

R A I N M A K E R S T W O

# PETER EDGE THE CREATIVE

**A**s chief of **RCA**, Peter Edge has presided over one of the splashiest rosters in the biz, which has culminated in big chart successes, top-tier **Grammy** love and, occasionally, pop-cultural godhead for his acts. Edge's keen A&R chops and artist whispering have been integral to his reign, and he has been acutely sensitive to the shifting winds of the marketplace.

"I'm always looking for a unique proposition," Edge said a decade and a half ago, and it clearly resonates today. "I'm really attracted to people who have an abundance of talent because I'm just in awe of that, being a music fan."

"Peter Edge loves music so much, it's his heart and soul," notes one of Edge's Grammy-winning, chart-topping signings, **Khalid**. "I've had such meaningful artistic conversations with him, and I'm always in awe of his knowledge and his passion."

"I have known and worked with Peter since I first started in this business," says manager **Brandon Creed**, "and he has always been a very kind and soulful leader and personal mentor to me. His taste and talent are inspiring, and he's as authentic and genuine as an executive as he is a human being."

He learned at the feet of some of the industry's biggest heavies: **Chrysalis'** **Chris Wright** and **Terry Ellis**, **Warner Bros. Records'** **Lenny Waronker**, **Sony Music** bosses **Doug Morris** and **Rob Stringer** and, for the longest stretch, **Clive Davis**, who was particularly vital in the shaping of Edge as an exec and an A&R man.

As a youth near Coventry, England, Edge was drawn to the music his sister listened to: longtime hitmakers such as **Otis Redding** and **Marvin Gaye**. "I loved all those soul records; they really spoke to me," he told the *New York Sun*.

As a student at **Coventry Polytechnic** studying Communication Studies—film, art, psychology and sociology—he DJ'd at local radio stations, clubs and parties, and after graduating with honors, he became a music researcher/DJ for **Channel Four's** TV series

*Switch*, where he booked artists such as **Sade** and **Grace Jones**. His work there caught the eye of **Simon Fuller**, who hired him as an A&R rep at **Chrysalis Music Publishing**; he subsequently moved to the label side at Chrysalis and was tasked with launching the London-based **Cooltempo** imprint in 1985, in tandem with producer **Danny D**.

In the U.K., the label would release music by **Erik B and Rakim**, **EPMD**, **The Real Roxanne**, **Slick Rick** and **Doug E. Fresh**, who had a significant hit with "The Show" in 1985. Edge signed the British rapper **Monie Love**; the first project he A&R'd was her debut, which included the Grammy-nominated "Monie in the Middle" and her only U.S. Top 40 hit, "It's a Shame (My Sister)."

To Edge, these were groundbreaking musicians who would pave the way for future hitmakers such as **The Fugees**, **Arrested Development** and **OutKast**. "These artists couldn't get a record deal at the time—no one was interested in hip-hop, really," he told the *Sun*. If it hadn't been for acts like **Jungle Brothers**, he says, "I don't know whether the artists who came later would have received the recognition they did."

In 1990, Edge—then still an A&R staffer for Chrysalis Records—told *Billboard*, "Real success is when you break an artist

# CONVERSATION

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Top: Edge and Khalid pose with plaque for American Teen. Bottom: Teacher Clive Davis with prize student Edge.

on a major level, someone who can have a career rather than just a hit song. When you discover an artist who can offer multiple albums, you’re into something exciting. My philosophy is to try and find people who can be around for the long term.”

He transitioned to Warner Bros. in 1991, bringing Monie Love to the Bunny, working with the brilliant singer/songwriter/bassist Me’Shell Ndegeocello (signed to label partner Maverick) and hooking up with the innovative Native Tongues hip-hop crew. After he’d spent five years at WBR, Davis brought him aboard at Arista as VP of A&R.

Just before departing the Bunny to work for Clive, he took a meeting with Jeff Robinson, who wanted him to meet a teenage singer-pianist whose girl band had just broken up. Impressed by her talent, Edge helped Robinson develop a showcase and some of her material, but before he could make an offer, Alicia Keys had signed with Columbia.

Once he was situated as VP of A&R at Arista, one of his first signings was Dido. He A&R’d her debut album, *No Angel*, which came out in 1999 and, after Eminem sampled her “Thank You,” it became one of the biggest sellers around the world in 2000 and 2001.

