



# RON PERRY

## THE CONNECTOR

**P**rior to assuming the Chairmanship of **Columbia Records**, Ron Perry was, among other things, a hot indie publisher, a multimillionaire, a guitar-bashing rocker and a cartoon.

Tapped in early 2018 as **Rob Stringer's** successor by **Sony Music** boss Stringer himself, Perry shares with his predecessor a love of the A&R hunt, a nose for the deal and

a way with artists.

Not many U.S. label CEOs are willing—let alone eager—to jump on a plane and fly halfway around the world to try to close an act, but that is a key part of Perry's M.O. He made multiple trips to New Zealand, for example, to ink Lorde to **SONGS**, and earned the trust not only of the precocious teen but also her mom. Since he took the



SONGS royals Perry and Matt Pincus with Lorde

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**—RON LAFFITTE**

reins at Columbia, Perry has traveled to Seoul to sign K-Pop sensations **BTS** before the other majors, and he’s flown to Stockholm, outmaneuvering a field of other contenders for the reunited **Swedish House Mafia**.

“Ron is the quintessential modern music man—he’s going full speed 24/7,” says **Ron Laffitte**, whose **Patriot Management** roster includes Swedish House Mafia and their Columbia label mate **Pharrell**. “And when he wants an act, there’s no stopping him.”

Just a year and a half on the job, this dynamo is aggressively signing acts while

overhauling the label’s A&R and marketing teams—and he’s already seeing results. Witness the #1 debut albums from **BTS**, **Vampire Weekend** and **Tyler, the Creator** during the span of a mere five weeks, joining **Hozier** to give Columbia four chart-toppers in the first half of 2019, along with a bump in marketshare. And Perry’s fingerprints are all over the astonishing smash single and pop-cultural phenomenon “Old Town Road” from the previously unknown, genre-defying rapper **Lil Nas X**. It’s an extraordinary accomplishment that is silencing the competition, some of whom had been questioning

whether Perry had the right stuff.

Perry is manifestly un-corporate in style, favoring hoodies and cutting-edge kicks over suits and wingtips, and is perfectly comfortable hoisting a **Les Paul** onstage beside **John Mayer**, which is how he spent his 40th birthday.

He established himself as a music-biz prodigy more than a dozen years before ascending to the big chair at Columbia, making his bones at the independent pubco **SONGS**, which was founded by former **EMI Music Publishing** exec **Matt Pincus** in 2004. Perry was part of the company from its very inception.

The New Jersey-bred Perry dug **The Beatles** and hip-hop innovators like **A Tribe Called Quest** as a kid, but he was thunderstruck by **Nirvana**. He fronted bands starting in his adolescence and through his late teens, writing songs, singing and playing guitar. “I wanted to be a rock star,” he confides. “When my dream looked like it wasn’t going to happen, I shifted to trying to be an A&R guy. I was quickly rejected by everybody—including Columbia Records. Nobody would hire me.”

Everything changed when he met Pincus. “We had lunch at a place by Penn Station,” Perry recalls. “There was no company—SONGS was just an idea Matt had.” He jumped at the opportunity.

“I was a 24-year-old kid, formerly a singer/songwriter in a band, and had worked in the tape room at EMI music pub,” Perry shared with *HITS* in 2013 (his other music-biz experience had been internships with **Jonathan Daniel** at **Crush Management** and **Daniel Glass** at **Artemis**). “My music career wasn’t going anywhere, and Matt took a shot on me. I joined on and soon became a partner.

“I probably signed 25 emo bands to SONGS,” he remembers with a laugh, recalling the heyday of the **Warped Tour**. “And I signed cool things like **Ted Leo & The Pharmacists** and the **Old 97’s**.” He ventured into hip-hop by signing **El-P**. These hip, mostly indie signings were the core SONGS business, he says, for about five years. Eventually, he was able to ink longtime hero and A Tribe Called Quest leader **Q-Tip**, an opportunity he describes as “a great moment.”

**Dev** gave the pubbery its first real hip-hop success, followed by **DJ Mustard**. Perry signed **Diplo** around this time, well before his breakout—“I was just a fan,” he recalls.

