

T W O

R A I N M A K E R S



SYLVIA RHONE

The Trailblazer



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hilly-born, Harlem-raised, Sylvia Rhone has spent her career making history, not least as the first African-American woman to head a major U.S. record company.

She first achieved that feat leading the Elektra Entertainment Group in 1994. In 2019, when she was promoted to Chairman/CEO of Epic, she was *still* the only woman of color in the top job at a major label.

Sony Music boss Rob Stringer, announcing the move, hailed her—accurately—as “a trailblazing and iconic executive.”

“This is not only a big day for Sylvia Rhone,” proclaimed UMPG Chairman Jody Gerson when the Epic news broke. “Her promotion to Chairman and CEO is an inspiration to our entire industry and the change we are working to affect for an equal and inclusive future. We all must acknowledge and applaud that a move has been made in the right direction, and it’s breaking glass ceilings and driving progress. Good for Sylvia and good for all of us.”

“Sylvia Rhone is a pioneer, a visionary—one of the most extraordinary and savvy executives I’ve ever had the

opportunity to work with,” declared Roc Nation’s Jay Brown. “An inspiration and mentor to so many, her ear and business sense are unparalleled. All she has to do is step in the room, and everyone knows that Sylvia Rhone has always been and always will be *the* Chairman and CEO.”

Rhone has long been a trailblazer for both women and people of color, with a dynamic career in rock and R&B that has spanned nearly 40 years. A veteran who has excelled in the midst of constant change, she’s played a key role in shepherding hip-hop culture to the mainstream and most recently led multiple hip-hop artists to the top of the streaming charts.

“Our one common goal is to protect the culture, and now more than ever, since our culture has gotten so popular and those people who have never been a part of the culture but see that they can make a lot of money [on it], we have to watch



Camila and Sylvia enjoy a “Havana” night with Epic’s Sandra Afloarei, Joey Arbagey, Ezekiel Lewis, Rick Sackheim, manager Roger Gold and the label’s Lisa Kasha.

“[Sylvia is] someone you want to be in a foxhole with. She’s a brilliant woman who’s gonna win, no matter what.” —Doug Morris

very closely,” she said at the 2018 **Culture Creator Awards**, where she was honored. “There’s a feeding frenzy, and [these] people are the buyers, not the believers.”

Another area in which she’s been a trailblazer: the digital revolution of the music business, a difficult adjustment that ultimately became a great equalizing force—a dynamic Rhone is particularly familiar with.

“There were many in the music community who questioned my ability as an African-American and a woman to run a label. The notion existed that I would negatively change the culture of the company and convert it into an urban label.”

The rapidly changing ecosystem of the music industry proved tricky, but she navigated it with aplomb.

“The transformation of our industry

into a content and technology business has created more entry points, a broader range of music-centric companies to explore than just record labels,” she said in 2018, “aspiring female executives will be able to find their place in this music ecosystem—and they will change the world.”

“Sylvia Rhone is a visionary exec with the intelligence, strength and sensitivity to navigate a radically changing business,” observes **Sony/ATV** boss **Jon Platt**. “Most importantly, she has inspired countless women and people of color in this industry by showing what’s possible when you have the talent and the guts to go the distance.”

“A great leader and forward thinker, Sylvia has been key in shaping contemporary music through historic changes,” says top attorney **John Branca**, who calls

her “a friend to great talent and a creative collaborator.”

Rhone was born to **Marie Christmas Rhone**—a schoolteacher at **Hunter College Elementary**, who marched with **Martin Luther King Jr.**, the **SCLC** and **Adam Clayton Powell**—and **Bob Rhone**, who, together with his wife, became an important part of the political and social fabric of Harlem. Sylvia was accepted to **Wharton**, one of the most prestigious business schools in the U.S., and graduated with a B.S. in economics. Fresh out of college, she entered an international management program at **Banker’s Trust** in NYC. One day, as she tells it, she decided to wear pants to work—and was

told to go home and change. “I never went back,” she declared.