That year was also Arista’s best financially, thanks largely to runaway hits by TLC and Santana; sales hit a record \$425m. But BMG’s Strauss Zelnick unseated Davis and installed L.A. Reid as Arista head. Clive and Charles Goldstuck promptly formed J Records, bringing along Edge to run the label’s A&R department. Davis was able to cherry-pick execs from Arista for his new staff; Edge, Tom Corson and Richard Palmese were among those who joined him at the fledgling company.

Edge brought Dido with him to J, along with one of his last signings at Arista, Alicia Keys, who hadn’t seen eye to eye with Columbia’s team.

“She had a million dollars on the table within a month of making [her] demo,” Edge told *The Guardian*. “And it was hard for her to turn that down. But I didn’t see that there was much hands-on development at Columbia, and she was smart enough to figure that out and to ask to be released from her contract, which was a bold move for a new artist. But she knew she had a back-up plan.”

Edge introduced her to Davis, who said “her talent as an arranger, a producer... she seemed almost too good to be true. I couldn’t



Edge, Rob Stringer, Fleckenstein and manager Chad Taylor with illustrious signing Childish Gambino.

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believe she would be available.”

J released Keys’ debut in June 2001; Edge served as executive producer. Driven by its lead single, “Fallin’,” the album, *Songs in A Minor*, would be one of the year’s biggest hits and lead to five **Grammy** wins for Keys. Her stratospheric success provided Edge’s first big moment and J with the international superstar that first broke the label. Her album went on to do 13m in sales and win five Grammys.

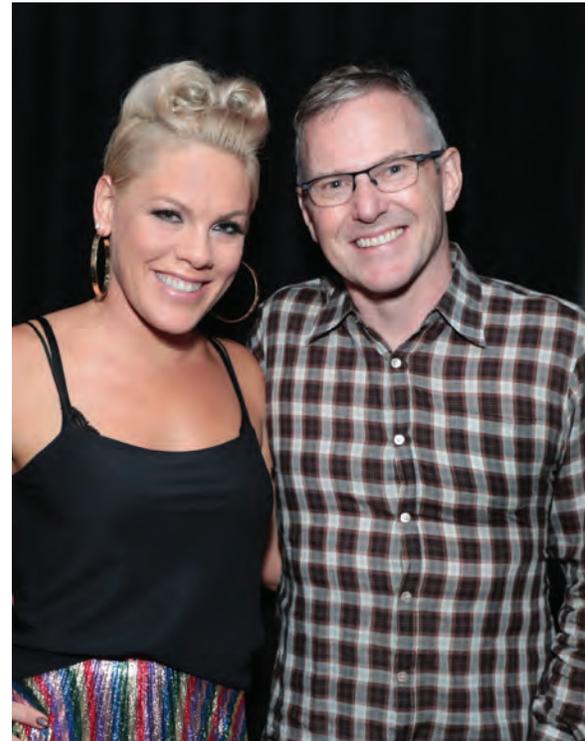
“Peter and I have grown together in so many ways,” says Keys. “I love the

way that he is a pure music lover. To me, that’s what makes us so close—we are inspired by listening to great music. We continue to discover different styles and different ways to create. Believe it or not, that’s not always a normal trait in the music business. Most times it’s more business than music. So it’s really powerful when you’re friends with and work with someone who cares about bringing the best to both worlds.”

Further Edge-supported successes on J included sets from **Luther Vandross**, **Jamie Foxx**, **Mario** and **Dido**.

In 2004, speaking to the *New York Sun*, he offered this perspective: “You have to look at what you’re really dealing with here, in terms of level of talent, marketability, the uniqueness in the marketplace, and a vision for a few years ahead of what they could actually be with some development and nurturing.”

“Nurturing,” he explained, “means bringing to fruition the artist’s creative talents. When they play you a song, you think, ‘Well, that’s good, but have you ever thought about improving your guitar



Left: 20/20 visionary Justin Timberlake with Edge, Keith Naftaly, Joe Riccitelli, John Fleckenstein, Corson, SVP National Sales Bob Anderson and manager Johnny Wright; right: Color him P!nk.

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skills? What about singing these types of songs? What if we brought this vibe to it?”

The success at J led to Edge being named EVP of A&R in 2003 and, once Sony and BMG merged, a promotion to President of A&R for the RCA Music Group. Sony bought out BMG in 2008.

When the Sony-BMG merger came to fruition, consummate record men **Tommy Mottola** and **Davis** were replaced by two execs from outside the music world, **Andy Lack** and **Rolf Schmidt-Holtz**. The latter, as the first CEO of the new entity from the BMG side, removed **Donnie Ienner**, **Michele Anthony** and **Davis**, bringing in **Rob Stringer** and **Barry Weiss**. This essentially marked the finale of Clive’s major-label run.

