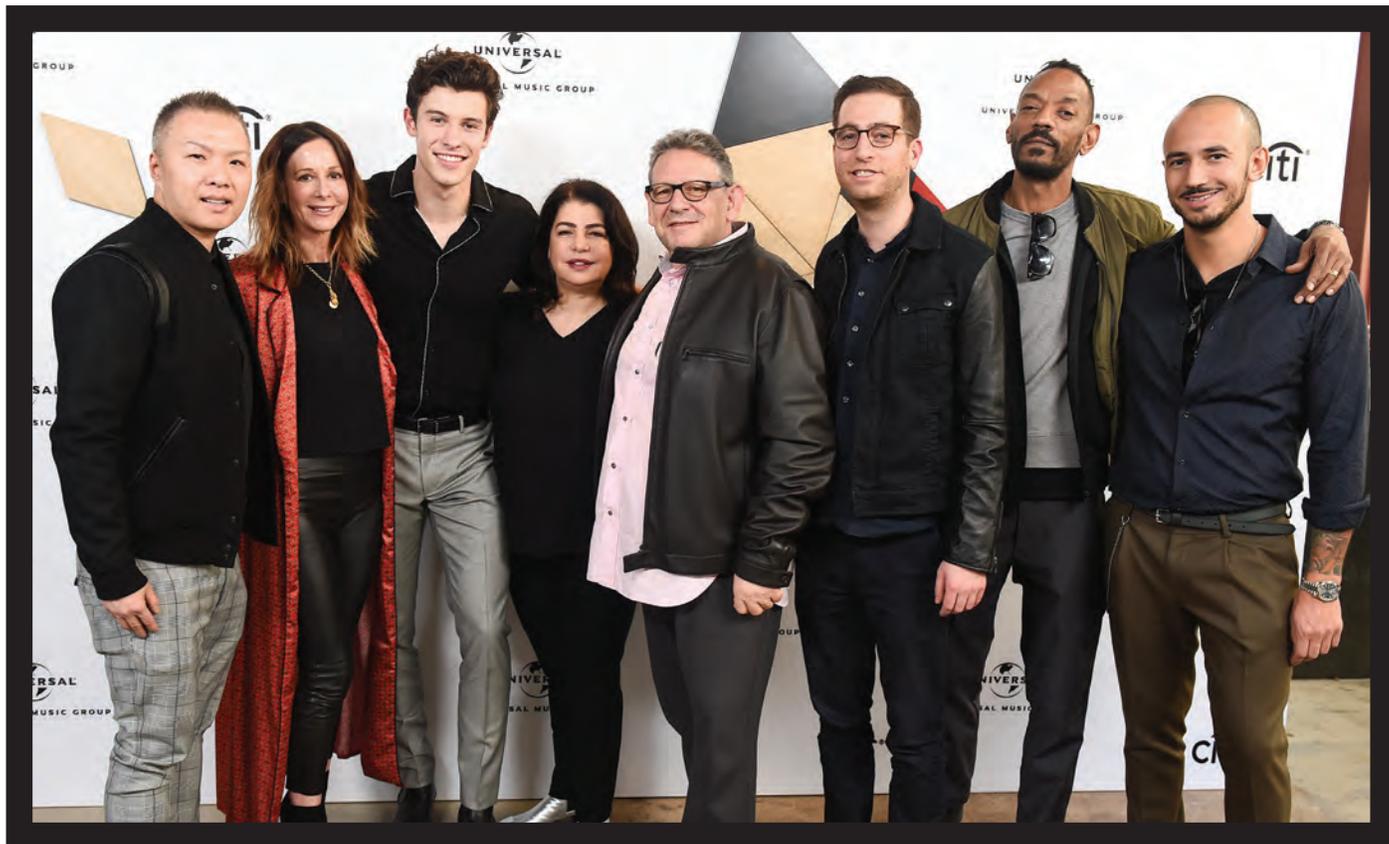
rest of the world. To think that I knew full well a girl from Camden singing jazz was going to sell 15 or 20 million records—that’s all bollocks.”

Her 2003 debut album, *Frank*, put her on the map, and *Back to Black*, released in October 2006, made her a star, yielding five hit singles, beginning

with “Rehab.”

After nearly four years on the *Frank* album campaign,” CAA’s Paul Franklin remembers, “Darcus sent me an email that said, ‘A couple of demos for you—you will like these.’ They were ‘Rehab’ and ‘Back to Black.’ It was one of the best emails I’ve ever received.”