In 2012, he was upped to President and Head of A&R. “This enhanced role for Ron, who has built SONGS with me since I started it, underscores the strength and uniqueness of the company,” Pincus announced on that occasion.

SONGS, which was intended, as Perry said, “to be a true partner to songwriters,” quickly emerged as a formidable presence



*Perry with SONGS partners Carianne Marshall and Matt Pincus; feeling animated on South Park*

in the pubbery world. This was thanks in no small part to the roster Perry built and cultivated. His signings there included **The Weeknd**, **Lorde**, **Diplo**, **DJ Mustard** and **XXXtentacion**, among many others; such hit-driven acquisitions gave SONGS Top 10 publisher marketshare for 14 straight quarters (Top 6 for nine) and earned it such plaudits as ASCAP's Indie Publisher of the Year trophy.

"All these projects started hitting at the same time," he remembers. "That's when SONGS started really making a statement."

"It's a relationship business," Pincus remarked. "Ron is able to develop relationships with writers that are really second to none." But he was also aggressive with a checkbook when necessary, as his deal with rapper **Desiigner**, among others, attested. Still, on more than a few occasions, his ability to establish a creative connection with prospective signings appears to have been the factor that won him the deal.

"I would like to say that I've added

some support and value to them in their careers, creatively, from an A&R standpoint," Perry says of his signings. "I'm a musician, so that's my favorite part of the job: to hear the music and get involved with the music."

Perry's tight working relationship with Lorde led to his overseeing the A&R on her acclaimed sophomore album, *Melodrama*—an unusual role for a publisher. Indeed, Perry was so strongly associated with Lorde that when the animated comedy series *South Park* devoted a couple of episodes to her, a leather-jacketed, tousle-haired character named "Ron Perry" was featured as well.

Perry frequently made moves that were typically outside the realm of the pub space, such as pairing The Weeknd with **Daft Punk**, and setting Lorde up as the curator of the soundtrack for *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part 1*.

"I always want to know: Where are we going with this project?" he said. "How can I add value to the artist's

career? I have a great A&R staff, and they're really involved with every artist and writer on the roster... To find somebody and not be involved in their career is not that interesting, really. I'd feel like I wasn't being that helpful."

"I'm a song guy at the end of the day," Perry added. "I really enjoy that process and giving feedback. Even if that feedback is, 'Just do what you're doing.' As someone once told me, sometimes it's knowing when to get a cup of coffee. But that's what excites me: being part of the process."

"Ron Perry—that's my boy," says **Wassim "Tony Sal" Slaiby**, who co-manages The Weeknd and heads the XO label. "No matter what crazy idea XO had, he was always ready to go. He's so driven and determined about whatever he puts his mind to, and I'm proud to call him my bro and the Chairman of Columbia."

"Back in 2013, when I was in Toronto meeting with Sal and **Cash** [co-manager **Amir Esmailian**] about

*Sylvia Rhone, Rob Stringer and Perry with Sony artists Calvin Harris, Camila Cabello and Diplo*





*A 40th birthday bucket-list jam onstage at the Troubadour with John Mayer in March 2019*

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an emerging superstar they managed known as The Weeknd, there was one other person I would always see there: Ron Perry,” high-powered attorney **Kenny Meiselas** remembers. “At the time, Ron was President of SONGS, and within a few short months, I was negotiating a major publishing deal for The Weeknd with Ron for SONGS. That’s who Ron is as an executive—passionate, with incredible ears, loves music and his artists love him—all very

special qualities for the chairman of a major label in 2019.”

**I**n 2015, SONGS made its first move into the master side, launching the **RECORDS** label, with **Barry Weiss** at the helm. “With SONGS and **RECORDS**, we believe it’s a similar model to what **Jive/Zomba** [where Weiss served] was in the ’90s, where you go in hand-in-hand and hopefully you use your own writers, and maybe

some outside writers, and put them on your record—keep it all in-house,” Perry explained at the time. “That’s a great model for us.” Though the label, which put out recordings by **Noah Cyrus**, **Nelly** and others, never scored a major breakthrough during its years as part of the SONGS structure, it would play a role in the subsequent chapter of Perry’s career.