In 2010, the industry was reeling from another down year. Album sales were off 13% from the year prior, and when track-

equivalent albums were brought into the picture, it was still bad: a decline of 9.5%.

The RCA Music Group’s two bright spots were pretty much **Usher** and **Kesha**, who were in the year-end albums and digital songs Top 10s.

Then things started to change.

In 2011, label group boss **Doug Morris** tapped **Edge** as CEO of the consolidated RCA, in a leadership tandem with President/COO **Tom Corson**. **Edge** promptly focused the company on a single label, RCA, shuttering **Jive**, **Arista** and **J**. The new position came with a new philosophy.

“My vision for RCA is to be more of a music company,” he told *The Hollywood Reporter* in October 2011. “You have to reinvent, and that’s what

we’re doing.”

The word from **Morris** was to focus on A&R. “The big initiative here is to spend more money on artist development, making more records and making better records and less on all the other stuff,” **Edge** said in that *THR* interview. “I happen to agree with him.”

Under **Edge**’s watch, that A&R investment has resulted in a litany of successes across multiple genres.

Hits from **P!nk**, **Justin Timberlake**, **Christina Aguilera**, **Shakira**, **Sia**, **Britney Spears**, **Chris Brown**, **Kelly Clarkson**, **Miley Cyrus**, **D’Angelo**, **Mark Ronson**, **Pentatonix**, **Pitbull**, **ASAP Rocky**, **Foo Fighters**, **Elle King**, **Bryson Tiller**, **G-Eazy** and **Kings of Leon** were among his triumphs during his power-sharing tenure with **Corson**.

“The music comes first,” **Edge** told



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—JONATHAN KALTER



*Experience* was nearly platinum in its first chart-topping week. They assisted in the reinvention of Miley Cyrus, whose monster set *Bangerz* featured mega-smashes “Wrecking Ball” and “We Can’t Stop,” and Shakira. Pentatonix consistently dominated Q4 sales with their holiday-themed sets.

“Peter is an excellent creative partner and collaborator who has always been generous with his time and expertise,” says Pentatonix manager **Jonathan Kalter**. “He’s an exec of remarkable taste and instinct, which I don’t only say because we share multiple projects as business partners, but also because we share multiple artists as music fans. He is not, however, a talented beatboxer, which I can only imagine is why he keeps **Keith Naftaly** so close.”

“Peter Edge is one of the most forward-thinking label heads in the music business, insists attorney **Craig Marshall**. “I have had the good fortune to work with him on two extremely talented artist projects in two very dif-

Top: A cappella game-changers Pentatonix serenade Corson, manager Jonathan Kalter and Naftaly; bottom: A Backstreet Boys moment for Edge, Fleckenstein, Naftaly and Riccitelli

Music Business Worldwide in 2017. “We are not a promotions-driven company—we are an A&R-driven company. We place emphasis on artist development and doing unusual things that not everybody would take on.

“When we signed Sia four years ago, we had a meeting where she told us she wouldn’t show her face, she wouldn’t do promo, play live or make videos,” he

added. “It was a leap into the unknown, but we really believed in her talent and the fact she is totally unique.” The former’s subsequent defection to **Atlantic** was a shock to the entire industry, particularly as Team RCA’s approach to developing her brand had been one of the most unusual, imaginative campaigns in recent memory.

Edge and team oversaw the return of Timberlake—Part 1 of whose *The 20/20*



ferent genres, **Brockhampton** and Elle King. Peter's willingness to allow his artists creative freedom on every level is a sign of his faith in what they are doing together. He ignores ego and creates an environment where his artists become part of the RCA family."

Team Nipper was also at the forefront of the idea that a producer can be a star with Mark Ronson, whose "Uptown Funk" featuring **Bruno Mars** became one of the biggest singles of all time; the track earned a coveted diamond certification (becoming just the 13th single in RIAA history to do so) and racking up well over 1 billion streams and 3.5 billion+ video views.

A key issue for RCA—with its pop-heavy, adult-skewing roster—was adapting to the streaming era. But rather than mining the status quo, Edge and his team—notably longtime associate Keith Naftaly and rising star **Tunji Balogun**—made moves.