Instead, she opted to pursue a dream she’d secretly held since college, at which time she attended a **Jackson 5** concert as the guest of the group’s manager, **Suzanne DePasse**—a friend of her mother’s. “I watched her working,” recalled Rhone of DePasse, “and something clicked.” She began her music career in 1974 with **Buddah Records** and subsequently worked her way up the ranks through **ABC Records** and **Ariola Records**.

But it was finding mentor and champion **Doug Morris** that truly helped shape Rhone’s executive trajectory. That vital chapter began at **WMG**, where Morris was President at **Atlantic Records**. “She flew right to the top” upon being hired, Morris recalls. “She can be tough as nails but always on the right side of the line. I’m very proud to have played a part in her career. She’s special.”

After a successful run as the regional promo manager in the Northeast for **Elektra**, Rhone was promoted to Director of National Black Music Marketing at Atlantic Records in 1985, reporting to Morris. The next year saw her promoted to SVP/GM of Atlantic, taking on additional responsibilities in the A&R and Marketing departments and overseeing the development and launch of artists like **En Vogue**, **The System**, **Levert**, **Brandy**, **Yo Yo**, **The D.O.C.**, **MC Lyte** and **Chuckii Booker**, among others.

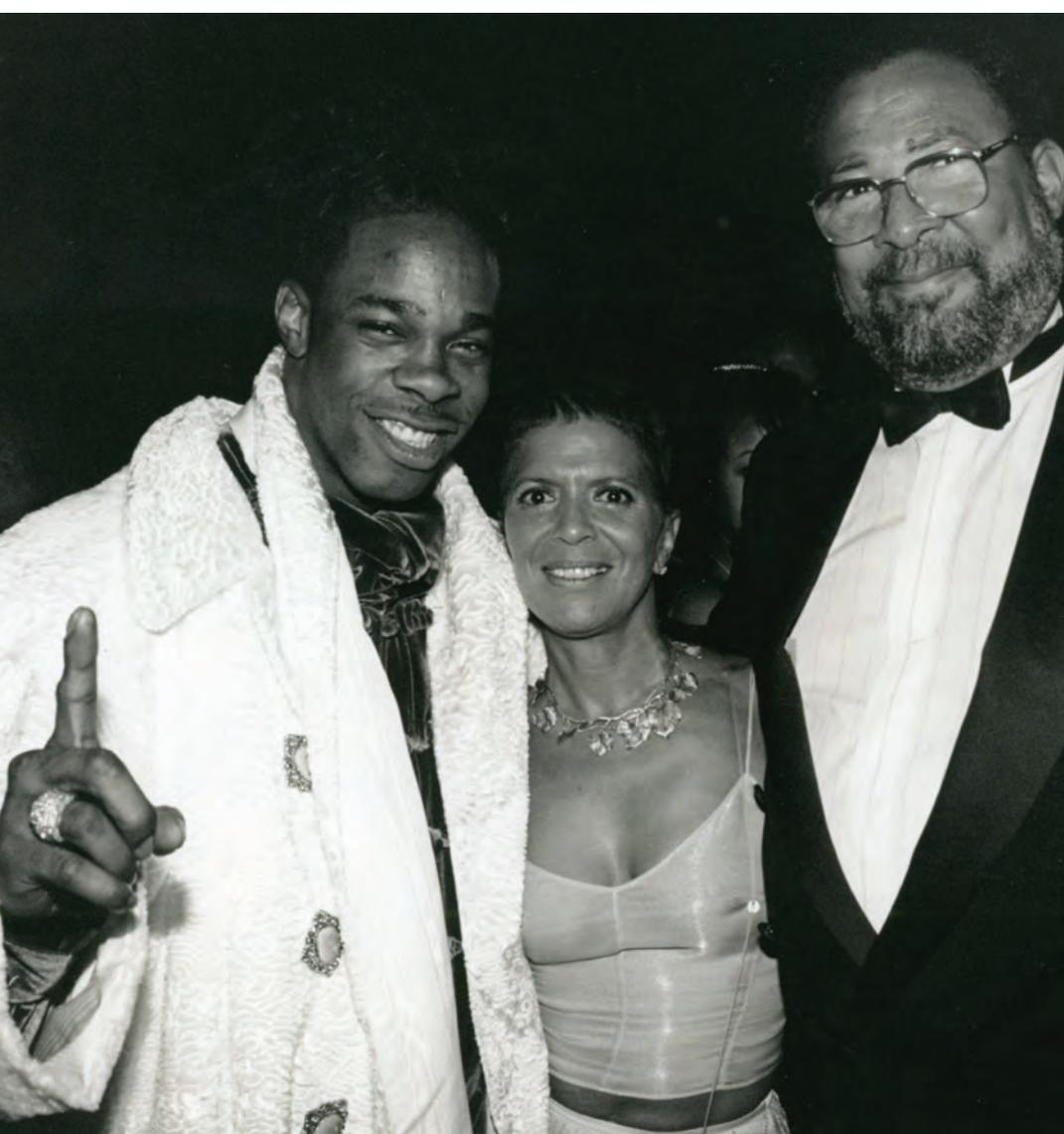
In 1990, Rhone pitched Morris on the formation of the **EastWest** label and, with her subsequent appointment, became the first African-American woman to head a major record company.

