



# Steve Boom

## A Voice for Streaming

“I’ve got the best job in the music business,” Amazon Music VP Steve Boom told *HITS* in a 2018 interview, adding, “I don’t ever have two days that look the same. I obviously spend a lot of time ... [with] record labels, publishers or managers, and then I spend a lot of time on the product.” Boom’s diverse duties have not only spurred his creativity; they’ve also helped propel him to



prominence as one of the most effective and biz-friendly execs in the digital space.

Thanks to the efforts of Boom and his team—who have been fully empowered by big boss **Jeff Bezos**—Amazon has emerged as a strong third, behind **Spotify** and **Apple Music**, in the hugely competitive on-demand streaming race.

This is thanks in part to the online-shopping giant’s innovations in voice-activated



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tech. The Alexa-powered Echo smart speaker—which enables users to stream songs just by asking—initiated, well, a Boom. But it’s also been the diligent cultivation of Amazon’s upper-demo user base (which has historically been slow to embrace streaming) and the development of trusting relationships with artists and execs that have made him a crucial figure.

One strong indicator of Amazon Music’s increased standing in the biz was its **Amazon Prime Day Concert** in July of 2019. Available as a live stream and an on-demand show thereafter, the highly touted event—developed by Boom and team—featured performances by **Taylor Swift, SZA, Dua Lipa** and **Becky G**. The concert earned a gigantic media look and underscored how important music had become to Amazon’s overall brand. It also underlined the company’s standing with artists and the biz.

“Steve has been an incredible partner and one of the most forward-thinking executives in the business,” **Interscope EVP/Chief Revenue Officer Gary Kelly**

says. “Looking at the recent global campaigns he and his team built for us—whether it’s **Billie Eilish, Imagine Dragons** or **Lady Gaga** for *A Star Is Born*—there’s always been one goal: engaging the fans in a meaningful way. He puts them front and center when we start talking about a project, and we build from that. But beyond all that, Steve is a truly great guy who’s passionate about what he does.”

“What we are seeing is that people are listening to more music than ever: We see it from data, and we hear it anecdotally from customers,” Boom says. “The simplicity of the technology—of just using your voice—opened up streaming to people who otherwise maybe don’t want to listen to music on their phone, which is an unnatural activity for entire groups of people. If you’re 15-22, of course, it’s totally normal. The phone is glued to your eyeballs, practically.”

But, he adds, “there are other populations for whom that’s not the case. The Echo is a combination of being simple and being in the home.”

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Michael McDonald, Danny Newcomb, Gary Westlake and Boom at the 2018 MusiCares Concert for Recovery in Seattle

Voice has thus brought a meaningful portion of Amazon’s generally older-skewing audience to streaming with the least amount of friction imaginable.

Central to that equation is Alexa, the voice-controlled mechanism Echo consumers use to access Amazon Music — as in “Alexa, play U2’s *War*.” Says Boom, “They’ve been my favorite band since I was 12.” The interoperability of Amazon Music, Echo and Alexa, he insists, provides a transformative user experience: “OK, I want to listen to U2 from the ’80s, so [previously] I’m going to type in U2, get to U2’s artist screen. OK, which albums are from the ’80s? OK, I’m going to create a new playlist, drag the songs...’ Five minutes later you’re listening to music. But this is five seconds.”

**A**s VP of Amazon Music, Boom has global responsibility for strategy, product development, licensing, marketing, industry relations and business development. He also has the ear of his boss.

“I try to spend my time on areas that I think are important for the future, and where I think I can add value,” Bezos told *Billboard*. “I also like to spend time on things that energize me. I dance into work if I have Echo and Alexa meetings on my schedule that day.”

“Steve is that rare executive who combines his love for music with his passion for taking Amazon Music and making it a force of nature for music consumption,” says *Maverick Music* President **Greg Thompson**, who adds, “U2 always felt we had the good fortune of having a fan



Boom with honoree Jeff Harleston at the 2018 T.J. Martell Foundation New York Honors Gala

**“ECHO AND ALEXA [ARE] BRINGING PEOPLE INTO PREMIUM THAT HAD NEVER USED IT BEFORE. WHEN WE LOOK AT PEOPLE USING THEIR FREE TRIAL ON AN ECHO, THEN CONVERTING INTO PREMIUM, WE SEE SUBSCRIPTION LEVELS THAT THE INDUSTRY HAS NEVER SEEN.”**