Publishers are not by and large the most boisterous of figures, so Perry’s willingness to let his rock & roll flag



*Celebrating a historic run with Lil Nas X*

**“I EXPERIENCED FIRSTHAND RON’S INSTINCT FOR RECOGNIZING HIT MAKERS, AND HIS DEDICATION AND PASSION FOR NURTURING THE CAREERS OF GROUNDBREAKING SONGWRITERS AND ARTISTS. IT DIDN’T SURPRISE ME AT ALL WHEN HE WAS CHOSEN TO LEAD A LEGENDARY RECORD LABEL INTO THE FUTURE.”**

**—CARIANNE MARSHALL**

fly—by leaping onstage at Coachella to back up Post Malone or accompanying Miley Cyrus at an industry party (both on Nirvana covers), for example—contributed to the lore that surrounded him. And so did the substantial social-media pawprint of his beloved dog, Ms. Larry David.

The continued success of SONGS and

its hit-driven roster spurred a continuous feed of acquisition rumors, which were soon substantiated as Pincus, Perry, partner Carianne Marshall and team prepped for a sale and an array of monied entities circled the pubbery.

“The market was becoming so expensive,” Perry says of the period leading up

to the sale. “Deals that we thought were expensive two, three years prior were becoming cheap. We’d taken a couple of big bets; it didn’t make sense anymore to be in a market where every bet was seven figures—with streaming becoming complicated for publishers on the royalty side. I think we made a strategic decision



*Columbia Co-Head of A&R Justin Eshak, Stringer, Leon Bridges, Austin Jenkins, Jonathan Eshak, Columbia EVP/GM Jenifer Mallory and Perry compare formalwear at the 2019 Sony Grammy afterparty in L.A.*

to end on a high note.”

Ultimately, the company was acquired by the financial arm of **Kobalt** (the publishing division of which took over admin duties) for an estimated \$160 million.

“It was bittersweet,” Perry acknowledges of the sale. “We started from the bottom and it was our baby. Matt, Carianne and I were always on the same page, but knowing it’s the right time to make a move doesn’t make it any easier.”

The deal went down in December of 2017; within weeks Perry would have more than a financial windfall to celebrate.

In the middle of 2017, *HITS*’ **I.B. Bad** listed Perry among “entrepreneurs from the indie sector with fine-tuned ears,” noting, “If an opening were to occur at the top of the food chain, [names such as his] would inevitably make the short list, because the top decision-makers view them as potentially solid choices for the big tent.”

Such was Stringer’s view, clearly; but it wasn’t just Perry’s track record that seemed to make him a good fit for the Columbia job in the Englishman’s mind. Many in the biz believed that Stringer saw Perry as a kindred spirit, a real music guy who related to artists and shared his delight in lurking at the back of a club into the wee hours in pursuit of new talent. Perry’s playful and down-to-earth public persona probably didn’t hurt either.

“Ron, Matt, and I will always share a special bond from the time we spent building **SONGS**,” says Marshall.

“Working together for over a decade, I experienced firsthand Ron’s instinct for recognizing hitmakers, as well as his dedication and passion for nurturing the careers of groundbreaking songwriters and artists. It didn’t surprise me at all when he was chosen to lead a legendary record label into the future.”

At 38, Perry was one of the youngest execs ever to be made Chairman of a major label. *Variety* subsequently included him—alongside such culturally potent figures as **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez**, **John Krasinski**, **Michelle Wolf** and **Billy Porter**—in its New Power of New York lineup.

“Ron is an immensely dynamic and forward-thinking executive who excels at bringing the best out of artistic vision,” Stringer trumpeted in announcing Perry’s installation, which also brought **RECORDS** into the Sony fold. “After his enormous success in recent years, we are thrilled to have Ron join Sony Music and lead the great team and unparalleled roster at the legendary Columbia Records label.”