In 1994, she was hired by Morris to become Chairwoman/CEO of **Elektra Entertainment Group**—the first black woman to attain that top-tier dual role at a major label. “We smashed right through the glass ceiling this time,” she said when the job was announced. “This is an important symbolic moment not only for me, but for every African-American and woman in our business. I know I have some very big shoes to fill, and I look forward to the challenges ahead.”

Rhone then guided the merger of **Elektra**, **EastWest** and **Sire Records** under a single WMG label—**Elektra**. Overseeing this newly consolidated label, she cultivated



Top: A WMG summit with Terry Semel, Russ Thyret, Ahmet Ertegun, Val Azzoli and Bob Daly; middle: with Sean Levert, Dave Glew, Gerald Levert, Mark Gordon and Doug Morris; Bottom: with Bob Morgado, Morris, Gerald Levin and Ertegun



Top: with Val Azzoli, Ted Field, Tori Amos, Doug Morris and Jimmy Iovine; bottom: with Busta Rhymes and Richard Parsons

one of the most wildly diverse rosters in the biz, including groundbreaking hip-hop artists **Missy Elliott** and **Busta Rhymes**, along with folk-music trailblazer **Tracy Chapman**, gospel-crossover powerhouse **Yolanda Adams** and rock pioneers **Metallica** and **AC/DC**, not to mention **Natalie Merchant**, **Gerald Levert**, **Ol' Dirty Bastard**, **Fabulous**, **Jason Mraz** and **Third Eye Blind**. In less than two years, she had increased EEG's sales by over \$300m.

"There are still some guys in the old guard who find it difficult to accept an African-American woman taking over the reins of a giant pop company, but Sylvia will wake them up," said **Joe Smith**, a former **Warner Bros. Records/Elektra/Capitol/EMI** chief, who was Rhone's boss during her promo days in the early 1980s. "What you have here is a bright and aggressive executive who has proven herself repeatedly over the past 20 years. The way I see it, Sylvia's promotion isn't just a great move for her; it's a huge step forward for the entire music business."

And she chose to face those major obstacles with a spirit of inclusion and diversity. "As a woman, you have to come from a position of confidence," Rhone advises. "There's a certain gift that women have in their management style that's more inclusive than a male counterpart's. One of the keys is to always be your best self. There's no secret formula to it. You just have to understand that you're managing a team of people, whether it's two or 100, that is far more important than you."

It certainly did not go unnoticed by her executive peer group. **Time Warner** Chairman/CEO **Dick Parsons** observed about her leadership, "The Elektra Entertainment Group was one of the most actualized examples of diversity in action at a company that I've ever seen."

That shine from the top came in handy; shortly thereafter, WMG was struck with massive upheaval and change. Following the exits of **Bob Krasnow** (whom Rhone succeeded at Elektra) and **Mo Ostin**, Morris

had been promoted to head of North America by then-WMG Chairman **Bob Morgado**, a corporate suit who'd come to power following the death of the legendary **Steve Ross**. But a power struggle with Morgado and the group's four major label chiefs eventually led to his exit, and Morgado was succeeded by non-music, HBO executive **Michael Fuchs**—who then fired Morris in 1995. Sylvia survived the corporate juggling, then worked for another nine years at the company, having forged a productive relationship with incoming WMG Chairman/CEO **Roger Ames**.