“WHAT I LOVE ABOUT AMAZON IS THAT WHEN YOU SIT DOWN AND EXPLAIN TO THEM HOW A SONGWRITER MAKES THEIR LIVING, THEY GOT IT. SO THEY KNOW THAT, HEY MAN, THIS IS AN ALBUM ARTIST; PROTECT THE ALBUM... THEY SAID, ‘IT’S YOUR MUSIC; YOU TELL US HOW YOU WANT IT SOLD.’”  
— GARTH BROOKS



Boom and Ryan Redington get some legal advice from Don Passman during the 2019 Billboard Power 100 gathering in L.A.

navigating their journey at Amazon.”

“I think we’re at the cusp of what I would call the Golden Age of the music industry,” Boom declares. “When we look at the long-term prospects... we’re incredibly bullish.”

Boom has assembled a strong team, including label and publishing veteran **Dan McCarroll** as Global Head of Originals and Artist Relations, **Alex Luke** as Global Head of Programming, **Ryan Redington** as Director and **Kelly Rich** as Nashville Senior Label Relations Manager. Each has proved integral in deepening Amazon Music’s relationships with artists, managers and music execs.

Asked by *HITS* about his criteria for this team, Boom replied, “The one common thread we look for is: Are they passionate about music? Not whether they come from music, but are they passionate about music? Even in our software-development talent, we like to find those types of people.”

He could have been talking about himself. Boom worked in software development and is a full-on music fanatic. The New Jersey native and father of three has said that a peak life moment was experiencing **Roger Waters’** 1990 *The Wall* concert, which occurred just after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

That year marked another milestone for Boom; he graduated from **Stanford**

with a B.S. in electrical engineering and an A.B. in history. He thereafter earned a J.D. from **Harvard Law School**, working as a Silicon Valley attorney throughout most of the ’90s with **Arnold & Porter** and **Venture Law Group**.

**Yahoo** came calling in 1998. He spent a decade there, rising to SVP, with oversight of mobile initiatives. Boom launched products like **Yahoo Go** and **oneSearch** and developed partnerships with mobile operators in North America, Europe and Asia.

Over the following four years, he worked briefly for or consulted to a handful of tech firms, including **Vlingo**, which, in particular, prefigured his tenure with Amazon. The speech-recognition software company was perhaps best known for its intelligent personal assistant, also named **Vlingo**. The latter functioned with **Android**, **iPhone** and other smartphones, allowing users to text, search and navigate devices using voice commands. **Vlingo** powered early versions of **Siri** (before **Siri** was acquired by **Apple**). It was purchased by speech-recognition giant **Nuance Communications** in 2012.

That was the year Boom was snapped up by Amazon, where, before taking his music post, he was VP Digital. In that gig, he managed to close all the majors after detailing plans for a dedicated streaming service for **Amazon Prime** members.

This of course, was several years

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before streaming became the dominant mode of music consumption. As Boom told *HITS*, “You have to remember that Prime Music was launched a year before Apple Music [in 2014], so the marketplace was very different than it is today. Streaming was less understood by consumers.” This began to change with the ascendancy of Echo. “From the time I started to now,” Boom said, “you can see the rights holders being much more willing to license innovative services that they think can grow the marketplace.” Boom describes “this magical moment the first time someone uses an Echo.

“I still remember showing it to record executives really early on; I’d have Alexa play a popular song from their artist, and their eyes would just bug out. Every customer has that reaction. It takes all the work out of it. ‘I know there’s a new song by Kendrick [Lamar]—play that,’ and it just starts playing. Isn’t that brilliant—and the way it’s supposed to be?”

By the time **Garth Brooks** signed on, in October 2016, the benefits to rights holders had indeed become clear. The catalog of the longtime holdout appeared one week after the launch of **Amazon Music Unlimited**, an expanded

and rebranded iteration of its on-demand streaming service.

“This whole streaming world for me is new,” Brooks conceded, then recalled, “We were talking to Spotify and Apple. Spotify didn’t have a place to sell [music] and iTunes had their own rules, so, even though we can stand in the same room and be friends, there is some kind of rub there... Then out of the blue comes a company that’s... the most trusted name in Internet sales, and they want to launch a streaming service.”

Brooks, who had resisted having his songs sold individually, then gushed,



Hilary Roberts, Neil Portnow, Boom, honoree Macklemore, McDonald and MusiCares' Debbie Carroll at the 2019 MusiCares Concert for Recovery, presented by Amazon Music, in L.A.