For his part, Perry thanked Stringer “for the extraordinary opportunity to run the premier label in the history of music. To embark as the curator of this storied



company is both the highest and most humbling career achievement I could imagine. Columbia Records has stood the test of time as the industry's marquee home for the world's greatest stars. Rob has handed off an extremely talented team at Columbia. I look forward to building on his successes, while developing culturally innovative new artists and extending Columbia's unprecedented run at the top into the future."

Perry's choice of the word "curator" dovetailed with *HITS*' description of him as "a CEO tailor-made for the streaming era," and his initial signings seemed to confirm this direction. His first inking was producer/artist Diplo, whom he'd signed at SONGS and who had been involved in a string of successful projects under various names (and who would make noise as part of the Columbia-linked supergroup LSD with Sia and Labrinth). Perry also signed the French DJ/producer Gessafelstein, teen singer/songwriter Zhavia (the standout on Fox's TV competition series *The Four*) and—after, a highly competitive derby—alternative



Top: With *The Chainsmokers*' Drew Taggart and Alex Pall at the Sony Music post-Grammy party; bottom: Three Bosses—Stringer, Perry and Springsteen—with Columbia team, including Mallory, Jim Burruss and Greg Linn



*John Mayer visits Perry and team, including Ms. Larry David, at label HQ.*

## “RON HAS A WORK ETHIC THAT IS SECOND TO NONE, CONSTANTLY THINKING ABOUT WHERE MUSIC IS GOING NEXT.” —MATT PINCUS

hip-hop artist **Dominic Fike**. He negotiated a release by **BTS** (via their **BigHit** label), inked **Swedish House Mafia** in a major coup and put out previously unreleased music by the late, beloved alt-rapper **Lil Peep** (including a duet with **XXXtentacion**).

He’s fond of describing his artist-acquisition efforts as “cultural,” and believes that he shares with **Stringer** a focus on signings that are “cultural at the time.” He’s also demonstrated a knack for knowing when to strike; he snapped up **Lil Nas X** while the rest of the business was just waking up to the potential of the project. And it was his sensitive approach to the family and estate of **Lil Peep** that resulted in the work of that influential artist—whose life was cut tragically short—going to **Columbia**.

Every label chief reconfigures his or her staff, and **Perry** was no exception. He moved **Sony** veteran **Jen Mallory** into the

**EVP/GM** position, expanded the purview of Operations head **Jim Burruss** and upped **Justin Eshak** and **Imran Majid** to the joint posts of **EVP/Co-Head of A&R**. On the radio side, he promoted **Brady Bedard** and **RECORDS** vet **John Strazza** to **SVP of Promo**.

He had the first **#1** album on his watch in **March of 2019** with **Hozier**. This milestone came a few weeks after **Perry’s 40th** birthday party, thrown for him by his fiancée and held at **L.A.’s storied Troubadour** during **Grammy** week. With **Sony** brass and plenty of industry friends in attendance, **Perry** hosted a karaoke session and then jumped onstage with his axe, jamming through the night with an assortment of roster artists and other guests.

But his first truly explosive hit for the label was “**Old Town Road**,” which shattered streaming records in the spring of 2019, partly via a **Billy Ray Cyrus** remix collab engineered by **Perry**. This

coincided with the chart-topping splash-down of **BTS** (including a hit **Halsey** collab, also brokered by **Perry**). The **Lil Nas** record just kept building, becoming an ever-snowballing unicorn and cultural phenom, winning over fans across the musical spectrum—and the 20-year-old Atlanta rapper found himself performing before huge, roaring crowds at **Stagecoach**, **CMA Fest** and **Glastonbury**.

**Perry**—whose team’s recent signings **Polo G** and **Y2K** are also seeing big streaming action—is obviously still building his own story at **Columbia** as this goes to press, and time will tell what kind of leader he turns out to be. But if his past is any indication, he’ll be one who’s happiest in the middle of the action.

“Ron has a work ethic that is second to none, constantly thinking about where music is going next,” comments **Pincus**. “When everyone else arrives, he’s already there—with **Ms. Larry David** in his lap.” ■