But enter **Edgar Bronfman Jr.**, who bought WMG from Time Warner in March 2003 for \$2.6 billion. Bronfman built **Universal Music** when he was head of **Seagram**, through the acquisitions of **MCA** and **PolyGram** in the 1990s, and he had a longstanding relationship with **Lyor Cohen**, who was heading **Def Jam** at the time. Bronfman immediately installed Cohen as the new head of WMG, and in 2004, Rhone's position was eliminated in a restructuring merger of **Elektra** and **Atlantic**.

Morris, by then CEO at **Universal Music Group**, hired her as President of **Motown Records** and EVP of **Universal Records** in 2004. "Working with both Doug and Mel is a homecoming for me," Rhone said of her appointment to Motown, "I had the privilege of working for Doug in my early years and consider him a mentor. What's exciting about the company is it has such a depth of creative assets. The collaboration possibilities with the sister labels are limitless."

While at the label, she developed **Akon**, **India.Arie**, **Erkyah Badu** and **Chamillionaire**, and helped guide one key independent label, **Cash Money**, to mainstream success.

By 2004, **Cash Money** was under the **Motown** umbrella, and Morris brought in Sylvia to manage it. She strategically helped raise the global

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Top: The Goldmind and Elektra crews celebrate Missy Elliott's hot streak; bottom: Elektra days with Gary Casson, Steve Heldt, Ray J, Alan Voss, Richard Nash, Bill Pfordresher and Bill Berger



Top to bottom: Hanging with Future at Epic's 2015 holiday party 2015; with Dina LaPolt and Midem's Alexandre Deniot and Paul Zilk in Cannes, 2019; with Ezekiel Lewis, Rob Stringer and Rick Sackheim at the City of Hope Spirit of Life Kickoff Breakfast in NYC

identity of Cash Money during a resurgence of fan interest led by **Hot Boys** and **Juvenile**, connecting fanbases to artists via social-networking platforms.

Rhone stepped down as the head of Universal Motown in 2011, amid a UMG leadership transition that saw **Lucian Grange** replace Morris.

In 2013 she founded the imprint **Vested in Culture**—with a distribution deal via Epic—by presenting Morris, then the boss at Sony Music, with a proposal to do a boutique label that would offer her a wider platform. “Our mission is to be a bridge for our artists and to help them grow as cultural brands,” she told *The Hollywood Reporter* about the label’s name, “Many times, the influence of music on culture is undervalued, so I wanted to reflect in the name of our company that we were passionate about culture in all of its aspects, including style, film, art, TV.”

She was also strongly committed to offering a different lane of opportunity for people working behind the scenes as well.

“There is an unfortunate history in our business of teams being segregated along urban and pop lines,” she explained. “Oftentimes, black executives are only allowed to work with black acts, so they’re not allowed to develop outside of the urban discipline, and their skill set is truncated somewhat. The deck really needs to be shuffled because music does not reflect that anymore. What’s pop, what’s hip-hop, what’s rock? It’s really more who that fan is. At Elektra, I always shuffled the deck. I had a black woman who was the head of video production. I had a black executive who was head of all of A&R—it didn’t matter. The talent is there, but we still are encumbered by old-school models.

“I’ve taken that responsibility very personally as a black woman in the business—to create opportunities that don’t fall into the typical silos that black people work in.”

As she continued to blaze new trails, Rhone was recognized by *Fortune* as one of the 50 Most Powerful Women (1998) and by *Ebony* as one of the 10 Most Powerful Black Women in America (2001). During her career, she’s made *Entertainment Weekly*’s Most Influential People list six times, and *The Hollywood Reporter*’s Women in Entertainment Power list seven times.