**Zayn Malik** became the first solo star from the **One Direction** camp, scoring a #1 album bow in 2016 with R&B/dance-tinged material that worked well in the emerging new economy. Indeed, several of the label's most effective A&R moves during this time were in the evolving R&B/soul space. In the wake of the smash "Redbone," they inked multimedia visionary **Childish Gambino**, who made one of the most provocative, politically powerful videos in recent memory with "This Is America," a song that went on to Grammy glory. Texas-bred artist/songwriter Khalid offered a fresh, endearing take on the form that paid off in streams, sales and noms. In 2017 they signed **TDE**-affiliated **SZA**; her intimate, future-friendly R&B was one of the period's biggest breakouts and earned critical plaudits and Grammy noms aplenty.

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The belief that the investments need

*Top: Edge with Doug Morris and Sir Howard Stringer surround their star, Alicia Keys. Middle: Celebrating SZA's breakthrough with the artist and TDE President Terrence "Punch" Henderson; Elle King and Edge celebrate the 2015 rock crossover hit "Ex's and Oh's." Bottom: Riccittelli, Edge, Nipper mainstay Usher and iHeart's John Sykes*



Top: H.E.R. feeling the love from EVP of Marketing Carolyn Williams, EVP of Creative Content Camille Yorrick, MBK Entertainment’s Jeanine McLean, Fleckenstein, Riccitelli, Edge, Jeff Robinson, Theola Borden and Misha Mayes. Bottom: Edge and Stringer with Kesha; A&R stars Edge, Tunji Balogun and Naftaly

to be made in A&R continues unabated.

“With Tom and Peter, we talk about music, records,” Bleachers’ Jack Antonoff said at a UJA event honoring Edge and Corson in 2016. “It’s not just about smashing the world with a [hit]. We’re talking about people who really want to do great work, music that matters. Anything I’ve done that really mat-

tered to me started with these conversations about making a great record.”

Among the key recent transitions at Sony Music, of course, was the one at the top, and Edge expresses gratitude for both his prior chief and his current one. “Doug Morris was a fantastic boss who gave me an incredible opportunity, and I’ll always be grateful for that,” he says. “What’s

great about Rob Stringer is that he was in the day-to-day business of running a label for a number of years; it’s super-valuable—and a pleasure—to have his insight. He’s a music guy, so we can have a lot of great musical conversations and he just *gets it*. He’s also very aggressive. I love having that support from somebody who encourages you to go for it.”



Getting vicariously uptown-funky with Mark Ronson are Riccitelli, Edge, Fleckenstein and Naftaly.

In September 2017, after six years serving with Edge, Corson left for Warner Bros. Records, prompting the CEO to significantly reorganize the company. He tapped **John Fleckenstein** and **Joe Riccitelli** as co-presidents. In 2018, Edge upped Naftaly to President of A&R; expanded the profile of **ByStorm** head **Mark Pitts**; promoted the forward-looking Balogun to EVP and set up a JV imprint, **Keep Cool**, for him to run (its first signing was **Fifth Harmony** alumna **Normani**). Balogun, one of Edge's many sharp A&R acolytes, played a key role in developing Khalid, who followed up his Grammy-decorated, breakout debut album with a #1 chart bow in 2019 for his sophomore set. Young A&R hitter **Derrick Aroh** (a "rising star," in Edge's words, who signed **GoldLink**, among other zeitgeisty proj-

ects) also got a more prominent spot in the lineup.

Naftaly says he and Edge share what he calls "young ears, open ears, because we listen to everything. We're constantly going down these never-ending streaming rabbit holes." He adds that the recent organizational changes have paid remarkable dividends not only in terms of marketplace success but also company culture. "We've been doing this a minute," he says, "and I've never felt this kind of groove before."

Edge's artist-development prowess has also paid off handsomely at the Grammys in recent years. Gambino took Song and Record of the Year in 2019 for "This Is America." SZA earned five nods (including a Best New Artist nom) in 2018 and SOTY/ROTY nods, among others, in 2019. Best New Artist

and Album contender **H.E.R.**, virtually unknown before the 2019 Grammy telecast, delivered a dynamite performance and left with two R&B wins. Khalid was also a New Artist nominee and earned four other nods in 2018.

"It's all about the music with Peter," H.E.R. relates. "He truly believes in and supports the artistic and creative vision of each artist. I've been signed to **MBK/RCA** since I was 14, and I am eternally grateful to him for allowing me the space and time to figure out who I wanted to be as an artist and then letting me shine."

Asked how he approaches artists in a breathlessly competitive marketplace, Edge emphasizes "talking from a more creative perspective. It's taking the hype—which is a big record-biz thing—out of the discussion, and having real, creative conversations about what you can do." ■

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