“When Amy and I were demoing some songs that would become *Back to Black*,” producer Mark Ronson recalled to Beese, “we played the opening of the ‘Rehab’ demo, and six seconds in, you jumped up and were like, ‘Rewind!’ You did that three more times before we got past the first six seconds. That was the



Feeling right at home in the States with Eric Wong, Jody Gerson, Shawn Mendes, Michele Anthony, Sir Lucian Grainge, manager Andrew Gertler and SVP A&R Ziggy Chareton

“FEW IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY HAVE DARCUS’ TRACK RECORD OF CREATIVE AND COMMERCIAL SUCCESS. I’VE HAD THE PLEASURE OVER THE YEARS OF WORKING CLOSELY WITH DARCUS, WHO HAS IMPECCABLE CREATIVE INSTINCTS AND TAKES A LONG-TERM VIEW OF ARTIST DEVELOPMENT.” —SIR LUCIAN GRAINGE

first time we’d played that music, and to get ‘daddy’s grand approval’ was wonderful. Without that faith that you placed in Amy and me, we never would have been able to have the freedom to make that record.”

The single was an immediate smash in the U.K., but her stateside ascent was more gradual. In March of 2007, just before “Rehab” entered the U.S. charts, Winehouse arrived in Austin for a series of sets at SXSW. One was an afternoon showcase in which she performed with just guitar-and-congas accompaniment in front of a small but mesmerized audience. That night at La Zona Rose, she blew away a larger crowd with her full band—and the word spread around town like wildfire. The next day, there

was a mob scene outside Antone’s, and when Amy walked up the street, the sea of humans parted—not because she was that famous at the time, but because she had such a fierce demeanor. With her beehive adding a foot to her height and her eyes flashing like a panther on the hunt for prey, she looked like she could kill. It’s safe to say no one who came upon this still-little-known artist that week would ever forget the sight or the sound of her.

Winehouse won the BRIT Award for British Female and subsequently received five Grammys at the 2008 ceremony, including Record and Song of the Year. At a time when album sales were plummeting, *Back to Black* would sell 3.58 million records in the U.K., making

it the second-biggest seller of the 21st century. In the U.S., the album (released by Republic) has sold 3.3 million, with another 5 million in singles sales and 475 million streams. Winehouse died in 2011 without releasing another album.

If working with this brilliant, troubled artist was the highest point of his career, losing her was the lowest. Just before the 2015 feature documentary *Amy: The Girl Behind the Name* was released, Beese, devastated anew by watching the film, expressed himself with unchecked emotion.

“She was ill. You had people who had praised her and now they were murdering her,” he told *Billboard*. “Hopefully, when they see their faces on the screen, they’ll feel embarrassed... The film was

an eye-opener. I didn't realize we were signing a girl who was broken."

In 2008, on the heels of *Back to Black*'s critical and commercial triumph, Beese was promoted to Co-President of Island U.K. with Ted Cockle, who would handle the marketing side of the operation. A year later, the label celebrated its 50th anniversary, and under Beese and Cockle's leadership the label scored commercial breakthroughs with Mumford & Sons,

Hozier, Jack Garratt, Florence + the Machine and Disclosure.

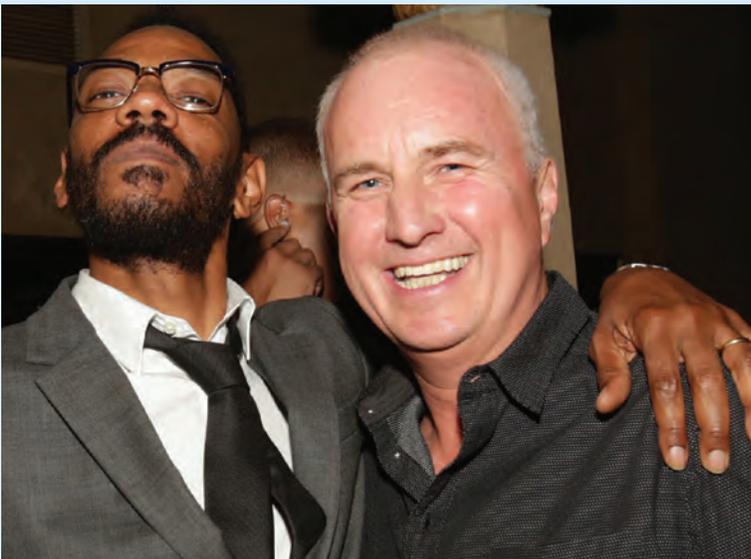
When Beese was honored by *Music Week* with the 2019 Strat Award, Cockle offered this tribute to his colleague and friend: "It's been a pleasure to be alongside you for so many years at Island with some good successes, spending a lot of time changing all the members of Sugababes and helping persuade the world that Amy's *Back to Black* was not just a jazz record for old people."

In 2013, when UMG ruler Lucian

Grainge put Cockle in charge of Virgin EMI, Beese became the sole President of Island U.K. in 2013, and, in addition to breaking homegrown talent, Island became the U.K. home for Drake, The Weeknd, Ariana Grande, Post Malone and others.

"Since the minute I met him, I knew he was a British leader of the new school and not a follower," offers Dre London, Post Malone's manager. "He's always trusted and knows how to take risks."

While some of these successes were



Clockwise from top left: With Boyd Muir; with 2014 MOBO winner Jessie J; Island U.K. team celebrating The Weeknd's breakthrough

immediate, Winehouse had taught him to always have faith in artists' *second* albums.