Barristers Elliot Groffman and Rosemary Carroll with Harlestone and Boom at the 2018 T.J. Martell Foundation New York Honors Gala

**“STEVE HAS BEEN AN INCREDIBLE PARTNER AND ONE OF THE MOST FORWARD-THINKING EXECUTIVES IN THE BUSINESS”**  
— GARY KELLY, INTERSCOPE

“What I love about Amazon is that when you sit down and explain to them how a songwriter makes their living, they get it. So they know that, hey man, this is an album artist; protect the album... They said, ‘It’s your music; you tell us how you want it sold.’”

The artist’s standing in the country world naturally fed the perception that Amazon Music had something special to offer the genre; its outreach to the Music City community confirmed this. As Boom told *HITS*: “We made a deliberate decision to invest more in Nashville.” *InsideRadio* has reported that Amazon Music’s country streams are 2.5 times the industry average.

In 2017, Boom joined the board of the **MusiCares Foundation**, providing further evidence of his support for the music industry. He was also honored with the **Music Innovation Award** at the 42nd Annual T.J. Martell Foundation Gala that year.

By April of 2018, more than half of Amazon Music users in the U.S. had reportedly used the Echo’s voice functionality, with the number of hours listeners

spent listening to music via voice-enabled devices having doubled compared to the previous year in the U.S., while more than doubling globally.

**Bloomberg** highlighted the diversity of Amazon Music’s subscriber base, noting, “The average Amazon shopper is...less focused on hip-hop and R&B. Amazon users are just as likely to crave jazz, country or music for their kids.” (And those kids quickly learned that Alexa would oblige any musical request).

Amazon Music raised its profile considerably in the summer of 2018 with its “A voice is all you need” campaign, featuring isolated vocals from **Ariana Grande**, **Kendrick Lamar**, **Kane Brown** and **SZA**.

Created in collaboration with the celebrated Portland, Ore., agency **Wieden+Kennedy**, the campaign was rolled out digitally and on radio, television and outside advertising in the U.S., U.K. and Germany. One of the ads featured **Queen’s** “Somebody to Love” and **Freddie Mercury’s** astonishing vocal performance.

Boom says Amazon “wanted to really showcase art, use the emotional resonance of music, [but] at the same time,

[we] knew we had to connect the concept of voice and voice control of the music service through Alexa... The pitch for this creative was Queen. And to hear Freddie Mercury's isolated vocal just sent chills up and down everyone's spine... Then, connecting [that] by having a voice come in and say, 'Alexa, play hits from Queen.' And then the whole power of the full instrumental version of the song comes in. We just knew it was a winner.

"I love those parts [of the job] where I get to be creative," he said of such projects. "That's my favorite part of the day.

"When we talk to people in the industry," he continued, "whether at labels or with managers and artists, they're all really excited because we have a way of reaching customers that...the other services have more trouble reaching, and that means more of their fans are in the services... Fundamentally, we're really focused on trying to grow the pie."

"Steve's a total pro and a great partner of ours," says **RCA Co-President John Fleckenstein**, echoing, if you will, the sentiment of his colleagues around the music business. "Aside from complete appreciation for music and its value on a business level, he's a true fan. Yes, that helps! We love working with him, Ryan [Redington] and the whole team over at Amazon. When you consider the next wave to hit this industry—voice—and you stack that together with Steve's understanding of music and Amazon's incredible reach, we're all very fortunate to have this guy at the helm.

"I say all this, of course, in hopes that he'll start comping my Prime membership."

2018 also saw **Audi** and **Samsung** ink exclusive deals for Amazon Music. By mid-2019, *The Financial Times* claimed that Amazon Music was growing its subscriber base at nearly three times the rate of Spotify.

Such advances notwithstanding, as Boom noted to *HITS*, "We still are in the early days of streaming, and there's just so much growth left." More to the point, he added, "We obsess over our customers, not our competitors. I really don't wake up and think [about] how we're doing against the other guys. I really think about how we are going to serve our customer base: How are we going to develop our product in a way that's attractive to them?" ■



PHOTO: KATRINA BARBER

Boom hangs with Garth Brooks at SXSW in 2017



Becky G, Taylor Swift, host Jane Lynch and Dua Lipa onstage at the 2019 Prime Day Concert in NYC