A post-Grammy moment with Rob Stringer and DJ Khaled at Sony's 2019 afterparty

Sylvia is also often recognized for the fierce sartorial flair and eclectic, sometimes avant-garde fashion sense that have always been her signature. (Don't forget that she left her banking job after being told what to wear.) She's also been widely celebrated for her refusal to tailor her style to convention as regards age, position or environment.

In 2014, Rhone was named President of Epic, working alongside chairman/CEO Antonio "L.A." Reid. But after Reid stepped down in 2017, Rhone began heading the label's operations solo, spearheading serious heat at the label with successful album launches by DJ Khaled, Future and Travis Scott, and breaking new acts like Camila Cabello—who made pop

history with "Havana"—and 21 Savage, the U.K.-born, Atlanta-raised rapper whose run-in with ICE has since put him in the national conversation on American immigration policy. Thanks to Future, Scott and 21 Savage, she had three records in the Top 10 simultaneously during her blistering run in Q1 2019.

"Sylvia is the perfect example of a QUEEN," exclaimed Khaled on the occasion of Rhone's elevation to Chairman. "I've been blessed to have witnessed the great leader she is and how she leads with greatness and love. I'm so happy we are on the same team—the winning team."

"Sylvia has been such a strong supporter of my music, and I am so thrilled to see her become Chairman & CEO of Epic," noted Cabello of her promotion. "It's equally wonderful to see more female executives

getting the top spots in music. Bravo."

"Epic has a tried-and-true leader who's been successful wherever she's been, and a person of fine character and loyalty—someone you want to be in a foxhole with," notes Morris. "She's a brilliant woman who's gonna win, no matter what."

She was notably part of the six top female executives at major record labels and music publishers who issued a formal complaint to the Recording Academy's board of trustee's over comments made by Neil Portnow about women needing to "step up" after the Grammys in 2018.

"Neil Portnow's comments are not a reflection of being 'inarticulate' in a single interview," the joint statement read in part. "They are, unfortunately, emblematic of a much larger issue with



Iconic exec Clarence Avant, physician Loretta Erhunmwunsee and Motown chief Ethiopia Habtemariam join the 2019 honoree at the City of Hope Spirit of Life Kickoff Breakfast at the Four Seasons Beverly Hills.

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the [National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences] organization as a whole on the broader set of inclusion issues across all demographics. As senior music executives with true commitment to the welfare of the organization and the music community, we hereby put ourselves forward for service.”

The letter was part of a larger mobilization among female execs and their male allies to realign the organization, which resulted in the creation of a task force, headed by Tina Tchen, and the appointment of Deborah Dugan as Portnow’s successor.

“I am honored I get to work with Sylvia,” said attorney Dina LaPolt, who was tapped to join Rhone for a keynote interview at MIDEM 2019. “Her wealth of experience and heart has helped her

shepherd the careers of countless music artists, all while maintaining an eye toward both the artistic vision of her clients as well as the cultural relevance and responsibility of her work. She is intelligent, fiercely driven and deeply focused on the well-being of the artists and creators she works with. This is all in addition to her trailblazing role on behalf of women and people of color.”

In March of 2019, Berklee College of Music announced that Sylvia would be receiving an honorary Doctor of Music degree, in recognition of her significant contributions to the industry. Mere weeks later she was upped to the Chairmanship, at which time she declared, “I am excited to continue my amazing journey at Epic Records, supported by Rob Stringer’s vision and leadership. Everything we do is a testa-

ment to our incredible artists, who set the bar of the entire Epic culture, inspiring our dedicated executive team every day and enriching the legacy of this great label.”

Shortly thereafter, Rhone was tapped as the City of Hope’s Spirit of Life honoree, becoming the first-ever African American woman so honored. At the L.A. kickoff breakfast, Motown boss Ethiopia Habtemariam recalled that seeing a black woman as Elektra Chairman in the dawning days of her own career filled her with a sense of possibility—and that Rhone’s gracious response to her early fan letter kept her on the path. “Sylvia has walked the walk” in supporting artists and young execs, Habtemariam declared.

In the words of Irving Azoff, “Sylvia simply is a winner and continues to prove it—past, present and future.” ■