"Unless it's an anomaly, you have to be making a second album with the artists you sign, whether you were successful with the first album or not," he told *The Guardian* in 2012. "Because there are too many things that go against you in the very first instance.

"With *Duffy*, her first album was so big that there was nowhere to grow to. The only way after something that huge is down. The reason I think *Adele* and *Amy* were so successful on their second albums was because they set the scene and there was expectation of what they could come back with. It's called artist development. I'll tell you, if *Amy* would've had a huge first album, I don't know if we'd be sitting here talking about *Back to Black*. If you don't get it right on the first album—just go again."

In 2014, when he was inducted as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to the U.K. music industry, *Jessie J* posted a testimonial on *Instagram*: "You always have had time for me, advice to share and great understanding of sometimes how hard it can be for me and never given up. The fans don't always get to see true music people in the music industry. And to see you being given an OBE brings so much warmth to my heart."

Music Week named him European Executive of the Year in 2016 for his hit parade of *Catfish & the Bottlemen*, *Harvey*, *Grande*, *Mike Posner* and *Drake*. The following year, he made two important signings, *Ray BLK*, the first unsigned artist to win the *BBC Sound Of* prize, and a rising star from Norway, *Sigrid*, who won *BBC Sound Of* 2018 poll.

"We've rarely lost a deal that we're really passionate about, certainly not when we're as passionate as we were about this," Beese told *Music Business Worldwide* in 2017. "It was still very competitive, but there are certain acts you decide you *have* to have, and *Sigrid* was one of them."

Just a few months after the heralded arrival of *Sigrid* in the U.K., *Sir Lucian Grainge* selected Beese to succeed *David Massey* as *Island's* New York-based President in New York. "Few in the



Top: At the 2015 Hollywood premiere of *Amy* with director *Asif Kapadia* and producer *James Gay-Rees*; bottom: with *Petite Meller*, 2015

“DARCUS IS AS PASSIONATE TODAY ABOUT HIS ARTISTS AND TEAM AS THE DAY WE FIRST MET. HE EMBODIES THE MAVERICK SPIRIT WHICH HAS ALWAYS SET ISLAND APART AS A LABEL.” —DAVID JOSEPH

music industry have Darcus’ track record of creative and commercial success,” the Chairman noted. “I’ve had the pleasure over the years of working closely with Darcus, who has impeccable creative instincts and takes a long-term view of artist development.”

Beese made quite a first impression on Massey-signed **Shawn Mendes** and his manager, **Andrew Gertler**. When they met, Gertler says, “We sat and had tea, and there was an incredible creative energy between us all. Darcus came out of the meeting saying to me that he has never felt so drained afterwards—in a good way—because of how much energy there was in the room. Darcus is an exciting executive who doesn’t always play by the book—in the best way. It’s been a pleasure working with him so far.”

“As I’ve gotten to know Darcus over this past year, he has become one of the most supportive people of my vision that I’ve met,” adds Mendes, whose “Señorita” duet with Camila Cabello was the first smash of Beese’s U.S. tenure. “He will walk into the studio to listen to songs we are scared to play for people for the first time, and we always

walk out energized because of how pure his reactions are to the music. It’s amazing having someone in your corner who is so purely affected by the music.”

Many in the industry have given props to Beese for his myriad accomplishments. “He is a real ‘music person,’ and the artists love him for this,” Paul Franklin offers. “He has integrity and a human touch that artists feel very comfortable with, together with an energy that resonates through the team. On top of that, he’s amazing at his job and thoroughly deserves all the success he has had.”

UMG EVP **Michele Anthony** praised him on the occasion of his Strat Award win, saying, “Your legacy continues as one of the great creative executives in our industry. We’re so very proud of you and thrilled that we were able to steal you from across the pond. As Island celebrates its 60th anniversary this year, there couldn’t be a more perfect person in place to continue leading the Island culture and heritage.”

“Darcus Beese, what a prince of a man,” **Bono** offered at the same time.

But the words of praise that will doubtless hold the greatest value for this

Island lifer come straight from the legendary label’s original chieftain, who received the second-ever Strat Award in 1988, Beese’s first year at Island. He writes...

Darcus is special. He has excellent taste and a personal strategy of instilling confidence in whoever he works with. He’s been with Island Records for 30 years and hasn’t aged a bit.

Keep the flag flying!!

One love. Chris

Beese is well aware of the challenge he’s facing, but he views it with characteristic humility and pragmatism. When asked recently if he intends to stay in the U.S., he replied, “If I’m successful, I’ll be staying. If I’m not, they’ll put me on the plane! But I want to make ‘out here’ work. I want it to be long term, but I’m on a five-year plan. I’m trying not to get fired—my whole mantra, all my career, is, ‘Don’t get fired!’ The only way to do that is to do good things, stay relevant and hopefully be indispensable.” ■

Eric Wong, Philymack Prexy John Taylor, Anthony, Nick Jonas and wife Priyanka Chopra, Grainge and Beese at Sir Lucian’s 2019 Artist Showcase

